



## **Transparency in Publicly Funded Homeless Service Programs**

*August 2023*

The San Diego County Taxpayers Association believes homelessness is a scourge that severely harms individuals, while devastating communities and damaging the fabric of any civil society. While the Association does not advocate for any specific solution, its members know that solutions can only be achieved when everyone – individuals, organizations, the community, and political leaders – works together in an open, honest, transparent, and cooperative environment.

The Association believes taxpayers have a right to know how their hard-earned tax dollars are being spent to solve this crisis; it has a duty to help them understand whether their tax dollars are being spent efficiently and effectively.

As such, the Association was surprised and disheartened to learn that the San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness (RTFH) – the only source holding all data on homeless individuals and their interactions with service programs – does not automatically provide anonymized data not only to the Association, but also to academics, and even the County of San Diego and the cities in it. The RTFH's position is that no one has an inherent right to this information, not even the taxpayers and their leaders who fund dozens of regional programs.

The Association believes this position is wrong.

The Association's position is that anonymous data (data with the removal of identifying details such as names and social security numbers) is critical in order to analyze what works best in breaking the chains of homelessness and helping our fellow citizens move from the streets to permanent housing. It calls on RTFH to immediately begin working in a spirit of cooperation and openness and provide this anonymized data to the public.

Additionally, it calls on public funders of homelessness services to encourage RTFH to take this action.

At the same time the Association recommends that public funders of homeless service programs adopt the following standard contractual provisions to guarantee transparency for the public. Such transparency assures that independent performance evaluation can be effectively performed.

- 1. That the public funder – the financier of a homeless service program – owns all the data, including any data that would be protected by relevant privacy laws, generated through the performance of the contract.**

It is generally accepted that in the performance of work by a contractor, the financier of the work owns as its property all the data and other items produced through the conduct



of the work.

2. **That the contractor must automatically consent to the sharing of any data within the Homeless Management Information System on other programs they manage in San Diego County.**

Because homelessness permeates political boundaries, it is important that the staff of any public agency funding homeless service programs can see performance in other parts of the San Diego region and be able to assess programmatic effectiveness.

3. **That the contractor must automatically consent to any data requests made to the Regional Task Force on Homelessness by any of the public agencies in San Diego County.**

Because it is likely that homeless service providers contract with multiple public agencies in San Diego County, maximum sharing of data prevents the information asymmetries that create inefficiencies in the marketplace of homeless service provision.

4. **That the contractor must automatically consent to any data requests made to the Regional Task Force on Homelessness – with privacy or other protected information redacted or removed – by any member of the public.**

Consistent with the spirit of California's Public Records Act or the federal government's Freedom of Information Act, the public should be entitled to non-private data so that independent evaluations of performance can be conducted.

Public agencies will benefit from these contractual provisions as they will provide data necessary for them to evaluate the relative efficacy and efficiency of programs they contract and fund. Staffs at public agencies with whom SDCTA has been in contact have expressed support for such a policy and agree that, as funders and contractors in homelessness services programs, they should be able to evaluate the programs which they fund and that this data is essential to do so.

Most importantly, taxpayers have a right to understand the impacts of their tax dollars, especially in areas such as homelessness which entail a monumental investment at the local level. This council policy would give taxpayers access to data showing the results of services in which they invest.