

City of Tacoma

“Sheltering the Unsheltered in Tacoma”- Report

5.10.2020

Over the course of three days in early March, Metropolitan Development Council (MDC) conducted 91 short interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness in Tacoma. The goal was to identify the temporary housing and supportive service needs of those experiencing homelessness by using a self-reporting survey method with individuals experiencing homelessness throughout the City of Tacoma.

These interviews were conducted at five locations in Tacoma because of the frequented use of these areas by those experiencing homelessness. The interviewers focused on conducting interviews at indoor shelter sites and outdoor locations historically known for large, unmanaged encampment sites. The variety of locations is important because of the differing, unique needs and challenges between individuals accessing traditional shelter services and those individuals living outside. These locations were also chosen so that we could conduct as many interviews as possible for a more comprehensive picture and larger sample size.

Interview Locations:

1. Nativity House shelter (14th Street and Yakima Avenue)
2. Tacoma Avenue (downtown Tacoma)
3. Earnest Brazill and G Street Area (downtown Tacoma)
4. The Tacoma Rescue Mission shelter (South Tacoma Way)
5. Port of Tacoma (along the river)

Interview Questions:

The interview consisted of five questions for ease of participation and conciseness. These questions focused on sheltered preference, housing barriers, and supportive services, so that the team could identify needs and gaps for those experiencing homelessness in Tacoma. The questions were as follows:

1. If you could choose, would you rather stay in an indoor shelter or at an outdoor, managed camp?
2. If you cannot be here and you have to stay somewhere, where would you go?
3. What is the main thing keeping you from being housed?
4. If it was up to you, where would you build a shelter in Tacoma?
5. How could the community support you and others?

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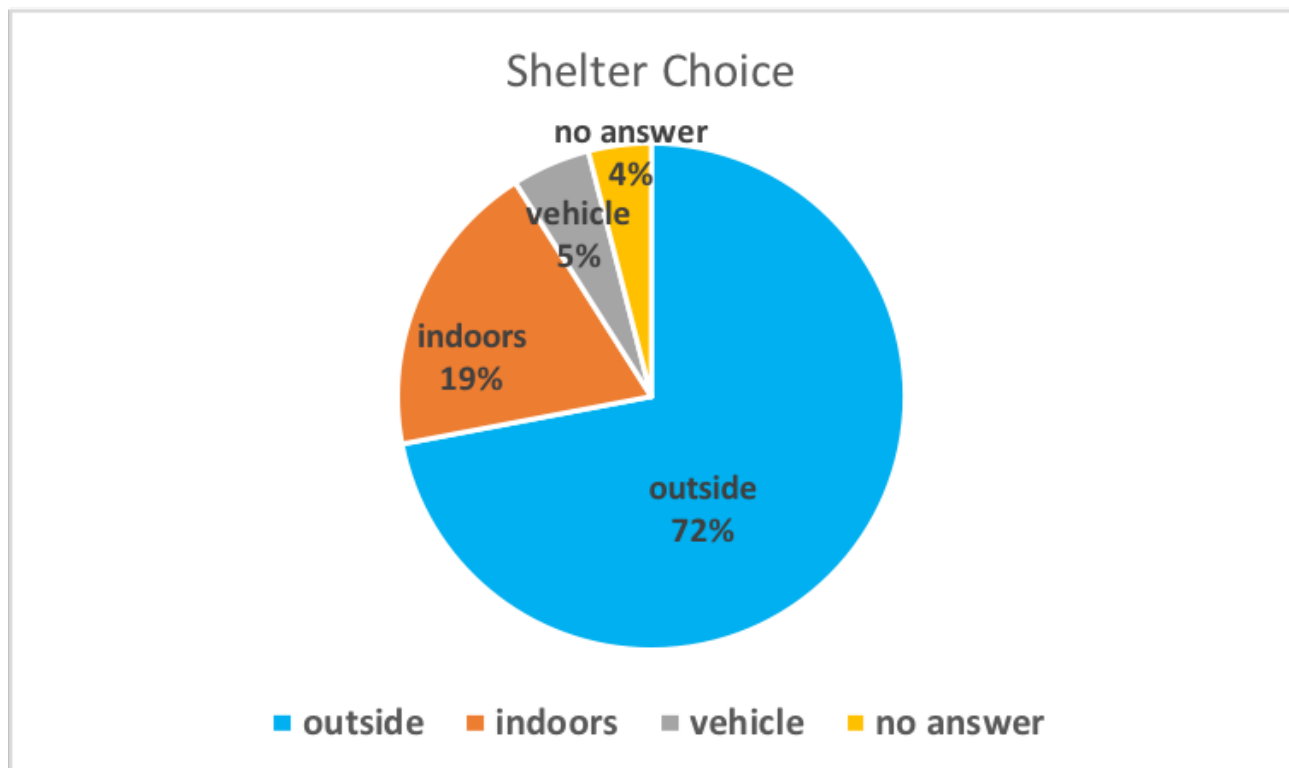
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Data:

The goal of the interviews was to identify temporary shelter recommendations and supportive service needs directly from those experiencing homelessness in Tacoma. There were 91 interviews completed with the majority of participants identifying as male (73%) and 27% identifying as female. The participants' race/ethnicity was: 44% identified as White, 37% identified as African-American/Black, 6% Native American, and 4% Hispanic/Latino. All participants interviewed were living in Tacoma at the time of the interviews.

Question 1

If you could choose, would you rather stay in an indoor shelter or at an outdoor, managed camp?



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Question 2

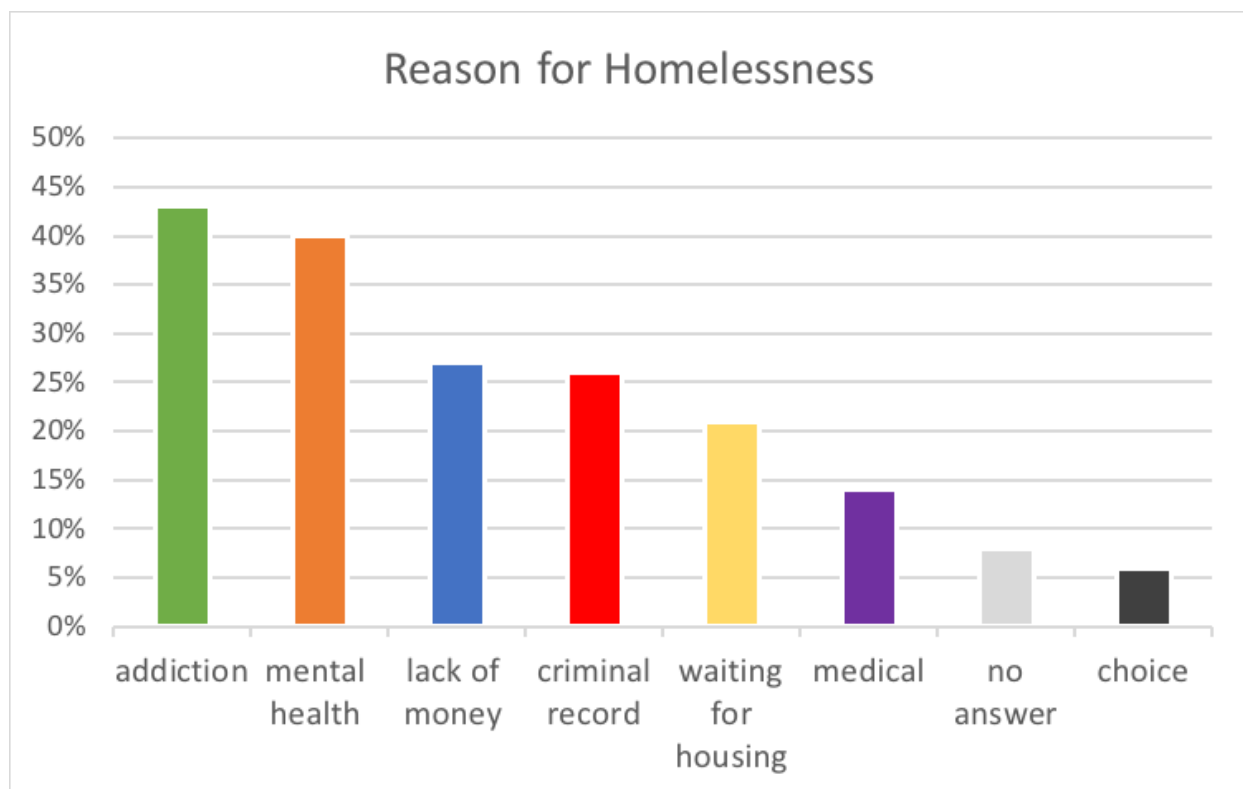
If you cannot be here and you have to stay somewhere, where would you go?

- 45% would choose to stay in the Port of Tacoma or by the river
- 22% would choose to stay on the sidewalk or alcove
- 19% would choose to stay somewhere nearby where they are currently staying
- 7% would choose to stay on vacant property or in the woods
- 4% would choose to leave town or stay somewhere out of town
- 3% didn't answer

Question 3

What is the main thing keeping you from being housed?

Participants can choose multiple answers for this question and 67% of participants chose multiple answers.



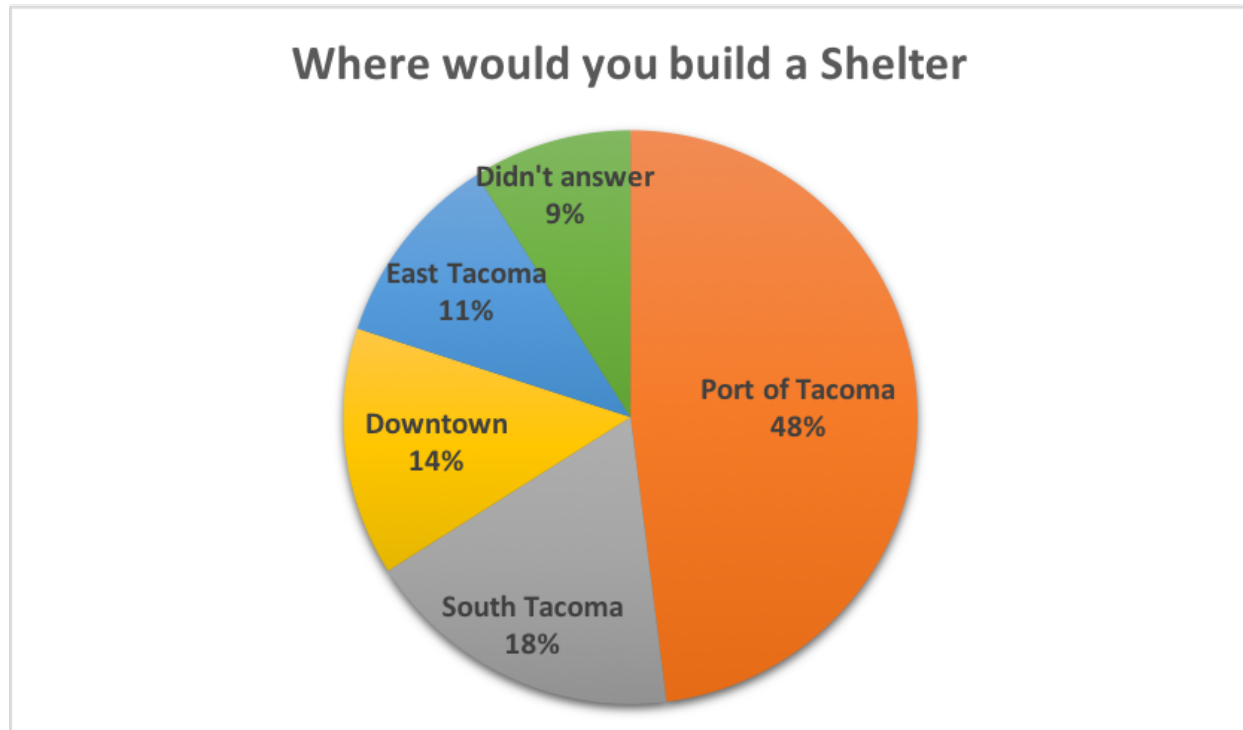
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Question 4

If it was up to you, where would you build a shelter in Tacoma?



Question 5

How could the community support you and others?

Participants can choose multiple answers for this question and 54% of participants chose multiple answers.

- Mental health services – 66%
- Hygiene services – 52%
- Garbage services – 45%
- Drug and alcohol services – 24%
- Secure storage – 21%
- Pet services – 9%
- Didn't answer – 5%

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Summary

The data from our interviews identified strong needs and preferences from the City of Tacoma’s homeless community. The purpose of these interviews was to gather more information directly from individuals experiencing homelessness in Tacoma. We wanted to identify their temporary shelter and supportive service needs.

A key finding was a large number of participants preferred to live in an outdoor setting. This could explain why the city, region and country continue struggle with the never-ending identification, response and removal of unsanctioned homeless camps, and why we are seeing an increase in visible outdoor sites throughout the community.

While a majority of participants preferred living outside, when they were asked about a preferred shelter location, nearly half (48%) of those interviewed chose the Port of Tacoma. The data also shows the other half of the individuals experiencing homelessness have different preferences for where they want to live. The other identified areas of interest were South Tacoma (18%), Downtown Tacoma (14%), and East Tacoma (11%). It’s important to note, most of these locations are near services and close to public transportation.

Although it was important to identify these temporary shelter locations and preferences, it was equally important to understand participants permanent housing barriers. A key finding was that addiction (43%) and mental health (40%) were identified as the main challenges for individuals’ path out of homelessness. There were also a significant amount of individuals who identified a lack of income/money (27%) and issues with a criminal record (26%). A considerable amount of individuals also identified they were waiting for housing (20%). During this interview process, it was unclear if participants were waiting for housing through the Coordinated Entry System.

When it came to community support, participants identified a combination of gaps in our current system, along with the need for an increase in vital supportive services . Participants could choose multiple community support needs. The need for mental health services was identified as the priority (66%). There was also a clear need for increased hygiene services (52%), along with more garbage services (45%). Hygiene services were described as safe locations where individuals experiencing homelessness could shower, use the bathroom and get fresh water, along with simply having places to throw away garbage. There was also a reasonable amount of interest in increased drug and alcohol services (24%), secure storage for peoples belongings (21%) and more pet services (9%).

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Recommendations

Based on the findings from these 91 interviews, we have identified key recommendations for the City of Tacoma as we continue to create innovative and strategic solutions to address and support the unique needs of those experiencing homelessness in Tacoma.

A staggering number of participants (72%) preferred to live outside. This may explain the constant challenge of clearing unmanaged encampments, only to have them show up in short order at another site across town. This finding is key as we continue to explore options for creating safe communities for all while also providing managed temporary shelter sites for individuals living outside. We continue to see visible outdoor camping grow in our communities and across the country. At some point we need to take the cue from the individuals.

In our current homelessness system, individuals are offered shelter (if there is space) and an opportunity to be assessed through Coordinated Entry for diversion, prevention and housing options. While this is an important service, shelter is often the only intervention offered to respond to their homeless situation. By learning that nearly three quarters of participants identified a preference for living outside, it's critical to create a solution that matches this preference and truly “meets individuals where they are.”

Providing individuals permanent housing is the answer to end homelessness. Efforts should continue to be focused on investing in the creation of affordable permanent housing and permanent supportive housing. We must also respond to the immediate need of, “where do I safely stay tonight?” We cannot do one intervention without the other, it needs to be a coordinated and strategic effort to do both. An immediate recommendation would be to create managed outdoor shelter sites with community safety, compassion and accountability as the foundation.

Another key finding was not everyone experiencing homelessness wants to live in the same area. Although a large portion of participants identified the Port of Tacoma as the primary shelter location (48%), there also is a clear interest in being in one's own area. The other half of the individuals wanted to be spread-out throughout the city. If the City of Tacoma were to build new temporary shelter sites, they should be equally and strategically dispersed throughout the city, this will provide choice and avoid saturating the Downtown Tacoma core.

Moreover, the strategic placement, set-up, and management of these sites is key to their success. The goal of an outdoor, managed site is to keep the site as small as possible, while being flexible to the changing needs. Ideally, the sites offer individuals a safe place where they can engage, stabilize, and quickly transition to other more permanent housing options. The sites can be quickly setup at reasonable costs, and quickly scaled down in size to adjust to the community need.

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A large number of individuals identified more than one reason for their current situation (67%). The two main self-identified barriers were addiction and mental health. This is key to understanding what services would be needed at these managed sites and/or what services are needed as providers continue to support individuals on their journey towards stability and permanent housing.

We are all learning the importance of hygiene services in combating COVID-19. This is also true for our homeless population. If the housed individuals in the community are doing a great job of staying clean, but individuals living outside are not, we will all be negatively impacted. This is also one of the few areas of homelessness we can control and impact. A majority of individuals will take advantage of having the opportunity to shower, use the bathroom and wash their hands. Providing hygiene centers strategically placed throughout our community in low-impact, high-trafficked areas is critical.

Priorities

- Managed outdoor sites (40 individuals or less)
- Hygiene centers with garbage services
- Increased mental health and substance abuse outreach services
- Safe car camping
- Secure storage

This should be the blueprint of where the city of Tacoma strategically invests homeless service dollars moving forward. Ideally, Pierce County and surrounding cities would mirror implementing similar services in their communities to equitably distribute the load throughout the County. Further work should be done to identify low-impact locations and strategically design the temporary shelter and services system model in the City of Tacoma. It will be important to identify points to connect individuals to the existing continuum of homeless services (Coordinated Entry), while also finding opportunities to quickly prevent and divert individuals from entering that system.