

It's A Question Of Shelter

A TEAM OF OU RESEARCHERS
CANVASSES THE STATE
FINDING SOLUTIONS FOR
OKLAHOMA'S UNHOUSED
AND AT-RISK CITIZENS.

By Emma Bitterman





Homeless Alliance client Thomas is grateful to be in an apartment after a period of homelessness that saw him sleeping outside a local gas station.

NATHAN POPPE/CURBSIDE CHRONICLE

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hile neighbors, cities and the nation struggle over how to handle one of the biggest issues of the day, an interdisciplinary team at the University of Oklahoma is helping find answers to housing instability and homelessness.

The Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency is receiving a \$30 million chunk of federal funding from a national pandemic-era program called HOME-ARP. The money must go toward supporting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, veterans and their families, people leaving domestic violence-adjacent situations, and any populations dealing with housing instability.

But before OHFA could disburse the federal resources, it had to answer critical questions about Oklahoma's housing needs and determine how those funds could be best allocated.

The OU team—a mixture of faculty and graduate students from the Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work and the Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture—was tasked with determining how

this considerable financial resource could fill Oklahoma-specific needs.

The OU researchers' analysis, shared with OHFA and available on the team's webpage, delivers straightforward results—they recommend 40% of the HOME-ARP funding go toward developing affordable rental housing. Other funds would be directed at supportive services, shelter services, rental assistance and more.

"We need housing, and we need a diversity of it. We need everything from tiny homes to space for youth who are homeless, to houses with four, five, six bedrooms," says Bryce Lowery, associate professor in OU's Division of Regional and City Planning and a project lead. "We need to figure out the balance between safety and accessible housing. Those things come at a cost, so how do we find ways to keep properties affordable?"

The team's research emphasizes a fact driving home the importance of affordable housing: Many people are not

far from facing homelessness. Data shows that the lowest-income Oklahomans—those who make 30% or less of the state’s median income—are also paying more than 30% of their income in housing costs alone, leaving them with little financial margin.

Modern homelessness is not just people living on the streets; it may be someone couch surfing because they don’t have a steady place to live, or someone living in their car for a time. It could be that multiple generations of a family live together to save money. Or it might be that someone lives on the edge every month and could easily be left unhoused by one financial emergency.

“We see in the data a really strong need to be prepared for the challenges of a population that’s paying a lot of its money for rent,” Lowery says. “That takes away from your ability to afford groceries, daycare, health care—all these other issues. The trickle-down effect is really problematic.”

While affordable housing ranks at the top of the state’s needs, it is far from the only resource gap Oklahoma faces, especially in rural communities. OU researchers found that rural areas don’t just have fewer resources than urban centers; many have nothing in the way of addressing homelessness or housing needs.

Though some regions of the state have high numbers of shelter beds—Oklahoma City and Tulsa, for instance, each have more than 1,600 total beds available year-round—the southwestern region of the state has just 92 and the northeast region 73.

“The need rural communities have is, literally, everything,” says Christina Miller, OU associate

professor of social work and co-faculty lead on the project. “There are no food pantries. There is no mental healthcare. And even in some of our larger regional cities, people travel to Oklahoma City to get the health care they need. Even good-sized towns are resource-poor.”

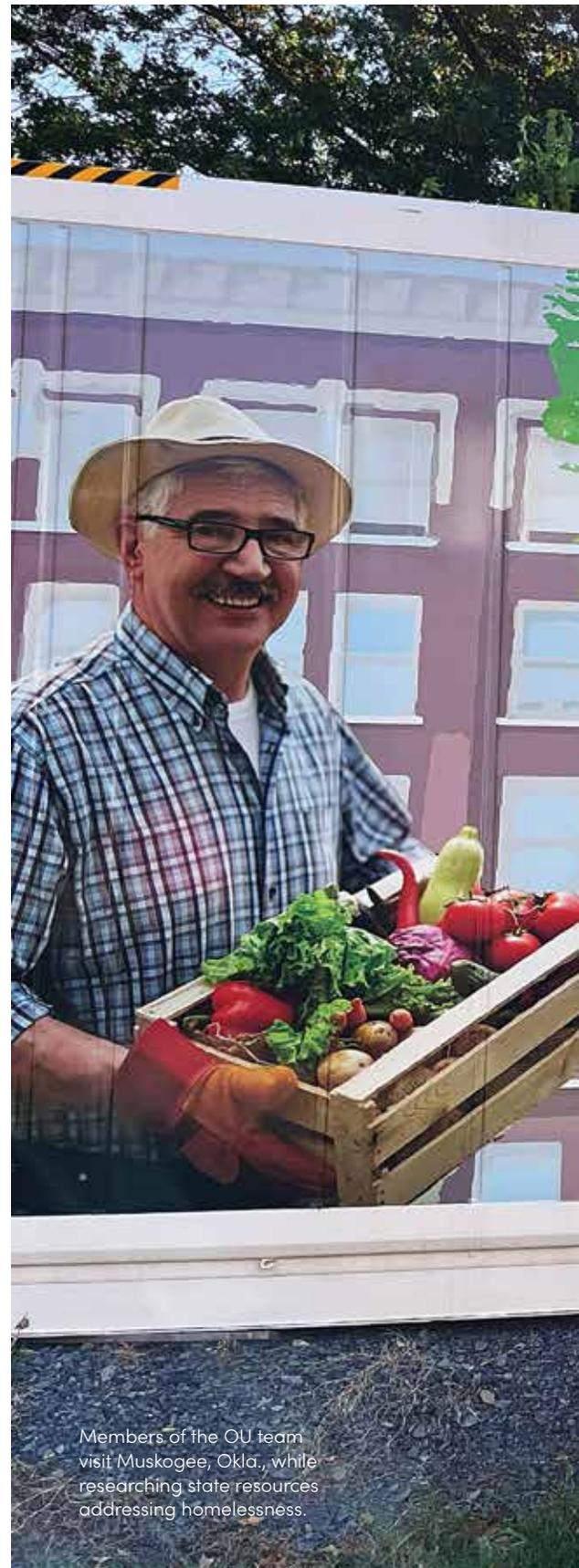
The team’s findings also show that some Oklahoma populations disproportionately struggle with housing. Black and Indigenous Oklahomans are overly represented in the state’s homeless when compared to population numbers, Lowery says.

OU researchers recommend funding that would provide wraparound care for people struggling with housing instability. High on the list of priorities are supportive services, which include everything from child-care to legal and employment assistance.

Researchers didn’t determine on their own how OHFA could best allocate this funding. They relied instead on in-person focus group meetings and online surveys that targeted both service providers and people with lived homelessness experience.

The process was long and involved the contributions of Social Work and Regional and City Planning graduate students, who studied how other states submitted their HOME-ARP responses. They also recruited involvement in surveys and focus groups, took notes, asked questions at focus group meetings, and pulled together data results.

“The Department of Housing and Urban Development is moving past the idea that experts always know best what will work in their communities. It’s very important that you formally document what community members have to say and how



Members of the OU team visit Muskogee, Okla., while researching state resources addressing homelessness.



GROWING HEALTHIER
NEIGHBORHOODS
Muskogee, OK

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—BRYCE LOWERY





Oklahoma City's Homeless Alliance members conduct a "point-in-time" count of the area's homeless population during the winter of 2023.

NATHAN POPPE/CURBSIDE CHRONICLE





Oklahoma City's Pivot Village provides an example of one housing solution—independent “tiny homes” for teens otherwise facing homelessness.

COURTESY PIVOT

that information and insight will be applied moving forward,” Miller says.

She says OU researchers focused heavily on collecting rural experiences. Larger cities like Tulsa and Oklahoma City have more established resources and are the recipients of more federal funds to address homelessness.

The OU team’s approach meant they have collected meaningful data on the state as a whole, says Emily Roberts, a medical social worker at OU’s Stephenson Cancer Center and a graduate student participant in the research.

“I originally am from a very rural area and was interested in the project because we covered all regions of the state,” she says. Roberts, who recently received her OU master’s degree in social work, studied under Miller and worked with co-project head David McLeod.

“I thought it was a good experience that represented the state,” she says.

While the needs revealed by OU’s study are clear, Oklahoma faces a number of hurdles in implementing solutions. Affordable housing is a significant priority, but Lowery and Miller note that the current system is showing holes.

“Across the state, the rental voucher system is not working well anymore,” Miller says. “Vouchers don’t offer enough money for landlords, and landlords don’t want to deal with inspections affiliated with the voucher process. So, we have vouchers available, but they just aren’t as useful as they were, say, 10 years ago, in helping people get rehoused.”

Still, the biggest speed bump on the road to reducing homelessness in Oklahoma may not be financial—it may be

attitudes, Lowery says. Interview and survey participants indicated community members sometimes lack understanding and empathy when engaging with homeless individuals and express reluctance to build housing.

“Communities need to examine tough questions that are keeping them from moving forward on housing solutions,” he adds.

Roberts emphasizes that while some individuals are chronically unhoused, others have faced a lengthy series of circumstances that pushed them onto the street or into an insecure position. A significant portion of unhoused Oklahomans—14% of those counted throughout the state in 2022—fled or faced domestic violence, and 7% are veterans.

Now that the OU team’s research work is complete and packaged, OHFA is moving forward on soliciting contractors for various housing projects and taking applications for non-profit agencies to receive HOME-ARP funds.

As their work becomes a reality, the OU researchers emphasize solutions to Oklahoma’s housing issues are at the state’s fingertips.

“I think we get caught up in thinking homelessness is such a complex problem, and it is, on one hand ... but on the other hand, we just need more housing,” Miller says. “We need more places where people can live. And it’s not brain surgery.”

To read the OU team’s entire HOME-ARP summary report, visit iqc.ou.edu/housing/home-arp. 

Emma Bitterman is a strategic communications specialist for the University of Oklahoma Foundation.