

Imperial County: Innovation & Collaboration to Combat Homelessness

Located on the far southeastern border of California, Imperial County is one of the state's largest but least populated, dotted with rural communities spread out across the Colorado desert landscape. In the past, greater geographic distances presented significant barriers to creating an integrated, cross-county homeless response system. But with homelessness rates nearly doubling between 2017 and 2022, County and community leaders remained deeply committed to addressing those barriers—and working toward a day when no individual or family went unhoused. To support that work, Imperial partnered with Change Well Project to implement new strategies to focus on building a strong, collaborative system ready to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness with care and compassion.

County Challenges & Opportunities

When the team from Imperial County reached out to Change Well, they were beginning to explore a range of new strategies to strengthen their homelessness response systems. In addition to seeking a new manager to oversee their homelessness services department and guide coordination across programs and communities, the County's team needed support to implement a coordinated entry process to streamline how individuals and families access a wide range of housing support services. That process demanded that the County identify an effective assessment tool to understand and prioritize the specific needs of individuals and families for housing and other critical supports. More broadly, Imperial wanted to build stronger bridges between key partners—including the Housing Authority, community-based organizations, and other key stakeholders in the Continuum of Care—to deepen collaboration and increase innovation in program design and implementation.

Customized Technical Assistance: Approach & Process

Change Well's Technical Assistance team began by having in-depth conversations with Imperial County's program leaders—to look at their homeless system as a whole and to identify opportunities to strengthen its service delivery. Through those conversations, three core areas of focus emerged:

- Determining what a coordinated entry system could look like for Imperial County
- Finding a standardized assessment tool to help facilitate coordinated entry
- Strengthening governance mechanisms, including policies and procedures, to guide the County's work

Drawing on Change Well Project's wide-ranging expertise and County leaders' deep knowledge of their community's needs, the team began creating work plans to identify a standardized assessment tool and to pilot a coordinated entry process.

Finding the right assessment tool took time. The Change Well team supported Imperial in exploring a range of options that could meet the specific needs of all community partners. Imperial County was also interested in strengthening their Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) programming and Change Well began helping them to develop a referral process.

A key component of all this work was bringing key stakeholders together—including the County's new homeless services program manager, their Department of Social Services Director, the County Housing Authority, and the Continuum of Care Committee—to build trust and connection. Previously there had been little collaboration between the County and the Housing Authority—and the Change Well team supported County leaders in developing an outreach strategy to build stronger bridges between key partners in the fight against homelessness.

Impact: A Stronger, Collaborative Homeless Response System

Since Change Well's work with Imperial began, the County launched a pilot of their coordinated entry process, using their existing homeless hotline to identify and prioritize individuals and families with particularly critical housing needs. Change Well encouraged Imperial's team to create open feedback loops with key staff and core providers—and this inclusive process has strengthened relationships between the County team and its partners.

Today the partnerships between the County, the Housing Authority, and the Continuum of Care are flourishing—and that increased collaboration has led to powerful results. The County's Emergency Voucher Program has been strengthened significantly: through Imperial's increased collaboration with the Housing Authority, the EHV program now has a utilization rate of 85 percent. By exploring new solutions together, the County and Housing Authority created a more seamless EVP program that reduced barriers and wait periods for individuals and families seeking urgent homeless services. As true partners, today they are continuing to explore innovative strategies to meet the needs of the County's most vulnerable populations.

With support from Change Well, Imperial County is creating a strong, collaborative response system that is shifting the narrative in the fight against homelessness.

When it comes to creating housing programs, what are some of the unique challenges facing California tribal communities? What are the opportunities?

Many California tribal communities are quite small—and so unlike larger Indigenous nations that are based on large reservations, some don't have their own land base, or housing specifically designated for tribal community members. Being smaller also results in staffing and infrastructure challenges. Not having enough staff members is a challenge everywhere, but in many tribal communities, leaders and administrators are already wearing 27 hats and juggling so much—and now they need to determine how to take on creating and implementing another complex service system.

Many Tribes in California and across the Country administer Federal housing dollars, but the federal housing funding dedicated to Indian Country are not enough to meet the full housing needs of the community, particularly for members of the community who are homeless. The CDSS funds are geared towards community members who are currently homeless or who are at-risk of homelessness. But the CDSS funds rely heavily on complimentary infrastructure – Bringing Families Home is designed to partner with child welfare resources, Home Safe is designed to partner with adult protection resources, and HDAP relies heavily on medical care coordination and social security advocacy capacity. The Social Services safety net is historically underfunded in Indian Country, so there isn't the same existing program infrastructure to work from that Counties who administer these funds are able to leverage. And because this is one-time funding, it poses even more complexity—because these communities are having to create programs from the ground-up to serve participants with deeper and ongoing needs, without being able to rely on the same level of funding in the future. In those ways, I think many tribal communities have a much steeper hill to climb and need more resources to lift up the same kind of services that a larger county can offer. But that said, there is such a deep commitment to community that is evident across Indian Country. And I've met so many amazing leaders—including many incredible Native women—working across these communities to improve social service systems. Most are not steeped in this kind of housing work but have been leading social service programs in their communities, including coordinating Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) work to protect and support children and families.

These leaders absolutely have the knowledge and skills to create dynamic housing programs, but they need more support and resources to get it done. Our goal is to provide as much technical support as we can—and to advocate for more resources to ensure tribal communities have what they need to create and implement critical programming.