Analyzing the barriers to addressing unhoused populations in rural and urban Alaska**:** a case study

A group of buildings covered in snow

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Atsaq Place, the new permanent Supportive Housing Unit in Bethel Alaska, photo by Gabby Salgado KYUK

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**Executive Summary**

Background: Homelessness is an issue nationwide, but in Alaska particularly, with an increase in the number of people experiencing homeless increasing steadily over the last several years. Due to Alaska’s largely rural geographical area, and its great distance from the rest of the United States, there are many barriers to addressing homelessness regarding building new housing to meet the populations needs, as well as providing supportive services to individuals in need. To gain a better understanding of the differences between rural and urban settings, the populations of Bethel Census Area and the Anchorage Municipality were chosen as case study samples.

Methods: Interviews with stakeholders from organizations in each community were conducted to get a lay of the land as information regarding barriers to providing services to people experiencing homelessness in their regions. Additionally, data from federal, state, and local databases were utilized to determine homelessness rates, as well as other important factors such rental market data, vacancy rates, and more.

Results: Alaska receives significantly less federal funding than it should due to inaccurate point-in-time counts. In addition to lack of funds, problems with infrastructure, lack of physical space to build new housing, cost of building, and cost of transporting building materials are all significant barriers to building new housing statewide. Rental costs have increased statewide, and vacancy rates are low, indicating that renters are at a disadvantage when it comes to finding affordable housing. In combination with restrictive zoning laws in the Anchorage municipality, building affordable housing has proven to be a complex issue. Permanent supportive housing has just launched in Bethel and has been a part of Anchorage’s strategies for over a decade now. This is considered to be the gold standard when combatting chronic homelessness. In addition to providing permanent supportive housing, the need for supportive services was also determined to be vital in combatting homelessness. Each community’s abilities to provide these resources differs based on the funding available to them.

Conclusion: Recommendations were provided at the federal, state, and local levels focusing on streamlining the funding process through improving data collection methods and increasing the minimum wage at the state level so individuals may be more likely to acquire housing. While there were many similarities between the two communities regarding barriers to addressing homelessness, key differences were zoning issues for the Anchorage municipality, and less funding opportunities for the Bethel Census Area. Despite these difficulties, it’s clear stakeholders are committed and engaged in helping their community’s overcome homelessness, and future efforts should continue to encourage improvements at each level to aid organizations in their work.

**Background**

Homelessness in Alaska has been a topic of discussion in both academic literature and local and national news articles for the last several decades. This issue is statewide, and multifaceted, impacted by race, geography, and infrastructure, as is true of homelessness throughout the country. What is perhaps more unique to Alaska is the predominantly rural land, with 82% of the communities in the state being inaccessible by road, and 251 communities accessible only by air (Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, 2023). Due to geographic challenges and a lack of an adequate definition of homelessness, research on this topic in Alaska, particularly in rural areas, is really lacking, leading to an incomplete understanding of the complexities and nuances of the issue.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides an annual Point-In-Time count of the number of both sheltered and unsheltered homelessness people annually in order to come up with a plan for the distribution of funds to communities throughout the country. However, HUD excludes from their definition of homelessness individuals who are staying with friends or family, or staying in a hotel or motel, which is a common solution for unhoused individuals in both rural and urban areas of Alaska (Christensen et al., 2017). This reliance on staying with friends or family or staying in hotels and motels is due in part to issues with overcrowding as a result of a lack of affordable or adequate housing in these areas (Kolerok and Wilson, 2018). Furthermore, not only is affordable housing scarce, but many of the homes available have some sort of issue, with the HUD American Indian and Alaska Native housing study stating Alaska had the worst physical housing conditions, and 36% of the units surveyed had some type of physical problem such as a plumbing or kitchen deficiency (Pindus et al., 2017). These points were echoed in a 2021 Arctic policy brief on infrastructure, with additional emphasis made on the “lack of access to land and funding resources for building homes” (Nicewonger et al., 2021). This lack of access to land may be confusing given that so much of the state is undeveloped, however this is due in part to the fact that much of the land presents environmental threats to housing and is unsuitable for housing development due to issues like permafrost. These examples illustrate the multiple barriers that exist just from a housing perspective, there are of course several other factors that impact homelessness, including socioeconomic factors and access to vital support resources (Christensen et al., 2017).

Access to resources is a serious issue for individuals living virtually anywhere outside of the three main cities in the state, which are: Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau. Even within some of those cities, you may still need to travel to Anchorage to receive certain kinds of medical care. Christensen points out many individuals in need of medical services must travel to Anchorage for care, but then have no resources to return back to their communities (Christensen et al., 2017). Once stranded in Anchorage and unhoused, they become more susceptible to other diseases. In addition to higher rates of infection, there are also concerns about substance abuse and the harsh Alaskan winter climate to the unhoused population’s health. An article in The New York Times published towards the end of 2023 stated that 49 homeless individuals passed away in Anchorage, more than double the amount in 2022, due the harsh weather, lack of housing and shelter space, and the spread of fentanyl (Baker, 2023). This data illustrates that homelessness also proves to be a serious public health issue, in addition to being a difficult hurdle to address from a public policy standpoint.

One common suggestion to address both the practical aspect of homelessness and the public health affects is the housing first model, where unhoused individuals are provided with permanent housing without any preconditions. A 2018 study looking at two housing first initiatives in the state of Alaska found residents had “significantly reduced alcohol consumption, moderately improved physical and mental health, and increased social engagement and connectedness among and between their residents and staff” (Driscoll et al., 2018). This method is also endorsed by the Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness, who advocated for the creation of more permanent supportive housing units (Alaska Mental Health Trust, 2018). While this is a strategy that is often recommended throughout the country as a method for addressing homelessness, as stated earlier, the funding resources to build this type of housing is scarce. The remaining part of this research will focus on what work is currently being done throughout the state to try and mitigate these barriers, and the relative success rates associated with them.

**Methods**

Data was collected from multiple sources at the federal, state, and local levels. Additionally, qualitative data was collected through interviews with stakeholders. Interviews were approximately 30 to 40 minutes long, and occurred over the phone, with representatives from two communities, Anchorage and Bethel. Interviews were largely conversational in nature, and while questions were prepared, the discussion was guided by the stakeholder and their knowledge, experience, expertise and what they felt was relevant to illustrating the context of homeless issues in their communities. For the city of Anchorage, the representative was the director of external relations at the Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness. In Bethel, the Executive Director of the homeless shelter, Bethel Winter House, was interviewed. Each interviewee was asked approximately five to eight questions, which can be found in the appendix section, some of which were specific to their organizations and the work going on in their community. However, common questions between the interviews were what did they perceive to be the greatest challenges to housing and homelessness in their respective communities, what did they believe to be the biggest misconceptions regarding homelessness to be, and how were their organizations doing post-COVID. These interviews, though there were only two, helped to add additional context and information to data pulled from the federal, state, and local databases.

Data was pulled from HUD, specifically from the Continuums of Care (CoC) Program. This federal program “is designed to promote community-wide planning and strategic use of resources to address homelessness; improve coordination and integration with mainstream resources and other programs targeted to people experiencing homelessness; improve data collection and performance measurement; and allow each community to tailor its programs to the strengths and challenges in assisting homeless individuals and families within that community” through the use of federal funds (HUD Exchange, 2024). For the state of Alaska, the HUD CoC program has two funding streams, one is designated to the largest city, Anchorage, and the rest of the funding is designated to the “Balance of State,” (BoS) essentially the rest of the state, including both rural and urban areas. The data collected by HUD includes point in time counts for Anchorage and the BoS, as well as demographic information, and how funds were allocated and to what amounts amongst organizations within the designated funding streams for each state. Additionally, Census data was used to supplement demographic data about state and community population information.

At the state level, there were several reports and databases accessed. One of which was the Alaska Homeless Management Information System which provided information about homeless populations at the community level, including point in time counts, demographic breakdowns, and data on special populations such as veterans, and domestic violence survivors. Another important resource used was the Alaska Economic Trends Report from the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development. This report specifically looked at changes in the housing market over the last year, reporting data on the rental market, vacancy rates, and how real estate development has changed in Alaska since its statehood in 1959. Data from the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation was also utilized, as they participate in work regarding affordable housing throughout the state, and they are also home to the Statewide Homeless Housing Office, which “serves a single point of contact for nonprofit and supportive housing providers regarding funding, technical and counseling assistance, data collection, best practice sharing, as well as connect those who are homeless with referrals to our community partners when appropriate” (Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, 2024). These data sources were collected by state entities to provide a statewide perspective, and more of a localized perspective when possible.

Finally, local data was utilized when possible. In Bethel, data was available from the local shelter, Bethel Winter House, and the Bethel Community Services Foundation (BCSF). The BCSF report includes data from Bethel Winter House, as well as from the Tundra Women’s Coalition, both of which operate within Bethel City. Other data points in the report are Bethel Police Department collected data, as well as Project Homeless Connect collected data. This provides an important comparison point to state data, as state data report on Bethel Census Area data, which includes Bethel City, as well as the 36 other communities. Both the Bethel Winter House report and the BCSF report include basic demographic information, as well as more region-specific questions such as tribal affiliation, and where participants have been for the past year, such as an outlying community, the hub (Bethel), somewhere else in the state, or the lower 48. For local Anchorage data, reports from the Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness were used, including their Point-in-Time counts, annual reports, and strategic plans to determine how homelessness has changed in the city over time.

**Results**

*State of Homelessness in Alaska*

Homelessness rates have been on the rise nationwide, with an increase of 6% since 2017 (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). In the state of Alaska, there has been a pretty consistent increase in homelessness, with a 12.7% increase between 2022 and 2023 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2023). Figure 1 below illustrates the increase in the number of homeless since 2013 based on point-in-time counts of overall homeless in the state.A graph with numbers and a line

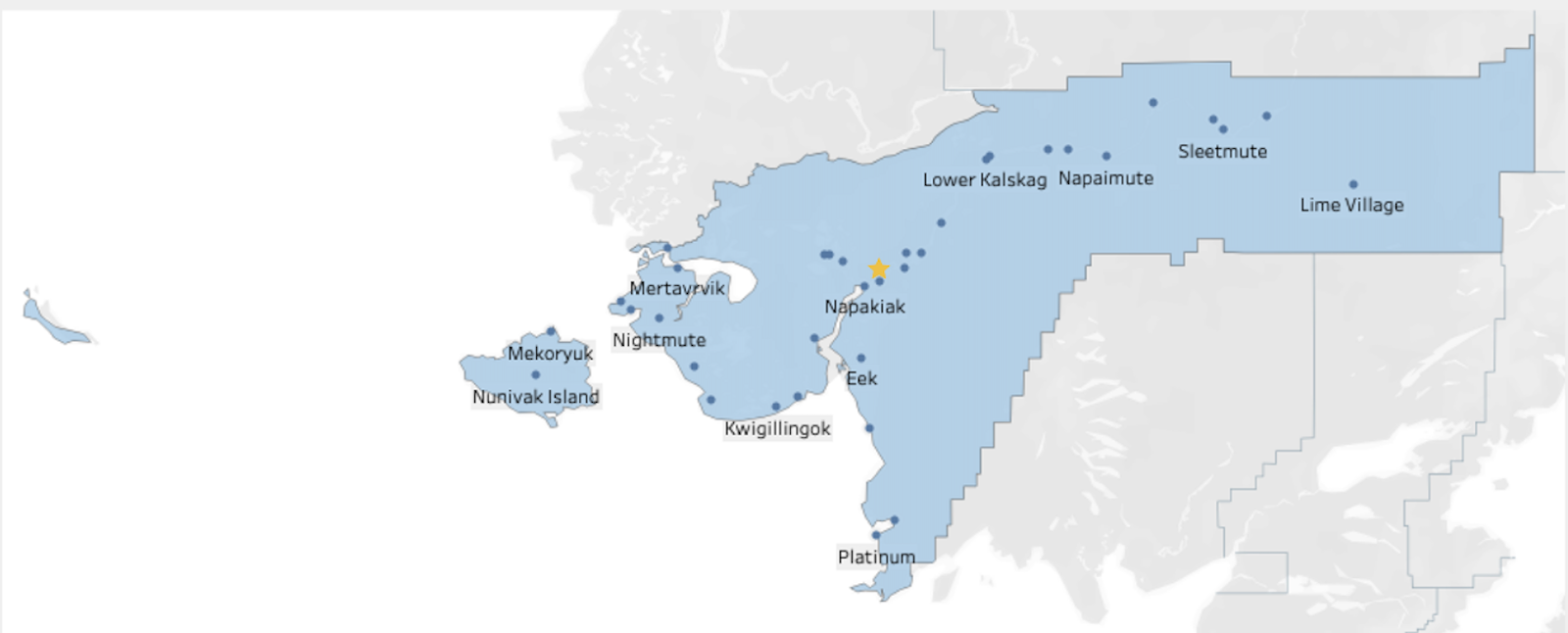
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Figure 1. Line graph depicting number of total homeless in Alaska each year since 2013.

Anchorage is the largest city in the state, with more than 40% of the state’s population residing within the municipality, or approximately 289,000 individuals (State of Alaska, 2024). The population in Anchorage is majority white (62%), followed by Asian (10.3%), Hispanic or Latino (10%), American Indian or Alaska Native (9.5%), Black (5.8%) with the remaining percentage being individuals of other racial identities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). In 2023 alone, Anchorage served a total of 11,902 unique clients in a variety of services, such as coordinated entry, where individuals at risk of homelessness are assessed and connected to the services they need, homelessness prevention, and supportive services (Alaska Homeless Management Information System, 2023). These 11,902 individuals in Anchorage accounted for approximately 65% of the Alaska population that received services throughout the state. It’s important to note, that while Anchorage has a majority white population, the homeless population has an overrepresentation of Alaska Native/Indigenous peoples at 43.7% despite a total population percentage of less than 10%. The 2023 state collected point in time count listed Anchorage at 1,764 individuals as either on the street or in emergency shelters, of which Alaskan Natives made the largest percentage at almost 43%. These racial differences are important to recognize as it illustrates the disparity in populations and shows an important area for further research.

While these point-in-time counts can help start to paint the picture of the problem in a community, an article in 2023 stated that often, point in time counts underestimate the number of individuals experiencing homelessness as they miss people who are not utilizing services by camping, or staying with friends, and that a more accurate estimate for Anchorage would be closer to 3,100 individuals experiencing homelessness. With this information, Anchorage’s homeless population numbers are actually quite similar to Houston Texas, who have about 3,200 homeless residents (Cadotte, 2023). Yet, the city of Houston receives over 10 times as much federal funding as the city of Anchorage to address issues with their homeless population (Cadotte, 2023). In fact, the city of Anchorage received just under $4.4 million dollars from the Housing and Urban Development Continuum of Care (CoC) award, while Houston Texas received around $47 million dollars in 2023 (Alaska's New Source, 2023). This discrepancy in funding helps illustrate the type of disadvantage a city like Anchorage is in when compared to cities with much larger populations, as that is part of how HUD determines CoC funding amounts.

In contrast, Bethel is a hub city serving 36 communities and over 18,000 people in Western Alaska and is only accessible by plane (*Alaska Population Estimates*, 2024). Bethel city has a population of approximately 6,100 people, the largest in the census area, while the community with the smallest population in the area has just 12 residents according to 2023 data (State of Alaska, 2024). The majority of the census area’s residents are American Indian or Alaska Native (85%), followed by white people (9%), and the remaining percentage being additional racial identities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The map below illustrates the Bethel Census Area, with Bethel city marked with a star to illustrate the hub city and its distance to the many communities it serves with vital services, such as transportation from the hub city to the outlying communities, as well as homeless services. To add additional perspective, the Bethel Census Area is roughly the size of the state of Kentucky, meaning the services that are provided in the hub city serve a great geographical area (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Furthermore, Bethel city serves as the main transportation hub from the census area to the rest of the state, and contains the main hospital for the area, although there are smaller clinics that do serve some of the more remote parts of the area, the hospital in Bethel is able to offer a wider range of services.

Figure 2. Map of Bethel Census Area shaded in blue, with different communities denoted by points. The city of Bethel is highlighted by a star.

In the Bethel Census Area, there were 405 individuals utilizing services, with 334 people needing emergency services, 250 clients needing supportive services only, and 3 individuals utilizing coordinated reentry (AKHMIS, 2023). Due to the nature of the geography of the Bethel Census Area and the much smaller population, there are far less service options available. While Anchorage data shows more options such as permanent housing or transitional housing, these data points are not covered in the Bethel Census Area reports due to a lack of availability at the time of data collection, so services were limited to overnight shelter and other more short-term needs. One of the two homeless shelters in Bethel, Bethel Winter House, provides a safe space for overnight residents, as well as meals (both dinner and breakfast), access to laundry facilities and shower facilities. This is an adult only shelter, and with the Tundra Women’s Coalition, a domestic violence shelter serving women and children, they collect their own data for the city of Bethel. The 2023 data revealed a total of 258 guests utilizing a combination of overnight stay services and meal services during their service window, which was a total of 208 nights. These organizations also gather some unique data points not captured by some of the larger communities, or by the statewide systems due to its unique position as a hub to much smaller communities. For example, participants are asked where they have been living for the past year, in Bethel city, in one of the villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area (another name for the Bethel Census Area), Anchorage, or if they have been incarcerated. Of those that have been in Bethel for the past year, they are then asked to identify where they are originally from, whether it’s originally from Bethel, a nearby village, or another state. These types of questions help shelters understand how long individuals have been trying to establish housing in Bethel, and whether they might have resources or social networks available to them nearby. It’s important to note that data reported by the Tundra Women’s Coalition is likely to be underreported due to safety and confidentiality purposes as they serve women who might be suffering from domestic violence. These two shelters serve the greater Bethel Census Area, as the city of Bethel is the largest city and has the greatest number of resources available, but it is a struggle as many of these communities are several miles from the Bethel hub. This is further exacerbated by the fact that travel between these communities and the hub is possible mainly through bush planes, as they are not on the road system. Of the HUD CoC funds awarded to Alaska, only the Tundra Women’s Coalition receives any funds, and it accounts for approximately 1.7% of the state’s total federal funds ($110,000). While there are other federal funds Tundra Women’s Coalition and Bethel Winter House have been able to utilize in the last few years, namely COVID-19 related funds, Bethel receives a significantly smaller amount of the HUD CoC funds.

*Stakeholder Viewpoints*

In conversations with stakeholders working in Anchorage and Bethel, barriers to addressing homelessness in their communities were discussed. Despite the vastly different geographic areas and population sizes, the greatest barriers cited were infrastructure and lack of physical housing available. This referred not only to a lack of state government organization and support to establish housing, but a physical lack of space and resources to connect housing to vital services such as running water due to either extremely high costs, or an inability to do so. In fact, in conversations with the executive director of Bethel Winter House Jaela Milford, she estimated that only 20% of the homes in Bethel are connected to city plumbing, leaving the rest of the in the city homes reliant on water delivery services. However, Milford continued that the city has a lack of water trucks, making it difficult for the residents who rely on them to get vital water services.

With regard to lack of housing, a 2023 report stated that Alaska will need an estimated 27,500 new housing units across the state over the next ten years (Housing Alaskans, 2023). These new units are a mixture of brand new physical spaces and spaces to replace existing structures that are in poor condition. This is a problem echoed in the 2017 HUD report titled *Housing Needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives in Tribal Areas.* This report looked at the quality of the housing available to people in tribal communities and reported on the number of homes with issues like plumbing or kitchen deficiencies, and rates of overcrowding. Alaska was consistently ranked as having the highest percentage of homes with some sort of physical problem (21%), in addition to having the highest rates of overcrowding (15%) across all tribal areas surveyed (HUD, 2017).

Additionally, due to the location of the state, transporting building materials is very costly which increases the costs of building, and with a short building season on top of it, makes trying to increase the number of housing options extremely difficult. This lack of housing leads to serious overcrowding issues, with 4% of homes in Anchorage dealing with overcrowding, and 35% of homes in Bethel overcrowded according to 2018 data (Kolerok and Wilson, 2018). The figure below (Figure 3.) is a map with the Bethel Census area outlined in blue, and the Anchorage municipality outlined in red, illustrating this 2018 data.

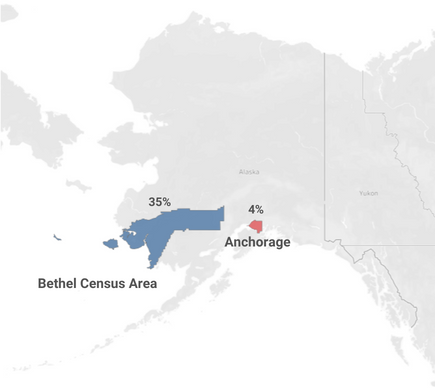


Figure 3. Map of Alaska, with Bethel Census Area and Anchorage Municipality highlighted and their respective overcrowding rates labeled.

In the 2023 report by Housing Alaskans, data on the costs of developing housing in Bethel was presented for pre- and post-COVID related costs. These numbers show a stark contrast, with pre-COVID costs in Bethel priced at $360 per square foot, now up to $850 per square foot. The rent needed to support this development would need to be at least $2500 a month, while the median rental costs currently sit at $1500, and the rent affordable at 80% of area median income in Bethel is actually closer to $1100 a month (Housing Alaskans, 2023). The cost of new development in Bethel is simply not affordable for most Bethel residents.

In response to the gaps created by the steep costs of housing development, Bethel Winter House has begun developing a permanent supportive housing building. This building will have 24 units and will be connected to the Bethel Winter House shelter and will share some of the same facilities.

The Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness has also been working to increase the number of permanent and supportive housing units in the municipality, with 860 new units brought into the community in 2023 alone (Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness, 2023). Yet despite this increase in permanent and supportive housing options, there is still a serious housing shortage in Anchorage, and much of that has to do with building issues such as restrictive zoning. According to the Director of External Relations at the Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness Owen Hutchinson, this restrictive zoning is a barrier to building new affordable housing in the municipality. The Anchorage municipality has focused on restructuring zoning laws to allow for more multi-family homes to be built, increasing the number of homes available in the area, however this has been met with some pushback due to concerns about lack of privacy and increases in short-term rentals such as Airbnb’s. However, as Hutchinson stated, “without a robust housing supply, we can’t move people out of those shelters and then new people can’t come in. There should be a flow in the system. And all across Alaska we have something called a shelter log jam, which is where our shelters just fill up.” Due to this lack of housing availability, shelters in Anchorage have started a new approach with one of their shelters, specifically the Emergency Cold Weather Family Shelter, with a focus on counseling and housing plans. These plans included connecting families with information on housing placements, helping fill out paperwork, and asking simple, but important questions such as “do you need help getting an I.D.,” “what happened in your last housing situation that caused you to lose it,” or “is income a barrier to housing?” This last question is very important to the next issue, as in addition to problems with a lack of housing, there are serious problems with the costs of rent throughout the state.

*Rental Market Data*

A 2023 economic trend analysis looked at the rental market across the state of Alaska and found that rent increased by 7% across the state on average over the last year (Schultz and Krieger, 2023). In the state survey, data was collected on rental costs for two-bedroom apartments in several major communities throughout the state to determine how rental rates have increased over time. For the first time in the state survey, Bethel Census Area was included, and they were rated as having the highest average rental cost for a two-bedroom apartment in the state, followed by the Anchorage municipality, which experienced a 5% increase in prices since 2022. This increase in rental costs is attributed to a variety of factors, specifically the climbing price of heating oil and the declining vacancy rates over the years (Schultz and Krieger, 2023). As the rental report states, as vacancy rates decline, landlords face less competition and are able to raise prices, and renters face more competition from other renters (2023).

As stated, in addition to collecting data on rental costs, the survey also looked at vacancy rates. Anchorage had a vacancy rate of 4.1%, while Bethel Census Area had a much higher vacancy rate of 17.3% (Schultz and Krieger, 2023). This much higher vacancy rate in Bethel may not be entirely reflective of what the usual vacancy rate in the area is and is estimated to be higher than usual due to the seasonal housing needs at the time of conducting the survey. In fact, a 2022 survey completed by the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation reported a vacancy rate for the Bethel Census Area of almost 8% (Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, 2023). This tracks with information provided by the Bethel Winter House director Jaela Milford who stated that the biggest employment industries in Bethel area are contract jobs at the hospital and the schools, making the community very transient in nature. Milford stated that even those individuals who “have money” are having a hard time finding reasonably priced housing, causing the more local residents to struggle even more, as Milford states a large proportion of Bethel residents live below the poverty line, with Census data stating 12.6% of Bethel city residents in poverty, and 21.9% of Bethel Census Area residents in poverty. The figure below illustrates the difficulty this information presents, given the high costs of renting a two-bedroom apartment in Bethel Census Area.

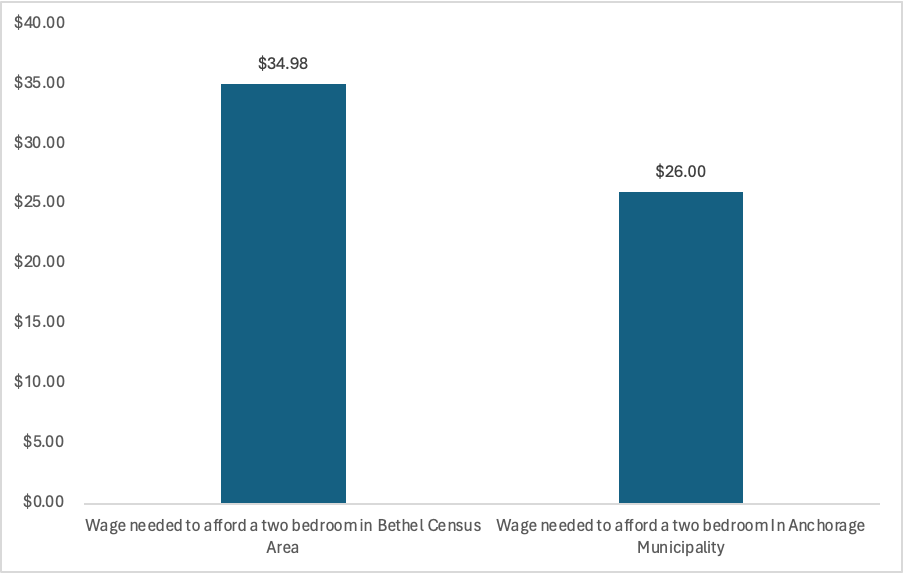


Figure 4. Chart of wages needed to afford a two-bedroom apartment in Bethel Census Area and

Anchorage Municipality, respectively from data provided by National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Data collected from National Low Income Housing Coalition used a two-bedroom apartment as the standard when calculating housing costs across Alaska communities and utilizes fair market valuations based on HUD guidelines. The Anchorage municipality currently has approximately 10.9% of its population living below the federal poverty level, illustrating further the difficulty placed on individuals and families trying to find housing in a very competitive rental market (HDPulse, 2021).

**Discussion**

**What are the gaps?**

*Funding*

Through analysis of the data and discussion with stakeholders, it is clear there are limitations within each system, the local, state, and federal levels, both in funding and the interventions provided. This was mentioned by both stakeholders interviewed, with Milford at Bethel Winter House citing some of the unique difficulties of running a nonprofit and trying to find funding. The difficulties she cited included finding funding for vital program components, such as personnel, stating “It’s pretty hard to find grants or opportunities for personnel. It’s a very strange concept that I’ve come to find in the last couple years working here. It’s like people are more than willing to provide money for services and things that they think will encourage people to become less homeless. But they don’t want to give you the money to hire someone to do that job.” This helps illustrate some of the difficulties Bethel Winter House has with keeping their facility open, as right now, they are not able to stay open 24/7, 365 days a year. The current season is October 1st through April 30th, with operating hours from 8pm through 7am, putting those experiencing homelessness at a serious disadvantage, as they have to find somewhere else to be during the cold winter hours of the day, and somewhere else to sleep in the summer. When speaking with the Executive Director at Bethel Winter House, her first goal would be to increase the operating hours during the winter season, to provide safe shelter all winter long and to keep clients warm during the harsh winter months. But first, they must secure the funding to do so. While the increase in COVID-19 related funds have been described by both stakeholders as a benefit to their organizations since the pandemic, these are not unlimited resources, and soon organizations will have to find other means to provide funding for vital services. This short-term COVID-19 funding further illustrates that the relationship between nonprofits and their funding streams has often been complicated, especially when it’s tied to government funding. A 2022 study of how grant funding has impacted nonprofit organizations stated, “a lack of financial stability can create difficulties in the administration of services through adaptation to fluctuating grant monies” (Addison & Rubin). Furthermore, participants in this study reported that when funds were cut, the first things to go were staff, followed by salary cuts, and that grant monies have strict policies on how their funds are used and what activities personnel may participate in (Addison & Rubin, 2022). This further illustrates the complex nature of funding nonprofit organizations, and the difficulties it can present when trying to retain staff.

This sentiment of frustration with securing funding was echoed by the Anchorage representative when referring to limitations with federal funding, specifically the formula that Housing and Urban Development uses to allocate funds to Continuum of Care recipients. Hutchinson from the Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness stated “the HUD formula really prioritizes large population areas. They say ‘well, there’s so many millions of people in Houston Texas and the surrounding area that we have to put more money there because it’s a bigger problem,’ but it doesn’t factor in things like cost of construction, rates of overcrowding, or health of the housing infrastructure. So, Alaska really gets significantly disadvantaged because of those things that are overlooked within the HUD policy.” This issue with the HUD funding formula has been noticed by the U.S. Government Accountability Office as well, who published a report in 2020 about how better HUD oversight of data collection would improve their estimates of the homeless population. This report found that HUD does not really examine the techniques CoC recipients use to collect their point-in-time data, which lends to part of the problem of inaccurate data (United States Government Accountability Office, 2020). Furthermore, CoC recipients reported that the support HUD did provide did not always meet their needs (United States Government Accountability Office, 2020). Upon receiving these recommendations, HUD agreed that their methods were not as effective as they could be, and they should work to improve data collection methods and provide greater support to CoC recipients.

However, this still fails to address one of the greatest flaws in the system, which is that point-in-time counts themselves are often considered to be an inaccurate measure of homelessness. This is due to a variety of factors, one of which is that HUD requires the count to occur in January, one of the coldest times of year, and when people are harder to find. Many organizations rely on volunteers to perform counts, and oftentimes, the number of individuals performing the counts is not sufficient compared to the size of the community, making it even more difficult to get an accurate count of the number of homeless individuals. When trying to collect data, surveyors are often told to avoid dangerous areas such as underpasses, alleyways, and parks, however, these are the places where homeless individuals are often found (Rosenfeld et al., 2024). Point-in-time counts also fail to account for homeless individuals that are in the hospital or in jail, leading to a large demographic missing from the count (Rosenfeld et al., 2024). Put together, it’s clear that there are significant gaps in the way HUD quantifies the number of homeless in a community in order to disburse funds, a problem which they acknowledge, stating “the agency does believe that there are some better ways to do it (count the number of homeless)” (Rosenfeld et al., 2024). However, despite this acknowledgment, there seems to be no efforts made to remedy these issues, and in the meantime, the organizations that continue to be underfunded are the ones that suffer.

*Zoning*

Returning to the issue of zoning, this is a significant barrier nationwide to addressing issues with housing and homelessness. The city of Anchorage is currently proposing to “dramatically overhaul” their zoning across the city to help address some of the issues created by the current zoning laws (DeMarban, 2024). This is a problem exemplified in communities across the country, that cities zone large portions of land for single unit homes with large lot size requirements, and have “number-of-unit caps, and parking mandates,” all of which are examples of how zoning impedes construction and reduces the number of affordable housing units available in a community (Lessard, 2022). Anchorage’s proposal would aim to remove single-family zoning in the municipality, allowing for more diverse housing options, and more dense housing (DeMarban, 2024). These changes to zoning will be important, as Anchorage has seen significant drops in construction, in large part due to the restrictive zoning in the city (DeMarban, 2024). Changes in zoning are currently focused in Anchorage, as that is where the zoning has the largest impact on building, in comparison to Bethel, where other barriers are much more impactful to hindering housing development.

**What is working?**

*Permanent Supportive Housing*

As previously mentioned, the city of Bethel is currently in the construction phase of their first permanent supportive housing structure, a 24-unit building that will be connected to the Bethel Winter House shelter. This is a huge step for this community, as the only other program of a similar nature in the area is a 7-unit transitional housing program called the Tundra Youth Home, which is limited to 17–25-year-olds. While these resources are a great step in the right direction, they are limited to the Bethel city area, and it’s unfortunate that resources aren’t available to more in the Bethel Census Area.

Similarly, as previously stated, Anchorage is also moving to create more permanent supportive housing options. In contrast, Anchorage already has a number of permanent supportive housing options that have served the community, one of which, Karluk Manor, was featured in a 2021 article. This article profiled individuals who were current residents of the manor as they shared their experiences living there, as well as comments from managing staff and their experiences interacting with the community. Karluk Manor, which opened in 2011, was Anchorage’s first permanent supportive housing unit, and was met with controversy as it was a wet facility, meaning it did not require sobriety of its tenants, and it was implemented at a time when housing first strategies were not as widely accepted. However, since opening, RurAL CAP, the nonprofit that runs Karluk Manor, has opened two more permanent supportive housing facilities in Anchorage using the same model (Boots & Lester, 2021). Data from the article stated while most residents have not moved on to independent living, there have been other significant improvements (Boots & Lester, 2021). A 2014 study on the manor found that “residents reported drinking less and made fewer emergency room visits within one year of moving in” (Boots & Lester, 2021). Furthermore, injuries went down, such as head trauma and dental problems, while residents spent more money on prescription drugs, visited behavioral health doctors more, and dentists more (Boots & Lester, 2021). Other quality of life improvements included an increase in participation in hobbies and interests, reconnecting with family members, and receiving long-deferred medical care (Boots & Lester, 2021). All of this data goes to advocate for the implementation of permanent supportive housing, and hopefully once the permanent supportive housing unit in Bethel is established, similar studies can be performed to measure the types of quality-of-life improvements made for residents there.

Not only is permanent supportive housing considered to be the most effective method at connecting people with services necessary to make meaningful behavioral changes, but it is also the most cost-effective solution to chronic homelessness. The Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness actually estimates that permanent supportive housing costs about $31,000 per person for a year, which is $25 a day less than what emergency shelter costs (Goodykoontz, 2024). To put that in perspective, there were 4,396 emergency shelter nights in Anchorage last year, costing the city almost $500,000 in services for the approximately 1200 unique individuals needing emergency shelter (Alaska Homeless Management Information System, 2023). And this number has been on the rise for the last 5 years. To help illustrate just how much more expensive emergency shelter is, if we put those 1200 people in emergency shelter every night instead of permanent supportive housing, we’d be spending over 11 million dollars a year more on emergency shelter, with less support and resources for those people. Increasing the number of permanent supportive housing units across the state is not only better for people from a mental and behavioral health perspective, but from a state economic health perspective as well.

*Increased support for people experiencing homelessness*

Through conversations with community representatives and review of the literature, it is clear that an increase in supportive services is a vital piece of the puzzle to increasing success rates when transitioning from homelessness. A publication from the National Health Care for the Homeless Council stated that while housing is an important part of the solution to homelessness, it does not “magically” stop the difficulties one experiences (2022). At Bethel’s new permanent supportive housing unit open house in early March of this year, the director stated that not only will tenants have their own studio apartment, but they will have access to counseling and health services in addition to other staff services, all of which will be located within the building (Smiley, 2024). This will be a new addition, as Bethel Winter House, the facility the permanent supportive housing unit will be connected to, currently does not have the capacity or funding to offer these services to its overnight guests. In fact, as previously mentioned, Bethel Winter House does not currently have the funding to be open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Anchorage on the other hand, due to its increased availability of funding, is able to offer more services to individuals not only in permanent supportive housing, but in emergency shelters as well. As previously stated, Anchorage’s Emergency Cold Weather Shelter offers a variety of supportive services to help individuals find housing, counseling, and financial support, as do a number of other shelters in Anchorage. Brother Francis Shelter, another emergency shelter facility in Anchorage, has a clinic within the facility that “provides free access to preventative care, acute illness treatment, wound care, skin infection treatment, laceration repair, injuries, cough/colds/flu, sore throat treatment, and more” as well as “on-site case management utilizing a client-centered approach in working with guests to make personalized goals to move forward on their path to permanent stability” (Catholic Social Services, 2024). Similarly, Anchorage Rescue Mission, a Christian organization, also offers to connect its emergency shelter clients to services, as well as options for longer term services, such as 6-month shelter accommodations for women returning to the workforce, or a one-year life skills program for men trying to pursue sobriety (Anchorage Gospel Rescue Mission, 2024). These offerings of supportive services at institutions throughout the Anchorage municipality indicate that homelessness service providers recognize the importance of providing a variety of services giving a holistic approach, such as meals, showers, laundry services, as well as counseling, case management, financial advising, and sobriety services.

**Recommendations**

*Federal level*

As alluded to throughout this report, the structure with which HUD uses to distribute funds to CoCs has significant issues that challenge its credibility and equity. In a recently published book titled *Changing the Paradigm of Homelessness*, the authors further challenge the relationship between HUD and the funding they provide to CoC recipients stating, “only programs that adhere to HUD definitions and agendas will get funded. If agencies want to serve homeless people, they have to modify what they intend to do to meet official guidelines,” guidelines the authors attest are not helping the people in need (Vissing et al., 2020). In fact, the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness from the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness focuses a lot of its key success measures on CoC and Point-in-Time data, despite HUD acknowledging publicly that these measures are not the most effective tools for assessing rates of homelessness. While federal funds are certainly helpful in providing resources to organizations to help them combat homelessness and provide services, changing the way fund award amounts are determined, as well as reexamining what criteria need to be met to receive funds might make for a more effective and impactful distribution of HUD resources. This includes reexamining the role point-in-time counts play in fund allocations and creating more consistency in how counts are performed if this is a metric that is going to be continually used. Additionally, addressing other important data points such as rental costs, overcrowding rates, geographical barriers to affordable housing development, and income inequality should be included in funding decisions. Furthermore, funding for CoC is dependent on meeting criteria for certain types of programming, such as permanent supportive housing, or safe havens, but in some more rural parts of the country, there is not an existing infrastructure to establish these types of programs, making these communities ineligible for HUD CoC funding. Similarly, for funding applicable to supportive services programs, there are requirements that they collaborate with coordinated entry to other resources, but if you are in a small community that lacks these resources, again you will be considered ineligible for funding. Federal programming needs to be more aware of these limitations, as these communities are in desperate need of support, yet due to these criteria they are not considered eligible to receive it. Incorporating these changes into federal planning tools can also create better instruments for state and local agencies who are looking for resources as they are creating their own interventions.

*State and local level*

While federal aid and funds is an important part of the solution to ending homelessness, state and local interventions are arguably more effective given they have a more intimate knowledge of the community they’re serving. The Alaska Council on the Homeless created a strategic plan to end homelessness in 2015, with a progress report updated in 2017, outlining priorities and progress made on addressing housing issues throughout the state. Priorities fell under five major categories: housing development, supportive services, education engagement and policy, prevention, and data (Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, 2017). Some of the specific strategies within these categories included increasing the number of housing available to priority populations, increasing funding and sources of supportive services in underserved areas, increasing income for people in transition, and coordinating community prevention services (Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, 2017). One of these issues, increasing income, is particularly important for increasing the ability to attain housing in the state of Alaska. The current minimum wage in the state is $10.85, but this is insufficient to afford the rent for a one-bedroom apartment at fair market value ($1,047/month). In fact, an individual would need to work 74 hours a week at minimum wage to afford the average rent for a one bedroom in the state. Figure 4 below illustrates the current Alaska minimum wage, as well as the hourly wage required to afford a one-bedroom apartment and a two-bedroom apartment working an average of 40 hours a week (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2024). As depicted in the chart, the wage needed to afford a one-bedroom is almost double the current minimum wage, indicating a serious need for change at the state level so individuals might have a greater ability to pursue housing. These numbers reflect state averages, while some areas throughout the state experience much higher rental costs with less housing access and less access to supportive services to tide them over should they not have the finances to afford their own housing. With this information in mind, it’s clear that some communities are at a greater disadvantage than others when it comes to addressing to homelessness.



Figure 5. Chart of Alaska minimum wage, and hourly wages required to afford a one-bedroom, and two-bedroom apartment.

To address the discrepancy between wages and rental costs, the state minimum wage should be increased significantly. One important benefit of increasing minimum wage is the increased access to medical care. There are “coverage gaps” that some full-time low-wage workers fall in to due to lack of Medicaid coverage, but not being high enough earnings to afford private insurance. Increasing the minimum wage can allow for individuals to have greater access to health insurance, either through their employment or through affordable care act subsidies (Bindman, 2015). Additionally, most workers who earn less than, or around $15 an hour do not qualify for important social programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program because they “earn too much.” These important benefits can have a significant impact for individuals experiencing poverty, but many low-income people do not receive them, but do not earn enough to afford housing or comfortable way of life with their wage alone (Lathrop, 2020). Raising the minimum wage can increase individuals’ upward mobility, financial stability, and health.

**Conclusion**

Through review of the literature and discussion with stakeholders in Anchorage and the Bethel Census Area, there were clear similarities and differences in the barriers to addressing homelessness and services they offered to try and mitigate those barriers. Key barriers identified by both community representatives included lack of space to build new housing units, high costs of construction, high rental costs, and infrastructure barriers and costs. This qualitative data was supported by data from the Housing Alaskans report, cited earlier in this report. What differs are the number of services and resources available in these two communities. Bethel Census Area is geographically large, but rather small in terms of population and services available for people experiencing homelessness. The majority of services for people throughout the census area lie within Bethel city, making it difficult for individuals in need of services who live much further from the city. Additionally, as pointed out, there is less access to supportive services, such as case management, and counseling services. This is in part due to lack of funding, as well as due to a lack of individuals who can provide these services living within the area as there are not appropriate housing accommodations or salary options.

For the Anchorage municipality, this area has significantly greater access to resources such as permanent supportive housing and supportive services like case management, addiction support, and counseling. However, other unique barriers to this area include restrictive zoning, and stigma regarding homelessness. While homelessness in general is often associated with stigma, Anchorage in particular struggles with this burden due to its high visibility given the number of homeless camps in Anchorage as well as the controversial nature of the permanent supportive housing structures within the city. Local and state organizations are hard at work to address these barriers with the resources available to them, but addressing homelessness will continue to be a nuanced issue that requires a multi-pronged approach.

**Limitations**

One of the major limitations of this case study was a lack of participation from community stakeholders. Despite reaching out to six different organizations to participate in interviews, only two individuals responded and agreed to be interviewed. These interviews were extremely valuable, but only provide a limited picture of stakeholder viewpoints on the challenges of providing services to people experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, efforts to connect with tribal organization representatives were also made, but unfortunately were unsuccessful. Further research would benefit not only from greater participation from other stakeholders, but from tribal entities and organizational representatives as well to get their perspective on how homelessness impacts their communities.

**Appendix**

Interview Questions – Asked to both stakeholders.

1. What do you feel are the greatest challenges to housing and homelessness issues in your community?
2. Does your city or organization have a strategic plan for homelessness?
3. Can you tell me about what your organization does, what activities you engage in?
4. What do you think are the biggest misconceptions when it comes to what needs to be done to address issues with homelessness?
5. How is your community and organization doing post-covid?

Questions for Bethel only

1. I read that Bethel Winter House is working on creating a permanent housing complex, what factors motivated that decision?
2. What is the vision for the permanent housing complex?
3. What are the biggest barriers to extending Bethel Winter House’s operating hours to full-time status? Do you provide other services during your “off” season?

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