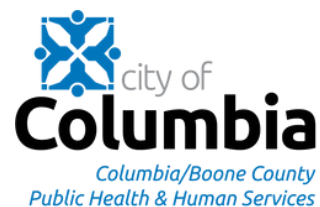




HOMELESSNESS IN COLUMBIA, MO: BACKGROUND AND NEXT STEPS

January 2026



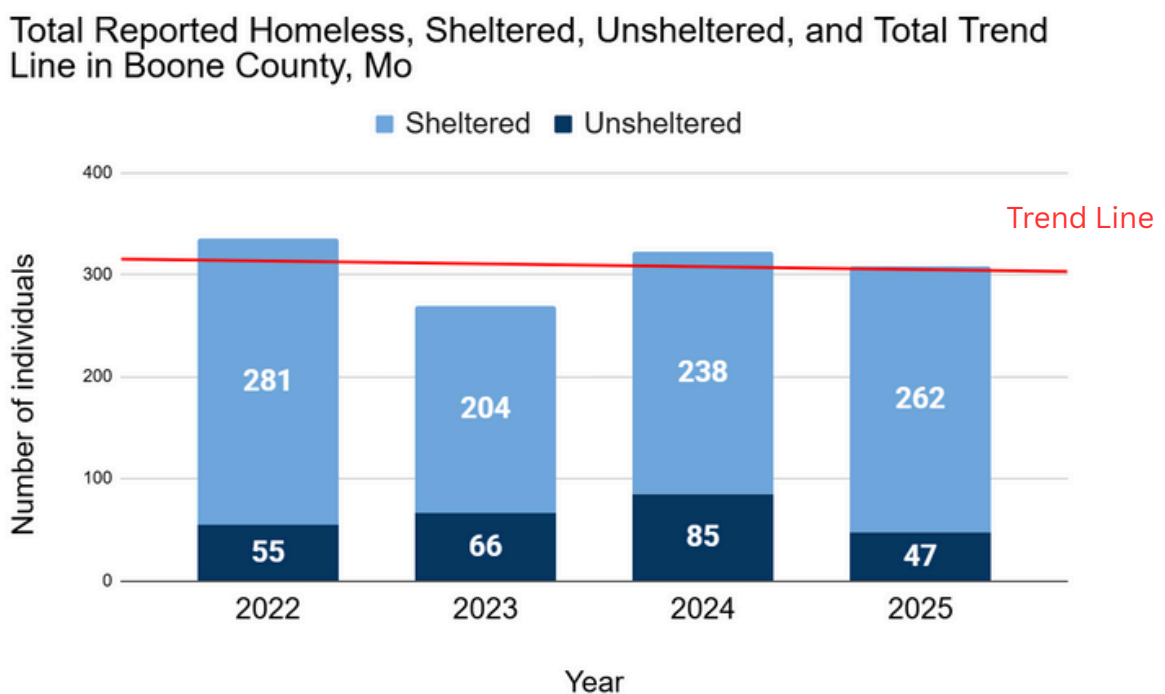
Executive Summary

Hundreds of people in Columbia and Boone County continue to experience homelessness, affecting their health, stability, and overall well-being. Over the past decade, the City of Columbia and many community organizations have expanded services, prevention efforts, and shelter capacity, yet homelessness remains a complex and ongoing challenge. This report provides background on current efforts and investments and outlines next steps, emphasizing the need for sustained funding and a coordinated strategic approach for long-term success. This report was prepared by staff from Columbia/Boone County Public Health and Human Services (PHHS).

Local Data: Boone County Point-in-Time Count

The Point-in-Time (PIT) Count provides a snapshot of literal homelessness during a single night in January. "Literal homelessness," as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), is when individuals lack a fixed, regular, nighttime residence, including those on the streets or in emergency shelters. It frequently excludes the "hidden homeless": those staying in self-paid motels, doubled-up with family or "couch-surfing."

The chart below displays total reported homelessness in Boone County, Missouri, from 2022 to 2025, including sheltered and unsheltered populations. The trend of total homelessness in Boone County (shown as a red line) has remained fairly steady from 2022 to 2025, with a slight downward trend.



Source: Missouri Balance of State Continuum of Care

Columbia's Approach to Homelessness

Over the past 10 years, the City of Columbia and other local organizations have successfully implemented several programs and services to care for unsheltered individuals. Below are some examples of those programs and services:

- Day center services at Wilkes Boulevard United Methodist Church provided by Turning Point.
- Year-round overnight shelter services at Room at the Inn.
- Emergency overnight shelter service at Wilkes Boulevard United Methodist Church during extreme weather provided by Turning Point.
- Temporary hotel rooms provided to unsheltered individuals who tested positive for COVID-19.
- Outreach and case management downtown, provided by the District, and outside of downtown, provided by the City's partnership with AAAAChange.
- Purchase and renovations of the Ashley Street Center by the City of Columbia, followed by Room at the Inn operating year-round in the building.
- Creation of the City's DIVERT program to provide a compassionate approach to justice by integrating social services in the City of Columbia's public safety and justice systems.
- Addition of a public health planner at Columbia/Boone County Public Health and Human Services to provide backbone support for the Boone County Coalition to End Homelessness and improve coordinated entry.
- COMO Mobile Aid Collective expanded services to include a medical clinic and applied for use of the City's shower trailer at Ashley Street Center.
- Creation of the Opportunity Campus by Voluntary Action Center and other community organizations.

In addition to the programs and services that have been successful, there have been other ideas that Columbia/Boone County Public Health and Human Services staff members have explored to identify feasibility, cost, etc. One of those potential solutions that was explored was the possibility of purchasing individual, rapid deployment shelters such as Pallet® shelters. They can be built on an extremely short time frame and are made of materials that are mold-resistant and weatherproof. Individual shelter villages can be built at a fraction of the cost of traditional homeless shelters. However, there are other costs required, such as building congregate bathrooms, a shared kitchen/food prep space, as well as costs for staffing, including maintenance, property management and wraparound services.

There were several reasons why the City did not move forward with creating an individual shelter village in 2023, including the availability of land, sanitation, staffing, and funding constraints. At that time, the approximate cost to purchase 17 Pallet® shelters was \$344,000 with an additional \$690,000 annually for program/property management and case management services.

Another significant reason the City did not move forward with an individual shelter village was the creation of The Opportunity Campus, which broke ground in 2024. At the time, it was difficult to predict how the Opportunity Campus would change the need for an additional housing option, like the individual shelter village. The Opportunity Campus is on track to open in 2026 and will provide more services and shelter beds than the individual shelter village would be able to accommodate.

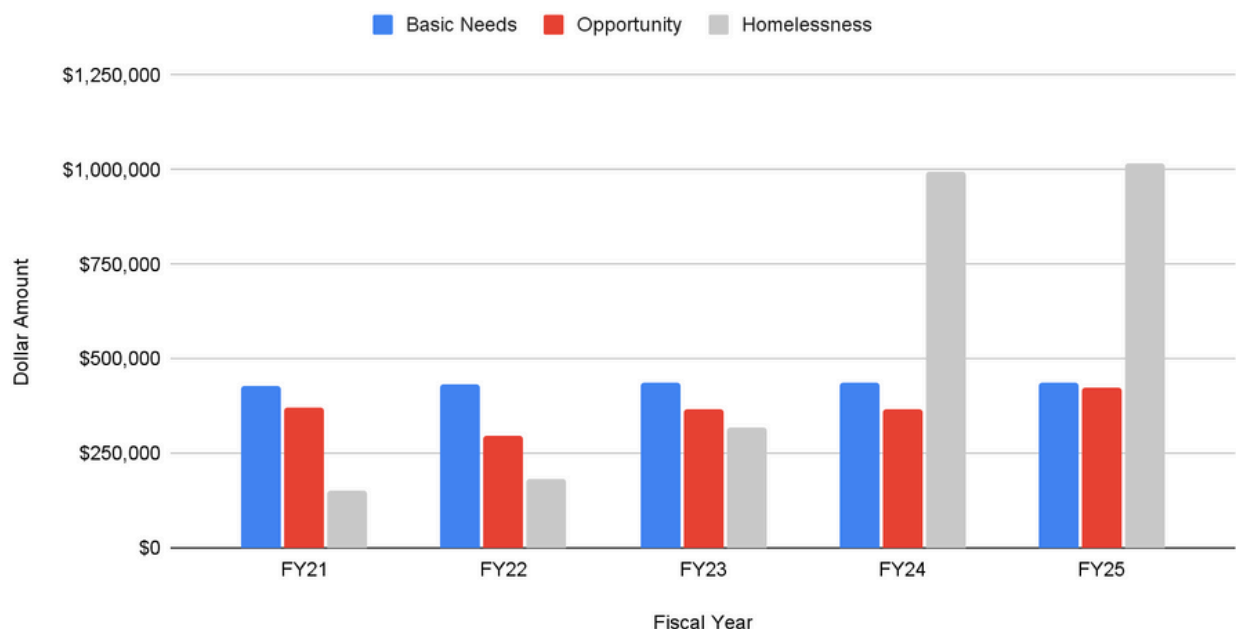
City of Columbia's Investment in Homelessness

The City recognizes prevention as the most economical and compassionate approach to housing stability. Funding for this is primarily allocated through the Human Services Commission across two strategic categories:

- Basic Needs (50–75% of funding): Crisis intervention and immediate support.
- Opportunity (25–50% of funding): Skill-building and assets to move residents out of poverty.

Homelessness Services are specifically funded to ensure dedicated resources for emergency shelters, warming centers, and day centers.

City of Columbia Funding for Basic Needs, Opportunity and Homelessness by Fiscal Year (FY), 2021-2025



Conclusion and Recommendation

Homelessness prevention and care require continued investments. As financial investments have increased, the City must spend them effectively. To build a truly effective system, the City must move beyond temporary relief and implement a structured roadmap.

Several other cities have invested in solutions and created plans to address homelessness. PHHS staff members have analyzed high-performing regional plans from the following cities:

- Kansas City, Missouri - [Zero KC](#)
- Des Moines, Iowa - [The Blueprint](#)
- Springfield, Illinois - [Heartland Housed](#)
- Lawrence, Kansas - [A Place for Everyone](#)
- Madison, Wisconsin - [Dane Forward](#)

These cities have various strategic approaches in their plans, some of which include public-private alignment, targeted funding, landlord partnerships, City-County collaboration, lived experience in leadership and more.

A similar approach would guide Columbia in spending funds effectively and strategically. To minimize trauma for individuals and maximize the return on municipal dollars, PHHS staff recommend formalizing a Systems Plan: Drafting a 5-year strategic roadmap specifically for homelessness, utilizing the identified data from the [2024 Boone County Housing Study](#) and comparative models.

In alignment with the [2024 State of Homelessness Report](#), PHHS staff support a transition from a reactive response to a proactive, centralized plan designed to move residents from unhoused to permanently housed sustainably.

PHHS staff recommend that the City of Columbia make a financial investment to gather data, align resource allocation and outline specific actions in a community-wide plan, so the City can effectively make decisions for future successes.



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