Designing Dignity

A Human-Centered Systems Framework for Modernizing Homeless Services in California

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California's homelessness response has become an optimization problem detached from the people it claims to serve. Billions of dollars move through fragmented systems that measure throughput, compliance, and eligibility, while individuals experience confusion, repetition, and the quiet erosion of trust.

Most public systems that interact with unhoused individuals are **not experienced as support structures but as hostile, non-consensual environments**. Intake processes compel disclosure, compliance, and repetition under conditions of cognitive strain, with little agency over pacing, narrative, or mode of engagement. In practice, the system functions less as a service and more as an involuntary exposure to administrative power, often mirroring the very traumas it claims to resolve.

This paper reframes homelessness not as a failure of will or compliance but as a **systems design failure**. Using human-centered design, trauma-informed practice, and service-journey simulation grounded in real municipal workflows, it provides evidence on how public infrastructure can restore agency, reduce friction, and materially improve outcomes without increasing staff burden.

The findings are unambiguous. When systems respect cognitive reality and human signal, people re-engage.

Dignity becomes operational.

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THE CORE FAILURE

Homelessness services are designed as though users are stable, resourced, and cognitively unburdened. In reality, many people navigating these systems experience trauma, sleep deprivation, executive dysfunction, and deep institutional distrust.

Current systems unintentionally reproduce harm through predictable patterns:

- Fragmented intake across agencies with no continuity of narrative
- Repetitive retelling of traumatic histories to unfamiliar staff
- Language that frames people as risks, exceptions, or compliance problems
- Long periods of silence following critical actions
- Physical and digital environments hostile to neurodivergent users

The result is systemic disengagement. Programs appear underutilized. Policymakers misinterpret withdrawal as apathy or non-compliance, rather than as a rational response to incoherent design.

REFRAMING THE OBJECTIVE

The objective is not to streamline services.
The objective is to **design for human reality**.

This framework treats homelessness as a journey through interacting systems, with each touchpoint either reinforcing or eroding agency. Success is defined by clarity, continuity, and user-held choice, not merely enrollment or throughput.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The framework integrates:

- Contextual inquiry with individuals who have lived experience
- End-to-end journey mapping across housing, benefits, healthcare, and documentation flows
- Heuristic evaluation of physical and digital environments
- Persona-based simulation using real municipal process maps

Simulation inputs included HUD datasets, municipal 211 call logs, CalFresh onboarding friction metrics, and peer-reviewed research on trauma, cognitive load, and executive function. Redesigned pathways were tested against baseline systems to measure differential outcomes.

WHERE THE SYSTEM BREAKS DOWN

Cognitive Overload

Forms, appointments, and documentation demands assume uninterrupted attention and intact executive function. Trauma invalidates this assumption. Abandonment occurs early and often.

Language as Power

Terms such as “non-compliance” and “eligibility review” encode hierarchy. They position the user as suspect and the system as arbiter. Trust degrades before help begins.

Interface Mismatch

Fluorescent lighting, crowded offices, dense paperwork, and inaccessible digital tools disproportionately exclude people with PTSD, ADHD, or sensory processing challenges.

Silence After Action

Applications vanish into administrative voids. No confirmation, no timeline, no signal that effort mattered. Silence converts hope into disengagement.

SIMULATED IMPACT OF HUMAN-CENTERED REDESIGN

When systems were redesigned around clarity, continuity, and user choice, the simulation projected:

- **42 percent increase in service engagement**
- **38 percent reduction in housing placement timeframes**
- **Over 50 percent improvement in modeled trust indicators**
- **34 percent reduction in time from first contact to eligibility confirmation**
- **40 percent decrease in dropout among high-barrier users**

These gains occurred without additional staffing. Automated confirmations, clear task hierarchies, and user-selected communication channels reduced missed appointments and follow-up churn.

The most consequential finding was qualitative. Users re-engaged when the system treated them as participants rather than problems to be processed.

THE PROPOSAL

A nine-month municipally sponsored pilot in a city prepared for civic innovation, such as Oakland, Sacramento, or Santa Rosa.

The pilot would include:

- Cross-department coordination among housing, human services, and digital innovation teams
- Co-creation design sprints with frontline staff and individuals with lived experience
- A live beta integrating simplified intake, trauma-informed language, and real-time status visibility
- Continuous feedback loops and iterative refinement
- A public Civic Impact Report documenting outcomes and transferability

TIMELINE

Months 1–2

Stakeholder alignment, user research, and system mapping

Months 3–5

Design sprints and prototype development

Months 6–7

Pilot launch with live iteration

Months 8–9

Evaluation, impact reporting, and scale planning

BUDGET RANGE

$850,000 to $1.2 million

This includes multidisciplinary staffing, equitable participant compensation, secure mobile-first infrastructure, accessibility retrofits, trauma-informed training, third-party evaluation, and public reporting. The budget reflects ethical rigor rather than administrative excess.

CONCLUSION

Homelessness persists not because people fail systems, but because systems fail people in consistent, measurable ways.

Design is not decoration. It is the moral architecture of how power moves. When public infrastructure acknowledges cognitive reality, respects lived experience, and communicates with continuity, dignity stops being aspirational and becomes operational.

This is not charity.
It is competence.

This refreshed version is a re-authoring of the original "Designing Dignity" framework and builds directly on the structure, research, and personas contained in the source document

APPENDICES: PERSONA PROFILES

The Paperless Veteran

Tech-savvy but documentation-challenged, Marcus is a 44-year-old Gulf War veteran living in his vehicle in Alameda County. PTSD disrupts memory recall, and after a wallet theft, he lost all forms of ID. Despite eligibility for a full suite of VA services, bureaucratic barriers prevent him from accessing care.

Ethnographic Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD, 2023 Homeless Veteran Needs Assessment

Recommendation: Implement biometric identity confirmation and integrated document recovery protocols through mobile-accessible accounts to address high documentation friction.

The Anxious Mother

Lorena, 29, fled domestic violence in Modesto with her two children. She currently resides in transitional housing. Distrustful of CPS due to past trauma, she experiences severe anxiety when interfacing with formal systems, particularly those requiring repeat storytelling or child documentation.

Ethnographic Source: National Network to End Domestic Violence 2022 Report; Los Angeles DHS Family Services Operational Insights

Recommendation: Design trauma-informed intake workflows that reduce administrative overhead and provide secure, parent-empowered, childcare-supported access to services.

The Chronically Shuffled

Darren is 51 and has experienced homelessness for 17 years across San Diego and Los Angeles. A survivor of multiple institutional systems—jails, shelters, psychiatric hospitals—he understands bureaucratic language but distrusts all forms of case management.

Ethnographic Source: RAND Corporation Behavioral Health Integration Study; National Health Care for the Homeless Council

Recommendation: Create a persistent, user-owned profile accessible across agencies that reduces retelling of trauma and facilitates handoff continuity.

The Neurodivergent Young Adult

Shay, 22, aged out of California's foster care system at 18. They are neurodivergent, struggling with executive function, sensory processing, and digital literacy. Despite interest in employment and housing, paperwork and rigid scheduling remain barriers.

Ethnographic Source: Casey Family Programs "Aging Out" Study; UCSF Child & Adolescent Transitions Lab

Recommendation: Use mobile-first, icon-based UIs with low-stimulus layouts, progressive disclosure, and context-aware nudges.

The LGBTQ2+ Youth

Alex, 19, was ejected from their conservative household after coming out. They have experienced both unsheltered homelessness and couch-surfing in East Bay communities. Repeated misgendering and deadnaming during service intake has left them skeptical of shelters.

Ethnographic Source: True Colors United 2022 LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness Index; The Trevor Project Housing Insecurity Study

Recommendation: Embed peer navigators, visibly inclusive design elements, and affirming pronoun practices across all UX touchpoints.

ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR UX WITH VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

- Informed Consent
  All research involving vulnerable populations must include clear, culturally competent language about intent, risks, and usage. Consent must be verbal and written, with the option to withdraw at any point.

- Minimize Harm
  Intake systems and research interactions should avoid requiring disclosure of traumatic events unless absolutely necessary. UX research must exclude coercive environments.

- Equitable Compensation
  Participants with lived experience must be compensated at equitable rates. This recognizes their time as labor and avoids exploitative dynamics.

- Privacy First
  Systems must anonymize identifiable data, avoid surveillance-style tracking, and allow users to see, edit, or delete their stored information.

- Participatory Design
  UX work must involve individuals with lived experience as co-creators in ideation, testing, and validation phases. They are not subjects—they are strategists.

- Cultural Competency
  All researchers and designers must undergo training in anti-oppression and neurodiversity-informed practice. Language, symbolism, and interaction models should reflect pluralistic values.

- Accountability
  All engagements must include a feedback loop to ensure that participants know how their voices informed the final designs. Exit surveys and debriefing support should be built in.

REFERENCES AND CITATIONS

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