

# Legislative Issues

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## Engagement Center for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

**FUNDING REQUEST** - \$2,000,000

### ISSUE SUMMARY

Since the early 1990s, downtown Fort Lauderdale has struggled with visible homeless encampments, notably between Stranahan Park and the Broward County Main Library, symbolizing the region's ongoing homelessness challenges. Early enforcement-focused efforts in the 1990s and 2000s failed to resolve the root causes, leading to recurring encampments and public frustration. In response, Fort Lauderdale shifted to a housing-first model by 2017-2018, launching the Home for the Holidays initiative, which successfully transitioned approximately 82 individuals from motels to permanent housing. Despite this progress, rising housing costs, inflation, rapid population growth, and limited affordable housing have intensified homelessness, with over 1,800 individuals affected in Broward County in 2026. A critical gap remains due to the lack of a centralized daytime hub offering coordinated services. The proposed Engagement Center aims to fill this need by providing low-barrier, comprehensive support, including behavioral health care, substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, recovery services, workforce readiness, and permanent housing connections, delivered through an integrated, wraparound approach. This project aligns with federal goals to end homelessness and improve health equity while reducing system-wide costs through prevention and early intervention. Expected benefits include fewer public disturbances, reduced emergency service reliance, measurable declines in street homelessness and encampments, improved access to treatment and housing, strengthened collaboration among agencies, and enhanced public safety and community well-being – ultimately fostering long-term stability for vulnerable populations and a healthier, safer Broward County.

### FULL DETAILED BACKGROUND

Since the early 1990s, downtown Fort Lauderdale has grappled with the recurring presence of visible homeless encampments, beginning at Holiday Park and near the Broward bus terminal. Over time, one of the most persistent sites emerged between Stranahan Park and the Broward County Main Library. There, a tent city became a prominent and highly visible symbol of the region's larger struggle with homelessness, one that highlighted the difficulty of addressing both immediate needs and the deeper systemic issues at play.

Early attempts by the city to manage the crisis throughout the 1990s and 2000s often fell short, as enforcement or relocation efforts addressed symptoms without resolving the underlying causes. The encampments would repeatedly reappear, sparking cycles of legal battles, public debate, and growing frustration in the community.

By 2017 and 2018, Fort Lauderdale moved toward a more innovative approach. The city, in partnership with the Fort Lauderdale Business Council on Homelessness, the United

Way of Broward County, and Broward County, formally embraced a “housing-first” model. This shift culminated in the launch of the Home for the Holidays initiative in November 2018. Through this program, approximately 82 individuals living in encampments were initially placed in motels, then supported as they transitioned into permanent housing. For many, this marked a turning point, demonstrating that stable housing – when combined with ongoing support – could break the cycle of homelessness.

Yet, even as progress was made, the challenges continued to mount. Florida's extraordinary population growth and evolving economy have exerted enormous pressure on urban housing markets. In Broward County, the affordability crisis has become acute, driving homelessness to critical levels. In 2026 alone, more than 1,822 individuals experienced homelessness in Broward County, with nearly 1,000 of them living within the City of Fort Lauderdale. The drivers of this crisis are clear: rising housing costs, inflationary forces, and limited availability of safe, affordable housing.

Adding to these pressures is the absence of a centralized daytime hub where unsheltered individuals can reliably access comprehensive services. Without such a resource, people experiencing homelessness are often left piecing together fragmented support systems, prolonging instability and preventing meaningful progress.

The proposed Engagement Center is designed to fill this critical gap. More than a simple service facility, the Center will operate as a coordinated access point where individuals can receive wraparound support that addresses not only housing, but also health, stability, and long-term reintegration into the community. Central to its mission will be the integration of behavioral health care: substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, recovery support, and trauma-informed services. These services will be delivered alongside case management, workforce readiness programs, and connections to permanent housing opportunities – ensuring that individuals receive continuous, holistic care rather than isolated interventions.

This project supports federal goals related to ending homelessness, advancing health equity, increasing housing stability, and reducing system-wide costs through prevention and early intervention. It will not only improve outcomes for individuals, but also reduce systemic inefficiencies, strengthen community stability, and provide a humane, sustainable framework for addressing one of the region's most pressing challenges.

### BENEFITS/EXPECTED OUTCOME

The Engagement Center will deliver significant benefits by creating a centralized, low-barrier access point where individuals experiencing homelessness can receive comprehensive daytime services, including shelter, healthcare, mental health and substance use treatment,