

Need Help? Start Here.

*A Resource Guide from **Unhoused and Unheard: The Black Experience of Homelessness***

Created by **Esther Dillard** | The Color Between the Lines

FREE RESOURCE

PRINT-FRIENDLY

AVAILABLE 24/7

Your First Move

Dial 2-1-1


Available **24 hours a day** in most areas across the United States. This is your starting point – no matter where you are or what time it is.

When someone answers, say clearly: "**I need emergency housing assistance.**"

Why 211 Works

211 is a free, confidential service that connects callers to local health and human services – including emergency shelter, food assistance, mental health support, and crisis intervention. Trained specialists answer the line and can help navigate the system even when it feels impossible.

You don't need to know the right words. You don't need to have all your paperwork ready. You just need to make the call. The specialist on the other end is there to help you figure out the next step.

 You can also text your zip code to **898-211** or visit **211.org** online if calling feels difficult.

I Need Help Right Now

When you call 211, be specific about what you're asking for. Case managers and housing navigators respond better when you use the names of actual programs. You have every right to ask for these services by name – and to ask about waitlists, timelines, and what comes next.

Emergency Shelter

Ask for immediate emergency shelter placement. This is for tonight – a safe place to sleep.

Transitional Housing

Temporary housing with services attached. A bridge between crisis and stability.

Housing First

You do not have to prove you're "ready." These programs house you first, then wrap services around you.

Rapid Rehousing

Short-term rental assistance and case management to move you into permanent housing quickly.

Permanent Supportive Housing

Long-term housing paired with ongoing services for people with disabilities or chronic homelessness.

- ✔ If you have children, say so immediately. Ask specifically for **programs that serve families**. Cross county lines if you have to. **Sharell Matthis did – and it changed everything for her family.**

What to Say When You Call

It can feel overwhelming to know exactly what to say in a crisis. Use this script as your guide. You can read it directly from this page – that is completely okay. The goal is to get you connected to the right help as quickly as possible.

"I am experiencing a housing emergency. I have [number] children. I need emergency placement and case management. What programs are available and what is the waitlist situation?"

Keep a pen and paper nearby. Write down the name of the person you spoke to, the programs they mentioned, any reference numbers, and the next steps they gave you. If the first call doesn't go the way you hoped, **call again**. Ask to speak to a supervisor. Ask what else is available. You are your own best advocate – and you deserve to be heard.

[hud.gov/find/local](https://www.hud.gov/find/local)

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's local resource finder. Search by city or zip code for HUD-approved housing programs near you.

nationalhomeless.org

The National Coalition for the Homeless maintains a robust directory of local organizations, advocacy resources, and support networks.

[salvationarmyusa.org](https://www.salvationarmyusa.org)

The Salvation Army operates emergency shelters, transitional housing, and family services in communities across the United States.

Someone I Love Needs Help

One of the most powerful things you can do for someone experiencing homelessness is simply **sit with them** while they make the call. Your presence matters. Your patience matters. Don't try to fix everything at once – just help them take the next step.

Call 211 together. Write down what the operator says. Ask follow-up questions. Be the person who holds space when the system feels cold or confusing. That kind of steady support can be the difference between someone giving up and someone pushing through.

Help Them Gather These Documents

- Photo ID (state-issued or passport)
- Birth certificates for any children
- Social Security cards
- Documentation of income or disability
- Any existing medical or prescription records
- Prior lease or eviction notices if available

What Housing First Actually Means

Housing First is not a reward for being "ready." It is a proven, evidence-based model that says: **stable housing is the foundation, not the finish line.** The right program will meet your loved one exactly where they are – without requiring sobriety, employment, or treatment compliance as a precondition.

When you call on their behalf, ask: *"What programs serve families? Is there a waitlist? Are services wrapped around the housing?"* These questions signal that you understand the system and are serious about getting real help.

What Not to Do — And Why It Matters

When someone we love is in crisis, our instinct is to open our doors. That impulse comes from a place of love – and it's not wrong. But without a plan, offering your home as a long-term solution can actually delay your loved one from accessing the stable, professionally supported housing they truly need.

1

Short-Term Help

Temporary support while they connect with services. Set a clear timeline together.

2

Navigate Together

Help them apply to programs, attend appointments, and track waitlist status actively.

3

Stable Housing

The goal is permanent, supported housing where they can rebuild with wraparound services.

⚠ Important: Do not offer your home as a long-term solution without a plan. It often delays them from getting the stable, supported housing they actually need. Love them enough to help them access the right system.

Visit nationalhomeless.org – they maintain a speakers bureau and local resources to help you support your loved one with expert guidance. You don't have to figure this out alone.

I Want to Help

Wanting to help is the beginning. But effective advocacy means understanding the landscape – who is affected, why the gap exists, and what actually moves the needle. The homelessness crisis in America is not random. It reflects decades of policy decisions, disinvestment, and systemic inequity. **Change is possible – but it requires intentional action.**

12%

U.S. Population

Black Americans make up approximately 12% of the total U.S. population.

32%

Homeless Population

Yet Black Americans account for nearly 32% of everyone experiencing homelessness in the U.S.

1 in 4

Receive Aid

Only 1 in 4 people who are eligible for federal housing assistance ever actually receive it.

That gap – between 12% and 32% – does not close on its own. It does not close with thoughts and prayers or good intentions alone. **It closes with policy, funding, and people who refuse to look away.**

What Works — And What You Can Do Today

The research is clear. We know what reduces homelessness. We know what doesn't. The question now is whether communities, policymakers, and individuals will commit to the proven solutions rather than politically expedient ones. Here is where your energy is most effective.

Evidence-Based Solutions

- Affordable housing production at scale
- Housing First program expansion
- Funding at the actual level of need
- Wraparound mental health and addiction services
- Eliminating barriers to housing access

Action You Can Take Right Now

- **Contact your elected officials.** At the city, county, state, and federal level. Ask them specifically about their Housing First funding commitments.
- **Support affordable housing development** in your community – even when it's nearby.
- **Oppose criminalization** of homelessness. Fines and arrests do not reduce homelessness – they deepen it.
- **Volunteer** with a local Housing First shelter or organization.
- **Educate in your space** – your classroom, your workplace, your faith community.

For Educators and Advocates

If you work in education, community organizing, social services, journalism, or faith leadership – you have a platform. You have an opportunity to bring these stories and this data into spaces where they can shift perspective, spark conversation, and motivate action.

The **ERASED educator bundle series** was built specifically for you. These are discussion guides and curriculum tools designed around the *Unhoused and Unheard* series – practical, classroom-ready materials that bring the human story of homelessness into focus with dignity and depth.



Discussion Guides

Structured conversation frameworks to help students and community members engage thoughtfully with the series.



Curriculum Tools

Standards-aligned lesson materials built around real stories from the *Unhoused and Unheard* podcast series.



Advocate Toolkit

Resources for social workers, housing advocates, and community organizers ready to turn awareness into action.

The ERASED educator bundle is available at **Esther Dillard's Etsy store**. Search "ERASED educator bundle" or visit **[estherdillard.com](https://www.etsy.com/shop/estherdillard)** for the direct link.

Listen to the Full Series

Unhoused and Unheard: The Black Experience of Homelessness – a groundbreaking investigative audio series that puts human stories at the center of one of America's most urgent crises.



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