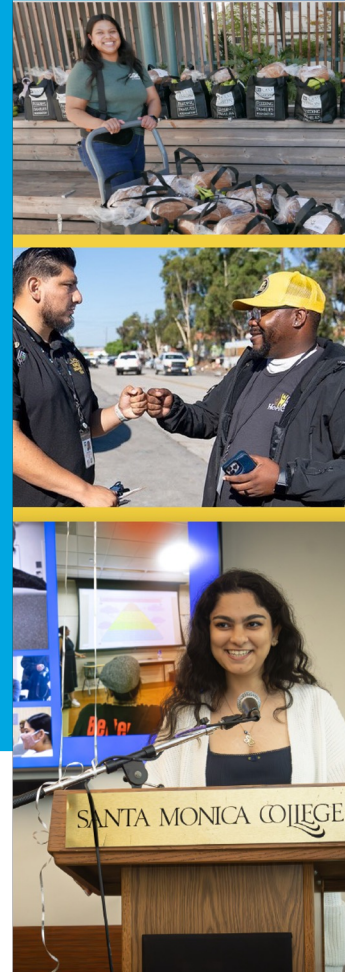


# Strengthening LA County's Homeless Services Workforce:

## Investing in Education and People to Serve the Community

*2025 Report Summary*



### STRENGTHENING LA COUNTY'S HOMELESS SERVICES WORKFORCE

Investing in Education  
and People to Serve  
the Community



PREPARED BY LESAR  
DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANTS  
JULY 2025

# Report Overview

# REPORT GOALS

- 🎯 Examine homeless sector's workforce challenges to attract, mentor, retain frontline homeless services staff.
- 🎯 Explore how community colleges can be an important partner in addressing training, onboarding gaps for new frontline staff.



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# REPORT FOCUS



An overview of current workforce gaps, including barriers to entering, staying in, and advancing within the sector.



An overview of how Santa Monica College's Homeless Service Work Certificate program addresses these gaps.



Actionable recommendations for community colleges interested in adopting, adapting the model.



Considerations for broader system alignment, recognizing that many barriers to student, workforce success fall outside the scope of community colleges.

# Los Angeles Homelessness Landscape

# HOMELESSNESS LANDSCAPE IN LOS ANGELES AND BEYOND

- Approximately 771,480 people in the US experience homelessness on any given night.
- Los Angeles County is one of the most impacted regions, with >75,000 unhoused people on any given night.
- To address this crisis requires a well-trained workforce commensurate with need.



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# HOMELESSNESS LANDSCAPE IN LOS ANGELES AND BEYOND, CONTINUED

- > 1,300 vacant positions in the sector at any given time in L.A., with a majority being frontline positions.
- Shortage of frontline workers = reduced service capacity, heavier workloads, service interruptions, and broken bonds of trust with people seeking services.



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# CHALLENGES FACED BY THE HOMELESS SERVICES WORKFORCE

- Low compensation at workforce entry
- High burnout, secondary / vicarious trauma
- Inadequate onboarding / early career training
- Limited career progression pathways
- Short-term funding leading to workforce instability



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# CHALLENGES FACED BY THE HOMELESS SERVICES WORKFORCE, CONTINUED

- Skills needed not consistently developed via training
- Role misalignment, overextension
- Advancement culture, limited role of training
- Lack of stackable, sector-recognized credentials



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# CHALLENGES FACED BY THE HOMELESS SERVICES WORKFORCE, CONTINUED

- Negative perceptions of the homelessness sector
- Underutilization of workers with lived experience
- Siloed relationships with broader workforce systems
- Lack of workforce data infrastructure
- Insufficient support for clinical licensure

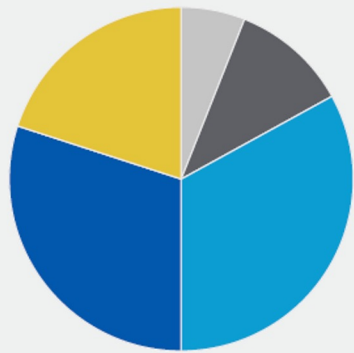


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# LDC SURVEY OF FRONTLINE WORKERS, RATING OF EARLY CAREER TRAINING QUALITY

Nearly half of frontline workers surveyed reported their early career training as 'fair', 'poor' or 'very poor'.



**Excellent, 20% (n=17)**

**Good, 30% (n=26)**

**Fair, 33% (n=29)**

**Poor, 11% (n=10)**

**Very Poor, 6% (n=5)**

# The Solution: SMC's Certificate

# SMC'S HOMELESS SERVICE WORK CERTIFICATE PROGRAM BASICS

- Launched in 2024.
- California's first Homeless Service Work Certificate Program at a community college.
- Funded through a partnership with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).
- Created to train individuals for frontline roles in the homelessness response system.





# SMC'S HOMELESS SERVICE WORK CERTIFICATE PROGRAM BASICS, CONTINUED

Target Audience includes people currently or hoping to:

- Serve unhoused individuals through healthcare, housing, case management.
- Advocate for housing justice, navigating complex support systems.
- Work in nonprofit, public sector homeless services.



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Communications

# SMC'S HOMELESS SERVICE WORK CERTIFICATE PROGRAM BASICS, CONTINUED

## Curriculum:

- Fall Semester (6 units)
  - Introduction to Workforce Training in the Homeless Response System.
  - Promoting Health Equity & Advocacy.
- Spring Semester (6 units)
  - Implementing Effective Practices.
  - Capstone: Fieldwork Reflection & Career Planning.
  - Homeless Response System Work-Based Experience.



# SMC'S HOMELESS SERVICE WORK CERTIFICATE PROGRAM BASICS, CONTINUED

## Key Features:

- No prerequisites required.
- Hands-on learning through work-based experience and expert guest speakers.
- Built-in student support (academic counseling, mentorship).
- Classes are offered in person on SMC's main campus.
- Career preparation for jobs in outreach, interim housing, prevention, permanent housing, and supportive services.





# SMC'S HOMELESS SERVICE WORK CERTIFICATE PROGRAM BASICS, CONTINUED

## Career Pathways:

- Graduates are prepared for entry and mid-level roles in:
  - Street outreach.
  - Interim, permanent supportive housing.
  - Housing navigation, case management.
  - Nonprofit, public sector service delivery.



# Impact



# SMC'S HOMELESS SERVICE WORK CERTIFICATE PROGRAM'S IMPACT AREAS

## 1. Focusing entry into the workforce

Curriculum addresses common onboarding gaps.

## 2. Building foundational skills

Built around most in-demand competencies including trauma-informed care, de-escalation, and system navigation.

## 3. Supporting professional development

Helps launch students' careers—leading to employment, increased wages, and long-term professional growth.

## 4. Providing a sector-recognized entry credential

Students and faculty report that certificate adds structure and credibility for both employers and learners.

## 5. Offering strategic contribution

Certificate has promise to deliver a meaningful contribution to addressing workforce entry gaps.

# SMC: BUILDING A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR THE HOMELESS SERVICES SECTOR

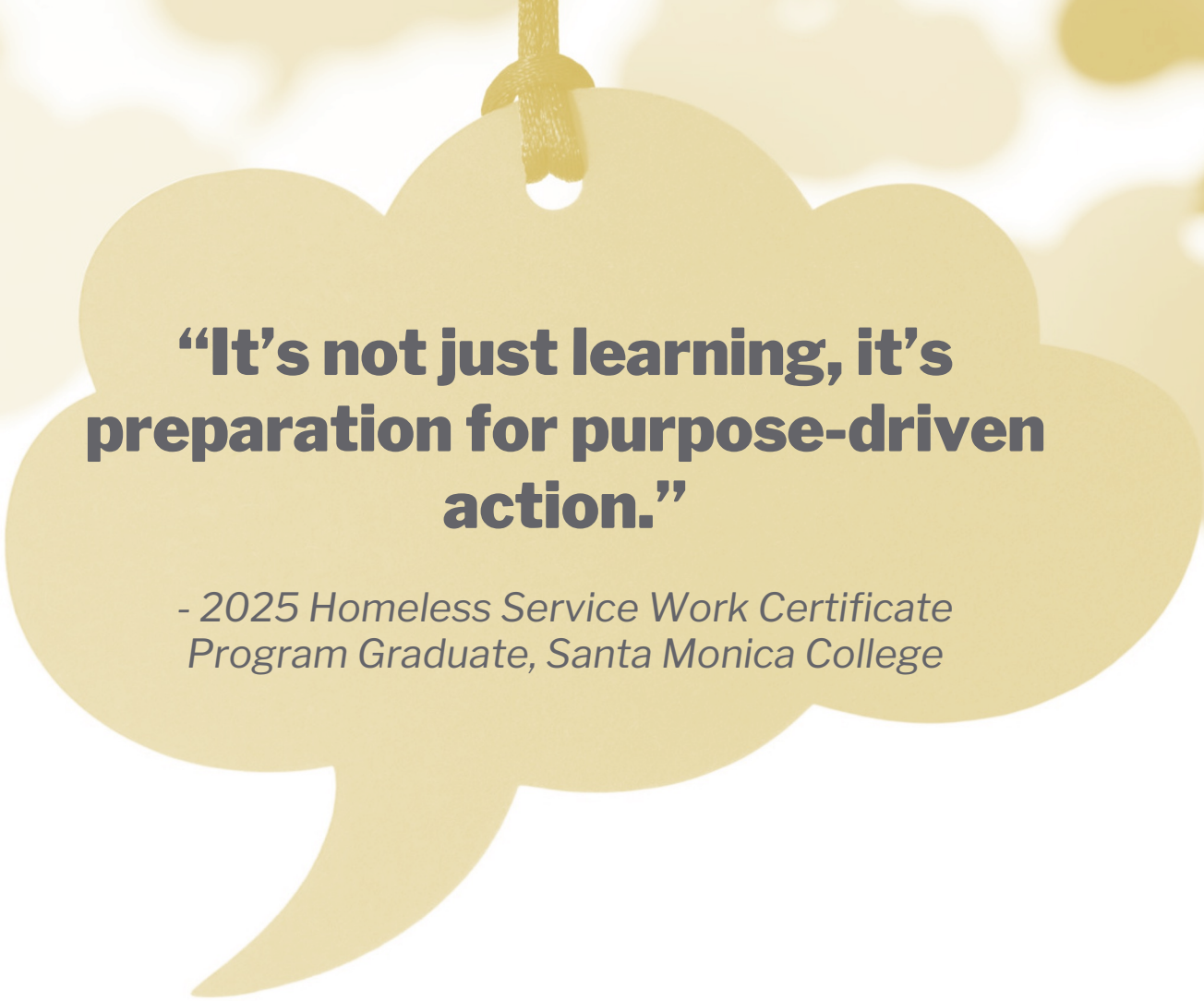
Through SMC's Homeless Services Work Certificate, we are:

- Preparing students with baseline knowledge and skills needed.
- Offering an accessible entry point, especially for those who may not have followed traditional academic pathways.
- Providing important step in building a stronger, more accessible workforce pipeline.



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**“It’s not just learning, it’s  
preparation for purpose-driven  
action.”**

*- 2025 Homeless Service Work Certificate  
Program Graduate, Santa Monica College*

# Scaling the Model

# THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES: HOW WE CAN SCALE THE MODEL

## 1. Share program with other colleges

Sharing materials makes it easier for colleges to build on SMC's work, tailor the program to region's workforce needs.

## 2. Create a faculty community of practice among community colleges

Creating learning cohort of community colleges implementing or exploring similar certificate programs.

## 3. Continue to involve employers to keep curriculum relevant

Creating partnerships between community colleges and homeless service providers.

## 4. Expand access through flexible formats

To reach more students—especially working adults and people with lived experience—community colleges can offer the certificate in flexible formats.

## 5. Connect the certificate to longer-term pathways

Community colleges can formally align the certificate with other academic and workforce pathways.



# OTHER STRUCTURAL AND PROGRAMMATIC CONSIDERATIONS TO BE ADDRESSED

## 1. Inadequate compensation

Without livable wages, workforce development can't translate into stable careers. Will require position uniformity, living wage thresholds, cost of living increases.

## 2. Employer culture around hiring, advancement

Without shifts in hiring practices to include certificates, training history, students can't experience benefits of certificate programs.

## 3. Unstable, short-term funding

Service providers often operate under year-to-year funding. Funding stability would lead to better retention.

## 4. Limited supervision, support for advancement

Employers often lack structured professional development programs, making it difficult for certificate-holders to move from entry-level to mid-level roles.

## 5. Employer, funder buy-in to sustain long-term workforce impact

Programs like SMC's depend on employers, funders recognizing credentials. Embedding credentials into hiring practices ensures workforce development efforts translate into durable sector improvements.

# Career Advancement & Workforce Sustainability

# CAREER ADVANCEMENT CAN OFFER VIABLE WAGES

## For Surveyed Supervisors:

- Report average salaries as:
  - Starting: \$41,933
  - Current: \$73,983
- Suggests that long-term, viable careers are possible for those advancing into management.
- Training and credentialing can support this upward trajectory.



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We would love to partner with you!

For more information, please visit our [www.smc.edu/HomelessServiceWork](http://www.smc.edu/HomelessServiceWork).

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I will be an advocate for systemic change while learning how to navigate complex systems (healthcare, housing, legal aid) and hold space for people's stories, trauma, and hope.

- 2025 Homeless Service Work Certificate Program Graduate, Santa Monica College

# Appendix



# Appendix: Glossary of Key Terms

## HOMELESSNESS SYSTEM TERMS

**Point in Time (PIT) Count** An annual count, required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), that estimates the number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. It includes both sheltered and unsheltered individuals.

**Coordinated Entry System (CES)** A standardized process used by homeless service providers to assess individuals and families, prioritize those with the highest needs, and connect them to housing and services in a fair and organized way.

**Housing First** An approach to addressing homelessness that prioritizes providing immediate, permanent housing to individuals experiencing homelessness without requiring participation in other services (e.g., substance use treatment, mental health treatment).

**Unsheltered Homelessness** Refers to people living in places not meant for human habitation, such as sidewalks, parks, vehicles, abandoned buildings, or encampments.

**Supportive Services** Help provided to individuals experiencing or exiting homelessness to maintain housing stability. Services may include case management, mental health care, substance use treatment, life skills training, or employment assistance.

**Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH)** Long-term, affordable housing paired with supportive services for people who have disabilities and have experienced long-term or repeated homelessness.

**Rapid Rehousing (RRH)** A program that helps people quickly exit homelessness by offering short- to medium-term rental assistance and supportive services, like help finding housing and case management.

# Appendix: Glossary of Key Terms

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & EDUCATION TERMS

**Frontline Workers** Staff who directly interact with and support people experiencing homelessness. This includes roles like outreach workers, case managers, housing navigators, and peer specialists.

**Lived Experience (of Homelessness)** Refers to people who have personally experienced homelessness or housing instability. Their insight is increasingly recognized as essential in designing and delivering effective services.

**Credentialing** The process of earning a certificate, license, or degree that formally shows a person has specific skills, education, or training needed for a job.

**Career Pathways** A clear series of steps—including education, training, and work experience—that help a person enter, stay in, and advance in a career.

## TRAUMA-INFORMED AND MENTAL HEALTH TERMS

**Trauma-Informed Care** An approach to working with people that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and prioritizes safety, trust, and empowerment to avoid re-traumatization.

**Vicarious Trauma (Secondary Trauma)** The emotional impact of hearing about or witnessing others' traumatic experiences, which can lead to stress or burnout for service providers over time.

**Burnout** A state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress at work—especially common in helping professions like social services.

# Appendix: Glossary of Key Terms

## WORKFORCE SYSTEM TERMS

**Frontline Workers** Staff who directly interact with and support people experiencing homelessness. This includes roles like outreach workers, case managers, housing navigators, and peer specialists.

**Stackable Credentials** Certificates or other qualifications that build on each other, helping individuals advance in their education or career by gaining more skills and recognition over time.

**Work-Based Experience** Hands-on learning that happens in a real job setting, often as part of a training program. It helps students gain practical skills while being supported by a teacher or mentor.