

HPRI Summer Fellows Program

Self Directed Activities & Capstone Projects

What is a Self-Directed Activity?

Each fellow will complete a Self-Directed Activity that supports their final Capstone Project. The Self-Directed Project is the fellow's guided independent research or field-learning activity during the program. The Capstone Project is the final presentation and reflection in which the fellow shares what they studied, what they learned, what evidence they used, and why the issue matters for homelessness policy, practice, or community response. In some cases, the Self-Directed Project and Capstone may be the same topic; in other cases, the Self-Directed Project may be one component of a broader capstone.

The **Self-Directed Activity** is an individualized, student-led inquiry assignment that gives fellows the opportunity to investigate a homelessness-related issue through research, mapping, policy analysis, observation, or community-based learning. Each fellow selects or is assigned a project that matches their interests, experience level, and supervision needs. The project helps fellows practice core skills in research, critical thinking, ethical reflection, civic analysis, and professional communication. By the end of the project, fellows produce a concrete deliverable—such as a memo, map, tracker, reflection, case study, or presentation—that contributes to their final capstone and deepens their understanding of homelessness as a systems-level issue.

Examples from the current project menu include community asset mapping, policy-in-action tracking, the Los Angeles mayoral homelessness policy tracker, lived experience narrative analysis, service system journey mapping, ethical field observation, rapid mini-survey design, media narrative audit, stakeholder mapping, intervention deep dive, and micro-advocacy action.

The **Self-Directed Activity** should:

1. Connect to homelessness, housing, policy, services, or community response in Los Angeles County. Fellows may examine topics such as service access, local policy, lived experience, media narratives, community assets, stakeholder systems, or interventions like Permanent Supportive Housing.
2. Use credible sources and structured inquiry. Students should draw from sources such as LAHSA, 211 LA County, City Council files, provider websites, public meetings, news coverage, program materials, academic research articles, or approved field observations.

3. Focus on systems, not individual blame. The goal is to understand how policies, institutions, service systems, geography, funding, public narratives, and civic decisions shape the state of homelessness.
4. Produce a concrete deliverable. Depending on the project, this may be a memo, map, stakeholder chart, policy tracker, field reflection log, short case study, survey summary, or presentation.
5. Support the final capstone presentation. The Self-Directed Activity can either become the fellow's capstone or serve as a warm-up assignment that helps the fellow develop a research question, evidence base, and final presentation topic.

What is a Capstone Project?

The Capstone Project is the final culminating product and presentation. It is where you demonstrate what you've learned, what evidence you've gathered, what issue you analyzed, and what conclusions or recommendations you developed. The capstone materials frame the project around identifying a civic issue, analyzing it, considering solutions, taking informed action, reflecting on learning, and presenting the work.

The Self-Directed Activity should feed into the Capstone Project. It can either become your capstone topic or serve as a smaller preparatory assignment that helps you develop your final capstone presentation.

By the end of the fellowship, you will submit a Self-Directed Activity deliverable and present a final Capstone Presentation. The Self-Directed Project deliverable shows your research, field learning, analysis, or applied activity. The Capstone Presentation is the final synthesis of that work, including the issue you studied, the evidence you gathered, key findings, and reflection on what the project taught you about homelessness, policy, research, and civic engagement. Students will also submit a brief reflection connecting their project to their broader learning during the fellowship.

The final presentation should include **three components**:

1. **Project Deliverable:** The actual product from your self-directed activity, such as a map, memo, tracker, survey summary, case study, or analysis. The format depends on the project type. For example:
 - A community asset map and short analysis
 - A policy-versus-practice memo
 - A mayoral candidate homelessness policy tracker
 - A lived experience narrative analysis
 - A service system journey map
 - A field observation/reflexivity log

- A mini-survey and findings summary
 - A media narrative audit
 - A stakeholder map
 - An intervention case study
 - A micro-advocacy artifact and reflection
2. Capstone Presentation: A short presentation explaining your topic, research question, evidence, findings, and recommendations or reflections. It should synthesize the self-directed project and explain:
- The issue studied
 - Why the issue matters
 - What question guided your inquiry
 - What sources, observations, data, or evidence you used
 - What you found
 - What systems-level barriers or patterns you identified
 - What recommendation, insight, or next question emerged
 - How the project changed or deepened your understanding of homelessness, housing, policy, research, or community response
3. Reflection: A brief written or spoken reflection on what you learned, what surprised you, and how your thinking changed. The reflection should answer:
- What did I learn?
 - What challenged or surprised me?
 - What assumptions did I bring into the project?
 - What do I understand differently now?
 - What would I study or do next?

In Summary

Self-Directed Project - Your inquiry/work process.
Project Deliverable - the concrete artifact they produce.
Capstone Presentation - the final synthesis you present.
Reflection - The learning you take away

Self-Directed Activity List

During the fellowship, you will complete a self-directed activity that helps you investigate and understand the various factors of homelessness in Los Angeles. Your activity should help you practice research, observation, policy analysis, ethical reflection, systems thinking, and clear communication. The activity may become your final capstone project topic or serve as one part of your larger capstone project.

Read through the options below. By Week Two (June 30), you should work with your mentor to select one activity, narrow your topic, identify your first sources, and choose a feasible deliverable. Your mentor may modify the assignment to fit your project, schedule, safety needs, and learning goals.

There are **thirteen** activity categories. Each activity follows a similar instructional structure: context, fellow task, step-by-step directions, suggested sources or platforms, analysis questions, and a final deliverable. The overall expectation is that you document your process, use at least one credible Los Angeles-based source, reflect on systems rather than individual actions, and identify at least one actionable insight or improvement. Fellows who wish to pursue another self-directed field activity may do so, if approved by their mentor.

1. Homelessness, Hunger, and Community Meal Service: Union Station Homeless Services Adopt-a-Meal Project

Fellows help plan and participate in a late-July Adopt-a-Meal service activity with Union Station Homeless Services. They coordinate through program staff, clarify partner needs and site rules, plan a menu, create a shopping and supply list, organize team roles, prepare or transport food safely, serve respectfully, and reflect on how hunger connects to homelessness, dignity, service systems, and unmet need.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in direct service, food insecurity, volunteer coordination, nonprofit work, community care, mutual aid, and the connection between homelessness, hunger, dignity, and service delivery.

2. Community Space Planning and Youth Engagement: Young People to the Front HQ

Fellows will partner with Young People to the Front to support early planning for a community space intended to host workshops for youth transitioning out of homelessness and community members. Fellows learn the partner's goals, research welcoming and trauma-informed community spaces, draft a short needs-and-interests survey, identify possible workshop uses, and attend the Homeless Communications Group meeting on Thurs, July 16 from 10:00am-2:00pm.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in youth homelessness, community space design, trauma-informed environments, arts and culture, youth engagement, participatory planning, and creating welcoming spaces for young people.

3. Housing Challenges and Approaches in Another Country: A Comparative Homelessness and Housing Policy Project

Fellows explore how one country outside the United States understands and responds to homelessness and housing instability. Fellows choose a country connected to their own background, culture, language, or interests, or another country they want to study, and compare its housing challenges, homelessness definitions, policies, and service systems with those in the United States.

Fellows will use credible sources to create a country profile, develop a focused research question, compare 2–4 major housing or homelessness approaches, and analyze what lessons, cautions, or further questions emerge from the comparison. The final deliverable may take the form of a comparative policy memo, chart with written analysis, short slide deck, infographic, policy brief, or capstone-ready case study.

This activity is especially well suited for fellows interested in international policy, culture, social welfare systems, housing models, human rights, migration, public health, inequality, urban planning, or how governments respond differently to poverty and housing instability.

4. Community Asset Mapping

Fellows choose a Los Angeles neighborhood, SPA, census tract, or service hub and create a digital map of homelessness-related resources. They document emergency services, health services, public infrastructure, informal community support, hours, eligibility, transit access, and possible barriers.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in mapping, neighborhood research, community resources, local service systems, public infrastructure, transportation access, and how people experiencing homelessness navigate help in specific places.

5. Los Angeles Policy-in-Action Tracking

Fellows select one homelessness-related policy and follow how it moves from proposal or public discussion into implementation. They examine the policy's purpose, supporting and opposing arguments, evidence from public meetings or records, and the gap between policy design and field reality.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in public policy, local government, civic decision-making, policy implementation, public meetings, accountability, and the gap between policy design and real-world practice.

6. Lived Experience Narrative Analysis

Fellows analyze an approved lived-experience account, such as a guest speaker, panel, recorded talk, interview, advocacy presentation, or written account. They identify themes such as service access barriers, system failures, shelter or health care

interactions, informal survival strategies, and moments where systems helped or fell short.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in storytelling, qualitative research, lived experience, ethics, advocacy, systems barriers, and how personal narratives can challenge stereotypes about homelessness.

7. Homelessness and Health: Access, Barriers, and Systems Response in Los Angeles

Fellows investigate how people experiencing homelessness access health-related services in a specific Los Angeles neighborhood, SPA, census tract, or service hub. They examine resources such as mobile clinics, primary care, behavioral health care, substance use treatment, harm reduction, recuperative care, and specialty care, then analyze practical barriers.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in public health, medicine, mental health, substance use treatment, harm reduction, disability, health equity, street medicine, and the relationship between housing instability and health outcomes.

8. Ethical Field Observation and Reflexivity Log

Fellows observe an approved homelessness-related setting using a structured ethical observation framework. They separate objective observation from interpretation and reflection, while considering power, safety, confidentiality, discomfort, assumptions, and the limits of what can be learned through observation.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in research ethics, observation, social science methods, positionality, power dynamics, confidentiality, and learning how to study homelessness respectfully and responsibly.

9. Rapid Mini-Survey Project

Fellows design and test a short survey on a homelessness-related topic, such as awareness of local services, transportation barriers or perceptions of safety. They write neutral questions, pilot the survey with peers or another approved group, revise for clarity, and summarize basic findings while acknowledging limitations.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in survey research, data collection, question design, community feedback, applied research methods, and learning how researchers gather and interpret information.

10. Los Angeles Media and Narrative Audit

Fellows compare how homelessness is represented across two or three local media sources. They analyze language, framing, whose voices are included or excluded, whether coverage is fact-based or opinion-based, and whether the coverage emphasizes public safety, housing, services, individual behavior, neighborhood impact, or structural causes.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in journalism, media studies, public opinion, storytelling, framing, stigma, political communication, and how homelessness is represented in local news and public debate.

11. Systems Stakeholder Mapping

Fellows map major people, agencies, organizations, and community groups involved in the Los Angeles homelessness response system. They may include LAHSA, City Council, county departments, nonprofit providers, outreach teams, neighborhood councils, housed residents, business groups, advocacy groups, and people experiencing homelessness.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in systems thinking, local government, nonprofit networks, public agencies, community power, advocacy, service coordination, and understanding who shapes homelessness policy and practice in Los Angeles.

12. Intervention Deep Dive

Fellows study one homelessness intervention or service model, such as Permanent Supportive Housing, interim housing, street outreach, harm reduction, recuperative care, Intensive Case Management Services, Individual Placement Support, Time Limited Support, eviction prevention, or rapid rehousing. They identify a local example and analyze the model's intended outcomes, strengths, limitations, and implementation challenges.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in evidence-based practice, program models, housing interventions, social services, implementation challenges, policy evaluation, and understanding how specific homelessness interventions work in practice.

13. Incentivizing Research Participation and Providing Comfort: Demographic Survey Donation Planning

Fellows support USC's Homeless Count Demographic Survey team by examining why participant donations matter in field-based homelessness research. Fellows will learn how small, practical items can support dignity, comfort, trust, and participation during survey work; gather input from approved Demographic Survey staff, surveyors, partner sites, or approved survey respondents; compare needs across LA County regions, including SPA 1 and Antelope Valley; identify feasible donation sources; create a donation source plan; and help plan or host a donation drive for future participants.

This activity is a good fit for fellows interested in field research, participant dignity, community care, research ethics, survey logistics, donation planning, regional needs assessment, and practical support for people participating in homelessness research.