



Symone Wilkes, 34, of Detroit reads a book to her youngest son DyLan Williams, 4, at the Thomas A. Edison Detroit Public Library branch in Detroit after picking her 8-yr-old son up from school, on Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2026. Credit: Kimberly P. Mitchell/Detroit Free Press

HEALTH AND WELFARE HOUSING

Detroit vowed to revamp its homeless response system. Has it worked?



by **Nushrat Rahman**
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Symone Wilkes and her children were homeless for about four months last year, as they bounced from one person's home to the next and struggled to get into shelter.

The single mom of two boys, ages 4 and 8, said she was forced to leave her bug-infested rental on the east side of Detroit in August. She repeatedly called an emergency housing hotline only to be told there weren't any shelter beds available. At times, when she sought a bed in a shelter, she was offered a chair.

"It was days I wasn't sleeping, days I wasn't eating," Wilkes, who was working while unhoused, said. "It just really put me in the headspace of 'I'm not a good mom,' and I know I'm a good mom."

Wilkes' experience highlights frustrations with a system that the city vowed it would

Detroit Free Press

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shore up [after two children died](#) last February while their family was apparently unhoused and living in a van parked overnight in a Detroit parking garage. The tragedy prompted renewed attention and [a sprawling seven-point plan](#) from the mayor's office at the time, ranging from the addition of a 24-hour helpline to doubling the number of drop-in shelter beds.

A year later, homelessness in Detroit has been growing, local housing experts said, particularly among families and the "working homeless."

Homelessness increased 16% from 2023 to 2024, [according](#) to the latest comprehensive data from a one-night tally that takes place each January across Detroit, Hamtramck and Highland Park. A [narrower pulsecheck](#) on homelessness in 2025 found a 2% increase in people living in emergency shelters and other housing programs year-over-year.

Since the city's seven-point plan was implemented last year, homeless service providers the Free Press spoke to said there's been more awareness around available resources and drop-in beds to quickly get families with children off the streets. But those beds are filling up, and people are generally staying in shelters for a longer period of time because there just isn't enough affordable housing to go around.

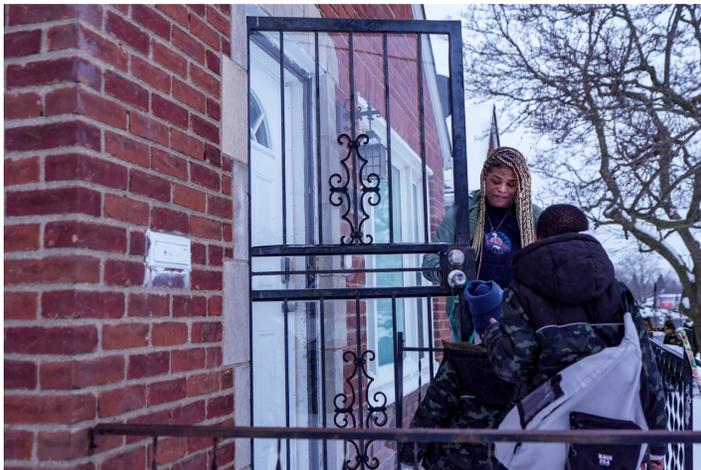
"You have people that have been in shelters for months," said Tasha Gray, executive director of the Homeless Action Network of Detroit (HAND).

The State of Homelessness in Detroit

Wilkes had a frustrating experience with the Coordinated Assessment Model, better known as CAM. It's the main way people dealing with homelessness in Detroit, Hamtramck and Highland Park can get into shelter.

"Just imagine this: you're waking up every day calling a phone number, waiting 20 minutes to even get somebody on the line, you get somebody on the line, each day you gotta keep telling CAM why you're calling," she said.

The 34-year-old Detroiter eventually found a place on her own, where a portion of the rent is subsidized, and her security deposit was paid through a diversion program, she said. But the process of repeatedly asking for help while unhoused made her feel like she was "less of a person" and "like I was the scum of somebody's shoe."



Symone Wilkes, 34, of Detroit, opens the door to their Detroit home, while her sons Dyson Wilkes, 8, and DyLan Williams, 4, patiently wait, on Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2026. Credit: Kimberly P. Mitchell/Detroit Free Press

On average, families spent 154 days on a waitlist for shelter in September, up 81% from 85 days in January 2025, [according](#) to the latest available data from the CAM system.

Concerns about CAM are valid, said Gray, of HAND, one of the agencies running it. The system can only make referrals to resources, she said. In other words, CAM is not responsible for bed availability, but rather filling those beds when they open up.

"They have been filling them when they're available, but the challenge is that they're

... they have been finding them when they're available, but the challenge is that they're not always available," Gray said.

Last month, Detroit Mayor Mary Sheffield [announced](#) a new Department of Human, Homeless and Family Services – directed by Benita Miller, an attorney and nonprofit executive. The department would bring together services previously scattered across multiple departments and is intended to give residents in need easier access to help.

"Our hope is that this department will ... provide the wraparound services and the accountability that is needed to ensure people are placed into housing," Sheffield said at a Jan. 12 news conference.

In [recent weeks](#), the city, in partnership with local homeless service providers, has also funded three emergency overnight standby shelters amid frigid temperatures and [publicized](#) other places to stay warm across Detroit.

The seven-point plan implemented under former Mayor Mike Duggan, now an independent candidate in the 2026 gubernatorial race, has met the need in some respects, Gray said, by expanding helpline hours and ramping up awareness, beds and outreach teams.

Tasnia Chowdhury, a street outreach coordinator with Community & Home Supports, Inc., has seen progress on the ground, too. Still, some people don't want to go to a shelter, whether that's because of past trauma or bad experiences, she said.

There has been an increase in complaints about shelter conditions and quality, Gray said. Shelters typically don't get funding for maintenance, but at the same time, more people are coming into a "strained" infrastructure.

"It's almost to be expected, because you're housing more people in the same space," she said. "You may have added more beds, but you haven't added more spaces."

Shelters, like the ones run by the Neighborhood Service Organization, Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries and COTS, are also full, leaders told the Free Press.

At the same time, temporary drop-off centers – where people are meant to stay for about two weeks at maximum to keep them immediately off the streets – are becoming shelters of sorts, too, with families staying as long as six months, said Chad Audi, president and CEO of the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries.

Cheryl P. Johnson, CEO of COTS, which operates a family shelter, echoed other local housing providers: the seven-point plan is a start, but there's more work to do.

"Say we build a lot of shelters, but if you don't have the end in mind in terms of more affordable housing and putting resources there, you're going to have people stuck in a shelter system, which is horrible," she said.

Detroit's 7-point plan by the numbers

The plan was launched after the two children died from accidental carbon monoxide toxicity while apparently living in a van with their family. The Wayne County Prosecutor's Office [announced last week](#) that the children's mother wouldn't be charged because there wasn't enough evidence to do so. The Free Press made several attempts to interview her.

Here's how the reforms have been going, according to data provided to the Free Press from the city of Detroit's Housing and Revitalization Department:

Visiting families with children: After the plan was released last year, the city and partnering social service agencies started connecting unsheltered families with minors to street outreach that same day and within 24 hours for single households.

To date, the street outreach team has contacted 1,683 households and 257 families received referrals for drop-in centers.

In December, the city launched a new division to help households living with friends

or family. From December to mid-January this year, that team got 155 referrals and did 73 in-person visits.

Finding families in vehicles: The Detroit Police Department now checks parking garages, structures and secluded areas, according to the city's housing department. Detroit police have an "Unsheltered Population Response Team."

The city of Detroit also funds eight street outreach programs at various agencies, tasked with going to areas where people are unhoused, and providing food and blankets, information about shelters and other resources.

Making helpline available 24 hours: The Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency operates the Detroit Housing Resource HelpLine during the weekdays and on Saturday. Another organization, Motor City Mitten Mission, and street outreach teams handle after-hours calls.

From December to late January of this year, the after-hours helpline received 3,503 inbound calls – an average of about 70 a day.

A reporter who called the helpline on a Saturday morning received automated messages, a follow up text message saying another resident was being helped and a call back within an hour and a half.

Doubling drop-in beds: The city created a new shelter program called the drop-in center in December 2024, providing same-day temporary shelter beds for police, hospitals and street outreach teams to take people. Residents can also access the centers – operated by Cass Community Social Services and Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries – by calling the helpline after hours or going to a Detroit police precinct.

The drop-in centers, available 24 hours, expanded to 235 beds in April of last year. From late February to the end of December, the centers have served 604 families with kids and 2,570 single adults.

Ramping up night outreach: Eight street outreach programs, funded by the city of Detroit, provide services 24/7, including on holidays. Another team does outreach but is funded by the state. Since late February, partner agencies – Motor City Mitten Mission, Wayne Metro and Noah at Central – have ramped up street outreach at night, leading to 136 more hours of coverage.

Police precincts for referrals: In 2026 to date, the Detroit police's homeless response team processed 90 calls, 51 of which came from police precincts.

Increasing education and awareness: Street outreach teams visit known locations, such as remote spots, under overpasses and transit centers, to connect with people. The city's housing department is also planning to release bus shelter inserts and bus ads promoting the Detroit Housing Resource HelpLine.

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Drew

February 2, 2026 10:40 am at 10:40 am

Where is the long-term strategy?

Seems there are some basic Homeless Types:

- Mentally-Challenged
- Addiction-Challenged
- Unemployment-Challenged
- Housing-Challenged
- More?

Each has their own unique issues, thus will require unique solutions.

Unemployment & Housing challenged groups are more short-term issues and should be "easier" to find solutions.

- Although one of the challenges will be financial education to break patterns of poor choices. Handouts have not proven to be a long-term solution.

Mentally & Addiction challenged groups require longer-term solutions that will be more difficult to address.

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