



National  
Homeless  
Law Center



California  
Homeless  
Youth Project



Young  
People To  
The Front

# ACTIVATING VACANT HOUSING IN LOS ANGELES FOR TRANSITION-AGED YOUTH: **A POLICY AND PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK FOR ACCESSING AND REALLOCATING EXISTING UNITS.**

## 2026

Prepared for Los Angeles  
policymakers, public  
agencies, and community  
partners



*In partnership with:*



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## Executive Summary

Time is ticking – Shana just turned 24. Things are going ok. She is working at a daycare making \$22/hour. Her take-home pay is about \$2800 a month (though she only sees about \$1800 of it because she has been saving \$500/month in cash and \$500/month in a retirement account – she participates in a local financial literacy program). She has her associate degree in Early Childhood Education and would love to get a bachelors degree but is worried about going into debt. She's been living in a transitional housing program for homeless young adults for the past 2 years – her rent is only 30% of her pay (about \$840) but her time in the program is running out. She is only eligible until she turns 25.

Shana has other expenses – about \$100 a month for transportation if all goes well on public transportation (it never does), closer to \$200 a month if she has to catch a Lyft a few times because the bus is late or the metro breaks down. She is using an old broken iPhone so luckily does not have a payment plan but still pays about \$100 for the service. Food has gotten so expensive and she doesn't qualify for food assistance (she makes too much money). She tries to keep it to about \$300 a month by packing all her lunches and occasionally getting fast food when she doesn't have time to pack. She almost never does anything social – she just can't afford it.

Shana has been talking to a caseworker at the program who runs the transitional living program she is in about housing after the program. Shana has managed to save about \$6,000 in cash and \$6,000 in retirement since she started working full-time a year ago. She is really proud of this accomplishment. But the cheapest possible housing available is about \$1850 a month for a studio, \$2100 for 1 bedroom. And that doesn't include utilities, which realistically will be \$200 a month. She doesn't qualify for any housing subsidies (she makes too much money).

The caseworker is pressuring Shana to apply for a studio that is \$1700 a month with no utilities included and no onsite washer and dryer (another extra cost). It is not in a great location (will likely add an additional 30 minutes to her commute) and it has terrible reviews as far as property management and maintenance is concerned. But even setting these concerns aside, Shana cannot imagine how she will be able to make it work on her salary. She will eat through a lot of her savings to put down the deposit and first month rent. She will no longer be able to save any cash and will likely have to reduce her retirement savings. Some months, depending on utility costs, her income might not even be enough to cover everything. She is willing to share housing – maybe she can rent a room? But even those listings are around \$1350-1500/month (not including utilities) and she has reached out to 10 different listings with no response and many listings require an income that is 3 times the rent – which Shana does not have.

Shana's chances of earning more money in the near future are low. She doesn't have a car so can't pick up delivery driving or rideshare work. She is unlikely to be able to get a second part-time job with her current hours at work and commuting time. And she is likely a few years away

from a promotion or being able to work at a different center with higher pay – and to really earn more, she would likely have to get a bachelors degree.

**Shana is getting more scared and depressed about her future as time goes by? What is she going to do?**

One day, during a monthly apartment inspection, one of the caseworkers tells Shana about a **new affordable housing program managed by the city called S.H.A.R.E.** – housing units that are vacant for a certain period of time are registered with the city and then the owners of those units are incentivized to lease them to the city in exchange for property tax breaks or help with needed repairs. The city then subleases the units to people who can't afford market rate rent. Rent is capped at a percentage of income, just like her transitional housing. There are even plans to incentivize property owners to sell their units to a community land trust or social housing developer, which might create opportunities to own rather than rent units. **It sounds too good to be true...but Shana asks the case manager to help her get on the waiting list.**

## The Opportunity and Proposed Solution

California faces a disconnect between existing housing supply and housing access:

- Over 1 million housing units statewide are vacant (ACS 2024).
- Hundreds of thousands of occupied homes include underutilized rooms.
- The HUD Housing Inventory Count (2024) found thousands of emergency shelter and transitional housing beds unused on a single night.
- In Los Angeles alone, over 93,000 units were documented as vacant, with 41,000 “other vacant” (SAJE & UCLA, *Vacancy Report*).

**Housing supply is not strictly a construction shortage, it is a systems misalignment problem.** California holds significant unused or underused residential capacity that local partners cannot meaningfully access. **Vacancy activation** refers to policies and operational strategies that bring long-vacant, underutilized, or idle residential units back into productive use, particularly as deeply affordable housing or Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH).

International models, such as those in Barcelona, Amsterdam, Paris, Ireland, and Belgium, demonstrate several policy tools governments can use to activate underused housing. Cities may require owners of vacant homes to **report and register** long-term vacancies, provide information about the length and reason for vacancy and future plans, and renew registration every 6 to 12 months so local governments can identify patterns of chronic underuse and plan activation strategies accordingly. They may also establish **activation deadlines**, allowing cities to offer incentives for occupancy, prioritize vacant units for nonprofit leasing or acquisition, apply modest penalties to discourage long-term vacancy, or facilitate temporary reuse

agreements when homes remain vacant beyond defined thresholds. Social Rental Agencies can serve as nonprofit intermediaries that **master-lease vacant units** from private owners, assume management responsibility, sublease homes at affordable rents, guarantee rent to owners, and provide support services, reducing landlord risk while generating stable affordable housing supply. **Community ownership models**, including community land trusts, limited equity cooperatives, and mission-driven nonprofit acquisitions, can help ensure permanent affordability and long-term stewardship. Finally, **prioritizing reuse** over new construction can be faster, less expensive, less disruptive to communities, and more environmentally sustainable, which is especially important in a period of shrinking HUD and HHAP funding.

## The Los Angeles Vacancy Problem

### Scale of Residential Vacancy

Los Angeles County has 214,016 vacant units while 86,219 people are experiencing housing insecurity, meaning there are approximately **2.5 vacant homes for every person in need**. Building enough new affordable housing to meet this need would cost an estimated \$650,000 to \$950,000 per unit, or roughly \$24 billion to \$34 billion, and could take five to seven years from concept to occupancy due to land acquisition, construction, permitting, and zoning timelines. By contrast, activating existing vacant homes could likely cost about \$250,000 per unit and make housing available within 90 days to one year. **Utilizing less than 19% of the vacant housing inventory would meet the need at an estimated cost of \$10 billion, compared with current yearly spending of approximately \$20 billion.**

### Housing Supply Versus Housing Access

Homes without people, rooms without occupants, and emergency shelter beds without matches. Together they reveal a deeper challenge: California's housing shortage is not only about supply, but about connection.

[ACS 2024](#) data show that a significant share of California's vacant homes are not available for rent or sale as they remain empty held for family use, investment purposes, or are pending decisions by owners.

In the shelter system, unfilled emergency shelter beds point to similar misalignment. Staffing shortages, eligibility criteria, and facility constraints can render available beds unusable for those who need them most. Across every layer of private homes, shared spaces, and public programs the same pattern emerges: **capacity exists, but access is blocked.**

## Vacancy, Affordability, and Housing Instability

Due to this significant number of vacant homes not being used, transition-aged youth face an even higher barrier to finding any housing, let alone housing they could reasonably afford. The introductory story of Shana is one of many stories that illustrate how young adults face housing instability despite being employed full-time. While Shana earns too much to qualify for available housing subsidies, the high cost of living and rent forces her to live in a perpetual state of housing instability with no end in sight. Situations such as these demonstrated how housing can exist yet remain financially and structurally inaccessible to the young people who need it.

## Why Transition-Aged Youth

### Housing Instability During the Transition to Adulthood

Youth homelessness is the direct result of policy choices, including years of disinvestment in affordable housing and an inadequate social safety net. Over 20 million people live in households that spend more than half their income on housing – including 7 million children. Yet only 1 in 4 people who are eligible for federal housing assistance programs actually receive any help. Not surprisingly, **lack of affordable housing and inadequate housing assistance is a main driver of homelessness**. Communities with the highest housing costs have the highest rates of homelessness per capita – nearly 6 out of every 1,000 people compared to an average of 2.5 out of 1,000 nationwide.

The need for affordable housing is even more urgent for transition age youth. Approximately 12% of children ages 14 to 17 and 20% of young adults ages 18 to 24 live in poverty across the United States. Data shows that a substantial jump in poverty occurs between the ages of 17 and 18 and **the number of young adults living in poverty has increased steadily over the last 50 years - even as poverty among children and older adults has declined**. Part of the reason for this is that there is almost no social safety net for non-disabled adults without children - and an extremely inadequate one for those who are parents and/or living with disabilities. Not surprisingly, **18 to 24 year olds endure the highest rates of homelessness and housing insecurity than any other age group**; nearly one in ten report couch surfing or another form of homelessness at some point each year. Shana knows this deeply – she spent her teen years couch surfing (first with family, then without). After fleeing a dangerous situation, Shana spent almost 6 months in a domestic violence shelter until she was connected with transitional housing for young adults.

Additionally, young people have always been left behind in the employment sector, experiencing both the highest unemployment and disconnection rates. In 2022, the **unemployment rate for youth and young adults aged 16-24 was 8.5%, compared to 3.5% for the general population**. Similarly, over 4.5 million youth were neither working nor in school. For youth

facing additional barriers, these numbers are much higher. Youth experiencing homelessness have a higher unemployment rate than housed youth. The Black youth unemployment rate is two times higher than white youth and unemployment rates for transgender people of color have reached as high as four times the national unemployment rate.

Regarding employment, Shana is actually beating the odds. She has full-time employment, and is earning above the federal poverty rate. She is doing everything “right” – scrimping and saving, not taking on debt. But she is still technically homeless - she has a roof over her head for now but there is a time limit and no prospect of finding market rate housing that she can afford without constant threat of eviction, or having to choose between food or the electric bill.

## Vacancy Policy: U.S. and International Models

### U.S., Canadian, and International Models

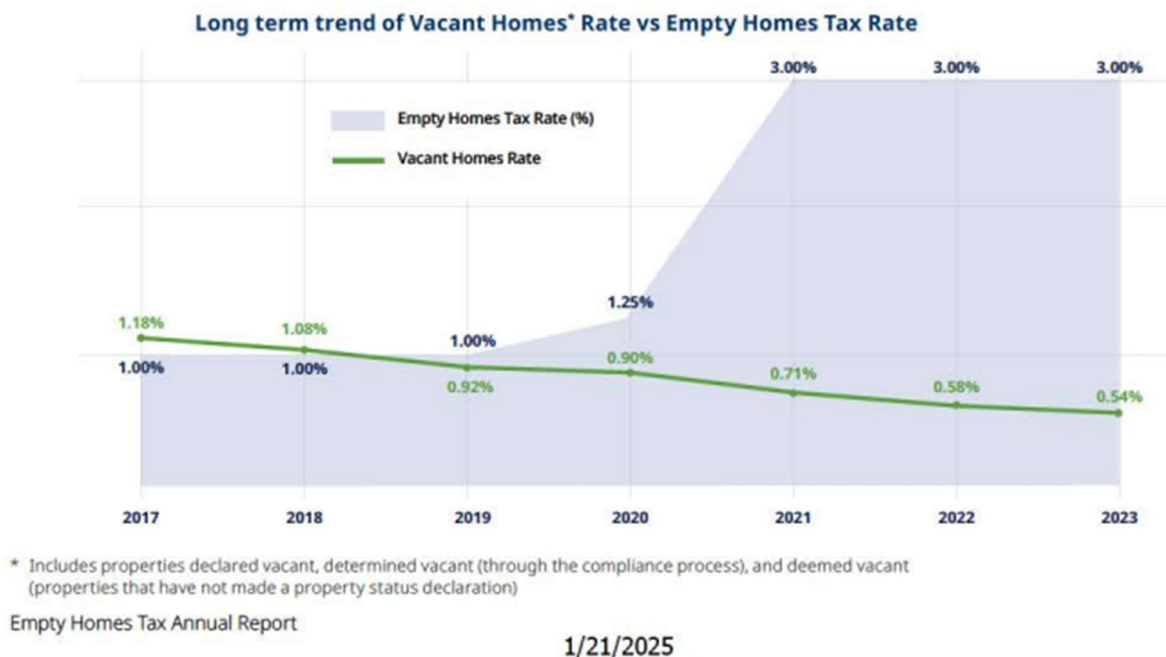
California has already made some strides towards regulating vacant housing. **Berkeley’s Empty Home Tax** clearly defines what vacancy means (properties vacant for more than 182 days), allocates funding for enforcement and implementation through a “Rent Board”, and generates funds through owner penalties (which can go towards housing elsewhere even if the owner doesn’t fill the vacant property). It is hoped that the size of the penalties will be substantial enough to force owner response (\$3,000 to \$6000 per unit) but there isn’t strong evidence (yet) that this penalty only scheme has resulted in vacancies being activated for actual housing. **San Francisco’s Empty Home Tax** was ruled unconstitutional by local courts and is currently being appealed (<https://sftreasurer.org/business/taxes-fees/empty-homes-tax-ehf>). At issue are the Takings Clause (a constitutional provision that “private property shall not be taken for public use without just compensation”) and the Ellis Act (which basically says that landlords are allowed to remove units from rental market entirely). The San Diego city council approved a vacant homes tax on second homes that was rejected by voters in June 2026.

**Oakland’s Vacancy Tax** is in effect, but struggling to generate income or increase housing supply due to widely available exemptions (on-going “construction”, claiming personal use, or underreporting). Owner only has to stay in property occasionally, have friends stay there, or can blame permit delays, financial hardship, or submit constant appeals and rely on slow administration/enforcement. The **City of Fresno** offers a 50% income tax rebate to owners who open a business in a vacant commercial building. The same idea could possibly be implemented in residential properties where owners view their vacant properties as businesses and/or tax write-offs. (<https://fresnoland.org/2026/01/23/inside-the-effort-to-fix-the-tower-districts-vacant-building-problems>).

**Vancouver, BC** has a more robust vacant housing policy and is seeing more success than California in vacancy rates actually falling. Some features include:

- Mandatory filling each year (non-filing is an assumed vacancy and penalty)
- Random audits that look at utility usage, tenant records, and tax filings
- To avoid penalties, the unit must be a principle residence, or legitimately rented
- Exemptions exist but are time-limited and require significant documentation
- There are fines for false declarations, as well as back taxes and penalties

Vancouver publishes results annually showing how the money is being used and current vacancy rates (to increase public pressure and improve transparency).



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Vancouver reports that vacancies fell 68.6% from 2017 - 2023 through these policies (<https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/2024-11-27-empty-homes-tax-annual-report.pdf>). What is unclear is whether these vacancy policies have actually resulted in more affordable housing for people who needed it.

Across Europe, cities such as Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Paris have launched data registries, activation deadlines, and targeted vacancy taxes to bring unused housing back into circulation. As described in Social Europe's 2023 article, "[Unlocking vacant properties to tackle homelessness](#)," these efforts rely on coordination, transparency, and time limits that create pathways for idle housing to reenter community use.

## Lessons for Los Angeles

In the United States, the **Philadelphia Community Land Trust** initiative remains a powerful cautionary example. In 2020, after years of organizing, residents secured 50 vacant homes for permanent community ownership and affordable reuse. The effort demonstrated how public-

community partnerships can convert unused properties into long-term housing. Yet, [follow-up reporting](#) revealed that some homes still lacked promised repairs and operational support, underscoring the importance of sustained investment and clear accountability structures once properties are transferred.

This highlights that activating vacant housing to create affordable housing is not just about transferring assets, but also about building durable systems of stewardship.

## The S.H.A.R.E. Housing Act

### Purpose and Policy Goals

The S.H.A.R.E Housing Act (Solving Housing-Insecurity by Accessing & Reallocating Existing Units) aims to establish a pilot program that converts underutilized and vacant residential properties back into productive use as affordable and supportive housing. The policy specifically aims to meet the growing demand among transitional-aged youth (TAY) experiencing homelessness due to increasing housing prices in cities such as Los Angeles. The act challenges former concepts of replacing housing construction completely by, instead, supplementing the conversion of existing units by creating pathways for Continuums of Care (COCs), local government advocacy, non-profit partnerships, and community-based organizations.

### Proposed Pilot Framework

The Act would involve approximately 3-5 Continuums of Care (CoC's) to represent urban, suburban, and rural communities. Regions would identify vacant and underutilized residential properties through sources such as assessor records, utility-use indicators, code-enforcement records, market listings, and eventually a broader vacancy database. Eligible properties include chronically vacant homes, rental units remaining unleased, properties listed for sale for extended periods, and units suitable for reuse in a cost-effective manner.

The S.H.A.R.E Act would then make this housing available for use through several activation strategies, including master leasing, voluntary acquisition, non-profit or social rental intermediaries, temporary-use agreements, and community land trust ownership. Regions participating in the Act would demonstrate an interest and capacity to develop vacancy data, work with local governments and nonprofit partners, identify funding sources, and make activated units available to CoCs, nonprofit housing providers, or other community organizations.

### Voluntary Participation and Property Owner Protections

The voluntary activation framework remains a central approach to S.H.A.R.E. for its ability to acquire, lease, or utilize temporary use arrangements with willing property owners. The Act does

not authorize eminent domain, compulsory purchase, seizure of privately owned housing, or displacement of existing tenants. Instead, property owners would receive clear information regarding their eligibility, options, financial terms, responsibilities, duration of agreements, and potential affordability requirements before being eligible to participate. Where vacancy policies are implemented, owners will receive notification of the opportunity to participate in S.H.A.R.E. as an alternative to taxes or penalties.

Participation in the program could be encouraged by incentivizing property owners to consider guaranteed or predictable rental payments, nonprofit property management, rehabilitation assistance for properties in poor condition, and tenancy support.

The proposed framework would also need to comply with constitutional protections, fair housing requirements, privacy laws, due process standards, while preserving owner control and focusing on voluntary participation.

### Governance, Oversight, and Youth-Centered Safeguards

The program would operate with shared governance and oversight among CoCs, local governments, nonprofit housing organizations, community land trusts, service providers, and people with lived experience of homelessness. Transparent records and reporting of outcomes, such as identified units, cost per activated units, time to occupancy, housing stability, and demographic equity are important measures to consider.

Youth-centered safeguards ensure that young people experiencing homelessness are meaningfully represented in pilot design, implementation, and evaluation. This framework incorporates protections for transition-aged youth, including connection to supportive services, peer support, and coordination with education and employment opportunities.

Additional independent oversight could help identify potential, unintended consequences that serve as metrics for re-evaluation for statewide expansion.

# Policy and Partnership Implementation Framework

## Vacancy Property Tier Matrix

| Tier Name                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Type                                              | Incentives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Penalties                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Requirements                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Proposed tiers reflect an owner's various options to receive either incentives, penalties, or both, in regard to their vacant properties. City officials are able to "pick and choose" tiers appropriate to their needs, funding, and accessibility. |                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                              |
| Bronze                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <i>Incentives Only</i>                            | Centralized & public reporting system for vacant properties, permit fee's waived and fast-tracked, utility connection rebates (water, electric, sewer)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                              |
| Silver                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <i>Incentives + Participation Requirements</i>    | Income-based rebates for landlords who rent to youth housing providers, low-interest loans through city partnerships, "conversion-teams" borrowed from Affordable Housing Developers                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                              |
| Gold                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <i>Incentives + Penalties</i>                     | Cash reimbursement for renovation costs, free city-paid inspections, grant money for safety upgrades, city guarantees rent payments if units are leased to a youth housing provider, city recognition for owners through "City Housing Partner" award + promotion                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Vacant property registration that increases annually</li> <li>•Vacancy tax of 3% on vacant properties</li> <li>•Mandatory inspections for vacancy thresholds within 6-12 months</li> </ul>                                                                                      | Housing must be provided to youth centered orgs              |
| Diamond                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <i>Enforcement + Conversion Pressure</i>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Access to city funds to perform repairs</li> <li>•City pays for demolition &amp; clean up if owner agrees to build housing afterwards</li> <li>•Bonus funding if owner includes youth supportive services (mental health counseling, case management, employment services)</li> <li>•Higher rebates for higher units reserved for youth homeless</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Court Appointed Conversion</li> <li>•Liens placed on properties after 3 years of vacancy</li> <li>•"Accountability registry" including public reporting of chronic vacant property owners</li> <li>•Denial of business licenses / permits of repeat offenders</li> </ul>        | Owner agrees to build housing afterwards                     |
| Platinum                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <i>Incentives + Enforcement + Housing Mandate</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Full tax relief for owners who convert properties to youth housing</li> <li>•Automatic pipeline partnership with youth partners + housing developers</li> <li>•Reuse Zoning Overlay to remove zoning barriers</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Dedicated Youth Housing Conversion Fund</li> <li>•City acquisition of properties left vacant after 2-3 years</li> <li>•Conversion Mandate for buildings in "high-need" areas</li> <li>•Escalating fines for chronic vacancy that become higher than conversion costs</li> </ul> | Must convert properties to youth housing to receive benefits |

## Partnership Engagement Matrix

| Tier Name                                                                                                                                                                       | Type                              | Responsibilities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Opportunities | Outcomes |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Proposed tiers reflect engagement options to establish a wraparound coalition that shares the load of responsibility rather than trying to host all needs in one single entity. |                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |               |          |
| <b>Strategic Implementation Catalyst</b>                                                                                                                                        | <i>Essential Services</i>         | Provide integral services to comprehensive vacancy reallocation and maintenance. Ex:<br><br>-Potential eligible vacancy identification<br>-Wraparound services for youth residents<br>-Housing construction, repair, maintenance, and consultation<br>-Investment, funding procurement, networking, marketing, etc.<br>-Contracts and services consultation and management |               |          |
| <b>Intermediary Vacancy Steward</b>                                                                                                                                             | <i>Social Rental Agencies</i>     | Reduce risk for landlords while generating stable, affordable housing supply. Ex:<br><br>-Master-lease vacant units from private owners<br>-Assume management responsibility<br>-Sublease to tenants at affordable rents<br>-Guarantee rent to the owner<br>-Provide support services                                                                                      |               |          |
| <b>Lead Vacancy Acquisitionist</b>                                                                                                                                              | <i>Community Housing Trustees</i> | Ensure permanent affordability and strong stewardship over time. Ex:<br><br>-Community Land Trusts<br>-Limited equity cooperatives<br>-Mission-driven nonprofit acquisitions                                                                                                                                                                                               |               |          |

## Funding and Implementation

### Funding Pathways

Braided funding from existing federal, state, local, and philanthropic sources would be organized across three primary areas: Capital funding, Operating subsidies, and Service Funding.

- **Capital Funding** for property acquisition and rehabilitation could include Homekey+, Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), Home and HOME-ARP funds, local trust funds, Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), and philanthropic capital.
- **Operating subsidies** could serve to support ongoing costs of activated housing through Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV), Project-Based Vouchers (PBV), Continuum of Care (CoC) leasing funds, and Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG).
- **Service funding** supports permanent supportive housing and services through CoC PSH funding, Medicaid for eligible populations, and county health departments.

Additionally, by prioritizing the reuse of existing residential units, conversion costs will be less costly per unit than new-build permanent supportive housing, reducing strain on homelessness resources and making cost more attractive to potential funders.

### Proposed Los Angeles Pilot

The National Homelessness Law Center, in partnership with the Hilton Foundation, has set an audacious goal of making 90 units of previously vacant housing available to young people transitioning from youth homelessness or other systems by April 2029. For the reasons, mentioned above, we think Los Angeles is a promising location for some, if not all, of these units. We believe utilizing the S.H.A.R.E. Act framework will make this dream possible!

## Government, Legal, and Regulatory Framework

### Role of Los Angeles Government

The Los Angeles Government plays a crucial role in advocating, promoting, and passing legislation that aids in the redevelopment of vacant and underutilized properties across the L.A. region. The proposed S.H.A.R.E. Act is a solution to a problem that both unhoused individuals and residents of Los Angeles agree upon more housing is needed to face this epidemic of housing shortages in the area. City officials, county supervisors, State Senators, and political and government staffers can play a direct role in making the S.H.A.R.E. Act possible to meet the demand for bettering, more affordable housing.

## Legislative and Regulatory Considerations

Certain constitutional considerations need to be taken into account. However, given the S.H.A.R.E. Act and the approaches mentioned in this reading focus primarily on voluntary engagement from landlords, it can be best understood as a permissible approach to solving the housing crisis, specifically for youth individuals who have become "priced-out" of homes in Los Angeles. These partnerships regarding vacant units have seen success in countries such as Canada, where a direct correlation between vacant-reporting systems and vacant properties can be observed.

## Opportunities for Partnership and Action

### How to Participate

Participation involves identifying the *Partnership Engagement Matrix* (pg. 14) to see where your organization's strengths and abilities best align with the goals of S.H.A.R.E. and this document. Since conversion of vacant units requires team-effort consisting of several different sectors, ranging from funding and stewardship to service-connection, marketing, and more.

Upon determining the appropriate category in the *Partnership Engagement Matrix*, teams can work together to identify next-steps, approaches, and apply this research to advocate for funding, policy change (if needed) and other governmental assistance.

### Recommended Next Steps

Connect with us! Feel free to reach out to the project's organizers if you want to be involved:

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