Reducing Atlanta's Homeless Population

An Applied Policy Project for the Mad Housers Inc.

PREPARED BY

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THE MAD HOUSERS

UVA | FRANK BATTEN SCHOOL *of* LEADERSHIP *and* PUBLIC POLICY

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Disclaimer

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Honor Statement

On my honor as a University of Virginia student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

Executive Summary

This paper seeks to understand and address the homeless crisis in Atlanta, Georgia. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated two major problems in Atlanta: (1) limited availability of housing and emergency shelter resources, and (2) alarming racial disparities among those at risk of becoming homeless and those currently experiencing homelessness. Some of the causes of homelessness in Atlanta include a lack of affordable housing, unemployment or working but in poverty, illness and disability, and abuse. The consequences of homeless include a lack of education, insufficient access to medical care, incarceration, high costs to society, and a continuous cycle of homelessness.

In recent decades, there have been three main approaches to solving Atlanta's homeless crisis: improving welfare programs, increasing incentives for the construction of affordable housing, and breaking down barriers to housing. This paper draws on evidence from these approaches and demonstrates how they have informed three possible policy alternatives.

The three possible policy alternatives proposed in this paper are (1) improve existing temporary shelters, (2) partner with Atlanta City Council to reallocate unused land and (3) increase grassroots support for Atlanta's HomeFirst initiative. These alternatives are evaluated on the following four criteria: effectiveness, equity, administrative feasibility, and political feasibility.

At the conclusion of this paper, I recommend that Mad Housers partner with Atlanta's interagency council to reallocate unused public land to the construction of free homes. This alternative scores the highest among all four criteria through its direct and immediate impact on Atlanta's homelessness crisis.

To implement this recommendation, the Mad Housers would have to overcome the following barriers: negative social perception of homeless people, Atlanta's disjointed approach to ending homelessness, and administrative burden. This paper elaborates on these barriers and concludes with ways to overcome them.

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Glossary

Key Terms:

Chronic homeless: an unaccompanied adult who has been continuously homeless for a year or more, or more than four times homeless in three years that totals 365 days (Pendleton, 2016).

Sheltered homeless: all adults, children, and unaccompanied youth residing in emergency shelters and transitional housing, including domestic violence shelters, residential programs for runaway/homeless youth, and any hotel/motel/apartment voucher arrangements paid by a public/private agency because the person is homeless (Henry et al., 2021).

Unsheltered homeless people: all adults, children, and unaccompanied youth sleeping in places not meant for human habitation, streets, parks, alleys, etc. (Henry et al., 2021).

330(h) funding: The term "330(h) funding" refers to Section 330(h)(5)(A) of the Public Health Service (PHS) Act which defines homeless individuals for the Health Resources & Services Administration and incorporates them under the "special populations–only grantees"(HRSA, 2018). Health centers dedicated to helping people experiencing homelessness and other at-risk populations receive funding known as 330(h) funding (*The Effect of Covid-19 on Homelessness in the US,* 2021).

Acronyms:

ADU – Accessory Dwelling Unit
CoC – Continuum of Care
HTF – Housing Trust Fund
HUD – Housing & Urban Development
IA – Invest Atlanta
LIHTC – Low Income Housing Tax Credit
PSH – Permanent Supportive Housing
RCOH – Regional Commission on Homelessness
SPARC – Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities

Introduction

From fenced off parks and alleyways, to hostile and anti-homeless architecture, Atlanta's homeless have very few places left to turn. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened key causes of homelessness from affordable housing to unemployment. Consequently, Atlanta's homelessness population has increased significantly within the last two years.

Problem Statement

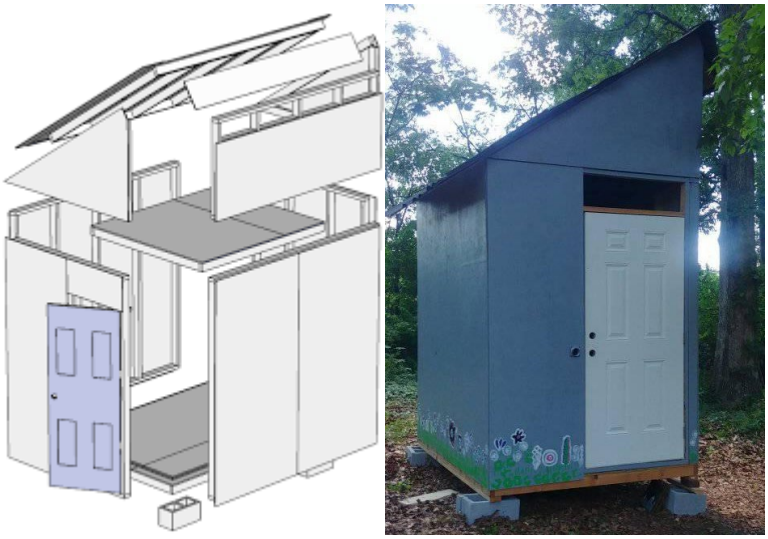
Atlanta is home to one-third of the state's homeless population (*Understanding the Problem*, 2021). In 2020, Atlanta's annual homeless census, performed by Partners for HOME, a non-profit in Downtown Atlanta, counted 3,240 homeless people — 939 of whom were unsheltered (found to be outside or in cars) (*Understanding the Numbers*, 2020). Meanwhile, the numerous private and publicly funded emergency shelters serving the City of Atlanta could only provide 2,756 temporary beds (Rhone, 2021). That's a deficit of over 480 beds. The result of Atlanta's temporary bed shortage has been a 31% increase in unsheltered homelessness since 2019 (*Point-in-Time Count,* 2020). **There are too many homeless people in Atlanta, and not enough housing resources to shelter them.**

Client Overview: Mad Housers, Inc.

Above all else, homeless people seek to be treated with respect, independence, and dignity — yet these qualities are rarely displayed in shelters. Therefore, non-profits, like the Mad Housers, Inc., pursue innovative solutions to tackle the growing problem of homelessness in Atlanta. Mad Housers, Inc. is a 100% volunteer-based organization. Since 1987, the Mad Housers' primary mission has been building temporary, emergency shelters for homeless individuals and families regardless of race, creed, national origin, gender, religion, age, family status, sexual orientation, etc. The Mad Housers use a harm reduction housing model that believes everyone has a right to shelter. The harm reduction model prioritizes safety and stability because regardless of what causes someone's homelessness, (e.g., mental health, physical disability, or substance abuse) their status won't improve if they're sleeping under a bridge (Woodard, 2019). This is why the Mad Housers build small modular shelters for chronically homeless adults and give them away for free. What separates the Mad Housers from traditional sheltering organizations isn't the construction, but the outreach— they identify clients and help them where they are, as they are.

Hut Construction: The Mad Housers only need about 50 hours to construct a hut once they've acquired the necessary land and materials (refer to Annex for full Mad Housers timeline). Each hut has a pitched roof, a sleeping/storage loft, a locking door, and a wood burning stove for both heating and cooking, as seen in Figure 6. The huts were originally expected to last only a couple of years. However, some huts have lasted over a decade and are still going.[1] Huts themselves are recycled to new clients as old clients move on and out of the huts (*Frequently Asked Questions—The Mad Housers*, n.d.). The City of Atlanta could assist the Mad Housers' in the general oversight of hut occupants and maintenance.[2] Thus, this alternative earns a high effectiveness score.

Figure 1: Design of Mad Housers' Hut



Source: The Mad Housers

[1] "Pieces which have become rotted are simply re-framed and replaced with a minimum amount of fuss." (*Frequently Asked Questions—The Mad Housers,* n.d.).

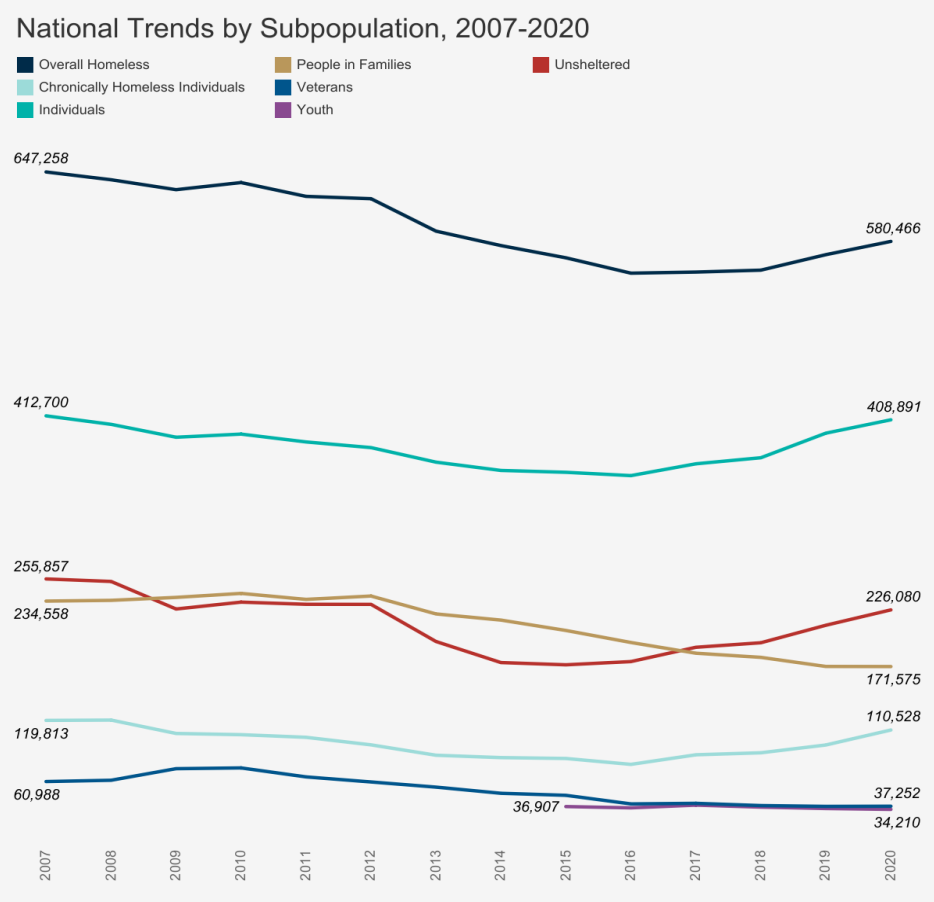
[2] "The huts are not designed to be permanent housing; instead, they are temporary, emergency shelters that offer our clients privacy, security, protection from the elements, and some stability" (*Frequently Asked Questions—The Mad Housers*, n.d.).

Background on the Problem

Troubling Trends in the U.S.

For the fourth consecutive year, homelessness increased nationwide (*State of Homelessness,* 2021). As seen in Figure 1, there has been a steady uptick in overall homelessness since 2018. Subpopulations like unsheltered, sheltered, and chronically homeless individuals are steadily rising; while veterans, people in families, and youth under 18 show subtle declines. Concerningly, African Americans and indigenous people (including Native Americans and Pacific Islanders) remain considerably overrepresented among the homeless population compared to the rest of the U.S. population. People identifying as black or African American account for 39 % of all people experiencing homelessness and 53% of people experiencing homelessness as members of families with children (Henry et. al, 2021).

Figure 2: National Trends by Subpopulation, 2007-2020

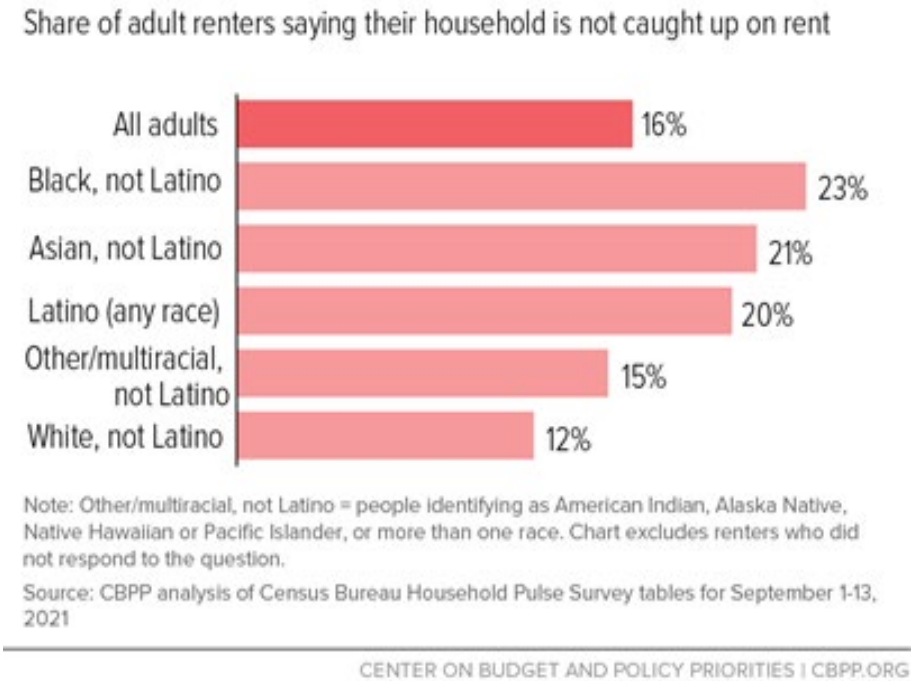


Source: *State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition*

COVID's Impact on U.S. Homelessness

Not only did the COVID-19 pandemic produce a new set of public health challenges, but it also exacerbated national crises that existed long before the pandemic. Nowhere is this more evident than in homelessness and affordable housing. The economic consequences of the pandemic have put more Americans at risk of entering homelessness. The large volume of evictions left many people experiencing homelessness unhoused as shelters were forced to reduce capacity as social services became more limited (*The Effect of Covid-19 on Homelessness in the US,* 2021). Figure 2 shows that 23% of Black renters, 20% of Latino renters, and 21% of Asian renters said they were not caught up on rent, compared to 12% of White renters. The rate was 15% for American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and multiracial adults taken together (*Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships,* 2021).

Figure 3: Share of Adult Renters Saying Their Household is Not Caught Up on Rent



Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

How Georgia Compares

As of January 2020, Georgia had an estimated 10,234 people experiencing homelessness on any given day, as reported by Continuums of Care (CoCs)[3] to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Of that total, 8.4% were family households, 7.5% were veterans, 4.9% were unaccompanied young adults (aged 18-24), and 13.4% were individuals experiencing chronic homelessness (Pounds, 2020). Since 2019, chronic homelessness in Atlanta has increased by 44% and unsheltered homelessness has increased by 31% (*Point-in-Time Count,* 2020). The 2020 Point-In-Time Census found that 88% of all homeless people in Atlanta were African American. The racial disparity of homelessness in Atlanta has grown to almost three times the national average.

Causes of Homelessness

There are a wide range of reasons why someone might be experiencing homelessness, but these are the causes most frequently cited:

1. ***Lack of Affordable Housing:*** There's a clear connection between the lack of affordable places to live, and the number of homeless people. The U.S. is currently facing one of the most severe affordable housing crises in history. Today, 8 million extremely low-income households pay at least half of their income toward housing, putting them at risk of housing instability and homelessness (*Homelessness in America*, 2015; *Housing,* 2020).

2. ***Unemployment or Working, but in Poverty:*** Insufficient income is one of the most prevalent causes of homelessness in the United States. More than a third of the homeless population is employed, but these jobs tend to be part-time, low-wage jobs. Workers with the greatest risk of long-term unemployment and homelessness include African Americans, Latinos, young adults 18 to 24 years of age, women, and those with less than a four-year college degree. The odds of homelessness at any income level are twice as high for Latinos as they are for European Americans, and three times higher for African Americans (Flaming, Daniel, et al., 2021; *Homelessness in America,* 2015; *Homelessness and Racial Disparities,* 2020).

[3] In Georgia, welfare programs that help shelter, feed, and support people experiencing homelessness are provided through Continuums of Care (CoCs). There are currently eight CoC's in Georgia, with only one serving the City of Atlanta.

3. ***Illness and Disability:*** Chronic illness and disability often prevent people from holding jobs and maintaining steady income. Without a steady income, finding affordable meals and sustainable housing can be near impossible. There's also the increased likelihood of medical bills and debt. In some cases, medical bills overwhelm low-income earners and push them into homelessness. For others, medical debt creates a barrier to employment that causes financial and housing insecurities (*7 Major Causes of Homelessness,* 2021: *Homelessness in America*, 2015).

4. ***Abuse:*** More than 90% of women experiencing homelessness attest to some form of physical or sexual abuse during their lifetime. Survivors often have to leave their homes to escape their abusers; with nowhere else to go they're forced to call the streets their home (*7 Major Causes of Homelessness,* 2021; *Homelessness in America*, 2015). On a single night in 2019, homeless services providers had more than 48,000 beds set aside for survivors of domestic violence (*Domestic Violence,* 2021).

Consequences

There are numerous short-term and long-term consequences of homelessness. Listed below are the main consequences of concern because of their cyclical connection to perpetual homelessness.

1. ***Lack of Education:*** There is an undeniable connection between homelessness and a lack of education for unaccompanied youth. Figure 3 shows that young adults who do not finish high school or obtain a GED are 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness than stably housed youths; while youth who experience homelessness are more than two-thirds as likely to not be enrolled in a four-year college program (Sosin, 2019). Melissa Kull, the lead researcher for Chapin Hall, an independent policy research center at the University of Chicago, said the following about the relationship between homelessness and access to education:

> "For young people who are not pursuing their education, who have dropped out of school, it becomes more difficult for them to then exit homelessness because they often don't have strong careers with growth potential that will help them to advance their economic

mobility. And then the same thing on the other side, we saw that for young people who were homeless, we saw that they were more likely to be leaving school and to not be advancing their careers" (Sosin, 2019).

Figure 4: The Relationship Between Access to Education and Homelessness

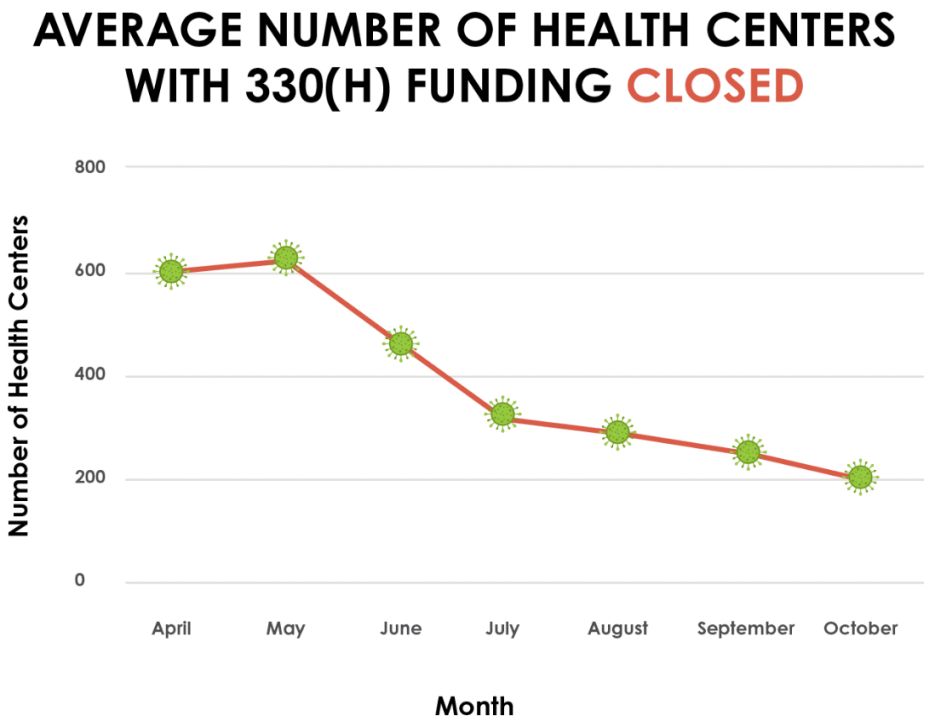
Source: Chaplin Hall

2. ***Insufficient Access to Medical Care:*** Health centers dedicated to helping people experiencing homelessness and other at-risk populations receive funding known as 330(h) funding.[4] Throughout the pandemic, health centers with 330(h) funding were forced to close due to increased costs and social distancing requirements. According to the data from COVID-19 tests in 330(h) health centers, rates of COVID-19 among populations of people experiencing homelessness and other underserved populations were between 9-12% from June through October 2020. Additionally, the CDC concluded that since many people

[4] The term "330(h) funding" refers to Section 330(h)(5)(A) of the Public Health Service (PHS) Act which defines homeless individuals for the Health Resources & Services Administration and incorporates them under the "special populations–only grantees"(HRSA, 2018).

experiencing homelessness are often older adults or have underlying medical conditions, they faced increased risks of severe illness due to COVID-19 (*The Effect of Covid-19 on Homelessness in the US,* 2021).

Figure 5: Decline in Health Centers Supporting Homeless Populations



Source: United Way of the National Capital Area

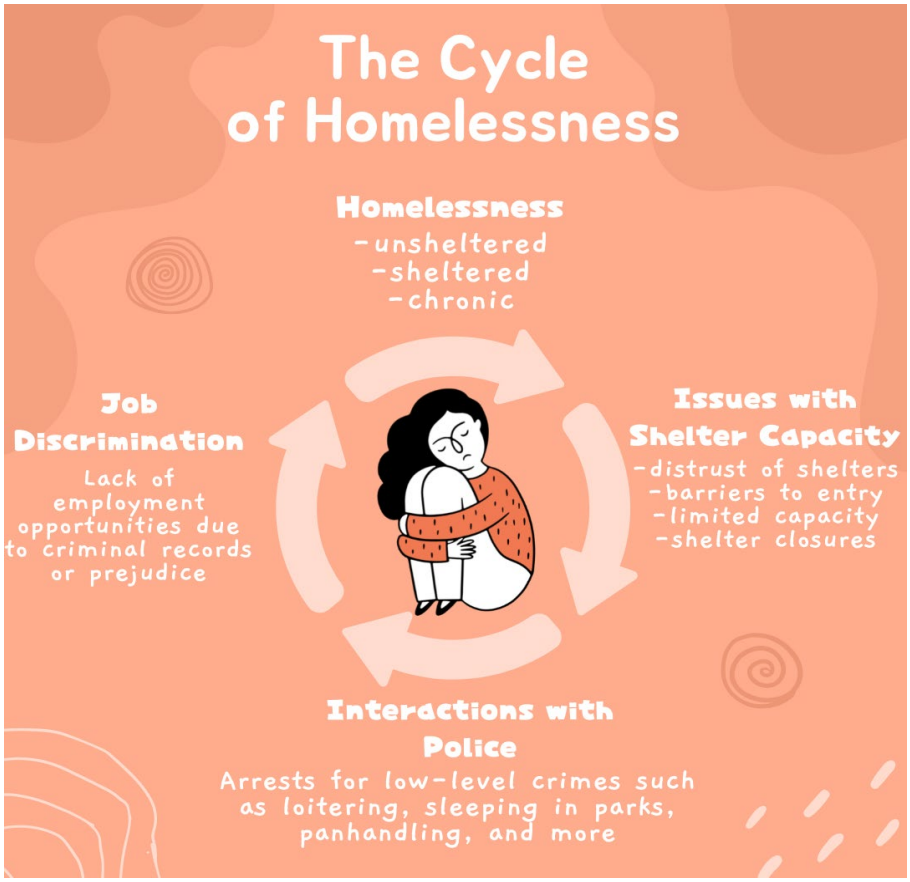
3. ***Incarceration:*** Homelessness and the criminal justice system are deeply intertwined. People experiencing homelessness are more likely to interact with the justice system through citations or arrests for low-level offenses like loitering or sleeping in parks. Evidence shows that people currently or previously involved in the justice system are often disconnected from support systems, face housing and job discrimination, and are therefore more likely to experience homelessness (Peiffer, 2020). Additionally, the Prison Policy Initiative, an independent research and advocacy organization, found that people who have been incarcerated once are seven times more likely than the general public to experience

homelessness. This figure doubles for individuals who have been arrested more than once. The risk of homelessness rises with each subsequent arrest (Couloute, 2018).

4. *Cost to Society:* HUD determined that chronically homeless individuals account for 15% of the total homeless population in the US, and that this 15% can consume 50-60% of all the homeless resources in a single city (such as Salt Lake City, Utah which is approximately twice the size of Atlanta, Georgia). In addition, they can cost a city $20,000 to $45,000 a year per person in emergency services such as EMT calls, emergency room visits, and interactions with the police (Pendleton, 2016).

5. *The Cycle of Homelessness:* A perpetual lack of affordable housing, coupled with stagnant wages, can set anyone on a path toward homelessness. An accident at work or a relationship that unexpectedly turns violent can send someone spiraling into the abyss of emergency shelters and short-term welfare programs. The fatigue of maneuvering complicated government resources often causes people to settle where they can — sleeping in alleyways and sidewalks. Sleeping in public spaces draws police attention, leading to arrests for low-level crimes like loitering. These arrests all too often lead to job discrimination and an inability to work or save enough money to climb out of poverty and homelessness. The causes and consequences of homelessness reinforce one another. Once an individual enters the homelessness cycle it is very difficult for them to break free (see Figure 5).

Figure 6: The Cycle of Homelessness



Source: Alyssa Candelmo (via Canva)

Evidence on Current Solutions

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated a need for innovative solutions to Atlanta's continuous and worsening homeless crisis. Over the last two decades there have been three main approaches to solving homelessness both within Georgia and across the nation, including: improving welfare programs, increasing incentives for the construction of affordable housing, and breaking down barriers to housing. Each approach has its pros and cons.

Welfare Programs

Welfare programs are government subsidies for low-income families and individuals. In Georgia, welfare programs that help shelter, feed, and support people experiencing homelessness are

provided through Continuums of Care (CoCs). There are currently eight CoC's in Georgia, with only one serving the City of Atlanta. There are an additional 17 privately-run homeless shelters in the city. These additional shelter programs aim to assist homeless people to secure a job, find a transitional housing solution, or enter a recovery program to address life controlling issues that feed the cycle of homelessness. However, a majority of these welfare programs can only provide temporary assistance.

Transitional housing programs provide temporary living spaces for 6 to 24 months, and there are currently 1,022 transitional housing spaces available in Atlanta. Additionally, emergency shelters provide short-term housing, but there are only 1,734 emergency shelter beds in the city. Both emergency shelters and transitional housing often go unused because of strict rules and curfews. These restrictions are worse for those with addiction or mental health challenges. Furthermore, like anyone else, many unhoused people don't want to live alongside people they don't know, trust, and even fear. They may also have strong ties to the neighborhoods they're currently residing in, with connections to friends, family, jobs, schools, or places of worship. To make matters worse, shelters are closing. The Peachtree-Pine shelter closed in August 2017, and in the years since, 18 homeless people have died from hypothermia (Deere, 2019). All of these concerns are intensified during a pandemic, when sleeping in close proximity to others presents significant health risks (Rhone, 2021).

Increasing Incentives for the Construction of Affordable Housing

The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program gives tax credits to owners of qualified rental properties for low-income tenants. The housing credit reduces a taxpayer's income tax liability if they make a long-term investment in affordable rental housing (*Tax Credits for Affordable Housing,* n.d.). The LIHTC is one of the most important resources for creating affordable housing in the United States because it works through the federal tax code and not the budget; it funds more units than any other federal housing program and enjoys bipartisan support (Scally et al., n.d.). Today, LIHTC-allocating agencies have an annual budget authority to issue $8 billion in tax credits for the "acquisition, rehabilitation, or new construction of rental housing targeted to lower-income households" and is widely considered, "the most successful affordable rental housing production program in history" (*Low-Income Housing Tax Credit*, n.d.). Approximately 60% of households that the LIHTC serves have a household income of less than $20,000, with the median household income set at $17,066 (Cantwell, 2019). This program has benefited individuals, families,

seniors, veterans, and persons with disabilities across Georgia for over three decades[5] (*Housing Tax Credit*, 2018).

Sadly, the LIHTC is a ripe target for fraud and abuse, which is perpetrated by tenants, developers, and government officials. Tenants abuse the program by occupying housing units to which they are not eligible, often by claiming a false income level on disclosure forms. Developers abuse the program by inflating their reported construction costs to receive excess tax credits. Furthermore, because states receive a limited number of valued credits that are handed out in a discretionary manner by government officials to developers, it creates an open invitation to corruption. From Dallas to Miami, there are numerous cases of LIHTC fraud and abuse (Edwards & Calder, 2017).

An additional program to highlight is the Housing Trust Fund (HTF). The HTF was established by the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 and operates under HUD. The HTF provides block grants to states, which may use those funds "for the production or preservation of affordable housing through the acquisition, new construction, reconstruction, and/or rehabilitation" of applicable real estate (*National Housing*, n.d.). Through the HTF, Georgia offers support to homeless assistance organizations, including local government and non-profit organizations. Funding provided by the HTF supports a wide range of programs, including emergency shelter programs, rapid rehousing assistance and homelessness prevention. To be eligible for funding, homeless assistance organizations must serve homeless or imminently homeless households. The HTF typically combines state funding from the General Fund with federal dollars. Georgia's State FY15 showed that the state contributed nearly $2.2 million in funding to the HTF (*Georgia Housing Trust Fund,* 2014). The Congressional Research service published HUD's National Production Report with data as of November 30, 2021, to highlight present-day outcomes of HTF. Their data showed that HTF funds had been used in a total of 1,641 completed housing units as of that date (most for new construction); nearly all the funds (985) benefitted households with incomes at or below 30% of area median income; 70% of units also received some form of rental assistance, but only a portion of these units were designed for homeless individuals (22%)and most tenants

[5] LIHTC is a federal tax credit created by President Reagan and Congress in the Tax Reform Act of 1986 (*Housing Tax Credit*, 2018).

identified as White (65%) (Jones, 2021). However, there is a lack of current information on the effectiveness of the HTF in Georgia, which gives rise to concerns of relevance and efficacy.[6]

Ways to Break Down Barriers to Housing

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) is an intervention that combines affordable housing assistance with voluntary support services to address the needs of chronically homeless people. These services are designed to build independent living, tenancy skills and connect people with community-based health care, treatment, and employment services. The effectiveness of PSH has been studied in three main ways: Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT), quasi-experimental studies (non-randomized comparisons between individuals who were allocated to or entered this intervention and those who weren't), and single group before-after studies (*Permanent Supportive Housing: Evaluating the Evidence for Improving Health Outcomes Among People Experiencing Chronic Homelessness*, 2018). These studies show that PSH lowers public costs associated with the use of homeless crisis services such as shelters, hospitals, jails, and prisons by decreasing the number of chronically homeless individuals by 20% since 2003 (Pendleton, 2017).

Additionally, the landmark 1990 City-State "New York/New York Agreement" proves to be a prominent case study for PSH. In addition to placing 4,679 homeless people with psychiatric disabilities into service-enriched housing, the "New York/New York Agreement" provided information for the first peer-reviewed study of the cost impact of supportive housing. This study on chronically homeless individuals living in supportive housing found that once placed into service-enriched housing, a homeless individual reduced his or her use of publicly funded services by an average of $12,145 per year in New York (Houghton, 2001). Despite New York having a homeless population that nearly quadruples Atlanta's, there is still reason to believe PSH can have a similar impact in Atlanta. The key is to humanize people's suffering from homelessness and eliminate restrictions to housing based on alcoholism or drug abuse (i.e., the harm reduction housing model).

The Housing First approach involves moving long-term homeless individuals directly into subsidized housing and *then* linking them to support services, either on-site or in the community (Gulcur et al., 2003). In other words, Housing First places homeless people in long-term housing

[6] In occupied units, most tenants identified as White (65%), while about 23% identified as Black. In terms of ethnicity, about 13% of units were occupied by tenants identifying as Hispanic or Latino. Some completed HTF-assisted units were designated for specific populations, such as homeless individuals (22% of units) or homeless families (6%) (Jones, 2021).

without asking them to get sober or be employed first. After they're settled in a stable home, they gain access to services such as drug and alcohol treatment, an assigned social worker, or job training (Perlman & Parvensky, 2006). Three main studies speak to the effectiveness of Housing First: a 24-month follow up of the Pathways to Housing program (one of the early versions of Housing First), a random assignment study, and a long-term study on Housing First participants (*The Case for Housing First*, 2020).[7] This research found that the majority of long-term homeless people who have moved into Housing First apartments remain stably housed and experience significant health improvements.

Utah is an important case study that supports these findings. In 2005, the state approved a 10-year Housing First plan to end chronic homelessness and 10 years later, in 2015, they reported a reduction in their chronic homeless population by 91% statewide (Pendleton, 2016). Having a roof over their head, a permanent address, and a place to prepare food and store belongings allowed for many people the stability they needed to address persistent health problems like malnutrition and addiction (Semuels, 2016). Federal and state governments both recognize Housing First as an evidence-based practice and are optimistic other states will follow Utah's lead. However, Housing First suffers from the same roadblock as PSH: people don't feel homeless individuals that struggle with alcohol and/or drug abuse deserve housing before treatment.

Criteria

The Mad Housers is an Atlanta-based non-profit that is 100% volunteer-driven. Their core values are to treat all homeless people with respect, independence, and dignity. Their primary mission is to build free, emergency shelters for homeless individuals and families regardless of race, creed, national origin, gender, religion, age, family status, sexual orientation, etc. The Mad Housers prioritizes safety and stability as part of a harm reduction housing model which states that everyone has a right to shelter. **To ensure the alternatives put forward in this paper align with the values of the Mad Housers, I propose the following criteria:**

- ***Effectiveness:*** *Will the proposed policy improve overall access to housing in the short-run, long-run, or both?*
- ***Equity:*** *Will the proposed policy ensure Black homeless people have fair access to housing?*

[7] These studies were conducted by the National Low Income Housing Coalition and the National Alliance to End Homelessness (*The Case for Housing First*, 2020).

- ***Administrative Feasibility:*** *Will the proposed policy be readily enacted by volunteers?*
- ***Political Feasibility:*** *Will the proposed policy be readily enacted by politicians?*

Effectiveness

For the purposes of this evaluation, effectiveness will be assessed on a qualitative scale ranging from high, medium-high, medium, medium-low, to low. Projections as to the effectiveness of each policy can be estimated from extrapolating lessons drawn from available literature (i.e., Point-in-time counts which are yearly counts of the number of homeless people in Atlanta conducted by hundreds of volunteers). An ideal policy would have the greatest anticipated decrease in Atlanta's homelessness population and thus a high projected effectiveness.

Equity

Equity will assess whether the policy is structured in a way that benefits or burdens one homeless group over another. Of particular concern is the treatment of Black homeless individuals in Atlanta, since the 2020 Point-In-Time Census found that 88% of all homeless people in Atlanta were Black (*Point-in-Time Count,* 2020).[8] A relative measure of equity can be taken by looking at the demographics and socioeconomic status of those impacted by the policy. This would then be relayed into a qualitative measure rating the level of equity from high, medium-high, medium, medium-low, to low. A policy with a high equity score would be widely available to various subgroups in the population without putting undue burden on Black individuals. Therefore, such a policy would be highly equitable.

Administrative Feasibility

Administrative feasibility is a qualitative measure of the ease of implementing the policy. It will be scored from high, medium-high, medium, medium-low, to low feasibility and will take stock of any hurdles in the way of enacting the policy. These hurdles could include any organizational approvals that need to be met, or an inability to integrate the framework of these policies to ones already in place. The greater the feasibility, the less costly and time-intensive the policy would be. To determine administrative feasibility, I will look at how willing Mad Housers' members are to support the policy

[8] The racial disparity of homelessness in Atlanta has grown to almost three times the national average (Henry, et. al, 2021).

(i.e., conduct supporting research for policy proposals, write memos/official correspondence to their representatives) and enact the policy (i.e., how many hours are they willing to dedicate to gathering supplies, building huts, gathering clients). To determine this, I will acquire data from Mad Housers' executive board on the demographics and size of their volunteer base. An ideal policy will have few administrative obstacles and be highly feasible.

Political Feasibility

Political feasibility analyzes the political environment to see if reforms can occur at this time. To operationalize, I will look at public opinion polling, specifically focusing on the political "worst case scenario". Comparing public opinion polling will also show both the salience (through what percentage of people have an opinion) and the elasticity (through the variation of polling numbers between surveys/phrasing) of the issue. There will also be an analysis of the general political trends of Atlanta since legislation and advocacy efforts are aimed at creating change at the local level and individual neighborhoods. The polling data would be translated into a qualitative scale ranging from high, medium-high, medium, medium-low, to low political feasibility.

Possible Alternatives

Each of the following policy options are evaluated against the criteria of how well each policy: promotes fair treatment of homeless people (*equity*); improves the overall access to housing in Atlanta (*effectiveness*); and will be readily enacted by both volunteers and politicians (*administrative & political feasibility*).

Alternative #1: Expand Access to Existing Shelters & Transitional Housing Programs

The first option is to improve on existing temporary/emergency shelters and transitional housing programs by increasing the number of beds available and reforming current guidelines that determine who can seek shelter. Currently, there are 1,022 transitional housing beds and 1,734 emergency beds available in Atlanta; however, this still leaves over 480 homeless people without one. Therefore, the Mad Housers could advocate for the expansion of temporary shelters and transitional housing programs to accommodate the 3,240 (and counting) homeless people in Atlanta. Additionally, the Mad Housers could recommend that these programs reconsider the strict rules and

curfews that discourage homeless individuals from staying in shelters. For example, many shelters and transitional housing programs have zero tolerance policies that place additional restrictions on individuals suffering from drug addiction, alcoholism, or mental health challenges (e.g., early curfews, drug screenings). Current policies are rooted in the belief that homeless individuals *choose* to use drugs and alcohol and ignore the reality that addiction and addictive behavior is not a choice, especially when coping with mental illness (Skinner & Rankin, 2016). Given that these individuals (i.e., people who identify as having a serious mental illness or chronic substance abuse) make up 30% of Atlanta's homeless population, making them feel welcome within shelters is essential to combating unsheltered homelessness (*Point-In-Time-Count*, 2020).

- ***Effectiveness:*** This alternative will only improve overall access to shelter in the short-run. An increase in the number of available beds will only lead to a decrease in Atlanta's homeless population if steps are taken to (a) reduce barriers to entry and (b) increase trust of existing temporary shelters. However, even with these improvements, emergency and temporary shelters only provide temporary living spaces for 6 to 24 months (Rhone, 2021). Therefore, this alternative has low projected effectiveness.
- ***Equity:*** This alternative aims to create enough beds (as well as fair access to beds) so that all homeless individuals in need of shelter can find it , regardless of race, mental illness or substance abuse. Therefore, this alternative has the possibility to increase equity in the long-run *only if* changes are made to current rules and regulations. Ultimately, this alternative projects medium-high equity.
- ***Administrative Feasibility:*** CoCs and privately-run homeless shelters are staffed by a mix of volunteers and paid employees. Research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had major impacts on the workforce from budget cuts to staffing shortages *(The Impact of COVID-19 on Nonprofits and the Outlook for 2021,* 2021*)*. Therefore, an increase in beds and shelter capacity may stretch an already thin workforce to its breaking point. Consequently, this alternative earns a low administrative feasibility score.
- ***Political Feasibility:*** An increase in shelter capacity would undoubtedly lead to an increase in cost. The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that the cost per shelter bed is $16,000 (*Annual Cost of Meeting Unmet Demand for Sheltering People Experiencing Homelessness Estimated at $4.5 Billion*, 2021 Therefore, a 480-bed increase would cost about $7.6 million. It's unlikely public opinion polls will show a willingness to put *more* money into the

improvement of existing shelters given the recent $3.5 million investment Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms put forward in October 2021 (Green, 2021). Therefore, the high cost of expanding shelter capacity results in low political feasibility.

Alternative #2: Partner with Atlanta's City Council to Reallocate Unused, City-Owned Land to the Mad Housers

Finding the right location for housing and the acquiring necessary supplies/equipment are the two largest obstacles for the Mad Housers' work. Therefore, the second option is to partner with the Office of the Mayor to reallocate unused, public land to the Mad Housers. In June 2019, former Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms released the One Atlanta: Housing Affordability Action Plan which established the following goals: "Create or preserve 20,000 affordable homes by 2026 and increase overall supply; Invest $1 billion from public, private, and philanthropic sources in the production and preservation of affordable housing; Ensure equitable growth for all Atlantans and minimize displacement; and Support innovation and streamline processes" (Bottoms, 2019). Last April, Mayor Bottoms established an interagency advisory council consisting of City staff, representatives from Invest Atlanta, Atlanta Housing, the Metro Atlanta Land Bank, community members, and other affordable housing partners, to achieve the four pillars of the One Atlanta Plan. Over the past year, the interagency council identified a total of 877 acres of land over 490 parcels that could be turned into housing (Capelouto, 2021). The majority of this land is located in the Northwest sector of Atlanta and is about 3 miles outside of the city's "amenity-rich" core (Edwards et al., 2020). The Mad Housers could partner with this interagency advisory council to identify land that could be used for the construction of free shelters that immediately serve the homeless communities of Atlanta. If the City of Atlanta provides the land necessary to construct much needed shelters, the Mad Housers can spend more time acquiring building materials and setting a reliable volunteer schedule for the consistent construction of free huts.

- ***Effectiveness:*** This alternative can result in improved overall access to housing in both the short-run and long-run. The land can remain city-owned, so long as the occupants of Mad Housers' huts are protected from eviction or removal.
- ***Equity:*** As stated earlier, the Mad Housers, "primary endeavor is building temporary, emergency shelters for homeless individuals and families regardless of race, creed, national

origin, gender, religion, age, family status, sexual orientation, etc." (*Frequently Asked Questions—The Mad Housers*, n.d.). Therefore, their mission and values project a high equity ranking. Additionally, the Office of the Mayor has made a similar pledge to establishing equity in the One Atlanta Plan: " The promise of One Atlanta is a city where all residents have equitable access to quality public services and amenities, including public spaces, schools, transit, retail, job opportunities, affordable housing, and healthy and safe environments" (Bottoms, 2019). Ultimately, this alternative earns a medium-high equity ranking.

- ***Administrative Feasibility:*** The ease of having a designated build site could also result in an increase in volunteers since panels can be built onsite and donated supplies would have a dedicated drop-off location.[9] Furthermore, the Mad Houser prides itself on community engagement and regular volunteer turnout. For example, group builds have been done with local schools, church groups, Scout groups, civic organizations, and more. Currently, group builds are completed with about 8 to 15 people (half the amount of pre-COVID builds) and changing COVID guidelines may allow for an increase in group size (*Frequently Asked Questions—The Mad Housers*, n.d.). The City of Atlanta would more than likely find the Mad Housers' community-based, volunteer and donation-driven model appealing and therefore be more willing to allocate land to the Mad Housers. Consequently, these alternative ranks high in administrative feasibility.
- ***Political Feasibility:*** This alternative can be achieved without any major changes to the mayor's current initiative to utilize public land for the construction of affordable housing. The construction of Mad Housers' huts can be incorporated under the first goal of the One Atlanta Plan: "Create or preserve 20,000 affordable homes by 2026 and increase overall supply". This goal is broken up into three sections and the third is where the Mad Housers can be incorporated: "Revise the Zoning Code". Of the proposed ordinances to be changed, the "Implement the Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Ordinance" could be modified to specifically include Mad Housers' huts. Since this alternative does not require an increase in funds (outside of the $1 Billion investment already pledged to One Atlanta), encourages

[9] Step 1 is gathering the hut materials. Step 2 is cutting lumber and nailing it together into the hut's component panels. Step 3 is moving those completed panels into the field and step 4 is assembling the hut. Each step takes a few hours *(Group Builds and Lectures—The Mad Housers,* n.d.).

community engagement, and decreases negative stigmas surround homeless individuals being lazy,[10] political feasibility for this alternative is medium-high.

Alternative #3: Increase Grassroots & NGO Support for Atlanta's HomeFirst Initiative

The third option is to increase community support for Atlanta's HomeFirst initiative. HomeFirst is a partnership between the City of Atlanta acting through Invest Atlanta (IA)[11] and the United Way Regional Commission on Homelessness (RCOH) that funds supportive housing projects.[12] In February 2017, the City of Atlanta made a bold commitment of $25 million in city funds to match private contributions to the HomeFirst initiative. As of September 2019, 200 units were "online" and another 350 were in development (*HomeFirst Initiative Bridges Public and Private Sector*, 2021). However, Cathryn Marchamn, director of the HomeFirst initiative, identifies two main obstacles to the continued success of this endeavor: (1) sustainable revenue streams and (2) a constantly changing homeless population. Therefore, this alternative proposes that the Mad Housers host a conference for Atlanta-based NGOs to learn how they can help to overcome these obstacles. This conference would focus on informing local non-profits of three things: the success of Housing First approaches locally and nationally, the importance of information sharing regarding Atlanta's homeless population (e.g., location, demographics, population size), and the need for collective fundraising to ensure the longevity of Atlanta's HomeFirst initiative.

- ***Effectiveness:*** If successful, this alternative could lead to increased access to housing in the short-run (at least by the 200 units already approved for tenants) and in the long-run (based on an additional 350 units coming in the next 2-3 years that are funding contingent) (*Bridging the Public and Private Sector,* 2021). By leveraging all existing resources and lining up new

[10] The Mad Housers encourage (but do not require) that their clients take part in hut construction. This participation helps prove that homeless individuals are not lazy free-riders (rephrase) (*Frequently Asked Questions—The Mad Housers,* n.d.).

[11] Invest Atlanta is the official economic development authority for the City of Atlanta. Its purpose is to strengthen Atlanta's economy and global competitiveness to create increased opportunity and prosperity for the people of Atlanta. Invest Atlanta is governed by a nine-member board of directors, chaired by the city's mayor and maintains governmental power through two pieces of legislation: the Local Government Authorities Registration Act and the Georgia Redevelopment Powers Law (*What We Do,* 2022).

[12] United Way works with housing and assessment center partners to assist in increasing access to housing and services in an effort to end homelessness in Greater Atlanta (*Street-to-Home,* 2020).

investments along the way, this alternative can continue to expand access to housing for years to come. Consequently, this alternative earns a medium-high effectiveness rating.

- ***Equity:*** Through HomeFirst, Atlanta will be one of 10 cities nationwide? to partner with the Center for Social Innovation and their new initiative SPARC to provide training, technical assistance, and reporting pathways, which create anti-racist intervention strategies in their homeless advocacy (*HomeFirst Funding,* 2021*)*. SPARC's effectiveness in creating equitable access to homeless resources is supported by a 2021 mixed-methods study that found equity-based responses to homelessness and interventions that explicitly address racism at the local, state, and federal level are key to solving homelessness (Olivet et al., 2021). This alternative could contribute to Black homeless people having more equitable access to housing through SPARC and the widespread community buy-in that is likely to occur as a result of the conference. Therefore, this alternative predicts a high equity ranking.
- ***Administrative Feasibility:*** There are dozens of non-profit organizations in Atlanta that work to eradicate homelessness, so it's fair to assume a great turnout. This alternative can garner widespread support for HomeFirst through its combined approach of education and community-building. However, support may not necessarily result in increased funding. Research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted revenues and funding for 75% of the nonprofits in the United States *(The Impact of COVID-19 on Nonprofits and the Outlook for 2021,* 2021*)*. Ultimately, the lack of funding means that administrative feasibility for this alternative will be low given the current competition for funding sources nationwide.
- ***Political Feasibility:*** The Mad Housers should partner with CoC to host the conference. The CoC can provide information on assistance grants, incorporate Housing First interventions into their community guidelines, and detail how services can be provided to homeless people who have been successfully housed. Mad Housers' volunteers could assist in the planning and execution of the conference; however, it's important to note that setting up a conference of this magnitude would be time consuming so there would need to be a balance between full-time CoC staff and part-time Mad Housers' volunteers. Ultimately, this alternative would cost little outside of securing a venue, printing materials, IT support, and providing complimentary refreshments. However it's likely that the CoC's state-sponsored budget can cover these costs. With this in mind, public opinion polls will more than likely demonstrate widespread support for this conference. As a result, this alternative projects medium political feasibility.

Recommendation

I recommend the Mad Housers pursue Alternative #2: Partner with Atlanta's City Council to Reallocate Unused, City-Owned Land to the Mad Housers. This alternative scores the highest among all four criteria (see outcome matrix below) and directly tackles Atlanta's homelessness crisis. Reallocating city-owned land is likely to garner massive public support and volunteer turnout (*high administrative feasibility*), allow for equitable access to free housing that will directly benefit Black homeless people (*high equity*), and increase access to housing both in the short and long-run (*high effectiveness*). What sets this alternative apart from the others is that it does not require any additional funding and is completely community driven. With widespread community buy-in and grassroots support, this approach can interrupt the cycle of homelessness and help to save lives.

Outcome Matrix

Color Key: Red connotes a low ranking, Orange connotes a medium ranking, Yellow connotes a medium-high ranking, and Green connotes a high ranking.

Policy Option/Criteria	**#1: Improve Existing Shelters & Programs**	**#2: Reallocate Unused Land to Mad Housers**	**#3: Increase Grassroots Support for HomeFirst**
Political Feasibility	*Low*	*Medium-high*	*Medium*
Administrative Feasibility	*Low*	*Medium-high*	*Low*
Equity	*Medium-high*	*High*	*Medium-high*
Effectiveness	*Low*	*High*	*High*

Implementation

Given the grassroots nature of this recommendation, this paper pursues a backward mapping approach to implementation. As a small, volunteer-driven, non-profit the Mad Housers very much operates outside of the formal devices of command and control that centralize authority in Atlanta. The section below describes how the Mad Housers' informal authority, derived from expertise, skill, and proximity to the task at hand (i.e., providing immediate housing to Atlanta's homeless), can persuade, maybe? the formal authority that is Atlanta's Mayor's office and City Council (Elmore, 1979; Orchard, n.d.) to implement this recommendation. For successful implementation, the Mad Housers would have to overcome the following barriers: negative social perception of homeless people, Atlanta's disjointed approach to ending homelessness, and administrative burden.

1. *Consequences of Negative Social Perception of Homeless People*

One of the largest barriers to widespread community support for the construction of free housing is the prevailing negative perception of homeless people. Misconstrued perceptions of homeless people are rooted in myths that homeless individuals are unmotivated to seek employment, enabled by homeless shelters, products of their own bad choices, and predominantly alcoholics and addicts (*Debunking Myths about Homelessness,* 2022; *Debunking Myths about Homelessness: Part 2,* 2022). Recognizing this barrier, the President of Mad Housers, Tracy Woodard, routinely hosts neighborhood conversations about Atlanta's homeless to alter these negative perceptions (Woodard, 2019). These neighborhood conversations provide a crucial opportunity for community members to voice their concerns, ask questions, and learn from volunteers who engage with Atlanta's homeless population regularly. There are two main goals for these talks: (a) to debunk the myths about homelessness that create hostility in Atlanta's neighborhoods and (b) humanize the plights of homeless individuals to encourage compassion and activism. While there is a lack of empirical data to highlight the benefits of this approach in Atlanta itself, there are studies that prove the effectiveness of this approach nationwide. For example, a 2018 study conducted by Tsai et al. on public exposure and attitudes about homelessness concluded that when people can relate to factors that lead to homelessness, like poverty or abuse, they are more likely to believe in structural causes of homlessness, the effectiveness of financial and mental health policies in addressing homelessness, and support greater federal funding for

these policies (Tsai et al., 2018). Therefore, in order to secure immediate and widespread buy-in for this recommendation, Tracy's talks must be disseminated at a much larger scale.

2. *Atlanta's Disjointed Approach to Ending Homelessness: One Atlanta vs. HomeFirst*

Since 2021, there have been two separate initiatives that specifically seek to provide housing for Atlanta's homeless: HomeFirst and One Atlanta.[13] HomeFirst seeks to add 1,000 permanent supportive housing units to the City of Atlanta; whereas One Atlanta seeks to "create or preserve 20,000 affordable homes by 2026 and increase overall supply" (Bottoms, n.d.). [14] The key difference between One Atlanta and HomeFirst is that permanent supportive housing units immediately provide homes to Atlanta's homeless, while increasing affordable housing does not.[15] These initiatives are drawing from the same private and public funds, but for different reasons thereby limiting the effectiveness of both.

3. *Administrative Burden: Rules & Regulations*

Development in Atlanta is shaped and governed by zoning and land use codes. To ensure the proper implementation of this recommendation there will need to be changes to Atlanta's zoning regulations. Specifically, Atlanta will need to do two things (1) protect Mad Housers' huts under the Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) ordinance and (2) extend the ADU ordinance to cover the entire city of Atlanta. The ADU ordinance outlines what constitutes an ADU and where they can be located. Currently, ADUs are only allowed on R-5 lots which are classified as "single-family residentials, minimum lot size of 0.17 acres" (Ariyal, 2019). Additionally, ADUs are currently defined as, "smaller, secondary residences located on single-family lots. They can be converted portions of existing homes, detached additions,

[13] One Atlanta refers to the "Housing Affordability Action Plan" outlined by the interagency advisory council established by Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms (Bottoms, n.d.).

[14] The Housing First approach moves long-term homeless individuals **directly** into subsidized housing and *then* linking them to support services, either on-site or in the community (Gulcur et al., 2003).

[15] The HomeFirst initiative seeks to incorporate this approach throughout Atlanta's existing network of homeless resources to immediately transition homeless people off the streets without any strings attached (like securing employment or sobriety). Whereas affordable housing is meant to (a) prevent homelessness and (b) provide an opportunity to escape homelessness once a homeless person secures employment.

or external new homes" (Bottoms, n.d.). The Mad Housers will need bureaucratic buy-in to ensure their huts are protected under the ADU Ordinance.

Next Steps

To overcome the barriers to implementation mentioned above, I recommend the Mad Housers take the following steps:

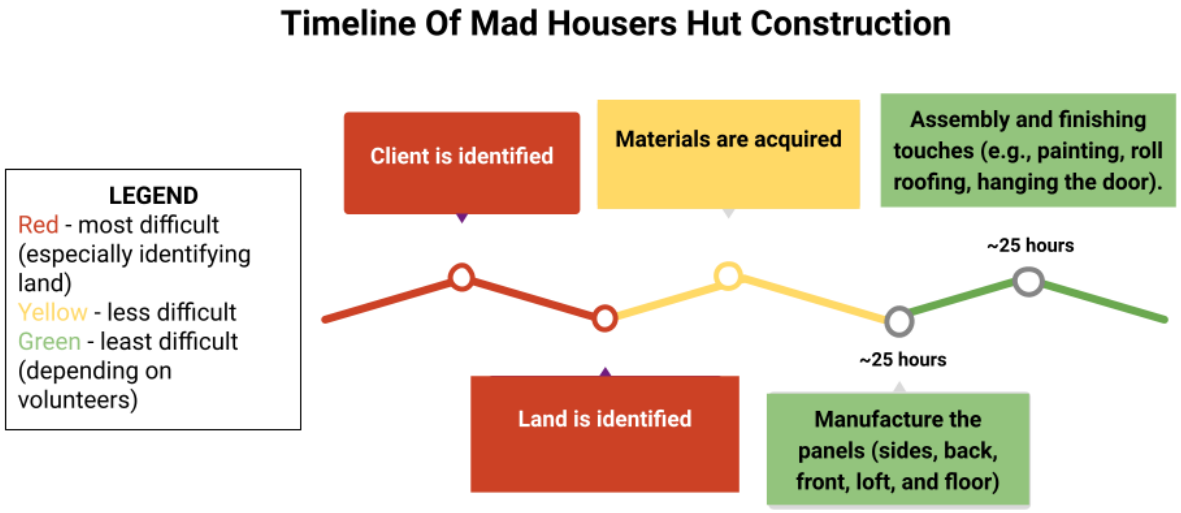
1. Widen the Dissemination of Tracy's Talks: The interagency council should lead the implementation of this recommendation with an informational campaign, led by Tracy, which reaches the entire population of Atlanta. Specifically, this information should be made available via the same informational routes utilized by Atlanta's City Council, i.e., their email and mailing lists, websites, television channels, and streaming outlets such as Zoom and YouTube.

2. Prove the Effectiveness of Housing First: The Mad Housers' need to emphasize their own success using the Housing First approach. The Mad Housers' board members have access to the total number of huts and clients helped through their combined harm reduction and Housing First model. These statistics can provide compelling evidence to be referred to by the interagency advisory council in talks with Atlanta's Mayor and City Council to focus public and local funds solely on the One Atlanta initiative.

3. Gain bureaucratic buy-in: To do so, the Mad Housers should highlight that the construction of huts is completely free (since they are either made of donated material or donations to purchase material and are constructed by volunteers)and time efficient (only takes about 50 hours to build a hut) to the interagency council. The interagency council will then inform the mayor's office and Atlanta's City Council for the formal incorporation of Mad Houser huts into the ADU Ordinance.

Annex

Figure 7: Timeline & Considerations



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