

SEEKING REFUGE IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC: UNDERSTANDING EMERGENCY HOMELESS SHELTER NEEDS DURING PUBLIC HEALTH CRISES



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Executive Summary

People experiencing homelessness are uniquely vulnerable to infectious diseases. As a result, emergency hotel- and motel-shelter programs were developed in order to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the homeless community in San Diego in 2020 and 2021. Following an executive order signed by President Biden, state and local governments are eligible to receive up to 100% funding support from FEMA in the opening and operation of noncongregate shelters until September 30, 2021. This policy has provoked calls from some activists and policymakers for the creation of noncongregate shelter options as part of San Diego's general emergency homeless shelter framework.

How should nonprofits in San Diego approach noncongregate shelter provision during and beyond public health crises? To approach an answer, I conducted a multidimensional analysis of the San Diego Convention Center shelter (as a model of congregate shelter) and a motel-shelter (as a model of noncongregate shelter) operated between March 2020 and March 2021. I reviewed normative and empirical literature about homelessness; conducted interviews with shelter clients, program staff, advocates, and policymakers; and analyzed budgeting information and client outcomes data. My findings, summarized below, demonstrate **the need for nonprofits in San Diego to invest in creating high-quality noncongregate shelter options.**

Motives and Findings

Previous scholarship suggests that there are many benefits to noncongregate living spaces, but research on noncongregate shelter options for people experiencing homelessness is limited. Additionally, research on homelessness generally does not juxtapose normative, experiential, fiscal/logistical, and political considerations about the issue—even though joint consideration of these lenses has important implications for best policy practices.

As in other major cities in California, San Diego's standard practice for shelter provision is mostly oriented toward congregate emergency shelter spaces; historically, there has been very little sustained investment in long-term noncongregate shelter options. Several findings suggest that noncongregate shelter options might add value to San Diego's emergency shelter framework.

Empirical and normative literature demonstrates that the state of unsheltered homelessness threatens human autonomy by eroding privacy and security; **while congregate shelter space might not sufficiently mitigate the harms that homelessness imposes on autonomy, noncongregate shelter may fill this gap.**

Experiential evidence from interviews with Convention Center shelter clients reveals that **privacy, security, and health concerns in congregate shelter settings can diminish their capacity to take advantage of supportive resources and ultimately emerge from homelessness.** Motel-shelter clients reported high levels of privacy and security and low levels of safety concerns; some, however, indicated that **high levels of privacy in noncongregate spaces were isolating and left them without a sense of accountability.** Clients of both shelters often cited the quality of **case management as important to their sense that they had been placed on a good trajectory to sustainable housing through their programs.**

Although near-term costs of setting up and operating congregate shelters might be less expensive overall, **logistical concerns and long-term fiscal considerations may favor investment in noncongregate shelter options.** Political forces at play in San Diego County don't disfavor either shelter type, but some advocates suggested that **noncongregate shelter options, which may be more attractive to some people, could help the County curb chronic homelessness.**

Implications for Practice

Service providers and government agencies in San Diego County should develop noncongregate shelter options as part of the general emergency shelter framework, which can be scaled up during public health crises.

Nonprofit staff indicated that setting up noncongregate shelter programs can involve a number of logistical challenges and important fiscal considerations, and that working through staffing logistics as a public health crisis is unfolding can lead to omissions that affect the quality of the shelter. Nonprofit leaders should work alongside City and County officials to develop emergency noncongregate shelter programs outside of the scope of a public health crisis and outline specific and thorough plans to expand these programs quickly when public health crises require immediate intervention. It is also recommended that these plans incorporate consistent input from people with lived experience of homelessness, who can speak to qualitative dimensions of emergency shelter provision that might otherwise be overlooked.

"I would say one of the challenges for sure is that we weren't expecting this program and so we didn't- it's not like we had a program built up...staff were stretched pretty thin. And so we were able to hire some staff. But also, not knowing, is this going to last 30 days? It's going to take 30 days to hire a brand new staff person, and then the program is going to be over."

– Program coordinator for motel-shelter program

"I think everyone sort of generally understands, like, more privacy is good. And that, like, treating people like you would want to be treated and thinking about how you'd want to be sleeping, and the security that comes from that, and allowing folks to recover from all that they've experienced, and then move into permanent housing, you know, just sort of makes sense...people have seen the value in having noncongregate shelters regardless of a global pandemic. And if you can afford it, and if you can provide that kind of shelter, it certainly does seem like a best practice."

– Ali Sutton, Deputy Secretary for Homelessness,
California Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council

Implications for Practice (cont.)

Service providers and government agencies in San Diego County should invest in training, hiring, and retaining competent case managers for both congregate and noncongregate emergency shelter programs.

Shelter clients reported that the quality of their case management was highly determinative of their sense of stability while living in a shelter. Nonprofit staff, advocates, and policymakers affirmed that better case management leads to better housing outcomes, but many voiced concerns about the retention of well-trained case managers and the effects of overburdensome caseloads. Nonprofit leaders should work alongside City and County officials and local colleges to develop robust case management curricula, including specialized training to address particular mental health needs that often arise in emergency shelter settings. These curricula should take into account specific incidents and challenges identified by clients of emergency shelter programs. Nonprofits should develop long-range strategies for hiring more case managers and consider a range of options for increasing retention in the profession, including increasing compensation for case managers.

"The bottom line is, you know, unless you've got a strong advocate in the system...your likelihood of success is less than what anybody would consider to be desirable."

– John Brady, Advocacy Director, Voices of Our City Choir

"Well, there are not enough of them [case managers], first of all, and...they don't have this kind of people-centered approach, right? And so oftentimes, people fall between the cracks and don't get the proper support that they need."

– Mitchelle Woodson, Executive Director, ThinkDignity

Implications for Practice (cont.)

Nonprofits running noncongregate shelter programs should integrate mechanisms for community-building and personal accountability. Some clients described strong feelings of isolation in the motel-shelter, which served to exacerbate mental health concerns and sometimes left clients feeling unaccountable for progressing in their housing plans. In order to alleviate the burdens of these strains on client well-being, nonprofits should explore internal and external mechanisms for combating isolation and providing regular accountability for clients as they move toward more sustainable housing solutions. Initiatives like the Miracle Friends program, which offers “general companionship and support” for people experiencing homelessness through informal phone calls and text messages, should be studied and potentially folded into the design of emergency noncongregate shelter programs in San Diego.

“I feel like I had too much privacy, really, because I was pretty much stuck in that isolation. I mean, you basically can do whatever you want.”

– Motel-shelter client

“Privacy? Like 0%, honestly. It really is, but that's alright... sometimes [you're] trying to sleep and you have, you know, 200 people snoring around you, and it, you know, makes it seem not very private. I'll take the deal with the bed. I'll sacrifice personal privacy for a shelter, honestly.”

– Convention Center shelter client

Nonprofits running congregate shelter programs should make efforts to increase client privacy and security. Clients expressed significant concerns about privacy and security in the Convention Center shelter. Nonprofits should explore infrastructural and programmatic remedies to these concerns, including using temporary physical barriers in sleeping areas, offering supervised storage bins for clients' belongings, and employing clients to supplement maintenance and oversight of the shelter space.

Future Research

The scope of this research is limited in numerous ways: program details at the sites studied are not necessarily representative of the practices employed at other emergency shelter sites; the perspectives of the individuals interviewed for this research are not necessarily representative of the views of other homeless individuals or stakeholders in homeless services provision; and the evaluative metrics included in this analysis (e.g. privacy and security) are not exhaustive.

These limitations, and the findings presented, raise a number of topics that merit further research, including:

- What characteristics or behaviors make certain people particularly well-suited for accommodation in a congregate emergency shelter setting, versus a noncongregate emergency shelter setting
- The nature and sustainability of housing outcomes for people exiting congregate and noncongregate emergency shelter programs
- Specific short-term measures that can be taken in order to build a robust emergency shelter infrastructure so that it is readily available when the next public health crisis hits
- How the public, businesses, and advocates might react to the preparation of shelter spaces outside of the duration of a public health crisis or other emergency situation

Future research should seek to consider many lenses on these issues, including the perspectives of people experiencing homelessness.

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