

**Testimony Provided by Street Angels to
the Public Safety and Health Committee of the Milwaukee Common Council
December 1, 2022**

Street Angels' mission is to help unhoused Milwaukee residents bridge the gap between homelessness and permanent housing. We are focused on survival and safety. We provide hot meals, supplies, resource connections, and hope to people living outside. Our two street outreach buses, manned by staff and volunteers, travel north and south side routes three nights a week year-round. We also conduct stationary daytime outreaches on Milwaukee's northside and West Allis in collaboration with community partners. Currently, we are serving 171 unhoused people. Since January 1, 2022, we have assisted 445 unique individuals. Since 2018, we have assisted 1,812 unique individuals.

Street Angels fully and wholeheartedly endorses the Housing First approach and the work of the Milwaukee County Housing Division and community partners. Our commitment to getting people into shelter and permanent housing is supported by these activities:

- Asking each new individual encountered if he/she is interested in shelter and housing and urging them to call IMPACT 2-1-1 (Coordinated Entry) to begin the process;
- Collecting name, DOB, and location for each individual and maintaining a current listing of the unhoused individuals we assist on our routes;
- Providing our up-to-date listing to the Milwaukee County Housing Division Housing First and 2-1-1 on a bi-weekly basis;
- Responding to calls for assistance from 2-1-1, shelter staff, and community members to help someone experiencing homeless who cannot get into shelter;
- Providing tarps, tents, jackets, and clothing to individuals who cannot get into shelter or who, for a variety of reasons, decline the offer of shelter but who need protection from the weather;
- Connecting individuals to resources, regularly checking on their progress in obtaining housing, and advocating for services to address homelessness and corollary issues;
- Consistently and compassionately offering support, friendship, and hope for the future to each homeless friend we meet.

In Street Angels' seven years of operation, we have seen these impediments to Housing First:

1. **It is nearly impossible to get someone into shelter.** On any given day, only 1-2 beds are available in the shelters that are part of 2-1-1/Coordinated Entry. Whether this lack of access is due to the need for additional shelter space or lengths of stay which tie up beds for long periods is not known. Note: Milwaukee Rescue Mission, not in the Coordinated Entry system, regularly has a large number of empty beds.
2. **Getting into permanent housing takes time.** Even when an individual receives a housing voucher, it takes time and persistence to find a place to rent. Many people get

discouraged and give up, or they find a place that is not right for them and it doesn't work out. This is not the fault of Housing First, it is a reflection of Milwaukee's housing market. Lack of affordable housing is the issue that underlies homelessness.

3. **Access to treatment is severely limited.** Street Angels has seen increased acuity of substance use disorders and mental illness in the past year. It is extremely difficult to connect individuals to services due to accessibility, eligibility requirements, transportation, and other issues. The Medical Examiner's Office reports a significant increase in homeless deaths since 2018 (21) with 52 deaths in 2021 with the leading cause being substance abuse, specifically opioids and fentanyl. Street Angels works with the Milwaukee Fire Department through the Milwaukee Overdose Response Initiative (MORI) to help connect homeless friends to treatment but services are inadequate to the need.
4. **Resistance to shelter is a concern.** To assess the extent to which having a tent might affect individuals' readiness for shelter or permanent housing, Street Angels conducted a survey of 103 homeless friends within the past month. This included 79 men and 24 women. Of this number, 59 had tents (41 of the 59 provided by Street Angels). **Of the 59 respondents with tents, 98% said they would accept permanent housing but only 73% said they would accept shelter.** Previous negative experiences, trauma, having a partner, and other issues were cited as reasons for saying no. In other words, resistance to shelter was demonstrated by 1 in 4 homeless friends. The reasons cited require more research and discussion on the part of the shelter system.
5. **Unwillingness to publicly acknowledge the continuing problem of homelessness in Milwaukee impedes our progress.** As a community, we have heavily invested in the 'elimination of homelessness.' We celebrate data that seems to support the achievement of this goal. At the same time, the shelters are full and Street Angels is preparing and delivering 170 hot meals 3/x week to individuals whom we have determined to be unsheltered homeless in Milwaukee and we only cover part of the city. In order to truly address homelessness, to confront its complexities, and find new solutions, we have to embrace the facts and aggressively and collaboratively make sure that every single homeless person is counted and cared for.

In closing, Street Angels remains 100% committed to Housing First. We have in the past, and we will continue, to offer our assistance, support, and resources to Milwaukee County Housing First, 2-1-1, and other community partners seeking to get people off the street and into safe, secure, and affordable homes. Street Angels brings seven years' of 'on the ground' experience, relationships, and successes. We are honored to be part of this discussion and ready to be part of new solutions that result.

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We surveyed 103 of our neighbors without homes who are unsheltered sleeping outdoors. 79 men and 24 women. Below are the questions and responses.

<u>Question</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Maybe/Depends on where</u>
Are you currently sleeping in a tent?	59 (57%)	44 (43%)	
If shelter was offered to you today would you accept it?	75 (73%)	21 (20%)	7 (7%)
If housing was offered to you today would you accept it?	99 (96%)	1 (1%)	3 (3%)
<i>Specifically for those who are sleeping in tents:</i>			
Did Street Angels provide you the tent?	41 (69%)	18 (31%)	
If shelter was offered to you today would you accept it?	42 (73%)	13 (21%)	4 (6%)
If housing was offered to you today would you accept it?	58 (98%)	0	1 (2%)

The most common reason individuals answered “no” to accepting shelter was due to being in a relationship and not wanting to split up.