

# PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NAVIGATION CENTER

## Report #4: The Future of the Navigation Center - Location, Scale, and Scope

This is the fourth in a series of five reports from the San Francisco Controller's Office on the Navigation Center. The first four reports are based on interviews with clients, service providers and stakeholders. The fifth report will summarize the Navigation Center's performance based on quantitative outcomes and interview findings.

### What is the Navigation Center?

The Navigation Center, which began operations in March 2015, is a pilot program designed to shelter and rapidly house San Francisco's difficult-to-serve homeless population. These individuals typically have material or psychological barriers to using traditional shelters. The Navigation Center provides these otherwise unsheltered San Franciscans room and board while case managers work to connect them to stable income, public benefits and permanent housing. The Navigation Center campus includes a common courtyard, storage for belongings, meals, showers and laundry, and dormitory accommodations for 75 clients and their pets.



*The Navigation Center courtyard at 1950 Mission St.*

### The Future of the Navigation Center

The Navigation Center was originally designed (and funded) as a time-limited pilot, at a physical location already slated for affordable housing development. We analyze three important considerations regarding the program's future: program location, program scale, and program scope.

#### Program Location

Interviewees praised the pilot's current location at 1950 Mission Street for its central location in the City, which maximizes convenient access to benefits and housing services. A new location in another central neighborhood was widely preferred by most interviewees, despite some concerns that it could perpetuate problems with clients' "disappearing" from campus and missing appointments. We found that locating a single new campus in an outer neighborhood of the City could alienate all but those already living in that neighborhood from wishing to enroll. Moreover, a non-central location would require program staff to invest more time and money for transportation arrangements to Human Services Agency and other offices.

#### Program Scale

Clients and City stakeholders alike expressed a desire to see the Navigation Center expanded in the future. We found that expanding the program's scale would likely ease the referral process and allow more unsheltered San Franciscans to be served, but it would come with important trade-offs. First, expanding program capacity without also increasing the number of permanent housing exits available to the Navigation Center would slow the ability to rapidly house clients. Second, increasing the number of program beds (either at a single, new campus or multiple new campuses) would likely necessitate more stringent program rules, compromising the campus atmosphere our interviewees praised.

#### Program Scope

On-site program staff consistently cited the challenges of working with clients who are heavily addicted to substances or otherwise not engaged with the case management and housing process. Some of these clients are ultimately asked to leave the Navigation Center, as they are unable to participate in their service plan. This raises the important issue of where to refer, and how to serve, clients who are asked to leave the Navigation Center. The City may wish to more clearly define the scope of Navigation Center services as the program continues.

*"They're doing what they need to do to get people housed; they're ironing out the bumps like they said they would. Like I said—let it grow. Let it grow."*

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# REPORT #4: THE FUTURE OF THE NAVIGATION CENTER

## LOCATION, SCALE, AND SCOPE

### *Introduction*

This report analyzes interviewee responses about the future of the Navigation Center. Since the Navigation Center was originally designed and funded as a pilot program at a physical location already slated for affordable housing development, stakeholders have begun planning for the program's future. If the pilot's operations are to be continued beyond the 18 months originally planned, the program will need a new geographic location in San Francisco. Stakeholders will also need to consider the program's scale (i.e., whether to expand service capacity at one new location, or open multiple new Navigation Centers around the City) and scope (addressing clients who are disengaged with case management). We analyze three important considerations regarding the program's future: (i) program location, (ii) program scale, and (iii) program scope. Direct quotes from interview participants are in italics.

### *Research Methodology*

**Our qualitative research consisted of 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Navigation Center stakeholders and clients. We conducted six interviews with representatives from collaborating City Departments (Human Services Agency, San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team/Department of Public Health, Mayor's Office of Housing Opportunity, Partnerships, & Engagement (HOPE), Department of Public Works, and SFPD), three interviews with on-site service providers (from Episcopal Community Services and HOPE), and eleven interviews with Navigation Center clients (6 active clients, 5 clients—including one couple—who exited to permanent housing, and 1 client who was asked to leave the program). We analyzed the interviews to identify major themes common to multiple interviews.**

### *Program Location*

Interviewees were quick to praise the Navigation Center's campus and physical layout for its unique and peaceful, welcoming atmosphere. They were also quick to praise the campus' neighborhood location for three main reasons: convenience, accessibility, and neighborhood politics. Balancing these three criteria should be considered when determining the new Navigation Center location.

#### **Convenience**

The central location of the North Mission neighborhood minimizes the distance to important services that clients and program staff routinely access, including the Department of Motor Vehicles, SF General Hospital, Human Services Agency, and various community providers in the Mission. The fact that the campus is in a walkable, centrally located neighborhood that is well served by BART and MUNI lines has

minimized the need to provide other transportation arrangements for clients to make their appointments.

### Client accessibility

Clients we interviewed praised the low-threshold program rules, nearly unanimously citing appreciation for the ability to “*come and go as you please.*” The program’s central location has enhanced this appeal, as clients can readily access an array of nearby services.

### Neighborhood politics

Stakeholders involved in the policy and planning of the Navigation Center praised the immediately surrounding neighbors for welcoming the program. Though “not-in-my-backyard” neighborhood sentiments were encountered during the initial community outreach process, these were overcome and ongoing opposition has been minimal, according to two interviewees.

### Program Location Trade-offs

Considerations about the geographic location of the new Navigation Center(s) are central to the program’s future. One theme we identified over the course of the interviews was a “**location vs. client engagement**” trade-off that should be given careful consideration in making location decisions.

**The geographic location of a new Navigation Center campus will likely impact:**

- (i) Clients’ ability to easily access the campus.**
- (ii) The neighborhoods from which clients are primarily referred.**

#### Location

As discussed above, most interviewees praised the campus’ central location in San Francisco as an asset. However, one stakeholder cited concerns about a central location: the relative physical accessibility of the program may also make it very easy for clients to “disappear,” sometimes for days at a time, with implications for case management when clients miss important appointments. Missed appointments were consistently cited as the biggest obstacle to the program’s performance. A Navigation Center campus that is less centrally located (for example, in the Bayview) may make it less tempting for clients to disappear, this interviewee suggested, meaning they

would be more present and available for case management and appointments.

### Client engagement

Other interviewees disagreed with this hypothesis, explaining two concerns about a distant campus location:

- 1. First, a campus location in an outer neighborhood may simply mean that fewer homeless San Franciscans would agree to use the program at all.** As explained in the second report on encampment location patterns, encampment homeless individuals often locate in areas that are convenient for their daily needs. An inconvenient campus location would be incompatible with this daily routine, potentially reducing the program’s ability to navigate clients who are only marginally engaged. Consequently, a new location in an outer neighborhood may restrict the City’s geographical reach in making program referrals, meaning the program may end up only serving individuals already residing in that neighborhood. Whereas most clients at the current

Navigation Center were referred from the Mission, we found that this represents a conscious political decision about the referral process, rather than a geographic constraint. However, locating a new Navigation Center in the Bayview, for example, may shift the predominant referral location to District 10 because of its distant location.

- 2. Second, regardless of referral implications, locating the program in an outer San Francisco neighborhood would place a greater strain on case managers, who would need to coordinate a far greater number of transportation arrangements for clients to make their appointments.** Even if the Navigation Center moves to an outer neighborhood, public benefits and housing offices in San Francisco will not move with it. Transportation costs may increase, and the problem of clients' missing their appointments may be exacerbated.

Overall, interviewees' sentiment against locating the program in an outer neighborhood outweighed the sentiment in favor of doing so. However, to address the legitimate concern about geographic impact inequities that would arise from purposefully avoiding the City's outer neighborhoods, Navigation Center planners may wish to consider opening multiple Navigation Centers in multiple neighborhoods, a proposal discussed in the section below.

## *Program scale*

Representatives from the San Francisco Homeless Outreach team (SFHOT), Department of Public Works (DPW), Police (SFPD), and the Mayor's Office of Housing Opportunity, Partnerships, and Engagement (HOPE), as well as three clients, all expressed a desire for the program to increase its capacity so that more clients could be served. As of December 1, 247 clients had been served by the Navigation Center, whereas the 2015 Point-In-Time Count estimates that 4,358 individuals are unsheltered on any given night in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> The large number of unsheltered San Franciscans who have yet to be served, and the popularity of the Navigation Center amongst homeless encampment residents, makes it clear that, from the perspective of direct service providers, the desire for program continuation and expansion is significant. Stated one client about the pilot: *"They're doing what they need to do to get people housed; they're ironing out the bumps like they said they would. Like I said—let it grow. Let it grow."*

To meet this demand, Navigation Center planners and policy makers discussed two possible solutions that would increase the program's scale: (i) increasing program capacity at one new Navigation Center site; and/or (ii) opening multiple Navigation Center sites around the City.

### **Increasing program capacity at a new Navigation Center site**

When the pilot at 1950 Mission Street closes, one option City policy makers have is to increase capacity by selecting a new program site that can house and serve more than 75 clients at any one time. This proposal has two advantages. First, it would capitalize on the current popularity of the Navigation Center to engage a potentially far larger number of unsheltered clients than is currently possible. Second, it may help reduce the burden on the various City departments (chiefly DPW and SFPD) responsible for overseeing encampment removals.

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<sup>1</sup> *San Francisco Homeless Point-In-Time Count and Survey (2015)*. Applied Survey Research, Watsonville, CA.

However, the proposal also has a number of distinct disadvantages that are concerning to our interviewees. **For one, increasing bed capacity without a concurrent increase in the number of available permanent exits would undermine the Navigation Center’s ability to rapidly house its clients.** Rapid exits to housing were consistently cited by the stakeholders we interviewed as the most important program goal for the Navigation Center. Absent an increase in the number of subsidized housing units, permanent exits will begin to take longer and become more difficult to achieve. Client and SFHOT interviewees both explained a key reason the Navigation Center is so well-liked: it has re-instilled hope for housing in a population largely disillusioned with homeless services. If the link between Navigation Center case management and rapid, reliable housing exits is weakened, this hope will be

**Increasing bed capacity at one or more new Navigation Centers without also increasing the number of available permanent housing exits would slow the program’s ability to rapidly house its clients.**

undermined. Therefore, if San Francisco policy makers wish to expand the Navigation Center’s capacity, the program is unlikely to continue to be successful without a proportional number of permanent housing units made available as exits.

**Second, greatly increasing the bed capacity of the center would also compromise the ability of the program to operate with the minimal rules and regulations that have made it so popular with clients.** Explained one interviewee who had previous experience with traditional shelter management: *“If you are operating a 350-bed shelter, you have to have stricter program rules, just to be able to manage the place.”* If the Navigation

Center’s operational culture and atmosphere begins conforming to that of traditional shelter programs, it may alienate a portion of the encampment population who avoid traditional shelters for that very reason. One of the consistently mentioned, unique features of the program is its comfortable, relaxing, generally peaceful atmosphere, a feature that may be compromised if curfews and stricter rules become an operational necessity.

## Opening multiple Navigation Center campuses

The Navigation Center’s political popularity has motivated discussions about the feasibility of bringing multiple Navigation Centers online to serve different neighborhoods. There are two ways this can be accomplished: (i) by opening two or more Navigation Centers whose total bed capacity exceeds the 75-client limit at the current center; or (ii) opening two or more Navigation Centers whose total bed capacity equals the current capacity (for example, 3 Navigation Centers with a total capacity of 25 beds each).

The first of these options, opening multiple Navigation Centers while also increasing total bed capacity across programs, offers two advantages: (i) it allows the City to expand the program’s geographic reach to currently under-served areas while maintaining a simultaneous presence elsewhere, thus easing the referral process; and (ii) it allows for each respective program site to remain relatively small and intimate, so that the popular “lenient program rules” model can be replicated. Disadvantages are that (i) again, absent a concurrent increase in the City’s available housing options, achieving rapid, permanent housing exits will be more difficult; and (ii) with multiple Navigation Centers now attempting to place clients into the same pool of permanent housing, case managers may begin *“competing with one another for housing,”* feared one interviewee, with potentially negative ramifications for the positive



energy fueling the Navigation Center’s collaborative model. An objective housing allocation procedure to avoid such intra-program competition would need to be developed.

The second of these two options, opening multiple, smaller Navigation Centers with a sum-total bed capacity that does not exceed the current 75 client limit, again offers advantages and disadvantages. It would enable a wider geographic reach for referral purposes while maintaining an intimate program feel that does not place greater strain on the availability of permanent housing exits. However, it would fail to heed multiple clients’ and stakeholders’ calls to serve a larger number of unsheltered homeless individuals, and would likely incur greater administrative costs.

Fundamentally, questions of future Navigation Center program scale can be boiled down to a one important question: which problem is San Francisco trying to address? As Trent Rhorer of HSA explained, the City is facing both a “homelessness problem” (a lack of housing availability and affordability) as well as a concurrent “street problem” (i.e., the growing visibility of unsheltered homeless individuals and the strain it places on departments responsible for addressing them). Plans for the Navigation Center’s future should consider this issue seriously: **if the City wishes to solve the *street problem*, then expanding the Navigation Center’s bed capacity may be advisable. But doing so without also expanding the City’s portfolio of affordable housing exits would fail to address the City’s *homelessness* problem.**

## *Program scope*

The Navigation Center’s pioneering operations have lowered the material and psychological thresholds to accessing shelter in San Francisco. However, important questions have emerged about unsheltered homeless individuals who have serious substance addictions or who are otherwise not fully engaged in rapid-paced case management. The City may wish to more clearly define the scope of Navigation Center services as the program continues.

On-site operations staff and case managers interviewed for this report consistently described the challenges of working with heavily-addicted or otherwise disengaged clients at the program. Every challenging case is addressed individually, and these clients are given multiple chances to re-engage with case management. However, as of December 1, nineteen clients (roughly 8% of the total served) had been asked to leave the program for violations of even the minimal program rules. Additionally, at the time of our interviews, Navigation Center stakeholders were discussing plans to tighten the program’s rules on drugs and community violence, meaning that a greater proportion of clients may be asked to leave in the future.

**Navigation Center stakeholders should consider how to better serve clients who are not ready to engage with the center’s demanding case management requirements.** Doing so requires that stakeholders clearly define the goals of the Navigation Center and the target population it

**City policy makers should consider how to serve clients who are not well served by rapid-paced case management, and whether and how to expand options (such as sanctioned encampments, priority access to drug treatment services, etc.) for those who are asked to leave the Navigation Center.**

intends to serve.

Over the course of our research, it became clear that program goals and target populations had not yet been made explicit, even if they appeared to be mutually understood.<sup>2</sup> Stakeholders most frequently described an operational vision that entailed rapid connection to housing and benefits for clients not currently using the shelter system. This vision, however, is not adequate to inform consistent, impartial decision-making about polarizing operational challenges, such as serving heavily addicted clients. We explore two options for better serving such clients below.

### 1. Defining the target population to meet program goals

If stakeholders believe rapid, efficient connection to housing and benefits is the most important goal for the Navigation Center, then it makes sense to limit the target population to only those clients who are ready to engage with such a program. Under such a scenario, heavily-addicted and disengaged clients' case plans would be discontinued, and San Francisco policy makers would need to find ways to better serve these clients with other programs. But merely asking these clients to leave the Navigation Center only prolongs the City's "street problem," as most will simply return to unsanctioned street encampments.

In response, interviewees from multiple departments discussed the potential benefits of one or more sanctioned homeless encampment areas in San Francisco, to operate in tandem with the Navigation Center:

*"Find some empty areas where you could maybe allow people to set up tents—not like a 'camping ground,' but pretty close. Set some very strict guidelines—'This is an area where you have to follow these rules. If you can follow these rules, you can stay; if you can't, then you gotta go.'"*

Such sanctioned encampments have become increasingly common in Oregon, Washington, and California in recent years, and are the subject of emerging academic and policy debate.<sup>3,4</sup> Full analysis of this option for San Francisco is beyond the scope of this report, and the opinions of these interviewees do not represent the official position of their respective departments. Rather, we raise it as an example of how San Francisco leaders might create other options (such as sanctioned encampments, safe injection sites, priority access to drug treatment services, etc.) for clients who are not successful in a Navigation Center model that focuses on rapid and efficient case management. **In sum, this arrangement would perhaps allow a greater proportion of the City's unsheltered population to be served by the Navigation Center. But absent an increase in other services, it would continue to marginalize the hardest-to-serve of the unsheltered population.**

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<sup>2</sup> Reports 1 and 3 describe the various goals and perspectives that the Navigation Center's diverse stakeholders contribute to the program's operations.

<sup>3</sup> Herring, C. (2014). *The New Logics of Homeless Seclusion: Homeless Encampments in America's West Coast Cities*. *City & Community*, 13(4), 285-309.

<sup>4</sup> US Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness (August 2015). *Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Advancing the Dialogue*. Retrieved from [http://usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/Ending\\_Homelessness\\_for\\_People\\_Living\\_in\\_Encampments\\_Aug2015.pdf](http://usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Ending_Homelessness_for_People_Living_in_Encampments_Aug2015.pdf)

## 2. Defining program goals to meet the target population

If, on the other hand, San Francisco leaders decide that the Navigation Center is unequivocally committed to serving the hardest-to-serve of the City's unsheltered homeless population, then rapid and efficient housing may not be the most appropriate program goal for all clients. Instead, stakeholders may wish to modify program goals to better suit this target population: for example, "housing shopping," long lengths of stay, and/or missed appointments would need to be formally tolerated and planned around for some clients to stabilize and ultimately achieve an appropriate exit. Asking a client to leave due to lack of engagement with case management would be incongruent with this model because, as one case manager described it, "*clients always have the ability to surprise you*"—in other words, a client may eventually find motivation to engage. **While such an arrangement would better engage the City's hardest-to-serve, it may greatly slow housing speed for the unsheltered overall.**

**One potential reconciliation of these two scoping options is to open two or more Navigation Centers that focus on different target populations and different goals.** For example, if one Navigation Center specializes in rapidly housing clients who demonstrate engagement and motivation, while another Center specializes in serving clients who are struggling with addictions or who are otherwise difficult to house, the City may accomplish two things: (i) a more efficient allocation of housing to those who are ready to quickly move on, while (ii) ensuring that clients who need more time are not further alienated from receiving services. Also, such an arrangement may allow multiple Navigation Centers to open without further straining the City's limited housing exits (assuming that less stable clients will not be ready for housing at the same rate as more stable clients). However, this arrangement poses serious neighborhood equity and political concerns; San Franciscans may object to a Navigation Center for clients with serious substance abuse issues being located in their neighborhood. City leaders will need to confront difficult trade-offs to improve services for the hardest-to-serve.

## Conclusion

The Navigation Center's location at 1950 Mission Street is time-limited, but its operational popularity amongst clients we interviewed underscores the need for thorough analysis of options for the program's future. Overwhelmingly, interviewees expressed the desire to see the program continued in some way. The specifics of that desire come with important trade-offs that require serious consideration from City leaders.