



County of Orange

County Executive Office

December 16, 2025

Honorable Maria D. Hernandez
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court of California
700 Civic Center Drive West
Santa Ana, CA 92701

Subject: "Homelessness: Is Orange County Moving in the Right Direction?" Grand Jury Response

Dear Judge Hernandez:

Per your request, and in accordance with Penal Code 933, please find the County of Orange response to the subject report as approved by the Board of Supervisors. The respondents are the Orange County Board of Supervisors and the Office of Care Coordination.

If you have any questions, please contact Lisa Fernandez of the County Executive Office at 714-834-7219.

Sincerely,

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Michelle Aguirre
Date: 2025.12.16
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Michelle Aguirre
County Executive Officer

Enclosure

cc: 2024-25 Orange County Grand Jury Foreman
Jessica Witt, Chief Operating Officer
Lisa Fernandez, Assistant Chief Deputy Operating Officer
Elizabeth Guillen-Merchant, Assistant Chief Deputy Operating Officer

**Responses to Findings and Recommendations
2024-25 Grand Jury Report:**



"Homelessness: Is Orange County Moving in the Right Direction?"

SUMMARY RESPONSE STATEMENT

On June 27, 2025, the Grand Jury released a report titled, "Homelessness: Is Orange County Moving in the Right Direction?" This report includes findings and recommendations directed to the Orange County Board of Supervisors. Below are the responses.

FINDINGS AND RESPONSES

F1. Despite its efforts and substantial resources, Orange County's current strategy for decreasing homelessness has been largely unsuccessful.

Response: *Disagrees partially with the finding.*

The County of Orange (County) agrees that it has made significant efforts to decrease homelessness; however, the County disagrees that it has substantial resources available to address homelessness and that its current strategies have been largely unsuccessful.

The County has significantly expanded its system of care to address homelessness over the last decade. Historically, the County did not operate its own shelters; today, it funds and operates a comprehensive network of County-owned and contracted shelter facilities that collectively provide several thousand beds across the region. These shelters, including the Yale Navigation Center and Bridges at Kraemer Place, offer not only interim housing but also access to case management, behavioral health, and housing navigation services.

The efforts of the County and its partners have ended homelessness for thousands of persons. From January 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024, 6,545 persons exited homelessness to permanent housing. These outcomes demonstrate meaningful progress for individuals and families and strategies that are working; however, the number of people entering homelessness was 12,087, nearly double and exceeding those exiting due to broader economic and housing market conditions.

Orange County's high cost of living continues to outpace local wages, leaving many households vulnerable to being rent burdened and housing instability. The county's median income is about \$113,700, yet renters must earn over \$55 an hour to afford the average rent of nearly \$2,800 per month. As a result, more than 40% of households spend over 30% of their income on housing. These economic pressures mean even minor financial setbacks can quickly lead to homelessness, underscoring the need for stronger prevention efforts. Strengthening early interventions and increasing affordable housing opportunities will be key to reducing homelessness and promoting long-term housing stability across Orange County.

The primary funding sources for the ongoing effort to address homelessness are state and federal, which are currently insufficient to fully address homelessness in Orange County, including a significant gap in the amount of federal funding that is needed to responsibly fund the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program. The provision of adequate funding for the HCV program could have a significant positive impact on the County's ability to prevent homelessness.

The County general fund receives the lowest share of property tax revenues statewide at five cents for every dollar collected, compared to the statewide average of 14 cents, challenging the County's ability to address homelessness after mandatory program/service requirements are met. Despite this resource challenge, the County is committed to addressing homelessness, including the prevention of homelessness. Recognizing the importance of prevention, the Board of Supervisors established the Homeless Prevention Ad Hoc in February 2025 to evaluate options for the prevention of homelessness.

F2. Orange County's contract with 2-1-1 Orange County provides for comprehensive information and 24/7 telephone referral service for households in need. However, its services are not well known by the population that could benefit from their assistance.

Response: *Disagrees partially with the finding.*

The County's contract is with Orange County United Way (OCUW), not 2-1-1 Orange County (211OC). Through this contract, the County provides funding for the 211OC Connection Center, which provides comprehensive information on health and human services, and support information to residents in need of shelter, housing, employment, childcare, food, physical and behavioral health services and a broad range of other human services.

According to the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025-26 Quarter 1 report as submitted by OCUW to the County, the 211OC Connection Center handled 105,068 requests for help and over 50,000 searches done through their online resources, demonstrating an awareness of 211OC services by those who need it. Additionally, referrals to 211OC and communication about 211OC availability and services are made each and every day by County employees and community-based organizations. The County, across many of its departments' webpages, provides information on how the community can contact 211OC for comprehensive information and referral services, but will explore additional strategies to increase awareness of 211OC.

F3. Extensive waiting periods for people seeking Section 8 (Housing Choice) vouchers and lack of affordable housing in general are major contributing factors to the growing number of people experiencing homelessness and housing instability in Orange County.

Response: Agrees with the finding

The funding provided by the federal government for Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) is insufficient to meet the need in Orange County. A lack of affordable housing, a lack of federal funding for Section 8 vouchers, and the competition for low-cost units in the community are factors contributing to housing instability and/or homelessness in Orange County.

As detailed in the 2025 Federal Legislative Priorities, the County continues to advocate for adequate funding to support the full utilization of the County's HCV allocation.

F4. While Orange County directs a limited amount of resources to prevention, its programs to address homelessness are primarily reactionary, which over time is more costly than preventive interventions.

Response: Disagrees partially with the finding

The County acknowledges the importance of prevention as a core component of a sustainable homelessness strategy. Since 2015, with the kickoff of the federal Stepping Up Initiative, the County has committed significant time and resources toward prevention efforts. While the Stepping Up Initiative initially focused on reducing the number of mentally ill individuals in custody, over the last 10 years it has evolved into the OC Cares initiative, which is focused on prevention and intervention for all individuals in the County's five Systems of Care, including those at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. The OC Cares initiative is focused on addressing the root causes of homelessness and providing prevention and intervention services during childhood and beyond – not just at the brink of homelessness. The County is focused on and committed to building comprehensive Systems of Care that meet individual needs for the response to and prevention of homelessness.

Recognizing the continued need for prevention services, the County launched a few pilot programs for rental assistance and prevention programs aimed at stabilizing households at imminent risk of homelessness. Funded through discretionary resources, these pilot programs will provide the County with insight on how targeted financial assistance toward homelessness prevention can help reduce the number of individuals entering homelessness.

And, as previously mentioned, the Board of Supervisors established the Homeless Prevention Ad Hoc in February 2025 to examine options for enhancing homelessness prevention efforts.

Additionally, the County's approach to addressing homelessness is not reactionary, but a strategy with thoughtful planning and continued investments. Since 2018, the County has significantly increased its investment in permanent supportive housing, expanding its portfolio of Project Based Vouchers (PBVs) by more than 327%, from 243 units in 2018 to an anticipated 1,037 units completed by the end of 2025. This substantial expansion, leveraging the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's provision to allow the allocation of up to 20% of Housing Choice Vouchers to PBVs, demonstrates the County's deepening commitment to addressing homelessness and housing insecurity continuously.

F5. The Commission to Address Homelessness has not provided the Board of Supervisors with sufficient recommendations on homelessness prevention efforts, focusing instead on reactive strategies.

Response: *Disagrees partially with the finding.*

The Commission to Address Homelessness (Commission) provides recommendations to the Board on both prevention and intervention strategies, which are key components of the County's overall approach to addressing homelessness. The Commission has gained knowledge from people with lived experience of homelessness, which the Commission has used in making informed recommendations for homeless services, including homelessness prevention, to the Board.

In October 2022, the Commission provided the Board with the Homeless Services System Pillars Report which details the best practices and guiding principles to better serve individuals and families at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness across four pillars – Prevention, Outreach and Support Services, Shelter and Housing. This report was instrumental in development of the Emergency Rental Assistance Program and the Homelessness Prevention and Stabilization Pilot Program that were approved by the Board in 2024. The Homelessness Prevention and Stabilization Pilot Program is actively serving households at risk of homelessness by providing financial assistance and case management supports. Both programs have been successful in preventing homelessness and followed the best practices and guiding principles as recommended by the Commission.

Additionally, the Office of Care Coordination conducted a study in 2025 titled "Falling through the Safety Net: Understanding Individuals' Journey and Contributing Factors to Homelessness." The results of this study have been presented to the Commission and the Commission will be working on utilizing the information and findings to develop additional recommendations to the Board on homelessness prevention efforts.

As the County continues to refine and expand its prevention strategies, lessons learned from those with lived experience, the Board's pilot prevention programs and Commission-led initiatives will help inform future policy decisions and guide the development of long-term, sustainable solutions to homelessness.

F6. Tenant-based vouchers are federally funded and administered by local Housing Authorities. They are a faster and more cost-effective way to house those experiencing homelessness. These vouchers are often unavailable and insufficiently funded, leaving many people experiencing homelessness, including those who have completed all the requirements for vouchers, without housing options.

Response: *Disagrees partially with the finding.*

The Tenant-Based HCV program is for low-income households and not specifically for households experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the Tenant-Based HCV program relies on the household's ability to identify a suitable low-cost housing unit so the voucher can be utilized. As mentioned in the response to Finding 3, there is both a lack of funding for HCVs and a high demand for a limited supply of low-cost housing in Orange County. A household with a Tenant-Based HCV would be more likely to find housing and/or faster at finding housing, if there were available units. The time it takes to secure a housing unit with a Tenant-Based HCV can vary depending on variables such as rental market conditions.

F7. Orange County's elderly and disabled residents are an increasing segment of the homeless population. They rely heavily on tenant-based vouchers to maintain stable housing. This fixed income population will be disproportionately affected by any reduction in funding to these programs.

Response: *Disagrees partially with the finding.*

The Tenant-Based HCV program is a federal program aimed at serving low-income households in need of rental assistance. The application process for Tenant-Based HCV is consistent across all segments of the population, as households apply when the wait list is open and the same income eligibility criteria is met. While the majority of those participating in this Tenant-Based HCV program are elderly and/or people with disabilities, a reduction in funding to these programs does not only impact this population but every low-income household who receives or needs this assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESPONSES

R1. Orange County should prioritize prevention of homelessness rather than primarily reactive measures. This could be done by earmarking sufficient discretionary funds toward this objective. This should be accomplished by June 30, 2026, and annually thereafter

Response: The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable.

The County is already committed to building comprehensive and responsive Systems of Care that provide prevention and intervention services and programs to address homelessness.

Through the OC Cares initiative, the County has focused on addressing the root causes of homelessness and providing prevention and intervention services during childhood and beyond – not just at the brink of homelessness.

While the County agrees with the intent of the recommendation, it cannot be implemented as stated because there is insufficient discretionary revenue available to earmark specifically for prevention efforts. Limited state and federal funding, combined with the County's lower share of property tax revenue compared to other California counties, creates significant fiscal constraints that limit the County's flexibility to dedicate new, ongoing funding for this purpose.

Nevertheless, the County is committed to exploring funding opportunities to support prevention efforts, and will continue to work collaboratively with cities, service providers, and other community partners to strengthen prevention efforts within existing fiscal realities.

R2. The Board of Supervisors should request that the Commission to Address Homelessness prepare a plan outlining current and future (next two years) prevention strategies. The Commission should submit this plan to the Board of Supervisors by December 31, 2025, and annually thereafter.

Response: The recommendation has been implemented.

The Commission has prepared and supported in the implementation of various homelessness prevention strategies that have been approved by the Board of Supervisors. In October 2022, the Commission provided the Board with the Homeless Services System Pillars Report which details the best practices and guiding principles to better serve individuals and families at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness across four pillars – Prevention, Outreach and Support Services, Shelter and Housing. This report was instrumental in the development of the Emergency Rental Assistance Program and the Homelessness Prevention and Stabilization Pilot Program that was approved by the Board in 2024. The Homelessness Prevention and Stabilization Pilot Program is actively serving households at risk of homelessness by providing financial assistance and case management supports. Both programs have been successful in preventing homelessness and followed the best practices and guiding principles as recommended by the Commission.

Additionally, the Office of Care Coordination conducted a study in 2025 titled "Falling through the Safety Net: Understanding Individuals' Journey and Contributing Factors to Homelessness." The results of this study have been presented to the Commission and the Commission will be working on utilizing the information and findings to develop recommendations to the Board on homelessness prevention efforts.

R3. The Board of Supervisors should partner with non-profit service providers in each district that are focused on preventive measures to reduce homelessness. The programs could be similar to Supervisor Chaffee's Emergency Rental Assistance Program, which partnered with the Friendly Center, a nonprofit in his district that emphasizes prevention. These partnerships should be implemented by June 30, 2026

Response: *The recommendation has been implemented.*

The County is already partnering with nonprofit service providers to carry out prevention-focused programs aimed at reducing homelessness. The Homelessness Prevention and Stabilization Pilot Program was launched on October 7, 2024 to assist households at risk of homelessness by providing rental and utility assistance, stabilization payments and case management support. The Homelessness Prevention and Stabilization Pilot Program is operated by OCUW in collaboration with five nonprofit service providers (Families Forward, Abrazar, Mercy House, Pathways of Hope, and South County Outreach), ensuring access to services across the county. Additionally, the County has partnered with Latino Health Access to administer rental assistance for households at risk of homelessness, demonstrating a coordinated, countywide approach to homelessness prevention.

R4. The County should develop a contingency plan to address potential reductions in funding for homeless prevention programs, especially for the elderly and disabled populations and those on a fixed income. This plan should identify alternate funding sources, prioritize critical services, and ensure continuity of care. This plan should be created by December 31, 2025.

Response: *The recommendation has been implemented.*

The County through the Homelessness Prevention Ad Hoc established by Chairman Doug Chaffee and through its departments has identified all funding federal and state funding source that allow homelessness prevention as an eligible activity, its eligibility requirements for participants, and funding levels. The County is using this information to support the planning and operations of homelessness prevention programs.

R5. Orange County should launch a comprehensive awareness campaign to inform the public about the services offered by 2-1-1 OC. This should include social media outreach, partnerships with local media, and community events. This should be accomplished by November 30, 2025, and annually thereafter.

Response: *The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable.*

While the County supports increasing public awareness of 211OC, the primary responsibility for this lies with OCUW. The County will continue to look for opportunities to use its messaging to promote awareness of 211OC and will encourage OCUW to consider a variety of communication methods from traditional approaches such as print media to community canvassing and the posting of bulletins in public spaces, recognizing that not all residents access information digitally.