# Tucson Poverty Project

## 2025 Poverty Policy Research Fellows

## Programs, Policies, and Recommendations to Reduce Poverty and Build Prosperity in Southern Arizona

**Care-Based Approach to Homelessness**

**Municipal Recognition of Tenant Orgs**

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# Authors' Notes and Acknowledgements

These reports are a series of policy and program briefs prepared by the 2025 Poverty Policy Research Fellows as part of the Tucson Poverty Project. Each Spring, Fellows are selected from the Poverty in Tucson Field Workshop undergraduate course and invited to participate in a policy workshop led by Dr. Brian Mayer and with support from Amanda Pierson in 2025. Policy Working in collaboration with the Tucson Poverty Project, Policy Fellows research innovative policy and program ideas aimed at alleviating poverty and fostering prosperity in Pima County. Each Fellow selects an individual topic and conducts comparative research, analyzing how other municipalities have implemented similar initiatives and identifying best practices that governments in Southern Arizona might adopt to achieve the desired outcomes.

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# Care-Based Approaches to Homelessness in Tucson

**Jesse Anderson, Food Studies Major**

Homelessness is on the rise across the United States, driven largely by housing scarcity, housing cost burden, and low incomes (Soucy, Janes, and Hall, 2024). Tucson is a city that has been hit particularly hard by this crisis, with a 60% increase in people experiencing homelessness (PEH) between 2018 and 2023 (City of Tucson, 2025a). Tucson's main approach to dealing with homelessness has been the Housing First initiative, which focuses primarily on connecting PEH to short- and long-term housing solutions (City of Tucson, 2025b). However, in Tucson, like many other cities, housing simply cannot keep up with demand, and punitive measures are increasingly popular. The city has very recently faced split votes on controversial measures to deal with homelessness (e.g., Kunichoff, 2025b). How can Tucson stay ahead in terms of serving as a beacon for compassionate care for PEH despite the overarching national and local narratives of homelessness being framed as a problem to be criminalized and controlled? In this paper, I summarize research on how homelessness has transformed in recent years and how we might systematically evaluate policies aimed at addressing homelessness. I then describe cases in two cities – the Safe Outdoor Space (SOS) sanctioned encampment in Phoenix, AZ and tiny home villages in Austin, TX – that may be helpful for crafting homelessness policy that empowers PEH rather than controlling and criminalizing them.

**The Political Context of "New Homelessness" and its Unique Challenges**

The increased salience of the issue of homelessness in Tucson reflects a broader national sociological trend, whereby aside from the increase in the number of PEH, there has been a shift in what homelessness looks like. In "The New Homelessness," Versteeg, Cope, and Mukherjee (2024) explain how court rulings over the past 8 years have led to sharp decreases in the use of public shelters and increases in mass encampments at or near city centers. In 2018, *Martin v. Boise* decided cities had to let PEH sleep in public spaces because to not do so comprised "cruel and unusual punishment" (and thus violated the $8^{th}$ Amendment), given they could not avoid violating the law. This ruling was overturned in *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* (2024), emboldening many states and cities to pursue aggressive, punitive policies, but Versteeg, Cope, and Mukherjee argue a great deal of social infrastructure was built in the time between *Martins* and *Grants Pass* that make the "new homelessness" unlikely to go away anytime soon. U.S. cities will continue to face the need to develop unique and creative solutions to homelessness.

Cities' responses to the "new homelessness" have varied, ranging from punitive policies that criminalize sheltering in public, panhandling, or feeding PEH in public spaces and often come along with encampment "sweeps," destruction and seizure of personal belongings, and citations and arrests, to more “care-based” solutions like sanctioned encampments (SEs), increased food assistance and social services, and creative solutions like “help huts” and tiny home villages (Orr et al., 2023). As media narratives and framing about homelessness have continued to emphasize homelessness as due to individual characteristics and personal challenges rather than structural forces (Shields, 2001; Varma, 2020), city responses have tended to lean toward punitiveness. Even in more progressive cities where SEs have been developed, SEs range a great deal in terms of how punitive they are and how much autonomy they give PEH (Orr et al., 2023). Scholars have regarded the broad shift toward more punitive policies as a digression from post-revanchism, which argues for using land to empower people and grant autonomy, to the revanchism of the 1870s, which aims to reclaim the land of less powerful groups for the purposes of the nation, state, or more powerful groups (Orr et al., 2023).

Tucson is in the eye of storm now regarding how it will approach “new homelessness.” Recently, Proposition 314 gave businesses tax refunds for documented expenses related to PEH affecting their land (Kunichoff, 2025b), and the city is reconsidering Ordinance 21-4, which regulates who is allowed to distribute food in city parks, what permits are needed, and where food distribution can occur (Cree, 2025). Further, the city council rejected a measure to ban sleeping in washes but passed one that includes fines and/or jail time for standing in certain traffic medians (Kunichoff, 2025b). Additionally, surveys done by City of Tucson showed that affordable housing, homelessness support, shade, and early education funding were the top priority for Tucsonans (City of Tucson, 2025c), but the city had opted to support Prop 414, which increased funding for some care-related services but mostly included large investments in policing. Currently, the city of Tucson is considering some new homelessness policies like “help huts,” proposed by Ward 6 Councilmember Karin Uhlich, which would issue city permits for aid groups to use several city parks to provide daytime aid and overnight camp sites for PEH (Borla, 2025). Others are considering replicating the approach taken by Phoenix, described more shortly (Kunichoff, 2025a).

The approaches cities take have stark implications for homelessness and the well-being of PEH as well as the broader community. In *City Making: Building Communities Without Walls*, Frug (1999) lays out how legal rules and city policies related to zoning, redevelopment, land use, and policing – driven largely by fears of strangers and crime as well as concerns about property values and “good schools” (factors broadly associated with “NIMBYism”) – have segregated cities and pitted residents against one another. These harms of punitive homelessness policies highlight the importance of putting care and community first in how the city of Tucson handles homelessness. When homelessness policies lack compassion and treat homelessness as something to be relegated to the periphery of society, they lack the social fabric we know to be necessary for building resilient communities (Tierney, 2019). How can we evaluate what the impacts of policies being considered might be?

Orr et al. (2023) develop a two-dimensional typology for evaluating SEs along the lines of dependence, which ranges from “control” to “autonomy,” and compassion, which ranges from “punishment” to “care.” To assess dependence, they consider site rules (e.g., curfews, restrictions on movement or property, pet allowances), management style (how much say residents have in decision-making), and management entity (municipal government versus non-profit organizations, which can be susceptible to corruption and a lack of accountability). To assess compassion, they consider barriers to entry (e.g., criminal record, drug addiction, pet ownership), location (e.g., isolation from city services, proximity to pollution, exposure to severe weather), and services (e.g., mental and physical health care, case management, housing assistance, job training).

I evaluate the two cases in this paper along the dimensions proposed by Orr et al. (2023). The case of Phoenix’s Safe Outdoor Space (SOS) sanctioned homeless encampment illustrates the process that Tucson’s “big sister” city has gone through, and in doing so, offers insight into dealing with political, social, geographic, and funding-related hurdles that Tucson will encounter as well. The Community First and Esparanza tiny home villages of Austin represent a more developed “next step” in terms of care-based approaches to homelessness that also address many of the limitations of Phoenix’s SE and offer greater autonomy and a pathway to future housing. Tiny home villages are not analyzed by Orr et al. but are discussed as having clear advantages over SEs in terms of both care and autonomy (although as explained, some aspects of Austin’s approach detract from the autonomy it offers).

**Case Study #1: The Safe Outdoor Space (SOS) of Phoenix, Arizona**

The case of Phoenix, Arizona highlights the competing forces that many cities are facing, with countervailing pressures to both clear out homeless populations and respect PEH’s autonomy and rights. Maricopa County experienced a 73% increase in the number of PEH from 2016 to 2022, exacerbated in large part by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which Phoenix was one of the few cities that experienced significant population *growth*, adding undue pressure to housing costs and social services (Gibbs et al., 2025). During this time, many PEH turned to Key Campus, a homelessness hub established in 2005 consisting of warehousing and light manufacturing businesses, parking lots, and empty parcels of land that was nearby other homeless services and temporary shelters. The surrounding blocks consisted of long stretches of small encampments. At its height in 2022, the encampment, referred to as “the Zone,” contained 800 PEH across over 15 blocks.

In light of a petition from local residents, local and national press, a Justice Department investigation, and court rulings, Mayor Kate Gallego and the city Council created the Strategies to Address Homelessness Plan (STAHP), which led to the creation of the Office of Homelessness Solutions (OHS) in May of 2022, a city department focused explicitly on homelessness (Gibbs et al., 2025). During this time, refuse collection increased from five to six days per week. A "Safe Storage" program was implemented, whereby PEH could store belongings in repurposed bins secured with zip ties while accessing needed services. ARPA granted the city $2.6 million in funding for a Heat Response Plan involving building another shelter. However, in 2021, the city had to take various actions to clear encampments in response to court orders and injunctions. During this time, the city adopted a client-centered approach involving a Homeless Laison Team (7 out of 11 whom had lived experience with homelessness) and used a block-by-block approach to clearing out encampments in "the Zone" but only as shelter beds became available. Several policies were implemented to ensure care for those being moved, such as securing property, help from outreach workers to find move-on options, and having police present (although only on "standby"). Eventually, 585 of the 718 people who were being cleared from encampments had accepted assistance in finding shelter, and there was a 600-person (19%) drop in unsheltered homelessness by 2024 (making Phoenix the only city where homelessness went down) (Gibbs et al., 2025).

In 2023, the Safe Outdoor Space (SOS) was born as a sanctioned outdoor camping area under an open-air, covered warehousing field about the size of a football stadium (Gibbs et al., 2025). It is approximately 4 acres of turf with a capacity for 200 tents, or about 300 people (Kunichoff, 2025a), and serves as a controlled, sanctioned means of temporarily housing PEH (Gibbs et al., 2025). It is funded via a $5.4 million grant from the Arizona Department of Housing and was developed in conjunction with efforts to expand outreach for a range of services, including dental care, physical and behavioral health care, pet care, transportation assistance, mailroom services, personal identification services, and workforce training and employment services (Gibbs et al., 2025). Residents can request tents through referrals from service providers, and people who need more structured housing for medical or other reasons can request one of 38 modified, solar-powered shipping containers. Amenities include shared bathrooms, showers, laundry service, bike racks, and picnic tables, as well as full-time security (Kunichoff, 2025a). A goal of the SOS is to be as low-barrier as possible, but residents still agree to a good neighbor agreement, there is a community advisory committee, and town halls for residents occur regularly. As of February, 2025, it has served almost 1,400 people, with an average stay of 90 days (Kunichoff, 2025a).

*Evaluating Compassion and Autonomy*

The insight we can gain from the case of Phoenix, Arizona is not only the development of the SOS but also the process the city used to transition from the unsanctioned encampments that initially existed to the SOS. Prior to STAHP and the creation of the OHS, efforts to combat homelessness were very decentralized, and so OHS is beneficial because it serves to centrally coordinate the work of Neighborhood Services, Public Works, and Human Services. This also means there is a city department that is directly accountable for the management of homelessness in Phoenix, which would not be as true if the project were run by a non-profit organization (Gibbs et al., 2025). Additionally, OHS allowed police to take a step back from managing homelessness as service workers stepped in. The process also put former PEHs front-and-center in the development of the city's plans. Looking back to the criteria laid out by Orr et al. (2023), these aspects of Phoenix's approach all increase its autonomy score on the grounds of management entity and management style.

In terms of clearing existing encampments, the process was gradual and deliberate in considering the needs of the people being moved while still abiding by a set deadline (although this was partly just due to the constraints of court orders). As people were cleared from encampments, service workers kept lists of names and provided individualized recommendations for temporary shelter, only moving people as temporary shelter became available. Finally, the SOS itself was developed specifically with the intent of being low-barrier, designed for the heat of the Sonoran Desert (e.g., using large areas with shade and turf), safe, and relatively autonomous. These things positively impact Phoenix's compassion score using Orr et al.'s (2023) criteria. In terms of autonomy, residents were able to have their own space, offering privacy and a sense of dignity, and regular town halls give residents a voice. The location is also central to the city and the use of case management workers also shows care in the city's approach.

Despite the many benefits of Phoenix's SOS and broader strategy for dealing with "new homelessness," there are notable limitations. First, although the city was keen on connecting those moved from "the Zone" to temporary shelters, these shelters were nonetheless temporary, limited, and plagued with complaints about unsanitary and inhumane conditions (Fytros, 2024). With severe overcrowding, "overflow areas" were often used as corrective spaces for residents deemed non-compliant. Even in the SOS, there were many complaints about raw sewage, heat (given many tents being on asphalt rather than the limited turf area), and limited case workers. These aspects of the SOS harm its compassion score. In the SOS, there are also restrictions on who qualifies for the limited space, they must get referrals from social workers, they must abide by an 11 PM curfew (unless they work overnight), and there are random tent and personal searches by security guards, all harming its autonomy score. Also, there is little to be found in terms of a sense of community in the SOS. The SOS offers respite, but it is not a place where the social fabric necessary to empower PEH is found easily. Finally, other than town halls, the residents are not directly involved in the leadership and rulemaking for the community. In other words, despite best intentions, the SOS often runs into issues related to both compassion and autonomy for its residents.

**Case Study #2: The Community First and Esperanza Tiny Home Villages of Austin, Texas**

In response to surges in homelessness, Austin, Texas took a route similar to yet distinct from that of Phoenix. Just like in Phoenix, Austin struggled to offer a caring and effective response to homelessness in a political and social environment moving toward criminalization and punitiveness. In 2019, the city Council lifted a ban on public camping, but soon after, as tents became more and more visible, residents began to complain, and Governor Greg Abbot sent the Texas Department of Transportation to clear out various encampments (Tompkins and Durst, 2024). Within two years, a new camping ban was on the ballot and was overwhelmingly approved by voters. Unlike Phoenix, however, some infrastructure for alternatives had already existed thanks to some organizations that had already been seeking creative solutions to homelessness.

In 2012, after a great deal of initial pushback, Alan Graham, a former real estate developer who had been involved in several efforts to address homelessness, raised $20 million for his faith-based non-profit organization to build an R.V. park exclusively for PEH just outside of Austin city limits. The park, called Community First, offers affordable (~ $385 per month on average, ranging depending on the amenities) R.V. and tiny home housing to nearly 400 formerly homeless people on a 51-acre plot of land with plans to expand another 127 acres and reach 2,000 homes (thus making it capable of housing half of the city's homeless population) (Tompkins and Durst, 2024). The community is far from public transportation but a bus brings residents to the city 13 times per day. The community also includes chicken coops, vegetable gardens, a convenience store, art/jewelry studios, a medical clinic, and a chapel.

Despite the affordability of Community First homes, they still remain out of reach for many PEH in Austin given their cost and location. The Esperanza Community, run by The Other Ones Foundation (TOOF), on the other hand, offers free temporary housing in their tiny home village (Leffler, 2023). In 2019, a 7-acre plot of asphalt signed over by Governor Gregg Abbott was Austin's only sanctioned encampment. It was run by the State Department of Transportation and consisted of tents and makeshift shelters on asphalt with no shade or air conditioning. Safety from one another was the top concern among residents. In 2021, the state gave control over to TOOF, and since then TOOF has built over 80 tiny homes with plans to build 100 more (Leffler, 2023). Units offer electricity, air conditioning, heating, and locking doors. Further, autonomy is a priority in Esperanza. TOOF holds elections for a council of residents that communicate needs to TOOF. One of the biggest deterrents to PEH joining shelters traditionally is not being able to bring a dog, and yet at Esperanza, there is a dog park on site and residents can keep a dog as long as it is on-leash, spayed/neutered, and vaccinated (Leffler, 2023). Although there is no time limit at Esperanza, the goal is to transition PEH to more permanent housing within 90 to 120 days (Leffler, 2023).

*Evaluating Compassion and Dependence*

Overall, there are still challenges faced by the tiny home villages in Austin, Texas. Perhaps most notably, there are still many more PEH in the city than there is available housing (whether temporary or permanent) and the expense of building tiny homes (~$21,000 each as of 2019; Evans, 2020) presents a notable hurdle to the challenge of building enough for all PEH. However, the approach used in Austin offers some advantages over the SOS in Phoenix. First, the combination of free temporary (Esperanza) and affordable permanent (Community First) housing creates a sort of scaffolding to serve the myriad needs of PEH in the city. Some individuals may move from one to the other, and others may just use one. One of the biggest challenges faced by Phoenix is where people go after the SOS. Attempts to incentivize building more permanent housing have seemed only to put a tiny dent in the issue, and so the approach taken by Community First seems promising in terms of offering larger-scale solutions to permanent housing needs. This characteristic of Austin's approach does not fit neatly into Orr et al.'s (2023) categorization scheme, but it certainly reflects positively in terms of autonomy.

The units in Austin give residents a much greater sense of dignity and privacy than the tents of Phoenix's SOS. This fosters community and strengthens the social fabric of a neighborhood that is necessary for people to get back on their feet. This is a core tenet of the tiny home villages in Austin and boosts their autonomy score. In terms of compassion, the housing used in Austin's approach also offers much greater protection from the elements (e.g., heat), more amenities, and more security than any SE.

The tiny home approach of Austin has a lot of advantages but still has notable deficiencies in terms of both compassion and autonomy. In terms of location, both Community First and Esperanza are somewhat on the outskirts of the city, and in terms of management entity, Community First is run by a faith-based non-profit, which could make it vulnerable to a lack of accountability and profit motives among partners (Orr et al., 2023). Without direct control by the city such as with the SOS in Phoenix, accountability may be harder to come by.

## Conclusion

In a general sense, the cases examined here reflect the broader efforts of some U.S. cities to address homelessness in an effective and ethical manner, but as seen here as well as in the broader literature, significant challenges remain even in the most progressive cities with care-oriented goals. Cities continue to struggle with the balance between providing care, resources, and autonomy to PEH while also dealing with concerns about safety, cleanliness, community impact, and cost. The cases presented here related to SEs and tiny homes, quickly growing proposed solutions to the “new homelessness,” highlight critical features of policies seeking to address homelessness that the city of Tucson should consider as they evaluate proposals in the near future.

Specifically, Tucson could benefit greatly from pursuing a scaffolded tiny home village framework like that of Austin (including both temporary and more permanent housing) but while taking advantage of the political strategy, funding, and practical insights offered from the Phoenix case, which has had to deal with many of the same political, geographic, and social issues as Tucson. Ultimately, rather than proposing that one approach is superior to the other, the recommendation here is to take lessons from both cases and apply them to the *process* of addressing homelessness in Tucson. As seen in both Phoenix and Tucson, homelessness solutions evolved over time, and there are potentially benefits to incorporating pieces of both cities’ approaches, ranging from low-cost, temporary options to more permanent housing investments. Tucson has the opportunity here to be a leader in how to deal with the “new homelessness” cities across the U.S. are experiencing in an effective and cost-efficient manner that preserves the dignity and autonomy of PEH.

All said, despite notable downsides in terms of location and management entity, Austin’s tiny home villages offer more in terms of care and autonomy than Phoenix’s SOS, but one obvious remaining concern is cost. Admittedly, the up-front cost of Austin’s approach is significantly greater than that of Pheonix’s approach, but there are a number of reasons we should place this up-front cost in context. First, we must consider the cost of more punitive approaches to homelessness. Some research estimates the cost of criminalizing a single PEH through anti-panhandling laws, anti-homeless architecture, police raids on encampments and general harassment, and emergency room and inpatient hospitalizations to be about $31,000, or roughly the same as paying that person $15/hour for a full-time job (Fraieli, 2021; Shinn & Watson Tracy, 2014). Chronically homeless people are arrested frequently, and given the costs of booking, incarceration, and police surveillance alone, approaching homelessness with criminalization can cost a city hundreds of thousands of dollars each year, even in a city with relatively low homelessness (Fraieli, 2021; Shinn & Watson Tracy, 2014). In a year, police can spend nearly 3,000 hours on offenses associated with PEH, with offenses mainly being related to crimes like trespassing, liquor possession, and public-order (Urban Institute, 2022). Conversely, places like Community First in Austin empower (former) PEH to gain dignified employment, bring in income, pay taxes, and serve the community. For example, Community First residents brought in $1.5 million in income in 2023 alone (Mobile Loaves & Fishes). Finally, although Phoenix brought in the expertise of various partners in the development of the SOS, Austin’s approach was still a bit more “ground up” in terms of the roles of private and non-profit partners. Many organizations exist that are already “doing the work” effectively in their own ways, and so coordinating their efforts can be more valuable than starting from scratch. This also means that a great deal of the up-front cost for Austin is paid for by donations from non-profit and private organizations rather than by the city.

In an overarching sense, the recommendation for the City of Tucson here is to pay careful attention to the evaluative criteria used by scholars like Orr et al. (2023) when determining the likely effects of homelessness policies. It is clear that in terms of the political landscape and media narratives at play as cities deal with "new homelessness," there is a tension between the desire to be compassionate and the instinct to be punitive and controlling (and in the current environment, the latter seems to often edge out the former). Cities' have therefore unsurprisingly varied in their responses. Both Phoenix and Austin took approaches that took compassion seriously. The SOS in Phoenix and tiny home villages of Austin vary along certain dimensions like management style/entity and location, but they both have a focus on being low-barrier (neither have very strict rules about becoming a resident) and offer a range of services related to case work, job training, physical and mental health, and finding housing. Ultimately, layered or scaffolded options that borrow from both approaches may prove critical. Approaches to addressing homelessness that prioritize care and autonomy while still navigating the crude and often unforgiving political landscape are possible, especially if we take the best of what these cases have to offer and learn from their weaknesses.

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# Municipal Recognition of Tenant Organization

**Ziv Belfer-Johnson, Linguistics and East Asian Studies**

Tenants' unions, or tenants' organizations, are groups formed by renters for the purpose of collectively making contact and negotiating with a landlord. In the United States, this practice has its origins in New York City, where the first major rent strikes occurred in the 1910s and 1920s in response to rent hikes after the first world war (1). Having existed in practice since the early 20th century, tenants' unions have surged in take-up and campaigning since eviction moratoriums ended post-2020 and as rent has increased year by year for many. Historically, unions form as reactions to objectionable or hazardous conditions in residential units, particularly in cases where tenants have sent individual complaints or requests for maintenance and received no response or have even had their rent payments increased while living on willfully neglected property. Once established, common topics for collective negotiation are rent increases, property upkeep, crime prevention and building security (2).

In Arizona, some protection exists on paper for members of tenants' unions. Section 33-1381 of the Arizona Residential Landlord and Tenant Act forbids a residential landlord from pursuing retaliatory action – raising rent, denying maintenance, evicting or threatening to evict – against a renter who "has organized or become a member of a tenants' union or similar organization." This plain language section of the Act features the only mention of tenant organization in Arizona law (3).

The definitions provided in Section 33-1310 do not account for the terms "tenants' union" or "tenants' organization." (4). Without concrete parameters for union membership in place, it remains feasible for landlords to engage in retaliatory conduct. Case in point is the campaign by renters at the Malibu Apartments, with the assistance of the neighborhood-level Amphi Panteras, for negotiations with the corporate managers of the building. In response to canvassing and on-site meetings held by the Panteras, who were invited onto the property by Malibu union members, lawyers representing the owners of Malibu issued the Panteras a cease-and-desist letter accusing the Panteras of soliciting, harassing and stalking tenants on the property (Personal communication between Amphi Panteras and King & Frisch, P.C., March 11, 2024). Members of the Malibu Apartments association have even been threatened with eviction, though management claims their union activity was not at issue (5).

It is popularly and statistically recognized that rates of eviction and homelessness are increasing in the City of Tucson. The common ameliorative suggestion of rent control has been rendered unfeasible by Arizona state statute. The city can lower eviction rates and provide a framework of support for low-income renters by following the precedents set by the municipal governments of San Francisco and New Haven. This would entail enacting ordinances that a.) provide solid legal definitions for protected individuals, organizations and activities and b.) bolster those protections such that local bodies like the Amphi Panteras and the Tucson Tenants' Union may exercise their rights and spread awareness of those rights to renters effectively and without fear of retaliation they are already, ostensibly, protected from.

**San Francisco, CA and the "Union-at-Home" Ordinance**

In April 2022, the City and County of San Francisco passed Ordinance No. 032-22, making amendments to Chapter 49A of the Administrative Code. This has been colloquially dubbed the "Union-at-Home Ordinance." Further amendments, definitional changes and protections were included in Ordinance No. 203-23 circa September 2023 (6). Shaped by these ordinances, Chapter 49A now protects the right of tenants living in the same building to conduct tenants' union business on the property in which the tenants reside.

Under the amended chapter, landlords are not permitted to prevent renters from "distributing literature to other building tenants, including literature on behalf of a tenants' association […] where the literature relates to issues of common interest […] to the buildings' tenancies." (7). Distribution entails hanging material on doors or in common areas.

Section 2 establishes definitions for the terms "Tenant Association" and for "Organizing Activities." The definition of "Tenant Association" is limited to building-specific groups, and those buildings must house five or more units; their purpose is defined as "addressing housing conditions, community life, landlord-tenant relations, and… issues of common interest … among tenants in the building."  "Organizing Activities" range from door-to-door surveys of interest to convening meetings on the property, among other things (7). The amended Chapter 49A protects such organizing activities in explicit terms. Noteworthy in relation to the landscape for tenants' associations in Tucson is that "organizing activities and participation by non-resident advocates and guests" are protected. As it stands, Panteras members from outside the Malibu Apartments association may be interpreted as trespassers when working with Malibu tenants while on the premises – the cease-and-desist letter claims they admit to this. Without the chance at aid from more experienced organizers, prospective union participants would be less likely to take initiative and start from scratch.

In a webinar hosted by the UC Berkeley Labor Center, Deepa Varna of California tenants' organization coalition Tenants Together, which pushed for Union-at-Home, explains how it was conceived based on tenant survey responses. The shared sentiment among respondents was that even if individual rights were strong, renters hesitated to take action and make use of them.

“The way to collect all [tenants’] issues into one issue was to support tenant organizing itself [and introduce a bill] that would reward tenants for organizing, remind tenants they can organize, and remove barriers to organizing.” (2)

UC Berkeley students, based on interviews conducted with San Francisco tenants and landlords since the ordinance passed, determined that certain challenges remain in need of addressing. Respondents indicated that potential beneficiaries weren’t aware of the ordinance, particularly non-English speakers, and that many were still hesitant that landlords could or would retaliate, or that they would otherwise harm their relationships with their landlords (2). These issues may serve as points of consideration for future drafting.

**New Haven, CT and Inclusion of Tenants’ Unions into Code of Ordinance**

In May 2022, the Board of Alders of New Haven, CT passed an amendment to Chapter 12¾ (“Fair Rent Practices”) of its Code of Ordinances with newly solidified definitions and rights for tenants’ associations and their members. The amended ordinance had previously been used to establish the city’s Fair Rent Commission, whose purpose has been to determine if and when rent has been charged in excess (8). This function of the Commission is not applicable to the Tucson renting landscape, but the 2022 amendment to the ordinance offers valuable insight to the capacity for municipalities to provide support for tenant organization.

This amendment provides definitions for “tenants’ union” and additionally for “tenants’ union representative.” In this case, qualification as a tenants’ union requires that tenants live in housing “containing ten or more separate rental units sharing common ownership” on the same piece of land, created by agreement of a majority of the property’s renters. The tenants’ union representative is defined as being the designated point of contact “in connection with any studies, investigations, and hearings involving [a] union or its members” (9).

Of note in the New Haven case is its emphasis of the incorporation of tenants’ unions and their members into investigations conducted by the city’s Fair Rent Commission, which carries out investigations of properties and landlords reported to have encroached upon or violated the rights of tenants. Tenants’ unions are able to register with the city, designate a representative, and instigate their own investigations from the Commission (10). Violation reports must still be filed by individuals, but they become empowered to do so because their fellow union members may testify on their behalf. This testimony may then be used in Commission decisions and for future reference on the relevant complexes in decisions by other city institutions (11).

This ordinance was the product of New Haven mayor Justin Elicker; tenants' unions which had already been established in the city had evidently been requesting some manifestation of support in local legislation.

Worth considering were Tucson to implement similar protections is that the protections and privileges for tenants' unions are largely – possibly entirely – leveraged through the Fair Rent Commission. Tucson could not take these protections wholesale from New Haven without a similar institution in place, and were there such an institution, it would not be able to function identically; New Haven's Commission is fortunate to benefit from the ability to determine and act upon "excessive rental charges on residential housing within the City." Without the ability to institute actual rent control, Tucson's adoption would be limited to the incorporation of tenants' unions into the process of reporting and investigation.

In sum, New Haven's ordinance grants members of tenants' unions the right to participate in the investigation of breaches of landlord-tenant contract and allows tenant testimony to shape later developments in case law.

**Conclusion**

As part of UC Berkeley's presentation, panelist Katie Goldstein of the Center for Popular Democracy states that for areas without rent caps or strong tenant protections, the right to organize is an ideal starting point, viewing its legal implementation as "an opportunity for governments to change how they see their role in the housing crisis and [take] on a much more active role in protecting tenants" (2). Arizona, at the state level, bars such rent caps from consideration. Tucson officials and community members can still do something for the city's low-income renters by providing concrete protections for renter-to-renter education and advocacy.

As mentioned, there are particularities in the definitions employed by these ordinances which would require modification in the Tucson context. San Francisco's definition orients groups which share a single building, with a minimum of five units, and doesn't cover tenants in not-for-profit buildings (2). New Haven's definition requires that members live on the same property with a minimum of ten units. In the case of adoption by Tucson, special care should be taken to account for the types of housing stock present here.

Goldstein states that what she feels is missing from extant protections is the right for tenants to strike by withholding rent. She opines that striking is "the biggest power that tenants have." If Tucson were to implement tenant union protections with the goal of maximizing the ability of low-income renters to self-advocate and win meaningful material concessions, an explicitly fortified right to strike could be the single most potent tool for addressing the power imbalance that exists between low-income renters and property owners. No precedent exists in any municipality for the codification of a right to strike for tenants or tenants' unions.

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# A Housing First Model for Domestic Violence Survivors

**Chloe Fuller, Sociology and Gender & Women's Studies**

The number of women experiencing homelessness has been on the rise. Between 2018 and 2022, the unsheltered homeless population of women grew by 25.1% (Tsai & Lampros, 2024). Domestic violence is one of the leading causes of women's and children's housing insecurity; approximately 1 in 5 women report being physically assaulted by an intimate partner at some point in their lives (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). The U.S. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness to include "any individual or family who is fleeing or attempting to flee DV, has no other residence, and lacks the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing." With women facing an increased risk of violence at home and on the streets, there becomes a concern about what to do to keep women out of domestically violent relationships and off the streets. There are domestic violence shelters in most cities and towns in the U.S, yet they are often overcrowded, unable to accommodate the increasing number of women seeking shelter. The 2024 Point in Time data shows that 39.2% of the 771,480 homeless people were women (USA Facts).

While there are resources for women seeking help from domestic violence, a lot of women do not seek these services for a myriad of reasons, including: fear of retaliation from abusers, shame, normalization of abuse, and negative experiences with professionals in this field.

The 'Housing First' model was created to help accommodate the number of domestic violence survivors seeking shelter, although it is not implemented everywhere for domestic violence survivors. This model focuses on getting domestic violence survivors into stable housing as fast as possible and then providing necessary resources to help them rebuild their lives. Since domestic violence is the leading cause of women's and children's housing insecurity, it is imperative to adopt a system that supports survivors with shelter.

Tucson has adopted a housing first model aimed at securing shelter for the general unhoused population, but not specifically for domestic violence survivors. Tucson would benefit from implementing this housing model for domestic violence survivors because of the rise in homelessness here and the number of women who are homeless. Arizona ranks 15th in the nation for homelessness; there are 19.4 homeless people per 10,000 people, so housing insecurity is an issue that needs to be addressed. Because of the dangers of living on the streets as a woman, it is essential to make sure women's housing needs are adequately addressed to avoid future violence.

**Washington State Domestic Violence Housing First Model**

*Background:*

The Washington State Coalition developed this model against domestic violence. The Domestic Violence Housing First model aims to secure stable housing for survivors and then provide the resources necessary for them to live their lives. In 2010, they launched a 5-year pilot program to test this model in tandem with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

*Program Specifics:*

- Survivor-driven, trauma-informed mobile advocacy: survivor advocates meet survivors at a convenient location, aimed at reducing the barriers of transportation
- Flexible Financial Assistance: transportation, child-care, employment, and housing
- Community Engagement: build relationships with the community and spread awareness about the services available
- Services Included:
- Immediate rental assistance
- A range of tailored services, including job training
- Potential long-term financial assistance

**Success Data:**

A study was conducted after the model was implemented to determine its effectiveness. The study was conducted over 2 years and found that the program was more successful in improving the housing stability of survivors, as well as decreasing further abuse and depression amongst participants, than services already in place. Furthermore, 96% of survivors kept stable housing 18 months after joining the Housing First program.

**Summary:**

Washington was the first state to implement the 'Housing First' model for preventing domestic violence survivors from going homeless. The program had immense success in reducing the likelihood of survivors experiencing housing insecurity and improving their lives. "Emphasis is on the shortest timeline possible to permanent housing" (WSCADV). After the program was first adopted, it was expanded to include rural, immigrant, and tribal communities.

**Los Angeles Domestic Violence Services**

*Background:*

Los Angeles has the second-highest homeless population in the U.S. As of 2024, there are 71,201 homeless people in LA (USA Facts). 44% of homeless women in LA reported that domestic violence was the primary reason for their homelessness (Urban Institute). Over the past five years, LA has focused its efforts on addressing the housing needs of domestic violence survivors by implementing the Housing First model. In 2025, the program was updated as follows.

*Program Specifics:*

- 
  "Flexible funding that can be used in a variety of ways to reduce barriers to permanent housing; mobile advocacy where a case manager meets the survivor in the field at a location that is convenient for the client- this reduces the added barrier for transportation when is survivor is seeking services; and landlord engagement so that agencies build relationships with landlords to increase the number of safe and affordable units available to survivors" (LA City).
- Crisis Shelters:
- for survivors fleeing imminent danger, provides short-term motel and hotel accommodation with supportive case management
- Enhanced Shelter Operations:
- Emergency Shelter
- Transitional Shelter: long-term shelter for survivors who need more support
- Unhoused Transitional Aged Youth Human Trafficking Shelter: unhoused survivors (age 18-24) who are victims of human trafficking
- LGBTQ+: more support for LGBT+ individuals
- Non-confidential shelter for survivors: an alternative option for survivors who do not need to stay in a confidential location

*Summary:*

LA's Survivors First program aims to give shelter to survivors of domestic violence, reducing the population of houseless individuals in LA. The three components of the Survivors First program are: flexible funding from the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), case managers who can meet survivors at any convenient location, and landlord engagement, which provides survivors with access to safe and affordable units.

**Why should Tucson care?**

Homelessness is on the rise in Tucson. Domestic violence is the leading cause of women's and children's homelessness in the U.S. For this reason, Tucson should be open to the idea of developing a Housing First model for domestic violence survivors because of the trauma that is interwoven within these experiences. It is crucial to be trauma-informed while also prioritizing the safety of survivors and their children. The 2024 Tucson Point-In-Time Annual Homeless Count found 2,102 homeless individuals, of whom 26.3% were women. Furthermore, 9% of these individuals are survivors of domestic violence, which equates to around 190 people. If Tucson used a housing first model for domestic violence survivors, the number of survivors who are homeless would significantly decrease. It is essential to take these steps because living on the streets is dangerous, especially for women and previous survivors of violence.

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# Migrant Death Identification Struggle: A Case Study of Texas and New Mexico

**Araceli Gonzalez-Montion, Sociology and Statistics & Data Science**

For decades, migrant deaths along the US-Mexico border have been a known non-natural disaster. So much so that the US-Mexico border has been identified by the International Organization of Migration as "the deadliest land route for migrants worldwide on record" (Black, Damasco, Gallo, 2023) and yet systematic regulations and procedures have not been created on a federal level "to enumerate and track migrant fatalities" (Kerwin & Martínez, 2024). Except for Border Patrol's "flawed" (Kerwin & Martínez, 2024) migrant death data, which has consistently undercounted recovered undocumented border crosser (UBC) remains when compared to counts recorded by local authorities along the US-Mexico border and "routinely delays publicly releasing its migrant deaths estimates" (Kerwin & Martínez, 2024). Due to a multitude of circumstances, not limited to; the lack of cross referencing migrant death count databases, the lack of a systematic procedure in reporting migrant deaths, and the vast land area along the US-Mexico border, a true accurate count of migrant deaths cannot be found. This should be taken into consideration when viewing any official count of recovered UBC remains as it is most likely underestimating the true number of migrant deaths.

From 2014 to August 2024, "a minimum of 5,405 persons have died or gone missing" along the US-Mexico border (Kerwin & Martínez, 2024). From 2014 to 2024, according to the migrant death database provided through the partnership between the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) and Humane Borders, there were 1,842 remains discovered in southern Arizona, with an additional 28 remains as of April 2025 (Humane Borders, n.d). This database contains records dating back to 1981 and is updated monthly. In total, under the jurisdiction of Pima and Maricopa Medical Examiners, 4,373 migrant deaths have been recorded from 1981 to April 2025. The historical trends throughout the decades show that the non-natural disaster of migrant deaths along the US-Mexico border is only to continue and show no signs of decreasing.

A multitude of challenges are faced with this disaster, including the struggle to identify these persons when remains are discovered. Out of all documented recovered UBC remains in southern Arizona, as of April 2025 1,613 still remain unidentified (Humane Borders, n.d). Between 1990 and 2020, 3,356 recovered UBC remains were examined by PCOME. During this period, an overall 64% of these recovered migrant remains were identified, a relatively high identification rate in this field (Martínez et. al., 2021). Located in Tucson, Arizona, PCOME has frequently been identified as a leading figure in the process of identifying and accounting for migrant deaths when compared to other county and state procedures. 95% of the examinations on migrant remains discovered in Arizona over the past two decades were conducted by PCOME, this is “more unidentified remains per capita than any other medical examiner’s office in the country” (Martínez et. al., 2021)

PCOME clearly takes on a large load in the mission to systematically assess migrant deaths and identification, and plays an important role in the identification of UBCs and bringing closure to the friends and family. Though PCOME sets the standard for what should be expected of migrant death reporting, there is always room for innovation. In investigating Texas and New Mexico’s procedures, PCOME can potentially implement practices that would allow for it to continue setting the precedent in identification policy and procedures.

### *The Office of the Medical Investigator - New Mexico*

In New Mexico, the Office of the Medical Investigator (OMI), located in Albuquerque, functions as the statewide medical examiner's office and is placed in the Department of Pathology at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine. New Mexico has historically reported low migrant death cases and as a result the OMI hadn’t kept track of migrant status. That was until a sharp increase of cases were reported between 2022 and 2023, where 47 recovered migrant remains escalated to 120. The exponential rise in OMIs migrant death caseload has enforced the need to take on preemptive methods in tracking these deaths (Hernandez & Edgar, 2024).

Research conducted by Hernandez and Edgar (2024) highlights the many procedural steps that take place to properly handle and record recovered UBC remains. The OMI has 98 part-time Field Deputy Medical Investigators (FDMIs) that are delegated to the scenes of recovered remains to investigate. These investigators are distributed across the 33 counties in New Mexico. In addition, there are 15 full-time Central Office Deputy Medical Investigators (CODMIs) who investigate the scenes of recovered remains in Bernalillo county, where Albuquerque is located, and “oversee the FDMI cases and determine jurisdiction of a death and the necessity for additional medicolegal investigation” (Hernandez & Edgar, 2024). After the completion of documentation at the scene, the remains are transported to the central office for a team of forensic specialists to perform autopsies and other forensic examinations. During this stage, the forensic pathologists begin different levels of identification procedures in efforts to confirm the identity of the decedents. The primary level being visual identification, if not possible, the following identification procedure is fingerprinting and dental or radiographic comparisons. If these forms of identification are unsuccessful the last forensic procedure performed is DNA analysis. Depending on circumstance, DNA samples are sent to various laboratories; the University of North Texas (UNT), Fastest Labs of El Paso, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Bode Technology. DNA profiles are compared with records in the FBI's Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) and the New Mexico DNA Information System. Forensic anthropologists enter into the identification process in the cases when remains are found in advanced stages of decomposition or skeletonization, their aim is to procure a biological profile report. As these identification procedures are being conducted a FDMI and a CODMI track leads on tentative identifications to obtain medical records or next of kin for DNA comparisons.

All these identification efforts result in a high identification rate, in comparison to PCOMEs overall identification rate of 64%, OMI has an identification rate of 87% (Martínez et. al., 2021; Hernandez & Edgar, 2024). The demographics of the recovered UBC remains in Arizona are similar to those in New Mexico; including, a higher percentage of males, majority falling in the age range of 20-29, and majority being of Mexican origin. Though it is important to note that from 2009 to 2023 OMI has only processed 248 recovered UBC remains and of these cases, 88% were found in fresh or decomposing conditions, which assists in the higher identification rate (Hernandez & Edgar, 2024).

Low migrant death cases prior to the surge in 2022 to 2023 has subsequently led to insufficient staffing as OMI processes all of New Mexico's investigable deaths. This results in FDMIs potentially not being dispatched to the scenes of recovered remains. Additionally, "there is a correlation between county population and deaths… [where] remains are less likely to be found and recovered in less populated counties" (Kerwin & Martínez, 2024). On top of potentially never investigated recovered remains, OMI struggles in its DNA analysis due to lack of sufficient funding. This is a common struggle among medical examiners handling large caseloads of migrant deaths. In similarity to PCOME, OMI's case system has been modified to include a Public Health Field that includes 'Border Crosser' as an option. This, seemingly small, update is vital to the acknowledgement of the prevalence of migrant deaths along the US-Mexico border. This change also leads "medicolegal investigations to approach death scenes with the rigor of crime scene investigations, instead of treating migrant deaths as commonplace" (Kerwin & Martínez, 2024).

### ***Operation Identification - TEXAS***

Texas is a particular case when it comes to unrecorded recovered UBC remains. Up until 2013, the majority of remains that were not immediately identified were buried without collecting DNA samples and the burial locations were not recorded, despite Texas state law requiring DNA samples of all unidentified recovered human remains be taken and sent to a state lab in order to be submitted into CODIS. These unlawful burials were heavily conducted in

Brooks County, notably one of the poorest counties in Texas, due to their lack of resources and high migrant death count. Attention was brought to this inhumane practice when, in 2012, Texas surpassed Arizona in migrant deaths. Following protests and lobbying, Brooks County was granted additional funding to be able to transport unidentified human remains to the Webb County Medical Examiner's Office and quickly volunteer efforts were made to exhume UBC remains in Brooks County with the primary goal of providing them the chance of identification they never received. (Spradley et al., 2019).

In all of Texas, there are only 13 county medical examiner offices, only two of which are located near the Texas-Mexico border (Kerwin & Martínez, 2024). The remaining counties have Justices of the Peace for medicolegal investigations. A systematic approach to unidentified recovered human remains in Texas has yet to be established making identification attempts difficult to accomplish. In efforts to combat these systematic inconsistencies *Operation Identification* or OpID was created to "locate, identify, and repatriate unidentified human remains found or near the South Texas border" (Spradley et al., 2019). Through OpID, based out of Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State (FACTS), thorough forensic anthropological analyses are conducted on unidentified exhumed remains with meticulous attention to detail and organization beginning from the exhumation scene to after a DNA sample is obtained. In the efforts to properly identify the exhumed UBC remains, three main processes are performed; skeletal analysis, DNA sample and profiling, and washing of clothes and personal effects. Photographs of these cleaned clothes and personal effects, as well as all case information, are then uploaded to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) (Spradley et al., 2019). Because OpID is conducted through Texas State University, these identification procedures, the washing and photographing of personal effects and the anthropological analysis of remains, are commonly performed by undergraduate and graduate student volunteers, respectively (Anderson & Spradley, 2016).

Along with these identification procedures, OpID works with the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF), a non-governmental organization (NGO) that collects family DNA reference samples (FRSs) from families of the missing (Spradley et al., 2019). The lack of FRSs in DNA databases is a frequent challenge in the endeavor to identify recovered UBC remains. This shortage is due to the fact that a law enforcement officer from an investigative agency must be present when DNA is sampled in order for the sample to be submitted into CODIS. Being within the presence of law enforcement and submitting your DNA into a federal database are strong deterrents for individuals with undocumented status that may need to report a missing person (Spradley et al., 2019). To increase FRSs in CODIS in order to maximize the probability of identifying recovered UBC remains, an event was made to provide a safe space where anyone can report a missing person and family of the missing can have their DNA sampled and uploaded to CODIS, known as *Missing in Harris County Day*. Hosted by Harris County Institute of

Forensic Sciences and co-sponsored by NamUs, many NGOs work with Harris County to provide a safe environment where "citizenship status is not questioned" (Spradley et al., 2019). The NGO work conducted on this day has directly resulted in CODIS genetic associations (Spradley et al., 2019).

From the fiscal year of 2018-2022, there were at least 1,502 known migrant deaths along the Texas-Mexico border. (Kerwin & Martínez, 2024). As of 2024 reporting, "[s]ince 2013, OpID has managed over 600 unidentified persons cases [and] over 200 individuals have been forensically identified" (Spradley, & Kaplan, 2024). This is a minimum of 33% identification rate. Due to the long lasting "fragmented system…and failure to follow state laws", Texas is left with having to locate then investigate remains at the burial location instead of at the scene where remains were first discovered (Spradley et al., 2019). A stark difference when compared to Arizona's practices and policies.

***What Could Pima Implement?***

On all fronts, PCOME has proven to be the gold standard when it comes to migrant death identification policies and practices. Even so, the OMI has a higher overall identification rate. It is important to note, the stage in which remains are recovered has an influence on identification rates. "Skeletonization without associated documentation makes resolving an identification difficult as the only avenue for positive identification becomes DNA analysis" (Hernandez & Edgar, 2024) and DNA analysis is unhelpful if the sampled DNA is not already uploaded in a DNA database or a FRS is unavailable. The OMI is finding remains in fresh or decomposing states 88% of the time, meanwhile, PCOME has an inverse relationship overtime with what stage remains are discovered in. During the fiscal year 2000 to 2020, the percentage of UBC remains recovered in fully fleshed conditions was seeing a downward trend (46% to 14%), inversely, the percentage of UBC remains recovered in completely skeletonized bone degraded conditions was seeing an upward trend (12% to 32%) (Martínez et. al., 2021). This increase of recovered skeletonized UBC remains is reflected in PCOMEs negative trending identification rate during this same period (79% to 48%) (Martínez et. al., 2021). Finding remains "in fresh or decomposing conditions… suggest recovery times close to the actual time of death" (Hernandez & Edgar, 2024), indicating that OMIs high identification rate may also lie in the search methods and practices of migrant remains and not necessarily just on its identification procedures. Analyzing the search procedures being practiced along the New Mexico-Mexico border that influence fast recovery time of UBC remains could potentially benefit recovery time of migrant remains in southern Arizona and therefore possibly increase PCOMEs already high overall identification rate.

“[T]aking missing persons reports (MPRs) on foreign nationals known or presumed to be missing in southern Arizona” has not been common practice within local law enforcement agencies (LEAs), so “the PCOME developed a systematic approach in taking these MPRs from family members, friends, and others who were reluctant to report the missing to LEAs or to governmental consulates” (Anderson & Spradley, 2016). Along with lack of MPRs, FRSs are difficult to obtain. The safe space for undocumented friends and family of missing migrants that *Missing in Harris County Day* provides is an event that Pima County could benefit from to combat the lack of FRS data in DNA databases and build to PCOMEs systematic approach in taking MPRs.

A key difference between PCOME vs OMI and OpID is that PCOME is not based out of a university. A benefit of this for OpID is the direct access to undergraduate and graduate student volunteers. Both PCOME and OpID wash and photograph the personal effects of the recovered UBC remains to then upload to NamUS, at PCOME this task is conducted by forensic anthropologists while at OpID undergraduate students take on this role. These undergraduate volunteers also “clean and process the human remains… and assist with any additional laboratory duties. Further, graduate students within the anthropology department volunteer their time to assist with anthropological analysis of remains” (Anderson & Spradley, 2016). Though PCOME is not operating through a university, an opportunity is being missed by not utilizing this potentially mutually beneficial alliance with university students. Especially, as the University of Arizona is located in Tucson, where PCOME is based.

These insights from Texas and New Mexico’s migrant death identification procedures can potentially aid in PCOME’s power to provide closure to the friends and family of these persons who have died due to this non-natural disaster. To finally allow these persons to be properly laid to rest. And most significantly, to give back identity to these persons that can no longer identify themselves. No matter your origin, every human deserves the right to their identification.

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# Approaches to Park Equity

**Emily Gruber, Sociology and Statistics and Data Science**

The idea of the playground came about in the 19th century as the result of idealist educational philosophy and reactions to the role of children in an industrialized society. Friedrich Fröbel's theory of play, which emphasized the importance of recreation to facilitate childhood development, inspired the public to create spaces and technology designed for the purpose of childhood play (Merrick, 2022). Today, playgrounds and public parks are used by people of all ages, and are great places to cultivate a community in a neighborhood. As the world becomes progressively more urbanized and online, public parks and playgrounds are increasingly necessary to ensure the health and happiness of a community.

Parks offer shade, beauty, and a place for people of all ages to congregate, rest, or play. They are a respite from the heat and noise of the city, and provide neighborhoods with much needed space to engage in physical activity or relax comfortably outside. Accessible greenspaces and playgrounds have a particularly positive impact on children, as outdoor play can nurture a child's curiosity, social development, and physical well-being (Patak, 2023). Having the space and resources to play outside allows children to develop their coordination, physical and mental health, and discernment. Research shows that living in closer proximity to parks and playgrounds has a positive impact on mental and physical health, and is correlated with a higher likelihood of exercising outside regularly (Grigoletto et al., 2021). Unfortunately, disparities in both the access to and quality of parks and playgrounds mean these benefits are not reaped equally by all residents.

While having local playgrounds and parks is seen as imperative for childhood development and overall health, the accessibility and quality of those parks vary widely due to existing social inequalities that permeate our infrastructure. For instance, residents in low-income neighborhoods, particularly in majority African American or Latino neighborhoods, have less overall access to parks than their wealthier, predominantly white counterparts due to a combination of redlining and historical residential segregation (Prevention Institute, 2022). Moreover, the parks that do exist close to low-income, majority non-white communities tend to be smaller, less safe, lower quality than the parks that exist in affluent neighborhoods. Tucson is no exception to this pattern. According to Trust for Public Land, "[Tucson] residents in low-income neighborhoods have access to 16% less park space per person than those in the average Tucson neighborhood and 36% less than those in high-income neighborhoods" (2022). Tucson also allocates a smaller portion of its land to public parks and playgrounds at only 5%, while the national median is triple that amount at around 15%. To address these disparities, Tucson must prioritize playground equity as it develops and updates its greenspaces and play areas.

Playground, playspace, or park equity refers to the fair distribution of quality playgrounds and parks across all communities in order to ensure that every neighborhood has equal access to the benefits and resources of a public park. It particularly seeks to address the systemic inequality that underlies this difference in park access through highlighting where unequal access to parks and playgrounds is most egregious and creating guidelines to improve existing public recreational spaces (Russo, 2025). Playground equity is measured in a myriad of ways: land acreage, neighborhood access, size of individual parks, quality of equipment on the playground, ratio between the number of people with immediate access to public parks in wealthy vs low-income neighborhoods and majority white vs non-white neighborhoods, number of people each park serves, neighborhood perceptions of nearby parks, percentage of people of color living within half a mile of a public park, and percentage of low-income households within half a mile of a public park (Larson et al., 2022), (Trust for Public Land, 2024b). Using playground equity to guide local parks and recreation programs includes restoring existing playgrounds and parks with an emphasis on those in underserved communities, designing new spaces that compliment their surroundings and make public parks more accessible to lower income and majority non-white neighborhoods, and fostering a dialogue between government and community leaders about how best to implement and restore local parks and playgrounds. By keeping these standards of playground equity in mind, cities can build a future where all residents have equal access to the numerous social and health benefits of quality, accessible public parks and playgrounds.

Tucson, like many other cities in the United States, has demonstrated interest in improving its public parks and playgrounds. In 2018, the city passed Proposition 407, which seeks to improve the quality of existing parks and develop a network of walkways between parks and various city landmarks (City of Tucson, 2025). Notably, it does not mention how Tucson plans to be mindful of park equity, meaning that it is unclear whether the city's improvements will benefit underserved neighborhoods or exacerbate existing inequities. In order to ensure the former, Tucson must incorporate playground equity into their plans for improving public parks. This report will detail how other American cities are dealing with questions of park equity, and what solutions Tucson can incorporate to improve its own public park system.

**El Paso, Denver, and the Importance of Public-Private Partnerships**

El Paso, Texas, is a similarly sized city to Tucson, and also has a Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) accredited Parks and Recreation department. However, unlike Tucson, El Paso has partnered with an organization, KABOOM!, dedicated to addressing playground equity in its parks system.

KABOOM! seeks to address playground inequity by identifying historically marginalized communities with high social vulnerability in cities and building better, ADA compliant parks and playgrounds within those communities. The organization has a data-driven approach, and works with NGOs and every level of government in order to fund playspace equity (KABOOM!, 2025). In El Paso, KABOOM! is helping to update six different parks, taking community suggestions and designs into account in order to successfully integrate the parks into their surrounding environments and to suit the needs of residents (City of El Paso, 2025). This project is still ongoing as of 2025 so the exact results of this partnership remain inconclusive, but El Paso's inclusion of KABOOM! in its efforts to improve its existing parks shows its dedication to addressing the structural inequalities affecting playground equity.

Organizations like KABOOM! would not be able to accomplish playground equity if it were not for public-private partnerships. Public-private partnerships are when a government organization works in tandem with (and is usually funded in part by) a private entity such as a nonprofit organization or for-profit company to accomplish social works and public goods. Denver, Colorado's playground equity first approach to park stewardship also relies on public-private partnerships.

The Denver Park Trust is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit fundraising organization used to support the city's parks and recreation department. The primary goals of the organization are to fund new parks so that all residents are within a 10-minute walk of a park, add new equipment and amenities to existing parks, and invest in the communities identified in their 2022 Equity Index as disadvantaged (Denver Park Trust, 2024). These community grants award up to $5,000 to "community-led, small-scale, high-impact park improvement projects", such as pop-up skate clinics, transforming an empty lot into a community garden, and updating existing paths to include elements of the city and community's history. The work done by The Denver Park Trust is made possible by their funding through public-private partnerships, such as with the YMCA, 4-H, Colorado UpLift, as well as various other companies, such as healthcare or energy companies in the state (City and County of Denver, 2019). The city of Denver is constantly seeking additional funding from the private sector in order to maintain the quality of parks and make playground access more equitable.

Tucson's city parks, as of 2023, were exclusively funded by the city's parks and recreation department, without any private, state, or NGO funding of any kind (Trust for Public land, 2024a). While Tucson does have a 501(c)(3) organization, Tucson Parks Foundation, it does not have sufficient funding from private companies and other donors to fully support efforts to address playground inequity in the city. In order to facilitate playground equity in Tucson, the city should be reaching out to partner with private entities for additional funding of efforts to improve its parks and playgrounds.

## Los Angeles and Displacement Avoidance Policies

Although reinvestment in underserved communities to promote greater equity in playgrounds and parks is a well-intentioned initiative, it may inadvertently contribute to gentrification and the eventual displacement of existing residents. Moreover, fears of displacement may lead residents to resist playground equity initiatives. As part of playground equity is involving a neighborhood in its own improvement and taking suggestions from residents, it is imperative that those improvements directly benefit the community and don't lead to its dissolution and hardship. Combating gentrification while bettering a marginalized neighborhood is a difficult task for this reason, but not an impossible one.

Residents of Los Angeles are combating gentrification as they improve their parks through the Los Angeles Regional Open Space and Affordable Housing Collaborative (LA ROSAH). This coalition is composed of cultural, environmental, tenant's rights, and affordable housing organizations with the goal of guaranteeing that all investments in public parks are accompanied by anti-displacement policies (LA ROSAH, 2021).

In 2019, LA ROSAH successfully advocated for anti-displacement policies in an addition to LA County's Measure A, which is a parcel tax that provides the county with millions of dollars to build and renovate parks. This addition included several methods of addressing potential gentrification and displacement in areas where Measure A would improve parks. Those methods included incentivizing partnerships between parks and affordable housing developers, implementing data collection to track potential displacement after improving parks, encouraging grant applicants to adhere to displacement-avoidance strategies, and allowing funds from Measure A to cover any residential or business relocation costs due to gentrification (Trinh, 2021). By mitigating, measuring, and compensating displacement, these policies seek to accomplish true park equity for the intended beneficiaries.

While LA ROSAH's advocacy is specific to the region of LA, its goals can be implemented in any city or county in the country. Tucson has experienced its share of gentrification in the past few decades, and should be extra cognizant of subsequent displacement from well-intentioned efforts to improve park and playground equity. By centering residents and ensuring their wellbeing in the effort to improve Tucson's parks and playgrounds, the city can better achieve playground equity.

## Summary

Public playgrounds and parks improve mental, physical, and social health for all community members, and particularly benefit childhood development. Playground equity makes these benefits accessible to all through a combination of increased accessibility and quality, with an emphasis on addressing racial and wealth disparities in a city. In order for playground equity to be accomplished, it needs to have adequate funding, such as through the public-private partnerships of El Paso and Denver. Tucson officials can reach out to local nonprofits and corporations to achieve sustainable funding for their playground equity initiatives. In order to preempt consequential gentrification in targeted neighborhoods, the city can model displacement-avoidance policies and strategies after the ones advocated for by Angelenos. Using these strategies, Tucson can ensure that they are making their parks and playgrounds more equitable for the residents they serve.

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# Community Resilience Hubs

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Community Resilience Hubs are local spaces that are designed to support neighborhoods in both everyday life and during emergencies. These hubs are places where people can access important services such as food, health care and the internet. During crises, like heat waves, power outages or natural disasters, they can also provide safe shelter, clean water, electricity and other resources. Resilience Hubs are more than just physical spaces. They help people respond to issues like climate change and economic hardship, while also offering year-round support, not just during emergencies. By addressing the specific needs of local residents, these hubs strengthen social connections, promote equity and create opportunities for people to work together. As social inequities continue to expose communities to greater risks, there is an urgent need for local strategies that demonstrate resilience beyond traditional disaster response. In addition to disaster aid, resilience hubs offer essential daily services like job training, education support and health initiatives. By acting as ongoing community spaces that serve locals in anticipating, managing and recovering from tragedies, resilience hubs help address important gaps. (Baja, 2019)

The concept originated in response to growing climate threats and the need to strengthen local foundation. Organizations such as Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) and the Institute for Sustainable Communities began pushing resilience hubs as early as the mid-2010s, recognizing that traditional disaster response strategies often failed to serve low-income and marginalized communities effectively. (Rogerson & Narayan, 2020) In the broader U.S context, resilience hubs are no longer just local pilots. Cities like Baltimore, Houston and Tempe have adopted the model in different ways. In Houston, resilience hubs are a part of a wider *Resilient Houston*[1] strategy, which integrates emergency preparedness with public health, housing and infrastructure. In Tempe, Arizona, the city is piloting a Resilience Hub Network[2] focused on extreme heat, power outages and community building through local partnerships and microgrid feasibility studies.

As Southern Arizona faces growing climate-related threats, the City of Tucson has an opportunity to invest in resilience hubs. While any new investment involves cost and coordination, the potential advantages of resilience hubs outweigh the challenges. In a time when many residents are feeling strain of overlapping social, economic and environmental obstacles, these hubs offer a hopeful, community-driven solution. By investing in resilience hubs, Tucson can lead with compassion and collaboration, ensuring that its residents are not only better prepared for future crises but are also supported in their everyday lives.

**Resilient Houston**

Resilient Houston is the City of Houston's official resilience strategy, launched in February 2020 as part of its participation in the 100 Resilient Cities initiative, introduced by the Rockefeller Foundation. (Olin, 2020) Developed by the city's Chief Resilience Officer and the Mayor's Office of Resilience and Sustainability, the strategy outlines a roadmap to help Houston prepare for and recover from a wide range of trauma and stresses, including hurricanes, flooding, extreme heat and public health crises.

Resilient Houston has been action-focused from the start, organizing its work into six main implementation themes to guide how different initiatives are carried out together.[1] These themes help the city coordinate efforts, instead of tackling each project in separation, allowing for a more unified and efficient approach. The *Engagement* theme focuses on improving how Houston listens to and communicates with its residents and partners. The city is committed to ensuring everyone has access to accurate and timely information, while also valuing lived experiences alongside expert knowledge. In terms of *Finance*, the city recognizes its budget limitations and is looking for innovative ways to fund its resilience goals. This might include creating new financing tools like resilience bonds, finding new funding sources or working with partners who can help in long-term improvements. These financial strategies are meant to stretch limited resources while maximizing impact. *Metrics* are used to track progress. Resilient Houston has eighteen main targets, one for each of its goals. Many actions within the plan include specific measures to hold city departments and partners accountable and to show whether the work is producing results over time. Building strong *Partnerships* is another key factor. The city emphasizes that lasting resilience can't be built alone. It's working with community organizations, scientists, residents, businesses and other government agencies to make sure everyone has a role in this work. Finally, Smart Cities technology is helping Houston innovate as it builds resilience. The city is using tools like data tracking, sensors and digital platforms to improve public services and identify needs more efficiently. By working with tech experts and local innovators Houston is finding smarter ways to build a more resilient future.

Resilient Houston highlights that true strength happens when its people, neighborhoods, nature, city systems and the whole region all work together and make resilience part of everyday life. The plan is structured by scale, meaning it invites everyone, from individual residents to city officials and neighboring counties, to take part in building a more resilient Houston.[1]

The strategy is divided into five key chapters:

1. Prepared & Thriving Houstonians, focused on supporting individuals and families.
2. Safe & Equitable Neighborhoods, which aims to make communities safer and fairer.
3. Healthy & Connected Bayous, which emphasizes the health of local waterways and green spaces.
4. Accessible & Adaptive City, targeting improvements to city infrastructure and services.
5. Innovative & Integrated Region, encouraging collaboration and innovation across the entire Greater Houston area.

Each chapter reflects the idea that resilience must be built at every level, to protect and support communities now and in the future. These five main chapters outline 18 goals and 62 specific actions. About one-third of these actions are already in progress, another third expand on current programs and the final third are entirely new ideas meant to fill existing gaps or respond to emerging challenges.

One of the Resilient Houston's goals is to provide emergency preparedness training to at least 500,000 residents by 2025. This initiative aims to equip Houstonians with the knowledge, skills and resources necessary to effectively respond to various emergencies. By 2020, the city had trained 5,750 individuals, marking the initial progress toward this target.[3] In 2022, the city reported 65,897 preparedness-related interactions, encompassing training sessions, presentations and distribution of educational materials.[3] Resilient Houston demonstrates a city-wide, multi-sector approach to resilience, with resilience hubs playing a key role in both emergency response and long-term community support. By placing these hubs in familiar institutions and backing them with citywide planning and infrastructure reinforcement, Houston is investing in local capacity and sustainability.

**Tempe EnVision Center**

The City of Tempe's Climate Action Plan (CAP) is a framework aimed at addressing the city's most serious climate challenges, with a specific focus on extreme heat, energy resilience and equitable community engagement. Initially introduced in 2019, CAP was updated in 2022 to include broader community input and to coincide with expanding sustainability goals.[4] The Resilience Hub Network is part of CAP, aiming to provide localized, community-driven centers that offer emergency support, daily services and long-term benefits. The hubs are designed to serve not only during crises but also throughout the year. Tempe's strategy was influenced by models from other cities, such as Baltimore and Austin, and is supported by national frameworks from organizations like USDN. The city's approach involves collaborating both city-owned facilities and community-led organizations to ensure secure and trusted spaces are well-equipped to respond effectively to natural and human-caused emergencies. These hubs also cater to resident's daily needs through diverse programming, including health services, food services, education support and social capital building events.[2]

The development of the Resilience Hub Network is structured into four phases:

1) Phase 1: Identifying Pilot Sites
   a) Tempe is evaluating up to 30 public and nonprofit facilities for potential hub designation and microgrid installation. Selection requirements include being located in a heat-vulnerable areas, offering regular public arrangement and having space to shelter residents during power outages.
2) Phase 2: Emergency Planning
   a) In collaboration with the Tempe Fire Medical Rescue Department and partners like Red Cross, the city is developing emergency action plans for both city-owned and community-led hub sites. This includes tools and templates for capacity assessments and coordinated emergency response.
3) Phase 3: Coordinating Programming
   a) Each hub offers year-round services such as cooling areas, food support, educational resources and social events. These programs are powered by community input and the city supports in identifying needs, building partnerships and securing the means to implement services.
4) Phase 4: Ongoing Collaboration and Sustainability
   a) The city hosts monthly Resilience Hub Network meetings with city officials, nonprofits and community organizations to promote planning, service coordination and access to funding. This helps ensure the hubs remain connected and responsive to developing community needs.

Tempe's EnVision Center officially opened its doors in 2024, making a notable step in the city's efforts to enhance community resilience and well-being. The location of the center is near by the Valley Metro's light rail and bus routes, facilitating convenient transit options for individuals without personal vehicles. The space is designed to function both as a daily community tool and as a critical support center during emergencies. This center serves as a comprehensive resource hub, providing aid aimed at increasing self-reliance and quality of life for Tempe residents. The EnVision Center's development aligns with Tempe's Climate Action Plan, highlighting the creation of neighborhood facilities that can serve as community hubs. The center works with local nonprofits and community groups to offer programs that meet different needs of Tempe's residents. It combines everyday help, like job support and health resources, with emergency planning, creating a well-rounded way to help people stay safe, healthy and connected.

**Lessons Learned**

The case studies of Tempe's EnVision Center and Resilient Houston offer valuable lessons for Pima County and the City of Tucson as they consider how to prepare for climate-related and social challenges. Both cities demonstrate that resilience hubs are more than just emergency shelters, they are community-center spaces that reinforce social ties, provide everyday services and help residents adapt to long-term obstacles such as extreme heat, power outages and health disparities. These hubs prioritize local leadership and accessibility, making them flexible to unique needs of different neighborhoods.

Tempe's model promotes the importance of utilizing existing spaces, like community centers and schools, and building associations with local nonprofits to extend services to vulnerable populations. This approach allows the city to maximize limited resources while cultivating trust and availability. For Tucson, which faces similar issues with extreme heat and economic inequality, a resilience hub strategy could be a practical and community-supported solution.

Houston's experience adds on the need for a comprehensive, multi-scale resilience framework that connects residents, neighborhoods, natural systems and city infrastructure. By aligning resilience efforts with funding, data tracking, policy updates and technology, Houston ensures that its hubs are part of a broader city-wide plan rather than individual efforts. Tucson could adopt a similar coordinated approach, putting together resilience hubs into existing programs such as heat mitigation, affordable housing and public health services.

Both cities show that investing in resilience hubs can build stronger, safer and more connected communities. As climate risks grow in Southern Arizona, now is the time for Pima County and Tucson to act. By learning from these examples, they can implement a progressive that only addresses emergencies but also strengthens the day-to-day lives of residents.

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# Participatory Budgeting

**Kaya Pyle, Sociology and Political Science**

In 1989, Porto Alegre, Brazil crafted a never-before-seen civic engagement process in response to large-scale government corruption and clientelism. They called this process participatory budgeting (PB), a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget to complement existing legal and political responsibilities of mayors and municipal legislators (Touchton, Wampler 2014). The implementation of PB was a huge success, quickly spreading across the country. Today, Brazil dedicates nearly 15% of its public budget to municipalities, allowing Brazilian Mayors greater autonomy to implement PB projects. Brazil utilizes a "quality of life index" which allocates greater resources based on a per-capita basis to benefit poor neighborhoods. In turn, studies of Brazilian PB show that the majority of participants and elected PB delegates have low income, low levels of education, and are often women. This shows how PB can reach marginalized groups with historically low political influence. Such minorities are in fact *overrepresented* in PB in proportion to the population (Local Government Association 2016; Touchton, Wampler 2014).

Participatory budgeting is becoming increasingly widespread in the U.S., experienced in countless small towns and large cities. PB is practiced at both large and small scales such as school districts, city wards or districts, entire cities, and entire counties. Many cities even include non-registered voters and residents under 18 years old in the process. Most notably, Chicago, New York City, Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle conduct city-wide or reduced versions of the participatory budgeting processes. However, no state or national government has adopted PB (Roth 2022). In most of these cities, the process is as follows:

1. The community adopts legal rules around creating a PB process including sources of funding.
2. A Steering Committee is elected, often including qualifying citizens who are elected or undergo an application process.
3. The Steering Committee facilitates the PB process and acts as a communicator between citizens and elected city officials.
4. Ideas are submitted by citizens and collected. This step may also include neighborhood brainstorming assemblies.
5. The Steering Committee reviews all proposed ideas and finalizes the ballot.
6. Citizens vote online or in-person on either one or multiple proposals.
7. The winning idea(s) are chosen and implemented in partnership with city officials and private and public organizations.

Tucson and Pima County face persistent challenges like high poverty rates, aging infrastructure, and declining public trust in local governance. Participatory budgeting is a way to give power back to the people of Tucson while increasing transparency and improving public trust in government systems. Through PB, residents directly propose and vote on how to spend a portion of public funds, ensuring taxpayer money goes where communities most need it. By fostering civic engagement through real decision-making power, participatory budgeting can help rebuild trust in local government and create more equitable, responsive policies.

**Case Studies**

Nashville, TN

Most recently, Nashville, TN voted to implement a participatory budgeting process in an effort to empower residents, specifically in underserved communities. Nashville also felt the need to address feelings of disenfranchisement within their community, leading the City Council to vote on PB legislation in 2023. Nashville had a unique opportunity to utilize American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to create a city-wide PB project. Of the funding, $10 million was dedicated to the project, allotting up to $2 million per winning PB proposal (Abrams 2024).

Nashville first developed a steering committee made entirely of 35 volunteers, one for each district in Nashville. The volunteers underwent legal, financial, and equity training and were required to meet every week. Their duties included establishing PB guidelines, creating the project timeline, developing outreach, prioritizing and finalizing ideas. Within the committee, members were further divided into committees that focused on specific city issue categories, allowing for greater specialization (Nashville.gov 2023).

Following the initiation of the project, the idea-collection process began. Nashville determined that anyone 14 years or older can submit an idea. As guidelines, the city required that each proposal:

- must provide primary benefit for the public at large;
- must provide a tangible, permanent benefit that allows for broad public access;
- must fulfill community needs without further funding (Nashville.gov 2023).

After the idea submission deadline passed, the steering committee began the ballot development process. To do so, they prioritized ideas using a rubric system, ranking projects based upon the need, feasibility, and equity of each idea. Ultimately, the steering committee chose a 35-item ballot, one per district. Citizens were allowed to vote in-person at a public library, online, or as a mail-in ballot (Aycock 2023).

Similar to Brazil, Nashville chose projects based upon two criteria: the Social Vulnerability Index (SoVi) score of the area and the number of votes for the project. The Social Vulnerability Index is a tool used to measure and identify vulnerable communities that may be adversely affected by physical and communal hazards, as determined by the Center for Disease Control. The CDC uses demographic and socioeconomic factors to determine a community's SoVi Index including poverty and homelessness, single-parent households, mobile homes, overcrowded housing, English language proficiency, and many more (CDC 2024).

Ultimately, of the 1,300 ideas submitted and 13,121 votes cast, 24 projects were selected (Abrams 2024). Each project received $50,000 - $1.75 million and included ideas such as park updates, traffic calming measures, covered bus stops, improving library resources (computer access & training, music instrument lending program), updating traffic light systems, creating historical tours honoring black history, funding apprenticeship programs, and pedestrian safety installments (Nashville.gov 2023).

Nashville is not new to participatory budgeting, but through the use of ARPA fundings, Nashville implemented a city-wide PB project. Following legislation approving the project, Nashville created a PB citizen volunteer Steering Committee who oversaw the rules and guidelines development and ballot finalization. Over 1,000 citizen projects were submitted. Following the vote, where 13,000 Nashville residents voted, projects were chosen based upon the Social Vulnerability Index of the area and highest votes. Overall $10 million was spent over 24 total projects selected across the city. It is unclear whether PB projects will continue following the allocation of APRA funds.

<u>Hartford, CT</u>

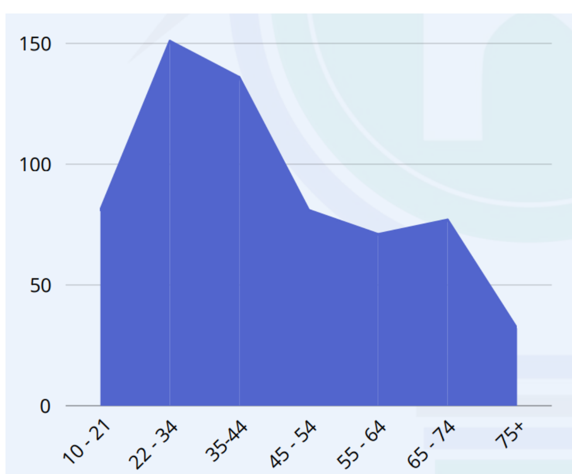
Rather than originate as a grassroots movement, Hartford, CT was inspired by other major cities using PB around the U.S. Through a partnership of five community organizations, Hartford Public Library, City of Hartford, Leadership Greater Hartford, and Metro Hartford Alliance, PB was introduced to the City Council in 2015 and legally approved in 2017. Hartford's PB process undergoes an annual cycle, dedicating $100,000 of Hartford's Capital Improvement Funds each year, as is approved by the mayor and city council. Notably, all of the funds for Hartford's PB are entirely capital-funded (Hartford Decides).

Hartford's steering committee is named Hartford Decide$, a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization that facilitates the PB process. All board members are volunteers excluding one part-time employee. The activities of Hartford Decide$ are funded by grants and donations. To begin the annual PB process, Hartford Decide$ hosts community brainstorming sessions at community centers, churches, libraries, and local businesses. Ideas are then collected in person at these such places or online. Ideas can be submitted in both English and Spanish. Additionally, anyone can submit an idea including residents 10 years or older, unregistered voters, and even non-citizens. To improve outreach, some K-12 students submit project ideas for their school classes. For an idea to qualify, it must:

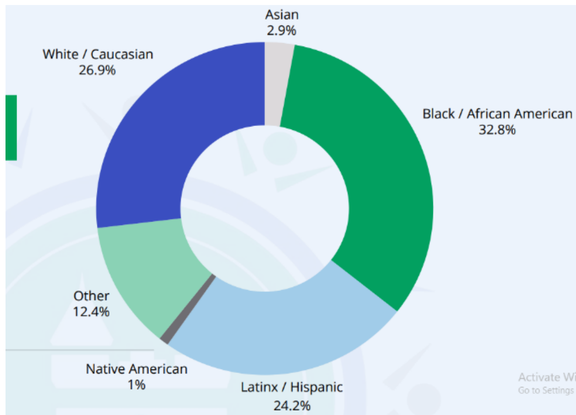
- construct, expand, modify, rehabilitate, or purchase equipment for a City-owned space or place;
- benefit the residents of Hartford;
- have a useful life of at least 5 years;
- address a community need or problem;
- be a new project and not part of any City project already in development;
- be implemented by the City of Hartford;
- be estimated to cost between $10,000 and $20,000 (Hartford Decides).

Following the idea-collection stage, the steering committee works for weeks to refine projects and prepare them for the ballot. Voting occurs online at the mobile app and website as well as in-person at community centers, libraries, and businesses. The winning projects are chosen based on the greatest number of votes. Current projects eligible to be voted on include community fruit trees in parks, picnic tables and charcoal grills in parks, roadside bike-repair systems, volleyball and pickleball courts, monuments, illegal dumping prevention near parks, and free pet food pantries near schools (Hartford Decides).

In the Fiscal 2024/2025 cycle, 629 votes were cast from city residents and two projects were selected. These projects were bus stop enhancements like benches and shade structures and pedestrian-activated flashing crosswalk sites. Winning projects from the past include city murals, laptops for learning, lighting in parks, fitness trails, and ice rink upgrades. To the right features voter age distribution and voter race percentage for the 2024/2025 cycle (Hartford Decides).



Hartford began its participatory budgeting project in 2016 after being lobbied by five public organizations. Since then, the community has voted over 7 years of PB projects. Each year $100,000 of municipal funds is allocated to Hartford Decide$, the non-profit organization who oversees the PB operations. All citizens can submit and vote on ideas. The submission with the most votes is implemented. Past projects have included city murals, laptops for learning, and pedestrian crosswalk enhancements.




**Summary**

While the implementation and creation of participatory budgeting processes in the United States is still growing, many cities have already adopted PB and have continued to use it for the betterment of their citizens. In using the Social Vulnerability Index, PB can be a method to increase civic participation and community improvements specifically for those marginalized and underrepresented such as women and low-income groups. Through school involvement, citizens under 18 can also be encouraged to submit and vote on projects, teaching the youth about civic engagement and community activism. The PB process often requires a steering committee who facilitate a project submission phase, idea refinement phase, voting phase and implementation phase for the city. Oftentimes, the steering committee is composed of volunteers. Some challenges cities face are finding sources of funding for repeated PB processes, however successful examples allocate city funds towards PB. Moreover, it has been learned that the greater the funding allocated for PB leads to greater overall participation and community impacts. Government advocacy towards PB including presentations of successful PB projects in the U.S. can be a solution to the funding issue. Through educating local leaders and civic advocates about the successes and importance of PB, cities like Tucson can work towards creating a greater democracy and solving issues of highest priority to Tucson residents.

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# Barriers to Accessing Post-Secondary Education for Former Foster Youth

**Jenessa Ricklefs, Care, Health & Society and Critical Languages**

**Overview:**

Arizona students experiencing foster care face a unique set of challenges during their K-12 education with lifelong impacts on their overall educational attainment. These challenges continue for those students who decide to pursue post-secondary education with less than 10% of former foster youth completing a four-year degree (D'Avignon et al., 2019). One piece of legislation Arizona has in place to help mitigate the barriers to accessing and completing post-secondary education is the Arizona Tuition Waiver. However, given the immense financial burden of higher education combined with the financial instability foster youth encounter as they transition to adulthood, the Arizona Tuition Waiver fails to achieve its goal due to its community service requirement, its positioning as a last-dollar scholarship, and its strict age limit for eligibility; all of which place unrealistic financial burdens on an already vulnerable population (Arizona Revised Statutes § 15-1809.01, 2025).

**Background:**

During their formative educational years Arizona students experiencing foster care are four times more likely than their peers to switch schools during the school year, with 15% switching three or more times in one year. This instability leads to gaps in education and learning loss. Arizona foster youth are also much more likely to be enrolled in low-performing schools. Arizona high school students experiencing foster care have significantly higher dropout rates than their peers, and only 40% of Arizona foster youth graduate on time (Barrat et al., 2015).

As former foster youth transition to adulthood they are much more likely than their peers to experience homelessness and food insecurity. The National Youth in Transition Database shows that 44% of former foster youth experienced homelessness at least once prior to the age of 21, with 49% of those experiencing multiple episodes of homelessness (Administration for Children and Families, 2023). A multi-state study on basic needs insecurity in higher education shows that 55% of former foster youth attending college experience very low food security (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). These students often have no support systems in place to help them navigate these issues or help them access resources, and that lack of support extends to a lack of institutional knowledge and familiarity of higher education, which can be just as much a barrier to accessing and completing a four year degree as the financial constraints (Gahagan et al., 2023). This can be seen in the low college enrollment numbers for foster youth, 31-45% of foster youth enroll in college, compared to the national college enrollment rate of 59.2% (D'Avignon et al., 2019).

In 2013 Arizona legislature enacted statutes requiring the Arizona Board of Regents and the Community College Districts to waive tuition and fees for eligible foster youth attending college. This was meant to encourage college attendance among foster youth and lessen the post-secondary education gap between former foster youth and their peers, by alleviating the financial constraints of pursuing post-secondary education (Arizona Office of the Auditor General, 2017). And although the waiver was initially introduced as a pilot program, in 2018 it was made permanent through the passage of House Bill 2482 (Arizona State Legislature, 2018). While the tuition waiver is incredibly beneficial for those who receive it, a study by the Fostering Academic Achievement Nationwide (FAAN) Network, Education Reach for Texans, and John Burton Advocates for Youth done on the effectiveness of the tuition waiver in Texas showed that students receiving the waiver were 3.5 times more likely to graduate than their peers who had also experienced foster care but did not receive the waiver (Bustillos et al., 2022). The waiver's requirements overlook the practical realities and challenges that former foster youth face as they transition into adulthood and pursue higher education.

Arizona Revised Statute 15-1809.01 determines that in order for foster youth to be eligible for the tuition waiver, after their first year of attendance, they must complete 30 hours of community service per year to remain eligible to receive the waiver (2025). Given that former foster youth transitioning to adulthood are already struggling with homelessness and food insecurity, as well as the balance of school and work, this requirement is unnecessary and impractical. Requiring an already vulnerable population to complete community service in order to access benefits designed to promote educational equity imposes an unjustifiable barrier. This eligibility requirement should not exist.

The Arizona Tuition Waiver's positioning as a last-dollar scholarship is an additional requirement that ignores the practical reality of former foster students needing to work and support themselves while attending college. The waiver is applied only after all "other federal aid scholarships or public grants and any other public aid" is received (ARS § 15-1809.01, 2025, B.). Meaning these student's Pell Grants are taken towards tuition and then the waiver is applied. Leaving no left-over funds for other life/college necessities: such as books, groceries, and rent. The very nature of the way this waiver works means these students must work in order to support themselves throughout their post-secondary education.

There is also an unnecessary age requirement placed on this statute. Former foster youth are not eligible to receive this aid after they turn 23 (ARS § 15-1809.01, 2025). Studies show that youth exposed to the foster care system have developmental trajectories different from their peers. And may] take longer to complete things like education (Yang & Bechtold, 2021). Given what we know about how trauma affects brain development, and how former foster youth often experience delayed emotional and cognitive development compared to their peers, it's worth questioning why this statute imposes an arbitrary age limit on eligibility.

**California's Tuition Waiver:**

California has its own statewide tuition waiver, The Foster Youth Tuition Waiver for Current and Former Foster Care Recipients, under State Education Code Section 66025.3 established in 2018. The goal, similar to Arizona's tuition waiver, is to increase post-secondary educational access and completion for students who have experienced foster care. However, unlike Arizona there is no mandatory community service requirement. Additionally, California has expanded eligibility for the waiver by expanding age limits. If a child is in foster care at the age of ten or later, they qualify for this tuition waiver and the waiver may be used until age 25. California does however position its tuition waiver as a last-dollar scholarship (California State Legislature, 2018). While this design may reduce California state expenditures, it often provides minimal additional financial support to students who often qualify for substantial federal aid. This, in turn, creates additional financial hardships and reinforces further barriers to degree completion, which directly contradicts the intended purpose of the waiver.

**Texas Tuition Waiver:**

The Texas tuition waiver is one of the oldest in the country, with Texas being one of the first states to establish a version of the tuition waiver in 1993. Texas also distributes the waiver at much higher rates than any of the other 24 states with statewide tuition waivers in place (Watt & Faulkner, 2020). The purpose of the Texas tuition waiver is the same as Arizona and California, however the eligibility requirements differ. Similar to California, Texas does not mandate community service hours. One major difference to both Arizona and California are the requirements regarding age, which are significantly expanded to allow for greater eligibility. If a foster child was under a Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) conservatorship at the age of 14 or later, they qualify for the tuition waiver. Additionally, if a child was in care and then placed into a permanent managing conservatorship (PMC) or were adopted after September 1st, 2009, regardless of the age at which PMC or adoption occurred they qualify for the tuition waiver. Additionally, Texas does not place an age cap on receiving this waiver if a child was adopted or placed into PMC. However, if a child was under Texas DFPS conservatorship, then they must enroll in college prior to age 25 to qualify for the tuition waiver. This expansion of age eligibility allows for a much larger number of former foster youth to attain post-secondary education. Texas legislature goes a step further and mandates outreach to student experiencing foster care in grades 9-12 to ensure they are aware of their right to use the tuition waiver (Texas Education Code § 54.366, 2025).

| | Arizona | California | Texas |
|---|---|---|---|
| Last-Dollar Scholarship | Yes | Yes | No |
| Volunteer Requirement | Yes | No | No |
| Age of Eligibility | 14 | 10 | Dependent* |
| Age Cap | 23 | 25 | Dependent* |
| Campus Liaisons / Support | Not mandated | Not Mandated | Yes |
| Outreach in grade 9-12 | Not mandated | Not Mandated | Yes |

*The age eligibility and age cap in Texas are determined by what type of permanency was attained while the child was in foster care.

**Summary and Recommendations:**

At its core the Arizona Tuition Waiver is a tool to help mitigate the financial barriers to accessing post-secondary education for former foster youth and address the gap in educational attainment between former foster youth and their peers who have not experienced foster care. However, true access means meeting these students where they are, not where the system expects them to be.

The current mandate requiring 30 hours of annual community service to maintain eligibility for the tuition waiver creates an unnecessary burden for foster youth, many of whom are already juggling full-time coursework, employment, housing instability, and food insecurity. Removing this requirement would ease the burden for students who are at significant risk of undergraduate attrition. California's tuition waiver does not have any mandatory volunteer requirement for eligibility. As a last-dollar scholarship, the Arizona Tuition Waiver only covers costs remaining after all other federal aid, such as the Pell Grant, has been applied. Allowing students to retain their Pell grants would help close the gap between post-secondary access and degree completion. The waiver currently expires when a student turns 23, regardless of their progress toward a degree. This age limit fails to account for the disrupted and delayed educational paths that are common among former foster youth due to instability and trauma during their adolescence. Many do not begin college immediately after high school, and others may need to attend part-time or take breaks. Extending the age limit to at least 26, as the statue was originally written, would better accommodate these realities and align with other federal policies that recognize the unique timelines of youth who have experienced foster care.

***Specific Recommendations:***

- Do not mandate community services hours as an eligibility requirement.
- Do not require other financial aid to be used before the waiver takes effect, the Arizona Tuition Waiver should cover the full cost of tuition.
- Expand the age limits for eligibility, ideally all youth who have experience with foster care should qualify, not just those in care after the age of 14.
- Remove the age cap to compensate for the unique barriers faced by this population; currently, the waiver expires at age 23.
- Similar to Texas, mandate liaisons and/or supports] for students who have experienced foster care at post-secondary institutions.
- Develop outreach initiatives, modeled after those in Texas, to engage foster youth in grades 9–12 and ensure they are informed of their eligibility for the tuition waiver.

Former foster youth deserve targeted legislation that reflects their lived realities, not arbitrary eligibility guidelines that create additional burdens to accessing post-secondary education for an already academically underrepresented population.

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# Public Awareness of City Services

**Madison Rutherford, Sociology and Psychology**

Connecting underserved communities to city services, such as housing, healthcare, food assistance, and behavioral health support, remains one of Tucson's most pressing challenges. Many residents experiencing poverty, housing instability, or food insecurity are unaware of the resources available to them. To improve outcomes, Tucson must not only expand these services but also ensure that residents are aware of them and feel safe engaging with them. This issue is not unique to Tucson, as cities across the country are exploring new outreach strategies that center on trust, accessibility, and grassroots involvement. Cities such as Sacramento and LA provide great pathways and examples on connecting residents with the services the city provides.

This report highlights two successful models, Sacramento's Neighborhood Resource Coordinators and the Los Angeles Community Action Network, and extracts lessons Tucson can apply to its own outreach strategy. These case studies demonstrate that building real relationships, embedding outreach in everyday community life, and empowering trusted messengers are key to connecting residents with the support they need. Rather than proposing a one size fits all solution, this report offers adaptable, proven methods Tucson can incorporate into local systems.

**Sacramento, California Neighborhood Resource Coordinators**

Sacramento California, a city similar in size to Tucson, uses Neighborhood Resource Coordinators (NRCs) who are embedded in the city's Office of Community Outreach, but their real work happens on the ground. NRCs respond directly to 311 calls, which for Sacramento, 311 calls are primarily for residents to report issues particularly those concerning unhoused residents, and connect individuals with emergency shelter, behavioral health care, and long-term rehousing options instead of addressing problems like water issues, code enforcement, and occasionally routes people to emergency services. They collaborate across departments and nonprofits to ensure a coordinated and personal approach. NRCs are primarily funded through a combination of local tax revenues and targeted program funds. This model is effective because NRCs are not distant city officials but they're known faces in the neighborhood. They build ongoing relationships with residents and act as a consistent point of contact for those navigating complex systems. Their visibility and responsiveness make services feel more approachable. For Tucson, adopting a similar model could involve assigning outreach workers to consistently serve specific high need areas. By building sustained relationships and acting as reliable liaisons between residents and services, these workers can make support more accessible. Instead of relying solely on centralized outreach, the city could take a more neighborhood-based approach that brings services closer to where people live and gather.

**Los Angeles, California Community Action Network**

The Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) offers a deeply community-led approach to outreach. Operating in Skid Row and South LA, LA CAN focuses on food justice, tenants' rights, health equity, and mutual aid, but what makes them especially effective is their leadership structure. Every project is designed and led by local residents, which ensures cultural relevance, authenticity, and trust. Outreach at LA CAN isn't confined to pamphlets or public service announcements. Instead, it happens through everyday activities: a community garden where neighbors grow food together, a weekly marketplace where people can access fresh produce and also learn about housing rights, and wellness workshops that combine health education with social connection. Their People's Medicine Project blends health services with organizing, while tenant committees help residents advocate collectively for better housing conditions. By keeping leadership and participation in the hands of residents, LA CAN has built lasting community engagement. They've helped protect thousands of affordable housing units and increased access to state benefits like CalFresh. For Tucson, this model suggests the importance of investing in and partnering with existing grassroots organizations already embedded in local communities. Rather than trying to do it all through formal government channels, Tucson could amplify its reach and trustworthiness by supporting resident-led efforts through grants, training, and collaborative planning.

**Community Centered Outreach Approaches**

Tucson should prioritize methods that center trust, relationships, and accessibility. Trusted messenger outreach allows local leaders, block captains, NRC-like coordinators, faith leaders, and known community organizers to be engaged as messengers. These are the people residents already trust. City messaging will go further when delivered by familiar faces.

While digital outreach is important, it should not replace personal engagement. Pop-up events, door-to-door outreach, and neighborhood meet-ups remain effective. Participation will improve when residents feel the city is physically present and listening.

The use of one-stop-shops provide centralized access points where residents can learn about and apply for multiple services, reduce confusion, and increase engagement. These should be well-publicized (Spanish-language radio, flyers at laundromats and grocery stores, public transit ads, and social media groups where information spreads locally) and located in trusted community spaces. Local markets, mutual aid events, and community gardens can double as outreach opportunities. Embedding service information in spaces people already go to is more effective than creating new events that require extra effort to attend.

Partnering with community based organizations allows for groups that are already embedded in communities to be supported and given funding to continue outreach work. Their credibility and consistency are major assets.

**Conclusion**

Tucson doesn't need to start from scratch. By learning from Sacramento's government-embedded outreach and LA CAN's grassroots, resident-led model, the city can build a hybrid approach that is both institutional and community-based. Outreach should be proactive, relational, and rooted in trust. Most importantly, it should meet people where they already are, in neighborhoods, churches, markets, and community spaces. Real connection happens through presence, trust, and participation, not just promotion. With the right tools, investments, and partnerships, Tucson can ensure that residents not only hear about available resources, but also feel empowered and supported to use them.

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