

INFLOW REDUCTION TOOLKIT

*A Practical Guide for Communities to
Reduce Entries to Homelessness*

COMMUNITY
SOLUTIONS

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Introduction

This toolkit is designed to help communities begin structured, realistic work to reduce inflow into homelessness — even when data is imperfect and capacity is limited.

How to Use This Toolkit

The sections in this toolkit are not intended to be sequential or completed in a fixed order. Communities may begin with the section that best aligns with their current priorities, capacity, or stage of development. Multiple sections can also be worked on simultaneously, depending on local needs and readiness.

It can be used:

- By a small internal team
- As a facilitated workshop
- With cross-sector partners
- With leadership groups

The approach is intentionally:

- Simple enough to start
- Rigorous enough to lead to real insight
- Adaptable to local context

You do not need perfect data to begin.

What This Toolkit Helps Communities Do

By using this toolkit, communities will:

- Identify a small core team responsible for inflow reduction
- Review available data to understand who is entering homelessness
- Use qualitative learning (interviews, conversations) to deepen understanding
- Identify 1–3 key drivers of inflow
- Form small action teams around those drivers
- Begin testing practical upstream strategies
- Build toward measurable impact over time

This is not a one-time exercise. It is the foundation of a long-term inflow reduction strategy.

1. IDENTIFY OWNERSHIP FOR INFLOW REDUCTION

Purpose

To ensure inflow reduction has clear ownership and does not become “everyone’s job but no one’s responsibility.”

Key Principle

If no one owns inflow reduction, it will not happen.

Action Steps

The community should:

- Identify 1–2 point people responsible for leading inflow reduction work
- Ensure at least one of these people has access to data (HMIS, dashboards, system reports)
- Ensure these individuals have time allocated for this work (not just “on the side”)
- Clarify who they report to and how progress will be shared

Suggested Roles

Often this includes:

- A system lead (CoC lead, CE lead, local government, backbone org)
- A data person (HMIS lead, analyst, evaluation partner)
- Sometimes a third person who brings strong partner relationships

Output

By the end of this section, the community should have:

- Named 1–2 people as Inflow Reduction Leads
- Agreement from leadership that this is part of their formal responsibility

2. INCLUDE PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE IN PLANNING & COORDINATION

Purpose

To ensure inflow reduction work is informed by the knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of people who have directly experienced homelessness or housing instability.

Avoid treating engagement as a symbolic checkbox or a tokenizing exercise. Instead, recognize that partners who have navigated these systems are essential co-designers. Their unique expertise is derived from 'the knowledge we bring because we have firsthand involvement or exposure to particular events, occurrences or conditions that we have tried to make sense of and construct meaning of' (O'Leary and Tsui, 2022:1075), providing insights that are foundational to developing effective strategies.

It is about building better strategies through real partnership and shared expertise.

Key Questions

The inflow leads should begin asking:

- Who with lived experience is currently involved in planning or decision-making?
- Are people with lived experience involved consistently or only occasionally?
- Are participants reflective of the populations most impacted by inflow?
- Are there barriers preventing participation?
- How are communities compensating and supporting participation? What compensation framework has been established to ensure that participants are compensated fairly and equitably?
- Are people with lived experience helping interpret data and identify drivers? Have they been properly trained in data collection, analysis, and interpretation?
- Are lived experience advisors/ experts able to influence decisions and strategy development?
- How are we incorporating feedback into action planning?
- Are people with lived experience represented in driver-focused workgroups?

Action Steps

Communities should:

- Identify individuals with lived experience who are interested in participating in inflow reduction efforts, ensuring they reflect the populations most impacted by the system.

- Identify individuals with lived experience who are interested in participating in inflow reduction efforts.
- Identify the person with lived experience you want to include, specifying their relevant history and the population of focus.)
- Create consistent opportunities for participation in:
 - planning meetings,
 - inflow analysis discussions,
 - strategy development,
 - evaluation conversations
- Ensure participation includes individuals from populations most impacted by the inflow
- Provide support for participation, such as:
 - Stipends,
 - Transportation,
 - Childcare,
 - Meals,
 - or virtual participation options
- Include lived experience voices in:
 - reviewing inflow patterns,
 - identifying system barriers,
 - and testing intervention ideas
- Develop clear processes for documenting and incorporating feedback

Do not aim for perfect structure. Aim for meaningful and ongoing engagement.

Important Mindset

People with lived experience are experts in how systems are actually experienced. Their perspectives may:

- challenge assumptions,
- identify missed barriers,
- and highlight opportunities that data alone cannot reveal.

This engagement may raise difficult questions about:

- Trust,
- Accessibility,
- Equity,
- and system design.

That is expected. Those insights help communities build stronger and more responsive inflow reduction strategies.

Output

By the end of this section, the community should have:

- A clear approach for engaging people with lived experience in inflow reduction work
- Identified participants or advisors with lived experience
- Strategies for reducing participation barriers
- A process for incorporating feedback into planning and coordination
- A greater understanding of how people experience pathways into homelessness

This becomes the foundation for more equitable, informed, and community-centered inflow reduction efforts.

3. INFLOW ANALYSIS SCAN

Purpose

To understand who is entering homelessness today, using whatever data is currently available. This is not about perfect analysis. It is about getting oriented to patterns.

Key Questions

The inflow leads should begin asking:

- How many people are entering homelessness each month?
- Is inflow increasing, decreasing, or flat?
- Are most entries:
 - Families?
 - Single adults?
 - Youth?
 - Older Adults?
- Are there racial disparities in who is entering?
- Are people coming from:
 - Evictions?
 - Doubled-up situations?
 - Institutions (jail, hospital, foster care)?
 - Unsheltered situations?
- Are there geographic patterns?

Action Steps

Using HMIS or any available system data:

- Pull a simple report showing new entries into homelessness over the last 6–12 months
- Look at:
 - Household type
 - Race
 - Age
 - Prior living situation
 - Location
- Do not aim for perfection. Aim for directional insight.

Important Mindset

- This scan often raises more questions than answers.
- That is expected.

- Those questions guide the next step.

Output

By the end of this section, the community should have:

- A simple written summary (1–2 pages) answering:
 - Who seems to be entering most?
 - What patterns stand out?
 - What questions remain unclear?

This becomes the starting hypothesis, not the final answer.

4. IDENTIFY POTENTIAL DRIVERS OF INFLOW

Purpose

To begin forming educated hypotheses about why people are entering homelessness in your community.

What a “Driver” Means

A driver is a systemic condition contributing to people losing housing, such as:

- People exiting incarceration without housing plans
- Youth aging out of foster care into instability
- High eviction rates in specific neighborhoods
- Hospital discharges without housing coordination
- Domestic violence survivors with limited safe alternatives
- Loss of informal family housing supports

Action Steps

Based on the inflow scan:

- Brainstorm 3–6 possible drivers
- Ask:
 - What pathways seem most common?
 - Which populations are overrepresented?
 - Where does the system seem to break down upstream?

You are not committing yet.

You are generating working theories.

Output

By the end of this section, the community should have:

- A list of 3–6 possible inflow drivers
- A short description of why each seems plausible based on the data

5. QUALITATIVE LEARNING (INTERVIEWS & NARRATIVE-BASED INSIGHT)

Purpose

To validate (or challenge) the data using real experiences.

Data shows patterns.

People explain causes.

Who to Interview

Consider brief conversations with:

- People newly entering shelter
- People who were recently diverted
- Outreach staff
- Shelter intake staff
- School liaisons
- Probation/parole officers
- Hospital discharge planners
- DV advocates

Sample Questions

You can keep this very simple:

- Would you be willing to share what was happening before you entered homelessness?
- Can you tell me about what was happening in the days or weeks leading up to entering homelessness?
- Looking back, was there a point where additional support or resources might have helped?
- Who, if anyone, did you reach out to before entering homelessness?
- Who did you reach out to before you entered into homelessness?
- What support would have helped earlier?

You are not doing research.

You are listening for patterns.

Action Steps

- Conduct 10–20 short conversations

- Capture themes (not names, not case notes)
- Compare what you hear with what the data suggested

Output

By the end of this section, the community should have:

- A short list of recurring themes (e.g., "Most families describe sudden eviction after informal doubling up ended")
- Greater confidence about which drivers are real vs assumed

6. PRIORITIZE 1-3 DRIVERS TO WORK ON

Purpose

To focus effort rather than dilute it. Communities often fail by trying to address everything at once.

Action Steps

Using the data scan + qualitative insights:

- Identify 1–3 drivers that:
 - Affect a significant number of people
 - Are realistically influenceable
 - Have identifiable partner systems

Examples:

- Inflow from jail release
- Family homelessness driven by doubling-up breakdown
- Youth aging out without transition support

Output

By the end of this section, the community should have:

- A clearly named list of 1–3 priority inflow drivers
- A short written explanation for why each was chosen

7. BUILD SMALL DRIVER-FOCUSED TEAMS

Output

To ensure inflow reduction becomes active work, not just analysis.
Each driver should have a small working group.

Action Steps

For each driver:

- Identify 3–6 relevant partners
(e.g., courts, hospitals, schools, probation, shelters, youth providers)
- Invite them into a focused working group
- Frame the work as:
 - “We want to understand this pathway better and reduce how many people end up homeless through it.”

These are not big committees
They are small, practical design teams.

Output

By the end of this section, the community should have:

- 1–3 small working groups
- Each group clearly focused on a specific inflow driver

8. DEFINE SMALL, TESTABLE STRATEGIES

Purpose

To move from analysis to action without overbuilding.
You are not launching massive programs.
You are testing upstream interventions.

Examples

- For jail discharge:
 - Pilot housing planning conversations 30 days pre-release
- For youth aging out:
 - Identify youth 90 days before exit and provide stabilization support
- For eviction-driven inflow:
 - Partner with legal aid to flag high-risk cases earlier
 - Pilot a targeted eviction prevention strategy by analyzing eviction data and partnering with landlords or properties with high eviction filing rates to test interventions that may reduce displacement and entries into homelessness.

Action Steps

Each driver team should:

- Identify 1–2 small interventions to test
- Define:
 - Who will do what
 - With which population
 - For how long
- Keep it simple and measurable

Output

By the end of this section, each driver team should have:

- 1–2 pilot strategies defined
- Clear ownership for implementation

9. TRACK LEARNING AND ADAPT

Purpose

To avoid "set it and forget it" efforts.
This is continuous learning work.

Action Steps

- Track:
 - What was tried
 - What happened
 - What barriers emerged
- Ask regularly:
 - Is this reducing inflow for this population?
 - What should we adjust?

You are building a learning system, not just a project.

Output

By the end of this phase, the community begins to develop:

- A culture of learning around inflow
- Better understanding of which strategies are effective
- The foundation for real inflow reduction over time

Final Note to Communities

You do not need perfect data. You do not need massive funding to begin.

You do need:

- Ownership
- Focus
- Curiosity
- Willingness to listen
- Willingness to test

This toolkit is designed to help communities move from:

“We don't know where to start”
to
“We know our drivers, and we're actively working on them.”

Appendix A – Key Terms and Definitions

Cross-Sector Collaborative

Coordination between multiple systems or sectors — such as housing, healthcare, education, corrections, and behavioral health — to address shared community challenges.

Diversion

A strategy used to help households identify safe alternative housing arrangements and avoid entering shelter or homelessness services when appropriate and desired by the household.

Driver

A systemic condition, pattern, or pathway contributing to people losing housing and entering homelessness.

Examples may include:

- Evictions
- Jail or prison discharge without housing planning
- Foster care exits
- Hospital discharges
- Domestic violence
- Loss of doubled-up housing situations

HMIS (Homeless Management Information System)

A local data system used by homelessness service providers to collect information about people accessing homelessness services and housing programs.

Housing Instability

A situation in which a household is at increased risk of losing housing due to factors such as:

- unpaid rent,
- overcrowding,
- unsafe living conditions,
- eviction risk,
- doubled-up situations,
- or loss of income.

Inflow

The number of people entering homelessness within a given period of time. This may include people entering shelter, unsheltered homelessness, or other parts of the homelessness response system for the first time or after a prior episode.

Inflow Reduction

Strategies and interventions designed to reduce the number of people entering homelessness by addressing upstream causes and pathways into housing instability.

Lived Experience

Knowledge and expertise gained through direct personal experience with homelessness, housing instability, or related systems.

Newly Identified

People who are being identified as experiencing homelessness for the first time within a defined reporting period. This may include individuals or households entering shelter, unsheltered homelessness, or other parts of the homelessness response system.

Pilot Strategy

A small-scale test of an intervention or approach designed to help communities learn what may reduce inflow into homelessness before expanding efforts.

Prevention

Efforts designed to stabilize households and reduce the likelihood that they will experience homelessness.

An organization, agency, or institution outside the homelessness response system that may influence pathways into homelessness, such as:

- schools,
- hospitals,
- courts,
- jails,
- landlords,
- child welfare systems,
- or behavioral health providers.

Qualitative Learning

Information gathered through conversations, interviews, observations, or lived experience perspectives that helps explain patterns behind the data.

Returns to Housing

People who previously exited homelessness to permanent housing but later re-enter the homelessness response system.

Returns from Inactive

People who reappear in the homelessness response system after a prolonged period without engagement or activity in HMIS or coordinated entry data.

Trauma-Informed Approach

An approach that recognizes the impact of trauma and seeks to create interactions, environments, and services that are safe, respectful, transparent, and supportive.

Upstream Strategy

An intervention that occurs before a household becomes homeless, with the goal of preventing housing loss or reducing risk factors associated with homelessness.