Annual Report 2021

Fiercely committed to ending homelessness in Austin and Travis County
The Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is the lead agency for the Continuum of Care in Austin/Travis County. ECHO works collaboratively coordinate and implement community-wide strategies and funding to make homelessness rare, brief, and one-time.

Henry and his dog, Allison, moved into a stable apartment in Terrace at Oak Springs (TAOS), a Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) development operated by Integral Care. The development provides stable housing for 50 people, half of whom are veterans, including Henry. As part of the Austin/Travis County community Continuum of Care, Integral Care connects people to housing through the Coordinated Entry System ECHO manages for our community.
A Rubik’s Cube appears simple enough: just a few colors, a few ways blocks can move, and a clearly defined goal. But combining the right actions in the right way takes time to learn and even longer to build the muscle memory to solve the puzzle.

Throughout 2021, **ECHO and our community partners made strides to identify and practice the right combination of actions** to solve the puzzle that is homelessness. We did so by **collaborating** across organizations and systems to center equity and lived expertise in our work and commit hundreds of millions of new dollars to evidence-based solutions. Another year of pandemic uncertainty, increased job turnover, and a historically volatile and unaffordable housing market proved difficult hurdles for providers across our system, yet **we made meaningful progress** toward creating a rehousing system that will work for everyone.

We were also reminded in 2021 of the **urgency** to solve this puzzle, when temperatures dipped into the teens and lower for a week and ice and snow coated tents where **people struggled to stay alive**. We were reminded again when, three months later, our community voted to **ticket and arrest those same people**.

Our goal has never been more clear: to ensure everyone living in Austin and Travis County has access to a safe, stable place to live. **This puzzle is not a game**, and it’s critical everyone in our community remains focused on finding the best, most equitable combination of actions to solve it.
ECHO's Philosophy of Service is comprised of five principles. **Grounded in equity and dignity, these truths guide our work to develop and implement communitywide strategies to end homelessness.** Throughout this report, we'll use the guide below to highlight how we lived our Philosophy of Service in 2021.

- **SUPPORT**
  - People in the context of their circumstances; recognize and honor their experiences, dignity, knowledge, aspirations, and ability to overcome adversity.

- **AFFIRM**
  - That people are experts in their own circumstances and couple their expertise with data to inform our system.

- **CENTER**
  - Racial Equity: seek diverse voices and unique perspectives in order to best serve our community.

- **LEAD**
  - And foster collaboration that strengthens our homelessness response system.

- **ADVOCATE**
  - Alongside the people we serve for the resources needed to fulfill our mission.
As we moved into the second year of remote work due to the pandemic, ECHO moved out of our physical office location in north central Austin in 2021. Money saved from the move out was invested to meet home office needs and reinvested in other areas of the budget. We expect to move into a new permanent location in 2022.

ECHO saw a 31.5% reduction in revenue collected in 2020 compared to 2019, as well as a 12.5% increase in expenses. These changes result from the Pay for Success program generating revenues in 2019 and expenses in 2020.

The organization also began a 401(k) program in 2020 to allow staff to save for retirement with a goal of working toward matching employee contributions in the near future.
Thank you, donors!

Donations to ECHO or any of our Homelessness Response System partners provide the kind of *flexible dollars organizations rely on* to meet a variety of individual needs including bus tickets, rent deposits, work clothes, and other resources our community’s Diversion Program provides to help people end their homelessness (see page 14).

ECHO received a total of **587 donations** from individuals in 2020 totaling more than **$120,000**!

**Thank you** for your support!

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**$5,000+ Donations**

- St. David’s Foundation
- Acorn Hill Foundation
- Haley Turner
- Suzanne and Garrett Quinn
- Ting Tsung and Wei Fung Chao Foundation
- Samsung
- Amazon
- Anonymous

Donyea, a young mother of a toddler, found a stable place to live in Austin through LifeWorks’ Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) program. The program, which provides short-term rental assistance paired with case management and supportive services, is one of the elements in our community's plan to end youth homelessness, a data-driven partnership between LifeWorks, ECHO, and many more.

[Meet Donyea](#)
The week of February 15, 2021 brought a dangerous and traumatic mix of freezing cold, snow, and ice, combined with extended power outages and water disruptions. Unhoused Austinites faced some of the worst of it, but everyone was hurting.

Yet day after day, people showed up to help.

Groups including Mosaic Street Ministry, Maximizing Hope, the Austin Area Urban League, Austin Mutual Aid, and more raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to put hundreds of people in hotels and bring needed supplies to thousands more living outside.

ECHO staff members (past and present) volunteered at the City-run cold weather shelter. Meanwhile, ECHO’s Community Housing Team identified a need for potable water, hot meals, blankets, and other supplies at several apartment complexes. The Team launched a campaign that recruited more than 260 individual volunteers and donations to more than a dozen sites.

U.S. Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Adam Schiff, among others, called on their networks to donate to several groups, ECHO included, during the storm to support unhoused people. These efforts raised $813,000+ in donations in 2021. See how the funds are helping end homelessness on page 14.
Housing providers in our community that share data with ECHO connected **1,676 people to Permanent Housing** in 2021, a **10.8% reduction from 2020**. Much of this change is due to the decline in Minimal Housing Assistance (MHA). Neither Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) or Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) placements changed much year to year.

Because homelessness is disproportionately experienced by Black people in Austin and because homelessness is a major contributor to health disparities, **ECHO applied for and received a St. David's Foundation Data for Equity grant. Working alongside Black people experiencing homelessness, ECHO is designing and conducting an asset mapping and qualitative research project that uncovers the community and individual resources used by the Black unsheltered community. Findings from this project will be used to address inequity in street outreach services.**
Due to the significant risks the COVID-19 pandemic poses to our unhoused population, **ECHO did not coordinate an in-person Point-in-Time Count** for our community in 2021. [Learn more about the decision here.](#)

Instead, **our Research & Evaluation Team developed and received approval to use a new methodology** to estimate the number of people who experience homelessness on a given day. The methodology sets parameters within the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) database to create a **snapshot of homelessness** similar, though not comparable, to the measurement PIT provides.

This "HMIS Snapshot" is easily reproducible and provides the clearest picture yet of the need for housing and services in our community on a daily basis. [Learn more about the methodology here.](#)

A monthly HMIS Snapshot is one of the data elements available on the **homelessness dashboard the R&E Team built in 2021**. Developed with input from focus groups with members of the Austin Homelessness Advisory Council (AHAC), the dashboard provides users direct access to regularly-updated in-depth homelessness data covering housing programs, the unhoused population, and the overall flow of people into and out of homelessness in our community. It **tracks data broken down by race, ethnicity, housing program type, organization, age, household type, veteran status, and several other variables**, allowing users to dig into homelessness data for themselves. [Watch a short tutorial from the team that built it.](#)
As we recognize that the process of integrating and living principles of equity and antiracism in ECHO’s work and culture is never finished, the organization took the following concrete steps in the process in 2021:

ECHO staff created a racial equity project plan; developed performance metrics related to training, hiring and community capacity building; and integrated racially equitable performance measures into the Continuum of Care Local Funding Competition.

In October 2021, 100% of ECHO staff (35 employees) completed a three-day Undoing Racism workshop facilitated by The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond.

ECHO covered the cost of a leadership and professional development opportunity called Dare to Lead for Black Women for six staff members throughout the organization.

ECHO secured $2 million from the St. David’s Foundation to establish the Austin Street Outreach Collaborative (ASOC). Funding will support 12 full-time positions at multiple outreach organizations in the community with the goal to grow a system to connect people to housing and services equitably across all parts of our community.

Our community began using a new equity-centered housing assessment tool built by people with firsthand experience of homelessness, equity advocates in our community, and service providers. Learn more about the Austin Prioritization Index on page 16.

Tina, Peter, and Natasha rely on their own and others’ lived experience with housing instability and substance use to inform their work with A New Entry. The Black-led organization offers substance use treatment, mental health counseling, case management, and connections to housing for people experiencing homelessness and people who’ve been incarcerated.
ECHO staff worked closely with community stakeholders to develop and implement the restructure of the CoC Governing Board. This restructure centered racial equity and the insight of people with firsthand experience of homelessness. Leadership Council, the name for the new governing body, passed a Compensation Policy ensuring that people with firsthand experience are valued for their time and insight. ECHO staff secured funding to accompany the governance work and is working with community stakeholders to determine an equitable funding mechanism to administer the funds.

The process to remake the governing body with and for our community is like learning how to build bikes so we can all ride safely together. (See next page.)

ECHO staff facilitated a CoC Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) process managed by Leadership Council, which is more racially representative than prior years and includes three voting seats for people with firsthand experience. The 2021 NOFO secured:

$11 million in funds for 14 projects across 9 agencies

Prior to opening the CoC NOFO Local Competition, ECHO staff engaged in intentional outreach to Black-led service providers. Three new organizations participated in the CoC NOFO Local Competition for the first time.
Leadership Council

We have decided we want to build bikes for all the kids in our community; but we’ve never built bikes before. So, we need to figure out what materials and tools we need, and then go out and get them.

Some kids will need training wheels on the bikes; some will need hand pedals. Still others might want skateboards instead of bikes. We’ll need to make sure everyone has helmets, and we’ll need to stock up on band-aids because as many safeguards as we put in place, we know kids fall off bikes.

And of course, we need to remember that this process takes time and we’re going to make a lot of mistakes. We can do everything we can to limit how many kids fall off bikes, how many kids get bikes that don’t fit them or aren’t accessible, and we still won’t have a perfect fleet our first go-around.

But we still want a bikeable neighborhood where every kid has a bike, so we’ll keep working at it until we get there.

Maya Beit-Arie
Assoc. Dir., Strategy and Community Planning

We need to talk to bike-builders and bike-riders in our community to learn from them. We also want to make sure we create a manual documenting our bike-building process so we can share with other neighborhoods in our community so that they can build their kids bikes, too.

And, once we start putting the bikes together, we’re inevitably going to put the handlebars or brakes on backwards and have to backtrack. We’ll also need to provide biking lessons to kids and parents in the neighborhood, build bike lanes, and repave some potholes.

While we do all this work, we also don’t want kids to miss school or other activities because they don’t have their bikes yet. So we need to put together carpools and school buses so everyone has an accessible way to get around.

While we do this, we also need to talk to bike-builders and bike-riders in our community to learn from them. We also want to make sure we create a manual documenting our bike-building process so we can share with other neighborhoods in our community so that they can build their kids bikes, too.
ECHO’s Community Housing Team continued building new and stronger relationships with property owners in the private market to expand our community’s portfolio of units available to people who are ending their homelessness. In 2021, **three new partnerships helped connect 133 households to stable places to live in the community**. This is despite the fact that Austin saw historic spikes in rental prices and occupancy rates through 2021.

In January 2021, the team also formally launched a housing justice collaborative campaign with the Austin Justice Coalition, called **How to House**.
In March and April 2021, ECHO joined people with firsthand experience of homelessness and local government, business, nonprofit, advocacy, and philanthropy leaders at the Summit to Address Unsheltered Homelessness. This novel collaboration, organized and hosted by ECHO Board Member Lynn Meredith and Mayor Steve Adler, produced concrete goals for our community to connect 3,000 people to safe, stable housing in three years.

In meeting this goal, our community will be building the physical and programmatic infrastructure necessary to rehouse tens of thousands of Austinites long into the future. This once-in-a-generation opportunity will move Austin and Travis County closer to making homelessness rare, brief, and one-time.
To better meet the needs of our unhoused neighbors and provider partners, ECHO’s Coordinated Entry (CE) Department staff re-assessed our organization’s role in the community and restructured the department to focus on supporting two systems central to the Homelessness Response System: Crisis Response and Rehousing.

The Crisis Response System Support Team is responsible for coordinating our community’s Diversion program. Diversion provides light-touch interventions for people who can end their homelessness with what are often one-time costs, like bus tickets to confirmed housing, work clothes, move-in expenses, or groceries. About 3-in-4 households (73%) who have been diverted through ECHO’s program since its inception in 2015 remained stably housed in July 2020.

ECHO prioritized a portion of the funds donated during the winter storm (see page 6) to expand our Diversion program. The Crisis Response System Support Team leveraged $250,000 to secure a matching donation from a private philanthropist. The organizations selected for the Austin Street Outreach Collaborative (see page 9) will distribute this $500,000 pool as direct financial assistance, including Diversion and Rapid Exit services.
A foundational element of the department’s restructure is the relationship we have with our partners. Beginning in 2021, we now rely entirely on our growing community of trained assessors to administer the Coordinated Assessment (CA) rather than ECHO staff. The Crisis Response System Support Team trained **38 new assessors** in 2021, now representing a total of **15 agencies** in the community.

With Leadership Council’s guidance, all assessors in Austin and Travis County began using a new assessment tool in 2021, replacing the survey we’ve used since implementing a Coordinated Entry System. The **Austin Prioritization Index is built to address racial and gender disparities** in service delivery and outcomes for people experiencing homelessness in our community. (See next page)
Ending Community Homelessness Coalition

Austin Prioritization Index

Our community implemented a new tool to assess people during the Coordinated Entry process in October 2021. The Austin Prioritization Index is an equity-centered tool built by people with firsthand experience of homelessness, equity advocates, ECHO staff, and direct service providers.

The Austin Prioritization Index replaces an off-the-shelf tool many homelessness services systems use in their Coordinated Entry processes. National and local research has shown this prior tool prioritizes white people over Black, Indigenous, and people of color for housing and services, and does not adequately measure the needs of transgender and nonbinary people. Our community identified replacing that tool as a priority to promote equity within our Homelessness Response System.

Developed, tested, and analyzed over the course of two years, this first version of the Austin Prioritization Index works to correct racial and gender disparities in who is connected to what kinds of services. Leadership Council and the larger governance structure will continue to work with people with firsthand experience and ECHO to analyze and improve the tool over time to meet our community’s equity goals.

Learn more about the Austin Prioritization Index.

Mosaic Street Ministry makes life easier for people living outside. At their hub on Sundays, people can expect everything from hot meals and clothing, to showers and laundry service, to housing assessments and ID cards. Director Leah Hargrave, who’s establishing a permanent north Austin hub called the Charlie Center, takes navigation services on the road throughout the week.

Meet Leah and the team.
HMIS

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Team recruited and trained **223 new HMIS users**, representing **10 new agencies**. This continued growth means our community is able to collect and analyze more data more consistently so our network of providers can better serve people experiencing homelessness quickly, equitably and humanely.

A survivor fleeing abuse faces both immediate and long-term housing barriers, designed by the abuser to drive them back. The SAFE Alliance provides a different path. Through emergency shelter, transitional and permanent housing, and supportive service, SAFE serves thousands of people fleeing domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and trafficking every year.

The HMIS Team developed and implemented a new platform to deliver trainings to the community virtually. The Learning Management System (LMS) includes videos, tutorials, and more in a central hub for busy staff to access self-paced training on our Homelessness Response System, privacy and confidentiality, and data quality. Since the onboarding of the LMS, HMIS users receive more training and knowledge at their own pace about the work we do in our community to end homelessness.
A Message from the ED

It has indeed been a disheartening and hurtful 2021, preceded by a traumatic several years. Many reading this know all too well that the injustices brought to light represent a lifetime of racist and sexist policy and law meant to oppress and maintain order and power for those whose privilege allows it. Many will remind us that this will not be the last time the pain of these injustices will be felt.

The majority in our community who believe in the rights of poor and marginalized individuals and communities, the rights of all races and ethnicities to the full protections of our constitution, and the need to protect our most cherished rights must take action to push back against the rule of the minority. We must work to ensure that these actions do not result in denial of access to basic human rights of housing and health care.

We talk about system intersection a lot in our work. Many of us have been working for housing justice long enough to name these systems; criminal justice, healthcare, foster care, juvenile justice, child protective services, support for people who use drugs, supporting women’s reproductive rights, and many more. Now is the time to merge our work and advocacy for more just systems and a more just society.

Through the work of our Staff, Board of Directors, Leadership Council, and all of you working for systems justice, a stakeholder group has formed that understands our causes are inextricably linked; the people we are fighting alongside are often the same people who find themselves entrenched across several systems that cause deep trauma and harm.

So, a call to action for us now, to bring our allies and colleagues from these adjacent systems and welcome them into our work and to be active and present in theirs. Welcome them in to merge and not intersect. Begin working with them for the long haul to dismantle the harm our systems have caused that we have been a part of. Fight for the justice of people ensnared in their systems with the same tenacity you fight alongside people experiencing homelessness on our streets and in our shelters because as we know they are many of the same people.

I would challenge us all to make connections and organize with people and organizations fighting for system justice to continue to grow our stakeholder group so that presence begins to demonstrate the full breadth of our network.

In sadness and hope,

Matt Mollica, Executive Director