

Report and Recommendations on Detroit System for Unsheltered Homeless

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Presented to:

Michael E. Duggan
Mayor

Submitted by:

Melia Howard
Deputy Mayor

Julie Schneider
Director of Housing and Revitalization Department





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Introduction

Following the tragic deaths of Darnell Currie, Jr. and A'Millah Currie on Monday, February 10, 2025, Mayor Duggan directed the Deputy Mayor and the Director of Housing and Revitalization to create a report that addressed three issues:

- 1) How is the City of Detroit's system designed to address unsheltered homeless?
- 2) What was the City's history of contact with the Williams/Currie family and how did they remain unsheltered for more than two months?
- 3) What improvements should be made to the system to assure that such a tragedy cannot occur again?

We have thoroughly reviewed the history of this case and consulted dozens of individuals engaged in assisting the unsheltered community. Our report addresses the three questions as follows:

The City of Detroit's System for Addressing Unsheltered Homeless

The City of Detroit's system to provide immediate shelter for unsheltered individuals changed dramatically on December 16, 2024, when the City implemented a new "Immediate Shelter" system. Two new drop-in shelters with 110 beds were opened for the express purpose of immediate shelter of unsheltered individuals with no persons turned away for lack of space. Outreach services were extended to 24 hours a day to put professionals on the street to locate and assist unsheltered individuals to give them access to the Immediate Shelter system.

The impetus for this change came one year earlier, in the winter of 2024. The Detroit Police Department reported to Mayor Duggan that it was having difficulty finding housing for individuals DPD picked up who were living on the streets and had emergency need for shelter. There were complaints that the CAM system was not effective in addressing those in emergency need and that there were not shelter beds dedicated to respond immediately to those living on the streets. An HRD review disclosed the cause.

Federal Definition for Services for Homelessness

Homelessness is defined broadly by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) regulations. HUD identifies four categories of homelessness:

- 1) literally homeless;
- 2) imminent risk of homelessness (are currently sheltered, but expect to lose shelter within 14 days);
- 3) homeless under other federal statutes;
- 4) fleeing/attempting to flee domestic violence.



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Homelessness in Detroit

According to the most recent data from January 2024, on any given night 1,725 people are estimated to be experiencing literal homelessness in Detroit, broken down to 305 living on the streets or in places otherwise unfit for human habitation and 1,420 staying in shelter or transitional housing.

Services are prioritized for people that fall into either the first category, literally homeless, or fleeing domestic violence. Those are the individuals most in need of immediate shelter.

The CAM system

The Detroit homelessness system centralizes all emergency shelter referrals through a system called CAM (Coordinated Assessment Model). People can access CAM two ways, through the Detroit Housing Resource HelpLine and at three in-person locations throughout the city. In order to do this, emergency shelters that receive either State or Federal funding are required to report their bed vacancies daily to CAM. CAM is then tasked with filling these beds before the end of the day. A coordinated entry system such as CAM, is a requirement of federal regulations.

An HRD review of the CAM system revealed its weakness in getting resources to those who were living on the street – the great majority of calls CAM receives are from people sheltered at the time of the call. In 2024 there were 12,530 deduplicated callers to CAM:

76% were in some form of housing at the time of the call, whether that be in an institutional setting, staying with friends or family, self-paying motel, etc.

24% were literally homeless (vehicle, unsheltered, uninhabitable structure).

This information is based on the caller's location for the previous night.

The volume of calls received from persons who are in temporary housing situations necessitates CAM to spend three-quarters of its staffing capacity triaging sheltered callers rather than the callers who are unsheltered, sleeping outside, or sleeping in cars. Capacity in the system needs to be added to further identify priority clients at imminent risk of becoming unsheltered.

Winter 2025 Plan: Immediate Shelter System

By the beginning of winter 2024, HRD was tasked with the assignment of implementing a new Immediate Shelter system to address the problem that the unsheltered in Detroit were not always getting prompt placement in shelter. The Immediate Shelter system was a plan to identify unsheltered individuals and transport them to drop-in centers where no one would be turned away.

On December 16, 2024, HRD met the Winter 2025 deadline when it opened the new drop-in centers and completed the 5-part Immediate Shelter Plan.



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Those 5 steps included the following:

- 1) **Doubled the City of Detroit funding for homelessness from \$5.7 million in the 2023-2024 fiscal year to \$12 million currently.** City Council approved a \$6 million general fund allocation for homelessness services. This was the first time that City of Detroit general funds were made available for homelessness. The increase took effect July 1, 2024.
- 2) **Increased 278 traditional emergency shelter beds** available to the CAM system from 924 in winter 2024 to 1,202 in winter 2025.
- 3) **Opened two new Immediate Shelter drop-in centers with 110 beds that for the first time accepted all unsheltered individuals who wanted housing and did not turn away any unsheltered person.** These centers are an entirely new system that allows police, street outreach teams, and hospitals to immediately take unsheltered households to their sites with no need to go through the CAM system. HRD opened 110 beds on December 16, 2024 at two different locations. The first center is operated through Cass Community Social Services which has 75 beds for all household types, including families with minors. The second site is operated through the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries, which has 35 single male beds. These 110 beds have provided a critical safety net in our system. Households are able to stay there until placement at an emergency shelter can be made or until their homelessness is able to be diverted by identifying friends or family to stay with the assistance of short-term funding.
- 4) **24-hour street outreach teams were added.** Detroit had operated street outreach teams 16 hours a day, which covered the traditional CAM call system. With the Immediate Shelter system, HRD expanded the street outreach teams to 24 hours a day so that there was immediate assistance and transport available to any unsheltered person in need. Street outreach teams work in the field and respond to known locations and provide services to unsheltered residents by distributing supplies such as hygiene kits and food, transporting to emergency shelter, and connecting them with homelessness system resources. The department also hired two internal outreach workers to respond to outreach requests from the community to add capacity and coordinate activities. A street medicine outreach team was also added in 2024 to provide basic medical needs to those that are unsheltered in Detroit.
- 5) **DPD and Crisis Intervention Teams trained on the new 24-hour Immediate Shelter service was completed so that** all first responder agencies were aware of new drop-in center model. For several years, HRD and the Detroit Police Department have formed a partnership related to unsheltered households. Intensive training has been provided to DPD officers responding to situations where people are in a mental health crisis or need mental health services. This training includes Behavioral Health Emergency Partnership training, Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), and Mental Health First Aid in partnership with Detroit Wayne Integrated Health Network. These skilled officers form a specialized unit that works with non-profit partners administering services to connect people experiencing chronic issues, such as homelessness or substance abuse, with resources, instead of criminalizing their situation.



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Since the implementation of the Immediate Shelter system for the unsheltered on December 16, 2024, no unsheltered person identified by outreach workers, DPD, or community agencies has been turned away by the drop-in centers according to our records. The centers accept all unsheltered immediately and keep them until longer term housing is arranged or the individual chooses to leave. Our review shows that one of the most tragic aspects of the Williams/Currie family is that they never knew about or got access to the new Immediate Shelter system.

Details of Ms. Tateona Williams and Homelessness System

Ms. Tateona Williams made several attempts to connect to services within the Detroit and Wayne County homelessness systems as well as other housing resources.

December 2022, call to enroll in CERA rental assistance program. The first record of a call was in December 2022 seeking assistance in rent payments from the COVID Emergency Rental Assistance (CERA). CERA was a federally funded program that had expired earlier that year. Ms. Williams indicated she was housed at that time of this call and did not indicate a need for shelter services.

December 2023, initial call for shelter. The next record of contact indicates that Ms. Williams called CAM twice in December 2023. A CAM intake was completed and the Ms. Williams was referred to overflow shelter, a temporary option when emergency shelter beds are not available. The record reflects that Ms. Williams accepted the referral but there is no record that she accessed the overflow shelter. If the client was at the overflow shelter for a short time, say one night, an intake record likely would not have been completed. Typically overflow shelter can be utilized until longer term shelter options are available.

Spring 2024, unsuccessful CAM outreach attempts. CAM made outreach to Ms. Williams in March, April, and May 2024 to update client information but there is no record that the CAM was able to reach Ms. Williams during any of those attempts.

Summer 2024, Ms. Williams called for shelter services. Ms. Williams made calls in June and July indicating that her family had temporary housing but did not know if they would be able to remain in that housing. It appears the situation was resolved temporarily by continuation of private housing.

November 25, 2024, final record of contact between Ms. Williams and CAM. Ms. Williams again indicated that the family was staying in temporary housing but indicated that they would not be able to stay in that housing for much longer. CAM recorded Ms. Williams status as likely to be unhoused in the next 14 days. CAM did not order a visit from the homeless outreach team.

Post-November 25, 2024. There is no record of any further contact with CAM, DPD, or Detroit Outreach Services until February 10, 2025, the date of the tragedy. The 24-hour outreach team continually visited streets, underpasses, parks, and other known locations, continually seeking the unsheltered. The outreach teams had not been searching parking structures looking for families in vehicles and, as far as our record review shows, no police or outreach team learned of the



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situation of the Williams/Currie family. Had the outreach teams made contact, the family would have been told of the new Immediate Shelter system and offered to be taken to the drop-in family center.

Review and Recommendations for Action Steps

The Immediate Shelter system that went into effect on December 16, 2024, is working for the placement of the unsheltered who learn of the service or are found by the 24-hour outreach teams. As the Williams/Currie family tragedy shows, the system does not work if those who need the service are not aware of it. In order to do everything possible to reach every unsheltered person in need of immediate shelter we recommend the following seven steps be taken immediately:

- 1) **Require Site Visits for All Families with Minor Children.** Site visits by outreach workers will be automatically required when CAM receives calls from families with minors facing imminent shelter loss. In Ms. Williams' November 25, 2024, call to CAM, she indicated that she and her children faced the prospect of housing loss in the near future. The intake worker recorded the family as likely to be without housing in 14 days, but did not order an on-site visit by the street outreach team. 76% of all CAM calls come from individuals who have shelter at the time of the call. It is difficult for CAM call center workers to determine the full situation from that initial intake phone call. HRD will now order an on-site visit by the street outreach team for any family with minor children who report they fear an imminent loss of housing.
- 2) **Give Special Attention to Finding Families in Vehicles.** The Detroit Police and 24-hour outreach teams will extend their focus to seeking out families living in vehicles. Chief Bettison is directing DPD to pay special attention to parking garages and other locations where people may be sleeping in their cars. Police will then connect with Street Outreach teams to get people to a safe place for the night. Outreach teams have also increased their attention to parked vehicles. Any member of the community who is aware of unsheltered individuals living in a vehicle can help by calling 866-313-2520.
- 3) **Expand Hotline to 24 Hours.** 24-hour outreach telephone assistance for the unsheltered has been added and is now available. The Detroit Housing Resource HelpLine and CAM share a common entry point through the 866-313-2520 phone number but had operated only during traditional business hours. HRD has now added a nighttime response to that line so that those calling the HelpLine and CAM can get a line directly to outreach teams after business hours who will provide connections to shelter for those who are unsheltered.



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- 4) **Double Number of Drop-In Beds.** The number of drop-in center beds for the Immediate Shelter system will be doubled. No one has been turned away for lack of space since the Winter 2025 Immediate Shelter system went into effect according to records, but HRD is anticipating that the extended outreach to those living in vehicles and the publicity of the new system will increase demand. HRD will double the number of beds at drop-in center beds from 110 to 220 to make certain there are no capacity issues within 90 days.
- 5) **Expand Night Outreach Teams.** The City had been operating with two outreach teams on day and afternoon shifts and one outreach team on the midnight shift. An additional outreach team has been added from 6 PM to 2 AM to provide more complete around-the-clock coverage when it is most needed.
- 6) **Continue Successful Use of Police Precincts as Havens for Safety & Referrals .** Police precincts have been successfully activated and will continue to be publicized as sites for emergency help for the unsheltered. Since the Mayor’s announcement two weeks ago that anyone with a shelter emergency can go to their police precincts, 25 individuals have already sought and gotten help at one of the 12 precincts. An additional 61 individuals were transported to shelter via DPD interaction in the community. The high degree of trust the community is showing in DPD will continue to be an important asset in preventing harm to unsheltered residents.
- 7) **Expand Street Outreach & Education.** Many unsheltered individuals are not getting updated information from traditional news and social media outlets. HRD will expand communication efforts to make resource information available at places that people may frequent when in a housing crisis such as bus stops and gas stations.