



Highlights

Why OCA Did This Study

In accordance with the Office of the City Auditor's Fiscal Year 2019 Audit Work Plan, we conducted a performance audit of the City's efforts to address homelessness.

The audit objectives were to evaluate the City's strategic planning efforts to address homelessness, including its organizational structure, outreach efforts, and use of alternative or interim housing solutions and short-term measures.

What OCA Recommends

OCA made 12 recommendations. Key recommendations are that the City should:

- Develop a strategy to fund the needs identified in the Strategic Plan and ensure staffing resources and coordination are sufficient to implement the plan;
- Monitor and report on progress to ensure accountability, transparency, and effectiveness; and periodically reassess the plan to adapt to a changing environment;
- Develop a comprehensive outreach strategy; direct and train all City-funded outreach workers to ensure outreach is coordinated and conducted in line with best practices; and ensure resources are sufficient to allow for persistent, person-centered outreach;
- Formalize the collection, analysis, and sharing of data on reasons for refusal of service when outreach is offered; and
- Develop an encampment abatement protocol that allows for persistent, person-centered outreach to be conducted by non-law enforcement outreach workers in advance of encampment abatement, whenever possible.

Management agreed to 7 recommendations and partially agreed to 5 recommendations.

For more information, contact the Office of the City Auditor at (619)533-3165 or cityauditor@sandiego.gov.

Performance Audit of the City's Efforts to Address Homelessness

The City Has Made Strategic Improvements But Needs Additional Planning, Coordination, Oversight, and Improved Outreach—Including at Encampments—to Better Address Homelessness

What OCA Found

The City of San Diego's homeless crisis is significant. The San Diego region has one of the largest populations of people experiencing homelessness in the United States, and homelessness affects the quality of life of everyone in the region. The Mayor has described homelessness as a profound social and humanitarian crisis and the central issue that the City and stakeholders must now act upon.

Finding 1: The City Has Significantly Increased Its Efforts to Address Homelessness, But Several Additional Steps are Needed to Successfully Implement the Recently Adopted Strategic Plan on Homelessness

Although the City has made significant efforts to address homelessness in recent years, until recently, the City had been operating without a strategic plan to guide its actions. Recognizing the need for a more strategic approach, the City Council adopted a new Strategic Plan on Homelessness in October 2019. We commend the City for adopting the new plan, but we found that the City needs to take several additional actions to ensure that staffing levels, coordination, funding, and performance monitoring are sufficient to successfully implement the plan.

Finding 2: Homeless Outreach Efforts Can Be Improved Using a Comprehensive Strategy that Includes Additional Outreach Workers, Improved Coordination, and Data Utilization

Outreach can play a vital role in helping end homelessness. In many cases, successful outreach requires significant time and effort to build relationships, trust, and rapport with homeless individuals who may be distrusting of the system. Although the City's homeless outreach efforts have recently improved and continue to evolve, we found that the City lacks a comprehensive outreach strategy and that there is currently no regional system in place to lead homeless outreach. As a result, the City lacks a sufficient number of non-law enforcement outreach workers to conduct persistent and person-centered outreach, and coordination between outreach workers is likely insufficient to drive large-scale, systemic improvements without additional resources dedicated to this effort.

Finding 3: The City Is Not Maximizing the Effectiveness of Its Outreach Practices to Connect Individuals with Shelter and Services During Encampment Abatements

The City should take advantage of all opportunities to conduct effective outreach during contacts with homeless individuals, including during encampment abatements. We found that the City's current encampment abatement process does not include a comprehensive outreach component to help resolve individuals' homelessness. Thus, homeless individuals may simply be displaced to another location that will then also require abatement—resulting in a repetitive and costly cycle of abatement and inefficient use of City resources. Frequent displacement without effective outreach may also impact homeless individuals' ability to successfully resolve their homelessness.

Other Pertinent Information: The City Should Continue Exploring Innovative Short-Term Measures to Alleviate Unsheltered Homelessness While Permanent Supportive Housing and Affordable Housing is Developed

Successful outreach is not simply getting people to accept assistance; the City must also be ready to deliver on the promise of help. However, there are more unsheltered people than there are shelter or housing opportunities available. To that end, we commend the City's recent work to identify innovative short-term options and to take steps to create additional subsidized and market-rate housing opportunities in the long run. While we make no specific recommendations, we encourage the City to continue pursuing innovative solutions to assist homeless San Diegans access shelter and services while more permanent options are being developed. We offer several examples of measures that could be considered.