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Exclusive: Biden administration unveils initiative to combat homelessness in 5 US cities, California



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WASHINGTON – Five cities and the state of California are getting tailored support from the federal government to reduce homelessness under a new initiative the White House described to USA TODAY.

The administration is sending a federal official into each community for up to two years to help cut red tape and better access federal programs, according to a plan that will be unveiled Thursday.

The cities – Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Seattle – along with California are home to half of the nation's homeless population.

Over the course of a year, more than a million individuals and families experience homelessness in the United States, and many more are at risk for homelessness, according to the administration. In addition, more are experiencing it in unsheltered settings, such as encampments.

The new initiative, which the administration is calling "ALL INside," aims to speed up local efforts to get unsheltered people into homes. It's a key part of Biden's goal to reduce homelessness by 25% by 2025.

"A great nation has a moral obligation to ensure housing, but it's also the smart thing to do," Biden said when releasing a blueprint to address the problem in December.

Susan Rice, Biden's domestic policy adviser, is meeting Thursday with mayors from the participating cities and other officials to launch the new component.

"These communities are taking meaningful action to address unsheltered homelessness," Rice said in a statement to USA TODAY, "and this first-of-its-kind partnership with our administration will help strengthen and accelerate local efforts in these sites, and communities across America, to ensure every unsheltered person has access to the housing they need."

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Navigating federal funding streams

In addition to committing a federal official to work full-time in each community, the White House says dedicated teams across the federal government will help the communities navigate federal funding streams.

For example, Medicaid can provide housing-related supportive services and behavioral health care. The Labor Department can help communities take advantage of employment opportunities for young people who are homeless.

The Housing Department is collaborating with Veterans Affairs and the Social Security Administration to address problems people have getting various forms of government-issued identification and other needed documents.

Sending a facilitator to each community and identifying people within each participating agency to help is a recognition that fighting homelessness touches on many elements including health care, substance abuse, transportation, and workforce challenges, according to a senior administration official.

The administration is also working with the private sector and nonprofits to see how they can help, according to the White House.

The participating communities were chosen in part because they have strategies to reduce homelessness that the administration thinks can be hastened with federal assistance. While there's no plan to expand the program, officials hope the lessons learned can be applied across the country which could include identifying regulatory changes that would help other communities better access federal assistance.

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