

Internship Description

Position: MSW Summer Intern

Duration: June 23 - September 12, 2025 (456 hours)

Team: Dignity For All Project

The Dignity For All Project combines ACLU's litigation on behalf of unhoused plaintiffs with advocacy focused on the social policy changes needed to end houselessness in Southern California communities and advance human dignity. This includes expanding access to affordable housing, permanent supportive housing, medical and mental health care, and benefits, as well as limiting counterproductive government and police practices. Such provision for basic human needs and protection from government-sanctioned harassment is necessary to ensure that even most vulnerable people can effectively participate in our democracy and fully exercise their civil rights and civil liberties.

Key to our advocacy is a focus on ending houselessness through the "Housing First" model, which gets people off the streets and into their own affordable, permanent apartments as quickly as possible. For the model to be effective, local governments must develop sufficient affordable housing to meet the demand.

Chronically unhoused persons – that is, people who suffer from mental or physical disabilities and experience frequent or long bouts of houselessness – are least able to exit houselessness and more than twice as likely as non-chronic unhoused people to be living in the streets. Their need for safe and permanent housing is particularly urgent. They require permanent supportive housing, which combines immediate permanent, affordable housing with appropriate health and mental health services.

The project works throughout Southern California, but our work is currently focused in Orange County and Los Angeles:

- *Orange County is one of the wealthiest counties in the nation – and least affordable. On any given night over 4,200 people are unhoused and, of those, approximately 800 are chronically unhoused. Orange County's response has been woefully inadequate. Because the county has not taken the lead in funding and building much-needed affordable and permanent supportive housing, local cities have responded to the increase in visible houselessness by passing punitive and*

counterproductive measures that criminalize houselessness. The county has the resources to end houselessness and must do so by prioritizing the creation of permanent supportive housing for disabled, unhoused residents, protecting the civil and human rights of people experiencing houselessness, and closing the housing affordability gap.

- *Los Angeles has long been dubbed the “unhoused capital” of America. Indeed, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s 2013 report to the U.S. Congress, it ranks first in the number of unhoused individuals and chronically unhoused people and second behind New York City in unhoused persons per capita. Houselessness is on the rise in Los Angeles, where over 26,000 people are living without a home (in L.A. County that number exceeds 40,000). Given shortage of shelter space and permanent housing options, about 70% of those individuals are living in the streets or in cars. The city and county routinely engage in practices designed to move unhoused persons out of public spaces such as the sidewalks of skid row, where gentrification has done little to improve the prospects for people who are unhoused. Recently the city passed harmful ordinances that will criminalize the possession of tents, makeshift shelter, and other bulky items in public places. In its recent report, the city’s administrative office showed that the City of Los Angeles spends \$100 million a year on houselessness, over half of which goes to law enforcement practices that do nothing to address root causes, and in fact perpetuate, houselessness. Instead, the city and county should devote their resources to developing sufficient affordable and permanent supportive housing.*

In addition to litigation and advocacy, the Dignity For All Project serves as a resource for unhoused individuals, providers, local governments and law enforcement agencies, and other stakeholders.

Project Descriptions

1. Orange County Permanent Supportive Housing (OC PSH) program evaluation project:

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) is a long-term, affordable housing program combined with supportive services designed to help people with chronic homelessness or disabilities maintain stable housing and improve their quality of life. PSH programs are funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) via local Housing Authorities and run by local agencies. This summer, an Orange County-based

advocate for unhoused individuals brought forward the case of a previously unhoused PSH tenant who has been placed in multiple squalid, inaccessible, and dangerous units, and who has faced discrimination and retaliation from property owners. This case has prompted a community-informed investigation into Housing Quality Standards (HQS) and the systems of accountability and oversight in PSH programs.

Research Findings

- Nonprofits providing PSH to previously unhoused individuals receive Continuum of Care funding (federal grants from HUD that are administered by local housing authorities). These PSH providers are required to adhere to HUD's Housing Quality Standards (HQS) to be eligible for the funding.
- The HQS enforcement mechanisms are extremely convoluted and non-transparent: the PSH provider receiving CoC funding is responsible for reporting and overseeing HQS, which means that they have no incentive to abide by HQS. This results in previously unhoused individuals being placed in unlivable conditions, where they face discrimination and retaliation from property management/owners if they try to file grievances.
- Through multiple attempts to contact HUD, the local HUD field office, the CoC, and Orange County Housing Authority, it has become clear that no institution takes responsibility for holding PSH providers like Illumination Foundation accountable to their program participants.
- Research Implications
 - These findings could support policy proposals that restructure the CoC's system of accountability and oversight for PSH statewide and nationwide.

Project Responsibilities:

- Meet weekly with the advocate to discuss updates in PSH tenants' cases, collaborate on investigation of systems of accountability, and strategize research.
- Compile and maintain all documents relating to PSH tenants' cases, meeting notes, and research notes for the project team.
- Conduct research on Orange County-based PSH programs, HUD Continuum of Care funding structure, HQS in PSH programs, and accountability and oversight policies in PSH programs.
- Conduct two 2-hour interviews with PSH tenants regarding their living conditions and treatment in PSH to gain insights into community members' lived experiences.
- Clean the two interview transcripts and construct qualitative thematic analyses of the interviews.
- Synthesize all research in a preliminary research memo, including original diagrams of systems of accountability.

2. Financial Situation of Tenants in Permanent Supportive Housing programs (PSH):

Previously unhoused tenants in PSH programs are responsible for paying 30% of their income toward rent, while their respective PSH program – funded by HUD Continuum of Care via local Housing Authorities – pays the remainder. This project calculates the cost of living for PSH tenants in Los Angeles and Orange Counties to assess whether they can

realistically afford this 30% rent contribution, or if the policy is unjust. This project also incorporates the lived experiences of PSH tenants through surveys.

Research Findings:

- PSH tenants make up to \$2,800 in monthly income, including SSI/SSDI, veterans benefits, unemployment, and general assistance.
- After paying for the cost of living and 30% of their income toward rent, the average PSH tenant living in Los Angeles County retains between -\$2,979 to -\$1,178.60 of their income.
 - Similarly, the average PSH tenant living in Orange County retains between -\$3,590 to -\$1,789.60 of their income.
- These calculations suggest that PSH tenants in both Los Angeles County and Orange County are living in extreme financial debt and hardship, and are unable to afford the cost of rent in PSH.
- All survey participants report experiencing food insecurity and inability to meet their basic needs. These insights into PSH tenants' lived experiences reinforce our quantitative findings.
- Research Implications
 - These findings can be used to advocate for a restructuring of PSH rent policies.

Project Responsibilities:

- Conduct two survey interviews with PSH tenants.
- Calculate the average monthly cost of living for PSH tenants living in Los Angeles County and Orange County, broken down by \$100 income increments, accounting for state and local taxes, CalFresh benefits, and Medi-Cal/Medi-Caid benefits.
- Construct a preliminary comparative analysis of what PSH tenants currently contribute toward rent versus what they can realistically afford based on the average monthly cost of living in Los Angeles County and Orange County (accounting for state and local taxes, as well as government assistance programs such as EBT and Medicaid/Medicare).

3. Budget Advocacy project:

The Board of Supervisors in counties across California review, revise, and approve their respective budgets for the upcoming fiscal year over the summer. A primary budget area for their review is discretionary allocations: while some county revenue is pre-designated toward certain projects and departments through policy, some county revenue (ie: property taxes) can be allocated based on the Board's discretion. Thus, advocates focus their efforts in convincing the Board to spend their discretionary dollars on initiatives that support our most vulnerable community members instead of those that systemically neglect or abuse them. This project analyzes the following county budgets for fiscal year 2025-6: Los Angeles County, Orange County, Kern County, San Bernardino County, and Riverside County. We specifically analyze discretionary costs related to criminalization (policing, prosecution, probation, and incarceration) versus permanent supportive housing. These budget analyses will guide county-level advocacy efforts for the

upcoming year, as well as popular narrative change work around what constitutes public safety.

Research Findings:

- Orange County, Kern County, San Bernardino County, and Riverside County have allocated approximately 50% of their respective discretionary funds toward costs that police, criminalize, and incarcerate our communities. Meanwhile, none of the counties allocate discretionary funds toward Permanent Supportive Housing, an initiative that would provide true public safety to the most vulnerable individuals and families.
- Los Angeles County does not delineate between discretionary and non-discretionary costs, which obscures the Board's decisions in perpetuating criminalization and makes budget advocacy impossible.
- Research Implications
 - These findings will be used for budget advocacy campaigns during the upcoming fiscal year – specifically, campaigns to defund criminalization and reallocate public dollars toward true public safety programs like PSH.
 - These findings will also be used by the ACLU SoCal Communications team to conduct narrative change work around what constitutes public safety, who is deserving of safety, and how we can achieve public safety.

Project Responsibilities:

- Analyze the discretionary costs and discretionary appropriations of the FY2025-6 preliminary recommended budget for Kern County, categorizing each line item related to public safety under criminalization or non-criminalization. The total discretionary costs is \$553.5 million and total discretionary appropriations is \$1.1 billion. Additionally, analyze the forecasted revenue generated through Measure K (increases sales taxes by one cent) and how this revenue is preliminarily allocated.
- Analyze the discretionary costs of the FY2025-6 adopted budget for San Bernardino County, categorizing each line item related to public safety under criminalization or non-criminalization. The total discretionary costs is \$1.1 billion.
- Analyze the discretionary costs and discretionary appropriations of the FY2025-6 adopted budget for Riverside County, categorizing each line item related to public safety under criminalization or non-criminalization. The total discretionary costs is \$1.4 billion and total discretionary appropriations is \$5.6 billion.
- Train and oversee another intern in analyzing the discretionary costs of the FY2025-6 adopted budget for Orange County, categorizing each line item related to public safety under criminalization or non-criminalization. The total discretionary costs is \$1.2 billion.
- Correspond with the Los Angeles County Public Information Officer and Civilytics to clarify discretionary versus non-discretionary costs in the Los Angeles County budget.
- Create the following visual representations for each county budget analysis: table of discretionary cost allocations by department, bar chart of discretionary cost

allocations by department, pie chart of public safety costs (criminalization vs. non-criminalization costs).

- Compile key findings and figures from each budget analysis into a cross-county comparative analysis, specifically highlighting discretionary costs relating to criminalization, non-criminalizing public safety, and permanent supportive housing for each county.
- Present key findings and figures to the ACLU SoCal Economic Justice Team.

4. Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) waitlist project:

The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV; formerly called Section 8) is a federally-funded, locally-administered program that helps low-income families, seniors, and people with disabilities afford safe, decent housing in the private market by subsidizing a portion of their rent. This project investigates the popular narrative around HCV: that many people who apply for HCV are placed on long waitlists due to high demand, and many are eventually removed without ever receiving assistance. We use HCV waitlist data from 1/1/2012 to 5/26/2025 for four California Housing Authorities: Los Angeles County Development Authority (LACDA), Housing Authority of Tulare County (Tulare), Oakland Housing Authority (Oakland), and Housing Authority of the County of San Bernardino (SB). We specifically analyze why applicants were removed from the waitlists. Through our statistical analysis, we uncover the actual narrative of HCV applicants on waitlists. Alongside our cross-county comparative analysis, we also provide policy recommendations for each Housing Authority.

Research Findings:

- In Los Angeles, 27.8% of applicants had received a voucher.
 - 66.6% of those who received a voucher were able to obtain leases while 25.2% were unable to obtain leases before their voucher expired (8.1% currently have active vouchers and have yet to obtain a lease).
 - A staggering 51.3% of applicants were removed from the waitlist because mail sent to them by the Los Angeles County Development Authority (LACDA) was returned as undeliverable. This was the most common reason for removal from the waitlist.
 - Other counties, like San Bernardino and Oakland, have much lower rates of voucher approval (~10%).
- Research Implications
 - There is a need to interrogate administrative practices that result in high attrition and lack of transparency.
 - These findings could support policy proposals that bypass or reform housing authorities, such as direct cash transfer programs or integrated case management models modeled after CalAIM or the VA.

Project Responsibilities:

- Assist supervisor in identifying the purpose and goals of this project, as well as strategizing the final deliverables.
- Using Excel, combine six datasets from LACDA into a master dataset. Clean master dataset for duplicates and misentries, reducing dataset from 38,398

observations to 19,286 observations; streamline codes for reasons for removal from the waitlist; and combine twenty-four codes into six parent codes.

- Conduct a statistical analysis of the LACDA dataset, including calculating the percentage of total observations in each category and the average number of days applicants in each category spend on the waitlist before removal.
 - Create a series of five pie charts, two bar graphs, and a table that visually represent the LACDA dataset analysis.
 - Train and oversee another intern in cleaning, coding, and analyzing the dataset from the Housing Authority of Tulare County (34,111 observations total) using Excel.
 - Write a methodology memo, including a table of codes and subcodes.
 - Present project updates and findings to supervisor in weekly one-on-one meetings.
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Skills

1. Research & Analysis

- Conducted qualitative and quantitative research on housing policy, tenant experiences, and government accountability systems.
- Performed statistical analysis of large administrative datasets (up to 38,000+ observations) using Excel, including data cleaning, recoding, aggregation, and descriptive statistics.
- Conducted qualitative thematic analysis of interview transcripts to identify key patterns and insights.
- Produced comparative analyses across multiple counties/programs to identify systemic trends and policy implications.
- Synthesized complex findings into accessible memos and presentations for diverse stakeholders.

2. Data Management & Visualization

- Cleaned, merged, and coded large-scale datasets from multiple sources to prepare them for analysis.
- Streamlined data categorization by consolidating dozens of granular codes into a smaller set of parent codes.
- Created visualizations (pie charts, bar graphs, tables, diagrams) to communicate findings effectively.
- Documented methodology and coding decisions in clear technical memos to ensure replicability.

3. Policy & Program Evaluation

- Researched federal (HUD) and local housing policies, funding structures, and oversight mechanisms.
- Assessed cost-of-living affordability for low-income tenants relative to federal housing program requirements.

- Analyzed county budgets (over \$1B in discretionary spending each) to evaluate allocations between criminalization and housing.
 - Developed policy recommendations informed by both data analysis and community input.
4. Community Engagement
- Conducted in-depth interviews and surveys with Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) tenants to integrate lived experience into research.
 - Collaborated with housing advocates to ground policy analysis in community needs.
 - Practiced trauma-informed and ethical approaches in working with vulnerable populations.
5. Project Management & Collaboration
- Tracked and organized project documentation, research notes, and case materials for the project team.
 - Presented key findings and analysis updates in weekly meetings with supervisors and external partners.
 - Trained and supervised other interns in data cleaning, coding, and analysis.
 - Coordinated with external stakeholders (advocates, county officials, public information officers) to clarify data and research questions.
6. Technical & Professional Skills
- Advanced proficiency in Excel for large-scale data cleaning, coding, and analysis.
 - Strong written communication through research memos, methodology documentation, and comparative reports.
 - Visual communication skills in presenting complex budgetary and policy findings through charts, tables, and diagrams.
 - Experience navigating sensitive and confidential data with discretion and professionalism.

Skills (shorthand):

- Quantitative & qualitative research (statistical analysis, thematic coding, comparative policy evaluation)
- Data cleaning, coding, and management of large administrative datasets (19k–39k observations)
- Advanced Excel (data cleaning, recoding, pivot tables, descriptive statistics, visualization)
- Policy & budget analysis (federal housing programs, HUD funding, county budgets >\$1B)
- Data visualization (charts, tables, diagrams) for accessible presentation of findings
- Community-engaged research (tenant interviews, surveys, trauma-informed methods)
- Project management & collaboration (documentation, memo writing, training & supervising interns, stakeholder communication)
- Strong written and verbal communication (research memos, methodology reports, presentations)