

Austin's Actionable Opportunities

The Sunlight Foundation Open Cities Team has compiled the below report to summarize potential opportunities for the City of Austin to support the community use of open data and information to address homelessness.

The report includes both opportunities to increase the City's ability to provide open data around homelessness through recommended process improvements, as well as opportunities to support external uses for open data and information about homelessness through tactical City-led interventions. Findings are based on foundational user research conducted by the Austin iTeam, and based on further exploration by Sunlight's Open Cities team.

This report concludes the [Refine stage](#) of the [Tactical Data Engagement framework](#).

Internal process recommendations

While Tactical Data Engagement projects are focused on directly and actively supporting the community use of open data, these indirect, foundational improvements are also essential in creating long-term progress in open data and transparency. By addressing these process opportunities, the City can begin to improve its open data practice as a whole, and increase public trust in government services, information, and data. This will, in turn, make collaboration easier in the future.

Better information sharing requires better internal relationships both formal and informal.

Internal data owners and departments need to collaborate

While a number of City departments have been identified as relevant to the issue of homelessness and while the data coordinators for those departments are in conversation, there are no data-sharing agreements in place across departments and there is no aggregate or centralized source of non-sensitive data for coordinators across departments. Data-sharing is ad hoc, based on one-off requests. This issue also extends to data gathering entities outside of the City, like the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO).

Opportunities:

- Formalize a data policy and/or implement a governance plan for open data that establishes free and open data sharing agreements across all departments at the City (see [Washington, DC data policy](#)).

- Determine how to best link existing datasets from EMS, Public Health to the new database in development at the Police Department. Consider proactive [data sharing agreements](#) between these key departments.
- Incorporate [Performance Management infrastructure](#), including specific metrics and sustainable data sources, to set departmental and citywide metrics and goals related to homelessness.
- Support action-oriented working groups with authority to affect policy change, including data coordinators at departments related to homelessness: Public Health, Code, EMS, Fire, APD, any others.
- Support a centralized data portal, dashboard, or Homelessness Initiative Hub for all departments to upload and share raw, aggregate, non-sensitive data about homelessness.
- Leverage existing summary/aggregated reports related to homelessness (PDFs and raw, aggregate data files in an open format), by sharing them publicly on the Open Data Portal or anywhere online to keep the public informed of ongoing initiatives and overall information about homelessness in Austin.
- Commit to coordinating across departments to develop multi-department strategy and service allocation based on homelessness data and evidence. Consider using [performance-based budgeting](#) and [Continuous Quality Improvement](#) to reallocate programs and services.

There is no internal referral process for directing individuals to services

Improving the referral infrastructure for the many staff across the City who act as informal referrers to homelessness services, primarily police officers, emergency medics, and relevant staff in other departments would help lessen the amount of time these staff spend searching for answers about how to help individuals they encounter. Based on our conversations with HACA members and department staff across the City, the Homelessness Street Outreach Team (HOST) has the strongest existing infrastructure to serve as a centralized, nimble referral team for individuals experiencing homelessness. There are staff from a variety of departments on the team, but these individuals don't serve as liaisons to their own departments. Internal cross-department training around how to interact with individuals experiencing homelessness is limited. Better internal transparency around referral processes or available services would help on-the-ground staff be more transparent and helpful to individuals experiencing homelessness.

Opportunities:

- Create a citywide referral process for addressing a person's needs and helping them enter in to services.
- Broaden the HOST team's geographical area of impact by partnering with the Downtown Austin Alliance to spread services to more neighborhoods. Coordinate with the HOST team to better integrate HOST into homelessness solutions across departments and as part of iTeam work.

- Train all on-the-ground personnel who regularly engage with homeless residents across departments on available referral systems. Build cohesion between all on-the-ground staff acting as referrers by hosting trainings or working groups.
- Provide contact information and/or create a new position on the HOST team to serve as internal liaison to field requests from across departments. Specifically, help this liaison gather information about linkages or touches other departments have had with specific individuals in specific locations.
- Build a [Coordinated Entry system](#) on top of the existing Coordinated Assessment to improve the flow of referral data and information across service providers.

City contracts currently don't support open data or data sharing

This area of improvement could use further investigation on the part of Austin Public Health, as the primary contractor for homelessness services. Austin Public Health currently “pays into” the HMIS database through ECHO but doesn’t share any publishable, aggregate, non-sensitive data from the HMIS database openly or specify the process in which ECHO is required to share information with the community. This contract is an existing asset for the City to leverage. Additionally, as contracts are renegotiated for new service provision, the City should investigate incorporate language that encourages data-sharing to the extent that’s possible. Austin can draw from examples in other cities of [leveraging contracts to improve open data](#). Contracting language specifically related to improving transparency and open data would help improve the data-sharing ecosystem in Austin and create better collaboration across partners.

Opportunities:

- Leverage the Public Health department’s existing HMIS partnership to open any shareable or aggregate data to help inform citywide homelessness strategy. HMIS analysts and Public Health data analysts likely already see or produce HMIS data that is aggregated in a shareable format, which could be shared as open data.
- Inventory all existing contracts across the City related to homelessness or housing to begin exploring how data sharing requirements could improve cross-departmental collaboration and allow for analysis and public report-outs of summary data/insights.
- Use contracts with service providers to enforce citywide requirements for clear information about service providers’ hours, schedules, for example assisting grantees with the implementation of [Open Referral](#).

People experiencing homelessness want to affect policy change

Through our conversations with members of HACA, we found that homeless individuals had two main information needs: information about available services *and information about policy issues they cared about*. One participant said, “I’m tired of information, I want action.” Clear policy issues of interest included: (a) better, more nuanced, comprehensive support for homeless domestic abuse victims, (b) more lenient policy around public loitering, (c) annual or value-driven bus passes instead of weekly, (d) geographically decentralizing new contracts for homelessness services, (e) better support for elderly homeless who “shut themselves in”, (f)

support for anti-eviction legislation with tenant advocates, (g) addressing the high number of disability denials or barriers to receiving disability for homeless individuals, and more. While the HACA framework helped to air these concerns, there appeared to be no consistent, sustainable way to collect policy input from individuals experiencing homelessness. Better transparency and civic engagement for homeless individuals to participate in policy-making would help build trust and improve issues important to the community.

Opportunities:

- Establish clear, consistent, sustainable channels for homeless individuals to participate in policy issues and programmatic planning that they care about, *even if not overtly about homelessness*, but rather about public space, bus transit, etc.
- Talk to ECHO's Executive Director's about their existing outreach to get policy feedback homeless individuals currently used to inform ECHO's policy recommendations to City Council.
- Provide policy-makers regular access to liaisons or navigators of the community who can help to regularly engage or survey people with lived experience and service providers to inform relevant policy discussions.
- Make City Council agendas more legible and transparent to help direct individuals to council meetings about issues that matter to them.

Austin's open data users

We developed the user personas below based on the Austin I Team's existing research on [user personas](#), adapted to represent open data or information users. The term "data users" refers to both current data users but also stakeholders who could potentially use data or information to address a challenge related to homelessness.

<u>REFERRERS</u>			
<i>Examples</i>	<i>Use cases</i>	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Info needs</i>
APD beat officers Service providers HOST outreach PATH outreach Anyone on the ground	Wants to make informed referrals to specific service providers	Limited connections with service providers No standardized wayfinding process Lack of training Outdated, incomplete, or unverified	On-demand information about specific service providers and services available

Individuals with lived experience		information on resources	
PARD		Finding new and non-formalized services	
Library			
<u>ANALYSTS</u>			
<i>Examples</i>	<i>Use cases</i>	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Info needs</i>
APD management	Wants to better allocate organizational resources	Siloed city departments	Pre/post data to evaluate interventions
HOST data owners		Rigid existing data infrastructure	Bulk information about homeless individuals' linkages
Service provider analysts	Wants to inform citywide strategy for addressing homelessness	Difficult to get data sharing agreements	Coordinated data across departments
Data coordinators			
ECHO			
<u>ADVOCATES</u>			
<i>Examples</i>	<i>Use cases</i>	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Info needs</i>
Tenants council	Wants to inform citywide strategy about homelessness	Lack of centralized information	Information about homelessness issue area
Downtown Austin Alliance		Need access to decision-makers	Data on specific policy issues
Local nonprofits		Need to help individuals with lived experience	Information about what people experiencing homelessness need
Community members			
<u>NAVIGATORS</u>			
<i>Examples</i>	<i>Use cases</i>	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Info needs</i>
HACA members	Wants to make informed referrals to	Lived experience of homelessness	On-demand information about specific service

People experienced with navigating the system	specific service providers Wants to find and use important public services	Background of community service but no current job Desire to help others or work toward progress, but no pathway Direct access to services and information about availability	providers and services Basic information about how to get a case manager Information about getting necessities <i>without</i> a case manager
<u>DISCONNECTED</u>			
<i>Examples</i>	<i>Use cases</i>	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Info needs</i>
Some HACA members People without case managers People far from downtown	Wants to find and use important public services	Currently homeless No case manager Unsure how to navigate the system New to homelessness Low CA score Not priority service recipient	Basic information about how to get a case manager Information about getting necessities <i>without</i> a case manager

Opportunities for TDE interventions

We used the Sunlight Open Cities team's Tactical Data Engagement framework to explore *who* needs open data through information-oriented user personas, *what* data residents need through an assessment of information sources, and *why* residents need information through open data use cases. The opportunities proposed below each address a specific persona's use case for open data by proposing an intervention. For each opportunity, personas are **bolded**, potential interventions are *italicized*, and we provide clear distinction around who community members are that belong to each persona as well as what data they might need. These opportunities are segmented by "[maturity level](#)." Many of the opportunities below reflect the [synthesis](#) already conducted by the Austin iTeam.

These opportunities are presented as potential projects for the City to carry out with support from partners inside or outside of City Hall including the iTeam and Open Data teams. The City's Tactical Data Engagement project will involve choosing or workshopping these opportunities to carry out one feasible, capacity-based project as a tactical solution to enabling open data use for community impact. The rest of these opportunities are simply recommendations or inspiration for future efforts the City could undertake to continue supporting the community use of open data.

Lower barriers to access/use

Maturity level 1 & 2

- Help **analysts** inside and outside of City government access open data about homelessness *by posting existing, available aggregate data online on the Open Data Portal* to help inform citywide strategy. Opening relevant data that already exists would help overcome internal data coordination issues and help create a shared, comprehensive narrative around the issue of homelessness.
 - **Relevant personas:** Analysts (facilitating intervention and using data)
 - Data coordinators, HMIS data analysts
 - **Relevant data sources:**
 - HOST (EMS) existing summary report to the Downtown Austin Alliance
 - ECHO existing community dashboard report
 - Downtown Austin Community Court reports
 - Police Department existing preliminary summary data
 - Count of homeless individuals (aggregating various existing sources)
 - Other departments with “ready-to-share” public non-sensitive data
- Help **navigators** and **disconnected** people experiencing homelessness better understand the process of getting a case manager *by making information about the Coordinated Assessment process public with clear guidance and explanation on timelines and what to expect*. This would help build people's trust in the currently non-transparent processes that dictate whether or not you receive a case manager. This would also improve people's currently low understanding of how to get a case manager. Austin would be the first City to improve transparency around this process.
 - **Relevant personas:** Referrers (facilitating intervention), Navigators, Disconnected (using data)
 - ECHO staff managing Coordinated Entry system
 - HOST staff administering the Coordinated Assessment
 - Service provider staff explaining the CA to people daily
 - **Relevant data sources:**
 - ECHO aggregate data on Coordinated Assessment results
 - ECHO basic information about Coordinated Assessment timeline

- HOST staff information about how to take the Coordinated Assessment
 - Stories from navigators about how they got case managers
- Help **navigators**, **advocates**, and **referrers** better understand citywide strategy around homelessness by *hosting a scope-a-thon where residents, service providers, and data owners can meet to scope out data-informed problem statements* either around allocation of resources or policy change. Having a collaborative event to discuss available or relevant data would help the community experiencing or working to alleviate homelessness unite around shared issues.
 - **Relevant personas:** Analysts (facilitating intervention), Referrers, Navigators, Advocates (using data)
 - Data coordinators (to provide data)
 - All external stakeholders interested in addressing homelessness with data-informed policy
 - HACA members
 - HOST and other front line staff
 - ECHO policy team

Improve responsiveness to community need

Maturity level 3

- Help **advocates** and **analysts** better understand the internal data inventory around homelessness by *hosting a regular public homelessness data user group* and inviting City data coordinators and the public to discuss available data sources and prioritize their release. This would help advocates and analysts outside of the City better understand what data is available relevant to homelessness, help inform citywide strategy, and allow analyst to share data analysis best practices and identify issues that might be impeding data quality.
 - **Relevant personas:** Analysts (facilitating intervention), Advocates, Analysts (using data)
 - City analysts from the departments that the auditors report has identified as being impacted by homelessness (as data providers)
 - Policy advocates from ECHO, Tenants Council, etc. (as data users)
 - **Relevant data sources:**
 - HOST (EMS) summary report to the Downtown Austin Alliance
 - ECHO community dashboard report
 - Police Department preliminary summary data
 - Unified count of homeless individuals (including multiple sources)
 - Other departments with “ready-to-share” public non-sensitive data
- Help **referrers**, **navigators**, and **disconnected** find better information on available services by internally implementing [Open Referral](#) for service providers to share relevant information about their operation. Sharing open hours, number of case managers on

staff, total number of beds, days open, or any gender limitations in a standardized way could help create a better understanding of which providers are open when. This solution would involve leveraging city contracts with service providers to get standardized data about hours, etc.

- **Relevant personas:** Referrers (facilitating intervention), Navigators, Disconnected, Referrers (using data)
 - Anyone who has built a platform to unify information about services
 - 2-1-1
 - Aunt Bertha team
- **Relevant data sources:**
 - Operating information of service providers
 - City contracts with service providers

Document and showcase desired community uses

Maturity level 4

- Help **advocates** make data-informed cases for policy to address homelessness by *sharing stories or examples of how to use City open data to advocate for a specific policy change* related to homelessness -- not just presenting all available open information about the issue of homelessness, but sharing narratives and documenting how advocates can use data and information to advocate for specific policy change. This would help address the lack of shared understanding around policy issues relevant to homelessness.
 - **Relevant personas:** Analysts (facilitating), Advocates (using data)
 - TBD relevant advocates for transitional housing, affordable housing, anti-homelessness
 - Department data coordinators
 - City council members
 - Department heads
 - **Relevant data sources:**
 - HOST (EMS) summary report to the Downtown Austin Alliance
 - ECHO community dashboard report
 - Police Department preliminary summary data
 - Unified count of homeless individuals (including multiple sources)
 - Other departments with “ready-to-share” public non-sensitive data
 - Any data based on advocates’ requests
- Help **navigators** and **disconnected** individuals see how others have successfully navigated the path to stability by *sharing infographics and data-informed stories about people’s positive experiences and long-term changes over time in the issue of homelessness*. This would help build trust in the community and help individuals feel more hopeful about their situation.

- **Relevant personas:** Analysts, Referrers (facilitating), Navigators, Disconnected (using data)
 - Service provider staff to share stories/infographics
 - HOST team
 - HACA meeting
- **Relevant data sources:**
 - Summary data over time
 - Documented stories about people with success stories

Prompt and incentivize community use

Maturity level 5

- Help **advocates**, **navigators**, and **disconnected** share policy recommendations based on their lived experience by creating a *data-informed dashboard about policy issues related to homelessness*, with space for public discussion and feedback. This would help individuals who have experienced homelessness feel that their voices are being heard, and could help direct both advocates and individuals to productive pathways to participate in local decision-making. Prototype could begin with identified important policy issues: bus passes, public space, access to disability benefits.
 - **Relevant personas:** Analysts, Decision-makers (facilitating intervention), Advocates, Navigators, Disconnected (using data)
 - City Council
 - Department heads of EMS, Public Health, etc.
 - ECHO Executive Director (policy advisor)
 - HACA committee
 - Service provider staff
 - Local advocates/nonprofit staff
 - **Relevant data sources:**
 - Any summary data about homelessness
 - Information about past policy on bus passes (and supplementary transit/ridership data)
 - Information about legal/illegal public spaces for loitering (supplementary demographic data about each neighborhood)
 - Information about past policy on other relevant issues (and supplementary data about relevant issues)
 - Any data based on users' requests
- Help **analysts** outside of City Hall contribute to overall citywide strategy by opening aggregated data about homelessness and *open sourcing maps or data visualizations about homelessness and releasing a set of problem statements* to encourage reuse and replication. This would help the City to engage civic tech groups productively to help inform public understanding around the issue of homelessness.

- **Relevant personas:** Analysts (facilitating and using data)
 - Open Austin
 - Department data coordinators
 - iTeam
- **Relevant data sources:**
 - Problem statements from department staff
 - Existing data visualizations + open source code
 - Aggregate/summary data about homelessness

Partner to support community use

Maturity level 6

- Help **referrers** get more information about individuals they're serving by *creating data sharing agreements between data analysts at service providers/ECHO and HOST/EMS staff* to share case notes. This would help solve the problem of lack of context or understanding about a person's journey when trying to refer them to the right services. This would also help inform HOST's (public) summary reporting with more narrative context.
 - **Relevant personas:** Referrers (facilitating and using data)
 - HOST team
 - Service provider staff
 - Staff already doing analysis on HMIS data at ECHO
 - EMS department leadership
 - **Relevant data sources:**
 - Service provider case notes
 - HOST/EMS database linkages
- Help **navigators** have a more formal and respected role in the community and help **disconnected** people gain entry into the service pipeline by *establishing a paid stipend for community members who have experienced homelessness to help spread information about public services and serve as a guide* for those newly experiencing homelessness. Potentially build off of Communities in Recovery "peer trainees" program to support a new Navigators program. Navigators could be responsible for regularly updating a service list. This would help reinforce the existing, strong informal networks in the community and spread information about public services.
 - **Relevant personas:** Referrers (facilitating), Navigators, Disconnected (using data)
 - HACA meeting members
 - Other experienced, recently housed members of the community
 - Service provider staff
 - Public library staff?
 - **Relevant data sources:**

- Aunt Bertha
 - 211
 - Service provider lists
 - Information about council agendas/how to get involved
- Help **referrers**, **navigators**, and **disconnected** share real-time information about public services by partnering with a City department and referrers *to build a real-time chat forum or web app* for people experiencing homelessness and for service providers to anonymously share information about daily updates in service availability. Having this chat forum up on computers at service provider locations or loadable via smartphone would help anyone working on providing services to homeless individuals find out about pop-up events, recent updates at service providers, or temporary changes in service schedules.
 - **Relevant personas:** Referrers, Navigators, and Disconnected (facilitating and using)
 - EMS or other department to host the web app
 - Open data team to conduct development sprint
 - HOST team as primary users
 - Service provider staff, other referrers
 - Aunt Bertha staff
 - HACA members
 - Other engaged individuals
 - People experiencing homelessness with first or second-hand access to smartphone or computer
 - **Relevant data:**
 - Crowdsourced information about services