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# **Legislative Report**

## **An Assessment of Shelter Needs for Transgender People Experiencing Homelessness in Minnesota**

Homelessness, Housing, and Support Services Administration

March 2025

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Minnesota Department of Human Services  
Homelessness, Housing, and Support Services Administration  
P.O. Box 64842  
St. Paul, MN 55164-0842  
651-431-3941

Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 3.197, requires the disclosure of the cost to prepare this report. The estimated cost of preparing this report is \$98,420.

*Upon request, this material will be made available in an alternative format such as large print, Braille or audio recording. Printed on recycled paper.*

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## I. Executive summary

Pursuant to Laws of Minnesota 2024, Chapter 115, Article 14, Sec. 1, the Minnesota Department of Human Services contracted with Propel Nonprofits to conduct a needs analysis and planning of emergency shelter for transgender adults experiencing homelessness in Minnesota. Propel Nonprofits hired Wilder Research to complete this task. Staff from the Department of Human Services and Wilder Research prepared this report.

This legislative directive emerged from growing concerns that existing services to address housing instability and homelessness among transgender people were unable to meet their needs and may be causing additional harm. A lack of adequate, safe shelter options for transgender people was of particular concern given the unique health needs and backgrounds of transgender people who are homeless or unstably housed, which can include trauma, victimization, and system-level discrimination. Homelessness often compounds other challenges that people in the transgender community face.

Wilder Research was asked to examine numbers, characteristics and needs of adults who identify as transgender (trans) and who experience homelessness in Minnesota. The goal of this work is to quantify the need for emergency shelter amongst this population, understand the circumstances that contribute to their entry into and, if applicable, prolonged experience with homelessness, document the non-housing-related needs of this population, and offer ideas for how those needs can be addressed. Wilder Research relied on a number of information sources to complete the needs analysis and produce this report, including:

- 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study data;
- A review of current literature and reports;
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with key informants including homeless service providers, policymakers and staff from community organizations that serve transgender adults;
- Focus groups with transgender adults with lived experience of homelessness and/or housing instability; and
- An online survey for transgender adults with lived experiences of homelessness and/or housing instability.

### Key data and themes from this report

- The number of people who identify as trans in the adult homeless population is relatively low and is similar to trans representation in the Minnesota population overall (approximately 2%). However, any count of trans people is likely an undercount due to reluctance for individuals to self-disclose as trans and their less frequent use of services or shelter.
- There are currently no emergency shelters in Minnesota that focus exclusively on serving trans adults experiencing homelessness.
- Most trans adults who have experienced homelessness have been victims of violence, abuse, harassment, or discrimination prior to and/or while experiencing homelessness. These experiences are more common for trans adults experiencing homelessness compared to the overall homeless population.

- Trans adults experiencing homelessness often sleep in places outside of the shelter system, e.g., outside or doubled-up, due in part to a fear of potential and actual violence and discrimination in the existing shelter system. Compared to all adults experiencing homelessness in Minnesota, trans adults experiencing homelessness are more likely to have been attacked or assaulted while homeless (50% vs. 35%) and to have stayed in an abusive situation due to having no other housing (62% vs. 39%).
- Nearly all trans adults experiencing homelessness (93%) have a serious physical or mental health condition or disability limiting the amount or type of activities they can engage in.
- Nearly all trans adults experiencing homelessness (83%) in Minnesota had their last regular housing in the state of Minnesota.
- Similar to the overall homeless population, Native American, Black, and Hispanic transgender adults make up the largest proportion of the transgender homeless population (66%).
- Nearly all transgender adults experiencing homelessness (89%) had experienced adverse childhood experiences, while also frequently reporting experiencing violence and sexual exploitation in their everyday lives, both while homeless and not.
- While overall employment rates are comparable to the entire homeless population, trans adults had lower average income and experienced differing employment barriers, more often related to mental health issues or disability, lack of resources needed to work (e.g. ID, clothes, and/or phone), and substance use issues.
- The current funding and policy environment informing emergency shelter development and operations is particularly complex and challenging.
- Most emergency shelter operations focus on grouping people into male and female programs.

## Summary recommendations

The following recommendations draw from key data points, as well as themes that arose across the data sources used for this report. These recommendations should be viewed as a first step in the ongoing work of effectively designing and delivering shelter and services for trans people experiencing homelessness across Minnesota in a fashion that includes both strengthening the existing shelter system to be welcoming and inclusive of trans adults and establishing new, population-specific models.

Gender-segregated homeless shelters and services have existed for decades, and trans people have often been neglected or an afterthought in how those systems function. There is a clear need for homelessness and housing services and supports that can effectively, inclusively meet the needs of transgender Minnesotans. Currently no shelter exists that expressly serves transgender adults experiencing homelessness, and while this group is relatively small in number, they face compounding challenges related to their unique needs and persistent societal stigma. Creating safe, accessible spaces and services—especially those that address trauma, mental health, and substance use—is critical to solving homelessness for transgender Minnesotans.

1. **Trans adults would benefit from targeted shelter and support services.** Trans adults make up a small proportion of the overall homeless population, but they are disproportionately impacted by violence and exploitation, discrimination, mental health concerns, and substance use.
2. **Services must focus on ensuring safety without policies that are excessively restrictive or exclusionary.** Trans adults experiencing homelessness face persistent violence, victimization, trauma, and exploitation

at the individual-level and policy-level. Effective strategies and approaches used in LGBTQ+ youth shelters and domestic violence shelters could inform shelter policies and operations.

3. **Appropriate staffing and policies will be critical to program success.** To create a space that feels safe and can effectively serve the trans community, it will be important to implement policies that are responsive to community needs, while also staffing the program with people who are aligned with organizational goals, have knowledge of best practices, and are familiar with or are a part of the trans community.
4. **Services to address the needs of transgender adults experiencing homelessness, especially the most critical needs (e.g. mental health, substance use), must be responsive to the diverse aspects of each individual's identity, inclusive not only of being transgender but also aspects such as race and ability.** This will increase the effectiveness of the services and better support long-term success.
5. **Beyond emergency shelter and related imminent needs, there is a need in the trans community for longer-term supports such as a broader spectrum of housing options (e.g. affordable housing) and a community hub.** Future planning efforts will need to consider if and how the varied immediate and ongoing needs can be met in one physical space.
6. **Planning efforts must consider how services can be made more accessible to all transgender Minnesotans experiencing homelessness, including those in Greater Minnesota.** This could include providing transportation support to the metro (the area a future shelter is most likely, based on where most people are living now and a site analysis in progress), or expanding services (physically or virtually) into Greater Minnesota. The majority of trans adults experiencing homelessness live in the 7-county metro; however, trans people in Greater Minnesota, while smaller in number, may have greater unmet needs due to the lack of services and supports.
7. **Additional planning and development work must be done collaboratively amongst those serving trans people, the homeless services community, and the trans community itself to increase the likelihood of programmatic success and sustainability.**

DHS hopes that this report and its recommendations can contribute to statewide efforts to better serve trans Minnesotans—which will in turn result in better service to all Minnesotans—in the homeless response system, to educate concerned parties about options and strategies, and to confront discrimination against trans Minnesotans that remains too common and produces devastating impacts for individuals, families, and communities.

## II. Legislation

Laws of Minnesota 2024, Chapter 115, Article 14, Sec. 1

Section 1. EMERGENCY SHELTER NEEDS ANALYSIS FOR TRANSGENDER ADULTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS.

(a) The commissioner of human services must contract with Propel Nonprofits to conduct a needs analysis for emergency shelter serving transgender adults experiencing homelessness and to conduct site analysis and develop a plan for building the emergency shelter. Propel Nonprofits may contract or consult with other vendors or entities as necessary to complete any portion of the needs analysis and site analysis.

(b) No later than March 1, 2025, Propel Nonprofits must submit a written report to the commissioner with the results of the needs analysis and preliminary recommendations for site locations. The commissioner must submit the report to the chairs and ranking minority members of the legislative committees with jurisdiction over services for persons experiencing homelessness within five business days of receiving the report.

### III. Introduction

This report was prepared pursuant to Laws of Minnesota 2024, Chapter 115, Article 14, Sec. 1, requesting a needs analysis for emergency shelter for transgender adults experiencing homelessness.

This legislation was brought forward in response to growing concerns that existing services to address housing instability and homelessness among transgender people were unable to meet their needs and may be causing additional harm. A proposed solution to address that service gap would be to open an emergency shelter that focuses on serving the transgender community. To that end, the work culminating in this report sought to quantify the needs and experiences of transgender adults experiencing homelessness using existing data sources and conversations with community experts. While thorough, this report is not a conclusive analysis of all experiences of homelessness among transgender adults in Minnesota.

In conjunction with this needs assessment, Platform CRE, a public-benefit commercial real estate brokerage and consulting firm that specializes in working with non-profits and government entities, is conducting a site analysis and selection process which will provide further details about the physical design and location of a possible shelter building. The work initiated by the legislation is a preliminary phase of work, completed over 3 months, that will inform future shelter planning efforts.

The body of this report is organized into five sections.

- **A summary of available quantitative data sources** about the numbers, characteristics, and needs of transgender people experiencing homelessness in Minnesota.
- **Feedback from community experts**, including a focus group with transgender people with lived experience of homelessness and housing instability, and interviews with service providers and other professionals who work with this population.
- **Insights from available literature** related to the experiences of the transgender community engaging with service systems and insights on how to best serve the community.
- **A description of the shelter site analysis and selection process to date**, produced by Platform CRE.
- **Issues to consider** from this assessment that may be helpful in the planning or implementation phase of a shelter and/or other services for transgender people experiencing homelessness in Minnesota.

### Glossary of terms for populations described in this report

For clarity, definitions of populations discussed in this report are outlined below. Throughout this report, we use the term “trans” to include people who identified as transgender, non-binary, non-conforming, or another gender identity.

- **Transgender (Trans):** “An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.” (Human Rights Campaign, 2023).



- **Two-Spirit:** “Refers to a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit, and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.” (Re:searching for 2SLGBTQA+ Health, 2024).
- **Non-binary:** An umbrella term that includes people whose “gender identity cannot be defined within the margins of gender binary. Instead, they understand their gender in a way that goes beyond simply identifying as either a man or woman.” (LGBT Foundation, 2024).
- **Gender non-conforming** “A person who doesn’t adhere to societal pressures to conform to gender.” (Anti-Defamation League, 2018).

## IV. Prevalence and characteristics of transgender people experiencing homelessness in Minnesota

The following section summarizes available quantitative data regarding transgender people experiencing homelessness in Minnesota. The primary data source is the 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study conducted on October 26, 2023.<sup>1</sup> Wilder Research also examined other sources that provided limited information for this summary including the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and the Minnesota Student Survey.

These data sources cannot identify all people experiencing homelessness in Minnesota, so any count of people should be considered a minimum number, i.e., an undercount, rather than a maximum. One reason for this is that the data does not include people who experience housing instability or are housed in unsafe or precarious situations. Another is that it under-represents people who do not use shelter or other homeless services. Therefore, the needs of any community are likely greater than the currently available data can quantify.

### The number of people who identify as trans in the adult homeless population is relatively low and is similar to transgender representation in the Minnesota population overall.

- **One-night statewide count: The Minnesota Homeless Study identified 156 people who identified as trans on October 26, 2023.** This includes a small number of people who identified as trans or Two-Spirit who were interviewed as part of the Reservation Homeless Study (report forthcoming). These numbers represent under 2% of the Minnesota Homeless Study population, similar to the percentage of all Minnesota adults who identify as transgender according to the Household Pulse survey from the Bureau of the Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).
- **Annual statewide count: Minnesota’s Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) identified 283 people who identify as trans in 2022 (72,331 total people served).** Hennepin County had the largest numbers (114), followed by Ramsey County (54), and St. Louis County (27). HMIS is the data system required for programs that receive federal funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and includes people served by most (but not all) shelters, street outreach, family homeless prevention programs, and supportive housing programs in Minnesota.
- **Minnesota Student Survey: The Minnesota Student Survey (2022) included 11 students** (in grades 8, 9, and 11) who identified as trans or non-binary who had been homeless anytime in the past year.
- **National PIT count: Nationally, the 2024 annual Point-in-Time (PIT) count reported that 1% of people experiencing homelessness across the U.S. identified as trans** (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2024). However, it should be noted that the unsheltered count includes “observational” data and trans people may be misidentified.

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1 Every three years, Wilder Research conducts a one-day, statewide study that includes two components: 1) face-to-face interviews with people who meet the federal definition of homelessness, and 2) a count of people experiencing homelessness throughout the state.

**The majority of trans adults experiencing homelessness in Minnesota are Native American or people of color, over age 24, and staying on their own.**

- Similar to the overall adult homeless population, about two-thirds are Native American or persons of color (66%).
- The average age of trans adults experiencing homelessness is 33. One-third are youth (age 18-24), 56% are age 25-54, and 9% are age 55 and older.
- The majority (73%) are on their own; 7% had children with them.

**Trans adults experiencing homelessness are more often sleeping in places outside of the shelter system, e.g., outside or doubled-up, compared to the overall homeless population.**

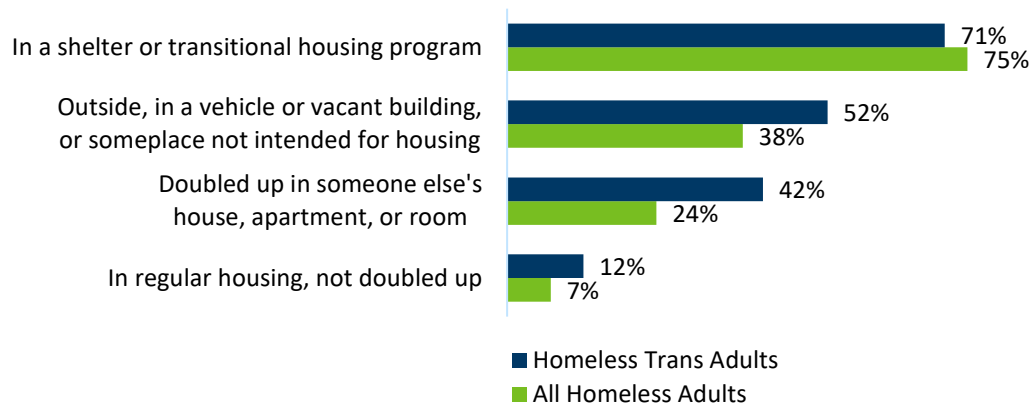
Trans adults are often piecing together places to stay in both the short and long term. Compared to the overall homeless adult population, trans people experiencing homelessness are more often:

- Doubled-up for at least one night out of the month (42% of trans people experiencing homelessness vs. 24% of all adults experiencing homelessness)
- Sleeping outside/unsheltered at least one night out of the month (52% vs. 38%)
- Moving from one place to another in a 60-day period (72% vs 62%)
- Homeless more than once in their life (81% vs 72%)

In addition:

- More than half (54%) of trans adults left their last regular or permanent housing because of problems or conflict with other people they lived with, compared to 31% of the overall adult homeless population and 43% of the overall LGBTQ+ homeless population.
- 39% had been turned away from a shelter in the last three months because there was no space available. Of those, 56% ended up sleeping outside/unsheltered.
- Most (83%) had their last regular or permanent housing in Minnesota, compared to 73% for the entire adult population.

## 1. Sleeping situation 1+ days out of the month: Homeless trans adults compared to all homeless adults



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews.

**Compared to the overall homeless adult population, trans adults more often experience challenges related to their physical and mental health that may limit the amount or type of activities they can engage in.**

These limitations include:

- Having a mental health condition (84% of homeless trans adults vs. 59% of all adults experiencing homelessness)
- Physical or mental health conditions that limit the amount of work they can do (58% vs. 45%), that make it hard to complete activities of daily living (41% vs. 20%), or that make them feel confused or have trouble remembering things (60% vs. 34%)
- A serious or chronic disability (93% vs. 80%)
- Being unable to get the services they need to address their physical health, mental health, chemical dependency, or dental needs (56% vs. 42%)

**While overall employment rates are comparable to the entire homeless population, trans adults experienced differing employment barriers and had lower incomes.**

Approximately one quarter (27%) of homeless trans adults reported being employed, compared to 23% of the overall homeless population; however, the average monthly income for trans people experiencing homelessness was much less (\$453 vs. \$702).

Common employment barriers that were experienced similarly amongst transgender adults experiencing homelessness and the entire homeless population include:

- Having housing issues (e.g., being homeless, shelter rules preventing some types of work, lack of stability) (40% vs. 37%)
- Transportation issues (34% vs. 38%)

- Physical health issues (31% vs. 31%)

Some barriers to employment were more common for trans adults experiencing homelessness. These include:

- Mental health issues (45% compared to 27% among the entire homeless population)
- Lack of resources needed to work such as an ID, clothes, and/or phone (34% vs. 24%)
- Substance use issues or chemical dependency (22% vs 12%)

## **The majority of transgender adults experiencing homelessness had histories of adverse childhood experiences, as well as more recent experiences with exploitation and violence.**

Homelessness can be caused and exacerbated by trauma. Adverse childhood experiences refer to potentially traumatic experiences that occur during childhood, like abuse or neglect. Compared to all adults experiencing homelessness, trans adults have higher rates of childhood trauma. Trans adults experiencing homelessness are more likely to have at least three adverse childhood experiences (71%), compared to 44% of the overall adult homeless population (52% of women and 36% of men). The particularly high rates of adverse events in childhood may be a contributing factor to trans adults having a lower average age of first homelessness (age 21) than all adults experiencing homelessness (age 28), men (age 29), or women (age 26).

### **2. Adverse childhood experiences among homeless adults: Homeless trans adults compared to all homeless adults**

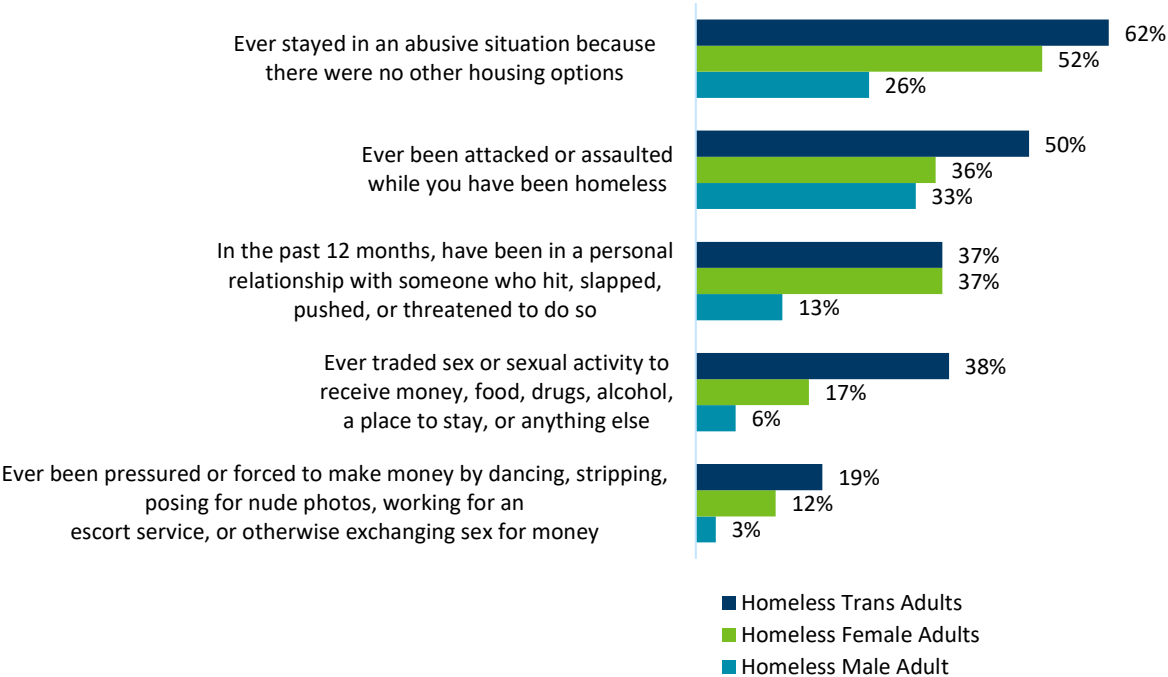
	<b>Homeless Trans Adults</b>	<b>All Homeless Adults</b>
<b>At least one adverse childhood experience</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>68%</b>
<b>Three or more adverse childhood experiences</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>44%</b>
As a child, did either of your parents ever go to prison?	30%	19%
As a child, did you ever live with someone who was a problem drinker, alcoholic, or drug user?	70%	47%
As a child, did you witness abuse of another family member?	66%	47%
As a child, did a parent or guardian ever struggle with mental health issues?	70%	43%
As a child, were you ever physically mistreated or abused?	71%	43%
As a child, were you ever sexually mistreated or abused?	50%	29%
Were you ever without food, shelter, or medical care, or left alone for long periods of time when you were too young to be on your own?	48%	29%

Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

Homelessness creates additional vulnerability for people who are already dealing with a variety of personal and systemic challenges. Trans adults were more likely to have been attacked or assaulted while homeless (50%) compared to all adults experiencing homelessness in Minnesota (35%) and to have stayed in an abusive situation because they didn't have other housing options (62% vs 39%).

Minnesota Homeless Study data indicates that while trans adults have the highest rates of experiences with violence and exploitation, they are often comparable to the rates experienced by homeless women. Even within the broader LGBTQ+ community, we see that trans adults more often experience violence or sexual exploitation while homeless compared to all LGBTQ+ adults experiencing homelessness (80% vs. 74%).

3. Experiences of violence and exploitation among homeless adults: Comparing trans adults, men, and women



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

Nearly all homeless adults, including trans people, rely on services and supports to meet their basic needs, although trans adults access several services more often than the overall population.

Nearly all (96%) trans adults experiencing homelessness used at least one service or support in the prior month, the same as the entire homeless population. For services that meet the basic need of food access, we see that trans adults experiencing homelessness utilized them at similar rates: free hot meals (70% of trans adults vs. 66% of the overall homeless population), food stamps or SNAP (50% vs. 57%), and food from a food shelf (43% vs. 44% overall). However, there are a few services that trans adults experiencing homelessness used at higher rates including: mental health services (48% vs. 25%), transportation assistance (52% vs. 37%), drop-in or opportunity centers (45% vs. 30%), and outreach services (43% vs. 28%).

## V. Input from community experts

Between December 2024 and January 2025, Wilder Research conducted 10 interviews with key informants. The group included homeless service providers, policymakers, and staff from community organizations that serve trans people.

During that same time period, Wilder conducted three focus groups and one online survey reaching a total of 40 transgender adults who had lived experience of homelessness and/or housing instability. For the purposes of this report, these two groups of participants—key informants and people with lived experience—are referred to collectively as “community experts.” A full description of project methodology can be found in Appendix A.

The following are the key themes and accompanying quotes that emerged from those individual and group discussions.

### **There are no shelters designed to serve trans adults and very few shelters that currently serve this community adequately.**

All community experts identified safe emergency shelter and stable housing as one of the most pressing needs amongst the trans community. Community experts note that safe, stable shelter (in the short term) and housing (in the longer term) are fundamental components necessary for trans people to live without masking who they are, while having the physical and psychological safety necessary to address other needs.

Community experts with knowledge of the housing and homelessness service system indicate there are no adult shelters in Minnesota specifically designed to serve the unique needs and trauma experienced by trans adults (age 25+). While some community experts had heard of or received services from adult shelters that “weren’t as bad” at serving the trans community (such as domestic violence shelters), most felt that existing shelters in Minnesota do not serve trans people in a way that ensures their safety or helps them access services that can effectively address their needs.

*There is a lack of options for shelters and they are not necessarily a safe space...but we’ve [trans service organization] built relationships with advocates in domestic violence and sexual assault shelters and gotten people in and safe... we also created a grassroots network of folks who are allies or who are a part of our community who happen to have an extra bedroom. – Key informant*

While no LGBTQ+ shelters exist for adults (age 25+), there are housing and homeless service providers in Minnesota who serve LGBTQ+ youth (age 24 and younger). Community experts felt that these programs serving LGBTQ+ youth are effective and have a positive impact in the community. However, once people age out of these programs, there are no options to support them as adults.

Community experts with lived experience expressed some apprehension about new shelter services serving the broader LGBTQ+ community, as opposed to trans adults only. They spoke about instances in which trans people were excluded or harassed by people in the LGBTQ+ community who were not trans. These experts also were concerned about the unique needs of trans adults and recommended that there be trans-specific shelter and supports, so that trans adults can feel safe and be their authentic selves.

*It would be nice to have a trans-space only...we tend to have more problems. – Person with lived experience*

In Greater Minnesota, there are compounding issues related to lack of services, transportation barriers, and stigma. Community experts in Greater Minnesota reported that there are significant challenges, because most trans-welcoming services are in the metro and transportation to the metro is costly and time consuming. In addition, a number of people with lived experience and several key informants are concerned that the number of trans people needing these services will grow as trans people move to Minnesota from other states, namely those with anti-LGBTQ+ laws.

### **For trans adults, shelter policies and requirements and fear of violence in shelters has led them to piece together informal, unsustainable supports to meet their acute shelter needs.**

While homelessness and housing instability is a challenge for all communities in Minnesota, community experts spoke about the compounding barriers that trans adults face in accessing shelter.

People with lived experience identified a fundamental barrier to accessing shelter in that nearly all shelters are gendered for males and/or females and do not have inclusive policies, practices, or spaces that would support service provision to trans people. This can result in trans people being forced to use shelters that do not align with their identity or being unable to access shelters if their physical appearance and/or government IDs don't align with the shelter services they are seeking.

*[There are] poor services for individuals with trans identities. Shelters are violent. People are turned away and denied or housed in facilities' sides that don't match their identity. – Key informant*

Beyond the structural barriers to accessing shelter (i.e., policies and requirements), many people with lived experience talked about experiencing violence and discrimination while in shelter, from staff and/or other shelter guests. This included physical violence as well as harassment, which when paired with restrictive shelter policies has led to the perception in the community that it is safer to stay outside the existing shelter system, such as with a friend, a "safe" acquaintance, or even with strangers who offer a place to stay.

A number of people with lived experience and a few key informants talked about the importance of mutual aid in supporting transgender people experiencing homelessness. Mutual aid is when a community comes together to support one another in meeting their basic needs (Cornell Law School, 2022). While mutual aid is viewed as a positive and safe way to meet needs, community experts shared that when those structural barriers and fear of violence in shelters exist and mutual aid is not available, trans adults experiencing homelessness may engage in survival sex, in other words exchanging sex for resources that can meet their basic needs such as housing and food.

*You had to pick between men's or women's units, and once you chose, you couldn't switch. Your two options were to stay with the men and get sexually assaulted or be with the women and the men try to take you down themselves. – Person with lived experience*

*There were times I didn't feel safe or comfortable because the people I was staying with in the shelter were acting hostile or seemed bothered by my presence... I wish they would have been more understanding that we're all doing the best we can. – Person with lived experience*



## **Beyond a building, a safe shelter for trans adults involves well-trained and welcoming staff and clear policies and community expectations that prevent harassment and promote well-being.**

Community experts identified the critical importance of skilled, welcoming, and well-trained staff to address the needs and barriers faced by trans adults experiencing homelessness. In order to develop the workforce, community experts suggested that there needs to be targeted, ongoing staff training that includes learning and demonstrating best practices in affirming and meeting the needs of people with diverse identities who may be facing systemic stigma and discrimination. Key informants mentioned that it is important to not take a one-size-fits-all approach, but to tailor services to meet the individual needs of each client. They also noted the importance of supporting clients, even after stable housing is secured, because of the multiple, complex needs and systemic barriers that continue to be faced by this population.

*[The shelter] needs to be able to give each person what they need. At the forefront of each training that should be that being trans or non-binary is not some third option, they need to get rid of that binary system in their head, and see each person as the unique person that they are. – Person with lived experience*

Community experts also recommended that shelters recruit staff who reflect the identities of those they serve including queer individuals, people of color, and people with lived experience. Community experts also mentioned the need for case managers or navigators who can provide information about specific programs that might meet individual needs, such as disability services, housing stabilization, and gender-affirming care. Community experts also highlighted the need for soft skills such as staff who are understanding, empathetic, and judgement free with individuals seeking shelter.

*Hire people with lived experience. Those who have gone through it are more likely to be compassionate and less like to be [bad]. – Person with lived experience.*  
*There's a lot of housing case managers who don't know anything about disability services. We need interdisciplinary connections. If there's a lot of people in someone's corner, it's going to be harder for that person to [mess] up your path to housing. – Person with lived experience*

Some community experts mentioned that if future shelters create a space that serves the larger LGBTQ+ population, they should develop and implement community standards and expectations, to both prevent harassment and other issues and to ensure trans people have an expectation of safety. This can help foster safety and trust within the community.

*If we open it up more broadly that we are making sure and enforcing community standards and basic respect to help foster safety and trust and all of that would be key. I think considering that, opening more up to cohabitating with trans people and getting them more experience with trans people, would probably help the community at large, too. – Person with lived experience*

## **Trans adults experiencing homelessness need easy access to high quality health and mental health services and other culturally-specific supports to meet their needs.**

All community experts prioritized shelter for trans adults as an essential need; however, they identified many other services that are needed in order to holistically support trans people experiencing homelessness. These

services should be gender affirming and co-located within a shelter space or as near to the shelter as possible. Status quo services that are ill-informed about the needs the trans community could do more harm than good.

Community experts most often mentioned the **need for health-related services, such as mental health care**, services to address substance use disorders, harm reduction services, and physical health services, especially those related to transitioning. Community experts were most concerned about the significant mental health issues and high rates of substance use in the trans community.

*Having a tolerant harm reduction style. Most people who experience homelessness, a lot have substance use disorder. And look at it as a health concern, not something to be punished. – Person with lived experience*

Community experts also frequently brought up the **need for legal services** (e.g., changing identification), employment assistance, education, housing, and general support identifying and accessing gender affirming resources (e.g., wigs, clothing).

*Have it all in the building... You have the health care center, the center where people apply for public assistance; if people need birth certificates, gender-affirming care. – Person with lived experience*

There is also a desire to ensure the shelter can **accommodate recreational activities** (e.g., accessing nature, doing art), be a community space, and support partnerships to other organizations. Some individuals with lived experience and several key informants emphasized the importance of **fostering and maintaining partnerships with trans-friendly service organizations**, the larger LGBTQ+ community, and the overarching homeless and housing services system.

*...work in the community, in building up robust partnerships and ensuring that internally we're doing that power and privilege training and that LGBTQI culturally responsive training. – Key informant interviewee*

*Art is a very huge part of how I cope with my situations... And I think a lot of people would also share that as well. – Person with lived experience*

*There should be opportunities to maintain connections... don't just cut ties [with others]. – Person with lived experience*

In addition to providing shelter and support services, people with lived experience and some key informants felt that a shelter with a **direct connection to permanent housing** would provide more stability and increase the likelihood of success for those exiting homelessness. If housing options were available (such as permanent supportive housing or subsidized rental housing), community experts felt that there may be more success in the transition from shelter to stable housing, because people would still be able to access community support and trusted services.

While most people with lived experience preferred to have services available at the shelter, they also mentioned the **need for staff to help them navigate external services systems and processes**. Additionally, a number of community experts expressed a desire for the shelter to be able to provide services and/or supports even after someone no longer needs shelter.

*I would like to see some sort of aftercare or follow-up program for when someone transitions outside of a shelter because even though someone has their own place or has roommates and has that stability it really doesn't mean that they're outside of that trauma. – Person with lived experience*

Community experts also emphasized that shelter and services must **be responsive to the other cultures and identities people have**. Most commonly, people with lived experience described the need to address the priorities and systemic challenges experienced by Native Americans and African American Minnesotans. When serving Native Americans in the trans community, it will be important to understand the culturally-specific practices and nuances of someone who is Two-Spirit. In addition, community experts mentioned the need to be responsive to people's physical abilities, geographic or regional cultural differences, and past experiences with trauma.

Given the need and desire for overnight shelter, support services, and housing, the shelter would likely **need to operate around the clock** to best meet the varied needs of the community and ensure issues are addressed before they escalate.

### **The current funding and policy environment informing emergency shelter development and operations is particularly complex and challenging.**

Key informants with knowledge of shelter funding and operations think it will be critical for whoever is leading shelter service development and operations to be experienced with non-profit management and round-the-clock shelter operations. There is often an underestimating of the costs and complexity of operating an emergency shelter given that most operate 24/7, have higher security costs, require adequate staff, and serve guests with high needs, especially around mental health and substance use disorders.

Key informants saw utilizing a mix of sources (e.g. philanthropic, community-based, and government) as necessary to sustainably develop and operate the shelter and its services. Government funding would likely be a more stable funding source for operations in the long-term, whereas philanthropic and community-based funding streams may be best positioned to support a capital campaign and trans-specific services and resources necessary to meet resident needs.

## VI. Insights from current literature

The following is a summary of insights from existing literature on the experiences of homeless trans adults and youth across the country, best practices for designing shelters, and approaches for providing services to the trans community.

An estimated 0.6% of individuals age 13 and older identify as transgender in the United States (Herman et al., 2022). In Minnesota, 2% of the population identify themselves as transgender/ other gender (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

Among all people, the factor most contributing to homelessness is the lack of affordable housing (Hussey, 2015). Additional drivers of homelessness among trans individuals are the following:

- **Familial rejection:** Rejection by family members is identified as the leading cause of trans homelessness. Rejection may result from a lack of acceptance of an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. Youth may experience both a lack of physical safety and emotional support in familial homes and decide to leave, even if they have no other place to go.
- **Foster care and criminal justice system:** According to the literature, trans youth are disproportionately represented in out-of-home care and the justice system compared to cisgender individuals. This population is also more often the target of degrading treatment and abuse, including sexual assault. They also have a higher risk of facing harassment and violence in these specific systems due to their gender or sexual identity.
- **Other causes to consider:** Other contributors of homelessness among trans people mentioned in the literature include a lack of understanding about issues related to trans individuals and a lack of funding for, and delivery of, services that effectively address the needs of trans people.

(Bowers et al., 2023; Hussey, 2015; Lykes, Weber, Bettencourt, 2017; McCann & Brown, 2021; Shelton, 2015; Transgender Law Center, n.d.)

According to multiple authors, trans and gender non-conforming people experiencing homelessness face unique risks and barriers beyond those experienced by the cisgender population.

- **Safety:** Homelessness, in general, can present challenges that affect people's safety, health, and well-being. Specifically, trans and gender non-conforming individuals experiencing homelessness face a higher rate of sexual and physical victimization, sexually transmitted illness, suicide attempts, being forced into survival sex, and substance use. Studies also indicate that individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ have a higher risk of victimization in shelters.
- **Discrimination with housing:** Trans people experience discrimination at homeless shelters. Many shelters are gender-specific, separating men and women, and may not accept people with non-binary identities. There are challenges in finding somewhere appropriate and safe for an individual to sleep—from doubled-up and sleeping outside to seeking an emergency shelter.
- **School push outs:** Specifically for trans youth, this population may experience a lack of support from schools. This lack of support may include discrimination from school staff who refuse to use correct names and pronouns or even bullying from peers and staff. Additionally, some district and school buildings lack gender-neutral restrooms and locker rooms.

(Bowers et al., 2023; Hussey, 2015, Kerman et al., 2023; McCann & Brown, 2021; & Shelton, 2015)

Most shelters are either specific to gender or co-gender spaces, as a result of systems being designed around binary, cisgender identities of men and women (Lennon & Mistler, 2014). Trans people feel unsafe and unwelcome in these specific spaces (Shelton, 2015). With this structural and systemic barrier, the unique needs of the trans people are overlooked, causing a lack of access and availability to needed services and resources (Soucy, 2024). Today, homeless shelters remain unsafe and unavailable for gender-expansive people (Canham et al., 2023).

## Best practices for serving the trans community

According to the sources included in this review, there is no universal approach for serving all members of the trans community. One size does not fit all, and each individual may have a unique combination of circumstances and needs (Shelton, 2015). Addressing the unique combination of circumstances and needs will also require a tailored approach. However, the authors do provide an overview of general ways in which providers and community members can support and provide services that meet the needs of the trans people.

- **An informed, respectful approach:** Providers, staff, and community members need to understand that there needs to be a holistic approach when providing shelter and supportive housing for the trans community (Davidson, 2016; Dolamore & Naylor, 2017; Lykes, Weber, Bettencourt, Esenstad, 2017). To serve this community, we must understand the unique community needs and create a welcoming environment for all (Davidson, 2016). Individuals feel a greater sense of safety around people they know and trust and have providers who respect their preferred name, gender, and pronouns (Lykes, Weber, Bettencourt, Esenstad, 2017), as well as feel comfortable if they are respected at all stages of transitioning (Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, 2023). Having an experienced staff member who understands the concept of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE) is important, as well as keeping them safe, as they are a vulnerable population (Lykes, Weber, Bettencourt, Esenstad, 2017; Kerman et al., 2023).
- **Maintain up-to-date policies:** Multiple authors recommend that all shelters continue updating and reviewing their policies to reflect the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) 2016 Equal Access Rules and other best practices for gender-affirming practices and services (Bowers et al., 2023). Policies mentioned that should continuously be updated are non-discrimination, confidentiality, and privacy protection policies (Davidson, 2016; Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, 2023; Hussey, 2015).
- **Improved funding:** Funding can be one of the main barriers to all resources and services for the trans community (Bowers et al., 2023; Dolamore & Naylor, 2017; HUD Exchange, 2024; Shelton, 2015). This may limit the availability of resources and services provided. Organizations must find state, federal, and/or private funding to support programming for the trans community to help with long-term care for trans individuals (Davidson et al., 2016).
- **Holistic support services:** Trans individuals experiencing homelessness emphasize the importance of wraparound services in a space in which they feel safe (McCann & Brown, 2021). The following are

specific support services that may be beneficial to the trans community and support a route out of homelessness:

- **Health care services:** Health care is critical during the identity development of trans people. These services may include sexual health care, physical health care, and support of gender-affirming care.
- **Legal support:** Some trans people voiced needing legal assistance, such as name and gender change services, protecting their rights, and navigating potential legal challenges. Staff members can become cultural brokers and help bridge gaps and provide support.
- **Education:** This service can range from obtaining a GED and pursuing higher education to developing essential life skills. This can help trans people develop skills and knowledge that can lead to more opportunities in life.
- **Employment and job training:** Some studies show that there is a correlation between transphobia and a person's difficulty integrating into the job market. Staff members can help support employment and job training by providing instruction, emotional support, mediation with employment centers, and recommendations of places to find jobs. This guidance may help with potential barriers and obstacles.
- **Stability and independence:** There needs to be continuous support and transition out of homeless services. This includes housing assistance and emotional support (therapy, counseling, etc.).
- **Professional training for staff and support:** This includes support services for both individuals and providers.

(Bowers et al, 2023; Davidson et al., 2016; Haug, 2023; Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, 2023; McCann & Brown, 2021; Nadan et al., 2024; Shelton, 2015)

## Shelter location and physical space

The literature lacks detailed information about the importance of shelter locations specific to the trans population. This project expects to obtain further detail in interviews and focus groups that will be specific to people experiencing homelessness in Minnesota. In general, the literature identifies the fundamental importance of transportation for people experiencing homelessness and suggests that shelters located near transportation are best situated to facilitate people's access to services.

Similar to shelter location information, there is no literature or best practices for designing shelter spaces for the trans community. Literature on alternative shelter design, trauma-informed design, and inclusivity in design are likely best able to inform trans shelter design.

While there are a number of LGBTQ+ shelters and housing programs for youth in Minnesota, we were unable to identify any shelter or housing programs that focus solely on serving trans adults experiencing homelessness.

See Appendix C for a full list of guidelines and reports providing information on different shelter designs and cost analyses that may be helpful to consider when constructing and planning the design of future shelters.

## VII. Site Analysis

Platform CRE is leading the site analysis component of this project. The following is a description of the site analysis to date, which will inform forthcoming site recommendations.

### Site selection

Nine potential sites throughout Saint Paul and Minneapolis were analyzed based on zoning compliance, land use, transit accessibility, proximity to services and amenities, size, price, condition, and sale terms. Two sites in Minneapolis were selected for further consideration, including the development of concept designs and financial analysis.

### Concept planning

Through a competitive process, the Platform and other project partners selected architect BKV Group based on their extensive experience with shelters, familiarity with the state bonding process, and capacity to deliver concept plans efficiently. To inform concept planning, two focus groups were completed in December 2024 with shelter service providers and with LGBTQ+ organizations. These sessions focused on identifying space and programmatic needs, with discussions covering communal spaces, safety and security, food preparation areas, the balance between community and private spaces, as well as preferences for colors, lighting, and trauma-informed design.



## VI. Report recommendations

The following summary of recommendations draws from themes that arose across the varied data sources used for this report, including findings from Minnesota Homeless Study population-specific analysis, experiences and recommendations from community experts, and insights from existing literature. These recommendations are a preliminary step informing future emergency shelter planning and service design for transgender people experiencing homelessness in Minnesota.

There is a clear need for homelessness and housing services and supports that can effectively, inclusively meet the needs of transgender Minnesotans. Currently no shelter exists that expressly serves transgender adults experiencing homelessness, and while this group is relatively small in number, they face compounding challenges related to their unique needs and persistent societal stigma. Creating safe, accessible spaces and services—especially those that address trauma, mental health, and substance use—is critical to solving homelessness for transgender Minnesotans.

1. **Trans adults would benefit from targeted shelter and support services.** Trans adults make up a small proportion of the overall homeless population, but they are disproportionately impacted by violence and exploitation, discrimination, mental health concerns, and substance use.
2. **Services must focus on ensuring safety without policies that are excessively restrictive or exclusionary.** Trans adults experiencing homelessness face persistent violence, victimization, trauma, and exploitation at the individual-level and policy-level. Effective strategies and approaches used in LGBTQ+ youth shelters and domestic violence shelters could inform shelter policies and operations.
3. **Appropriate staffing and policies will be critical to program success.** To create a space that feels safe and can effectively serve the trans community, it will be important to implement policies that are responsive to community needs, while also staffing the program with people who are aligned with organizational goals, have knowledge of best practices, and are familiar with or are a part of the trans community.
4. **Services to address the needs of transgender adults experiencing homelessness, especially the most critical needs (e.g. mental health, substance use), must be responsive to the diverse aspects of each individual's identity inclusive not only of being transgender, but also aspects such as race and ability.** This will increase the effectiveness of the services and better support long-term success.
5. **Beyond emergency shelter and related imminent needs, there is a need in the trans community for longer-term supports such as a broader spectrum of housing options (e.g. affordable housing) and a community hub.** Future planning efforts will need to consider if, and how, the varied immediate and ongoing needs can be met in one physical space.
6. **Planning efforts must consider how services can be made more accessible to all transgender Minnesotans experiencing homelessness, including those in Greater Minnesota.** This could include providing transportation support to the metro (the area a future shelter is most likely, based on where most people are living now and a site analysis in progress), or expanding services (physically or virtually) into Greater Minnesota. The majority of trans adults experiencing homelessness live in the 7-county metro, however trans people in Greater Minnesota, while smaller in number, may have greater unmet needs due to the lack of services and supports.

7. **Additional planning and development work must be done collaboratively among those serving trans people, the homeless services community, and the trans community itself to increase the likelihood of programmatic success and sustainability.**

DHS hopes that this report and its recommendations can contribute to statewide efforts to better serve trans Minnesotans—which will in turn result in better service to all Minnesotans—in the homeless response system, to educate concerned parties about options and strategies, and to confront discrimination against trans Minnesotans that remains too common and produces devastating impacts for individuals, families, and communities.

## Appendix A: Methodology

This Appendix outlines and describes the multiple methods used to collect information for this report. Sources for information included:

- **Analysis of 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study data.** Wilder Research conducted special analysis of the 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study dataset to better understand the experiences of trans adult experiencing homelessness as a whole, as well as in comparison to other segments of the homeless adult population.
- **A review of current literature and reports.** Wilder Research librarians conducted a digital scan of existing literature and reports to determine what information exists regarding the experiences of trans adults and youth experiencing homelessness in other states and to identify best practices for designing shelters and providing services to the trans community. A full list of literature and reports cited can be found in Appendix D.
- **Semi-structured interviews.** Interviews were conducted with 10 key informants from organizations that have topical expertise related to homelessness and housing and/or the trans community and service provision to the community in Minnesota.
- **Focus groups.** Three focus groups were conducted with a total of 32 trans people with lived experience of homelessness and/or housing instability. Two focus groups were conducted in person, while the third was done virtually to increase input from participants in Greater Minnesota.
- **Online survey.** An online survey was administered to reach additional transgender adults with lived experiences of homelessness and/or housing instability. A total of 8 people responded to that survey.

Platform CRE also provided information regarding the site analysis component of this project.

## Appendix B: Community expert demographics

The following tables include descriptive information about trans people with lived experience of homelessness or housing instability who participated in focus groups and an online survey.

### B1. Demographics

	#	%
<b>Age (n=38)</b>		
18-24	12	31%
25-35	16	42%
36-45	9	24%
46+	1	3%
<b>Race (n=38)</b>		
African-born	1	3%
American Indian or Native American	6	16%
Asian or Pacific Islander	3	8%
Black or African American	17	45%
White	18	47%
<b>Identified as Hispanic or Latino/a/x (n=39)</b>		
Yes	6	15%
No	33	85%

Note: Participants could choose more than one race.

## B2. Current housing situation

	#	%
<b>Are you living alone or with someone else? (n=40)</b>		
With other(s)	24	60%
On own	16	40%
<b>Do you have dependent children living with you? (n=40)</b>		
Yes	3	7%
No	37	93%
<b>Where are you currently living? (n=40)</b>		
My or my partner's own home or apartment	21	53%
Outside, in a car, an abandon building, or on public transportation	4	10%
Traditional Transitional Housing Program	4	10%
Permanent Supportive Housing	4	10%
Rapid Rehousing Program	4	10%
Couch hopping or doubled-up in someone else's house, apartment, or room	6	15%
Someplace else	2	5%
Community-centric transitional housing	1	3%
Emergency Shelter	1	3%
Hotel/motel	0	0%

Note: Participants could report more than one place they are living.

### B3. Places people stayed while experiencing homelessness

	Yes		No		Unsure	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Which of these places have you stayed while experiencing housing instability or homelessness?</b>						
Outside, in a car, an abandon building, or on public transportation (n=36)	30	83%	5	14%	1	3%
Couch hopping or doubled-up in someone else's house, apartment, or room (n=38)	37	97%	0	0%	1	3%
Emergency Shelter (n=36)	20	55%	15	42%	1	3%
Traditional Transitional Housing Programs (n=32)	14	44%	13	41%	5	16%
Community-centric transitional housing (n=29)	9	31%	17	59%	3	10%
Rapid Rehousing Program (n=35)	9	26%	23	66%	3	8%
Permanent Supportive Housing (n=33)	9	27%	22	67%	2	6%

Note: Participants could report more than one place they had stayed.

#### B4. Sleeping preferences while experiencing homelessness

Of the places you lived while experiencing homelessness, which did you like best? (Quotes on reasons why it was the best option)	# (%)
Permanent Supportive Housing <i>"I had my own space"</i> <i>"Support, resources, location"</i>	8 out of 9 (89%)
Couch hopping or doubled-up in someone else's house, apartment, or room <i>"Community and I could keep my dog"</i> <i>"With friends that I knew and genuinely cared for me"</i>	14 out of 37 (38%)
Rapid Rehousing Program <i>"It was actual housing"</i> <i>"I had a caseworker, my rent was mostly paid. I had my own space and could lock my door and decide for myself"</i>	3 out of 9 (33%)
Traditional Transitional Housing Programs	4 out of 14 (29%)
Outside, in a car, an abandon building, or on public transportation <i>"I was not under someone's control or at risk for sexual exploitation like with couch surfing"</i> <i>"Preferred due to more privacy and safety [compared to shelter]"</i> <i>"Privacy and community"</i>	8 out of 30 (27%)
Community-centric transitional housing <i>"It gave me the most freedom"</i>	2 out of 9 (22%)
Emergency Shelter <i>"Nice room, my own space, other people in shelter"</i>	3 out of 20 (15%)

## Appendix C: Shelter design resources

The following guidelines and reports provide information on different shelter designs and cost analyses that may be helpful to consider when constructing and planning the design of future shelters.

### Shelter Design Guidelines | 2017

Created by BC Housing, this report details design and programming principles and objectives, shelter sleeping accommodation, utilities, and building systems. This is a high overview of what a shelter should entail. This broad overview helps organizations with the planning, design, and development process for constructing and upgrading emergency shelters.

BC Housing. (2017). *Shelter design guidelines*. <https://www.bchousing.org/publications/Shelter-Design-Guidelines.pdf>

### Alternative Shelter Evaluation Report | 2024

This project, by Portland State University's Homeless Research and Collaborative, compares village-style and motel shelters with traditional shelters. Studies show that a village-style shelter could be a better option for creating a greater sense of safety and belonging. This also includes cost analysis and benefits of this type of shelter.

Greene, J., Ferry, T., Leickly, E., & Spurbeck, F. H. (2024). *Alternative shelter evaluation report*. <https://johs.us/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Alternative-Shelter-Evaluation-Report.pdf>

### Trauma-Informed Design for Homeless Populations | 2022

HOK, a global design, architecture, engineering, and planning firm, created a trauma-informed design for homeless populations. This offers housing shelters and organizations design guidelines for creating spaces that include trauma-informed care. This reduces stress and creates a welcoming space for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Light, P., Sperry, D., Selcer, L., & Sargent, K. (2024). *Trauma-informed design for homeless populations*. HOK. <https://www.hok.com/ideas/publications/trauma-informed-design-for-homeless-populations/>

### Design Resources for Homelessness | 2024

Design Resources for Homelessness is a knowledgebase platform that provides shared information about applied research and the best approaches to designing facilities for individuals experiencing homelessness. They also provide consultation to help designers, organizations, policymakers, and the general population with trauma-informed spaces for homelessness. <https://www.designresourcesforhomelessness.org/general-8>

## Examples of shelters focused on serving trans and gender non-conforming people

Wilder identified several examples of shelter services focused on serving trans and gender non-confirming people nationwide that may be helpful to consider when creating new shelter opportunities.



### **Project Live Out Loud | Minneapolis, MN**

The Link operates Project Live Out Loud, a rapid rehousing program in Hennepin County for youth who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Although this is not specifically for the trans and gender non-conforming community, this program provides housing for LGBTQ+ individuals, including culturally specific and trauma-informed services ranging from case management to leadership development opportunities.

<https://thelinkmn.org/housing-program/project-live-out-loud/>

### **House of Tulip | New Orleans, Louisiana**

House of Tulip is a non-profit organization creating housing solutions for trans and gender non-conforming individuals in New Orleans. This organization provides a safe place for this population, and provides community programming, case management, and linkage to care to sustain a continuum of care. <https://houseoftulip.org/>

### **My Sistah's House | Memphis, Tennessee**

My Sistah's House is an organization that provides a safe and supportive environment for the LGBTQ+ community in Memphis, Tennessee. This organization provides emergency housing, advocacy, and multipronged resource assistance developed by and for gender non-conforming people of color. They currently have a project called "The Tiny House Project," where they are building affordable permanent housing to help the continuum of care for individuals they serve. <https://www.mshmemphis.org/>

### **The Trans Housing Coalition (THC) | Atlanta, GA**

The Trans Housing Coalition (THC) is a trans-led and founded organization aimed to serve getting homeless Black trans women off the streets. They use the "Housing First" method mindset, which believes that housing is a human right and that everyone should be offered housing without needing first to satisfy any conditions, such as sobriety, and be provided wraparound services to stay in housing and thrive in their lives.

<https://www.transhousingcoalition.org/>

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