

Minnesota Coalition *for the* Homeless



The MCH Advocacy Model

Centering Lived Experience to Create Lasting Solutions for Homelessness



About MCH

Our journey to centering lived experience and advocacy

Since its founding in 1984, the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless (MCH) has generated policies, community support, and resources to end homelessness in Minnesota. As the only statewide, member-driven advocacy organization focused exclusively on nonpartisan solutions to homelessness, MCH has helped secure hundreds of millions of dollars in funding and removed key policy barriers to housing stability.

Over the past decade, MCH has transformed its advocacy approach by centering leadership around those who have lived in and experienced homelessness. Rather than relying solely on traditional policy strategists, MCH now prioritizes community-led solutions. From 2017 to 2023, this shift was evident in a major campaign to end unsheltered homelessness, emphasizing shared messaging, relationship-building, and LE engagement. **This effort resulted in \$300 million in new investments for shelter infrastructure, operations, and prevention programs.**

This transformation began in 2017 with the creation of the Regional Expert Network (REN), a group of individuals with firsthand experience of homelessness who contributed through speaking, consulting, and advocacy. After six years of collaboration with the REN, MCH launched a paid Advocacy Fellowship Program in 2023 to further invest in lived experience leadership.

Now in its fifth decade, MCH is fully embracing a new era—one where leadership rooted in lived experience is not just valued but central to the organization's mission and every aspect of its work. Read on to discover why we made this change and how it has transformed our approach and outcomes.



Our Three Pillars

Communications, policy, and community engagement

MCH advances its mission through three key pillars. First, we focus on messaging and framing—strategic communications that ensure we’re telling the right stories, involving the right people, and shaping a narrative that is inclusive, respectful, and widely understood. Second, we integrate that narrative into our legislative work, using carefully crafted language to inform policies. Finally, we bring that messaging into communities, ensuring it resonates across diverse groups and is grounded in real-world experiences.

MCH Values

Three pivots to lived experience leadership

Pivot #1

Before 2017, MCH relied on professional voices and lobbyists over those with lived experience of homelessness (LE). That shift changed with the launch of the Regional Expert Network (REN), a paid collaboration of 12 organizations and over 40 LE participants. REN members contributed to policy consultations, public speaking, and key projects, including a state mortality study and a philanthropic advisory board.

Over six years, MCH and the REN recognized a critical distinction between engaging LE voices and truly supporting LE leadership. This insight shifted MCH's focus toward building leadership skills within LE communities and ensuring access to decision-making spaces—paving the way for deeper, lasting change.





Lived Experience Engagement *and* Lived Experience Leadership

MCH partners directly with communities impacted by homelessness to turn their solutions into policies and resources. By investing in the skills, talents, and leadership of people with lived experience (LE), MCH supports transformative, community-driven change. This work happens in two key ways:

- **LE engagement:** Creating accessible spaces to ensure broad participation from LE voices.
- **LE leadership:** Deeply investing in individuals to support strong, skilled leaders driving the work forward.

While both are important to advocacy work, at MCH, we elevate LE leadership. We create spaces and opportunities for individuals to become leaders in communities, at the Capitol, and in the media.

MCH Values

Three pivots to lived experience leadership

Pivot #2

In 2021, MCH took a second major step toward centering LE by restructuring its staff to align more closely with grassroots organizing. The former Director of Public Policy role was converted to the Director of Advocacy, held by a community organizer. MCH also adopted a new policy requiring that all legislative priorities originate from LE communities, ensuring advocacy efforts are truly rooted in their leadership and voices.



**MCH does more than
engage people with
lived experience of
homelessness—we
elevate their voices in
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change happens.**



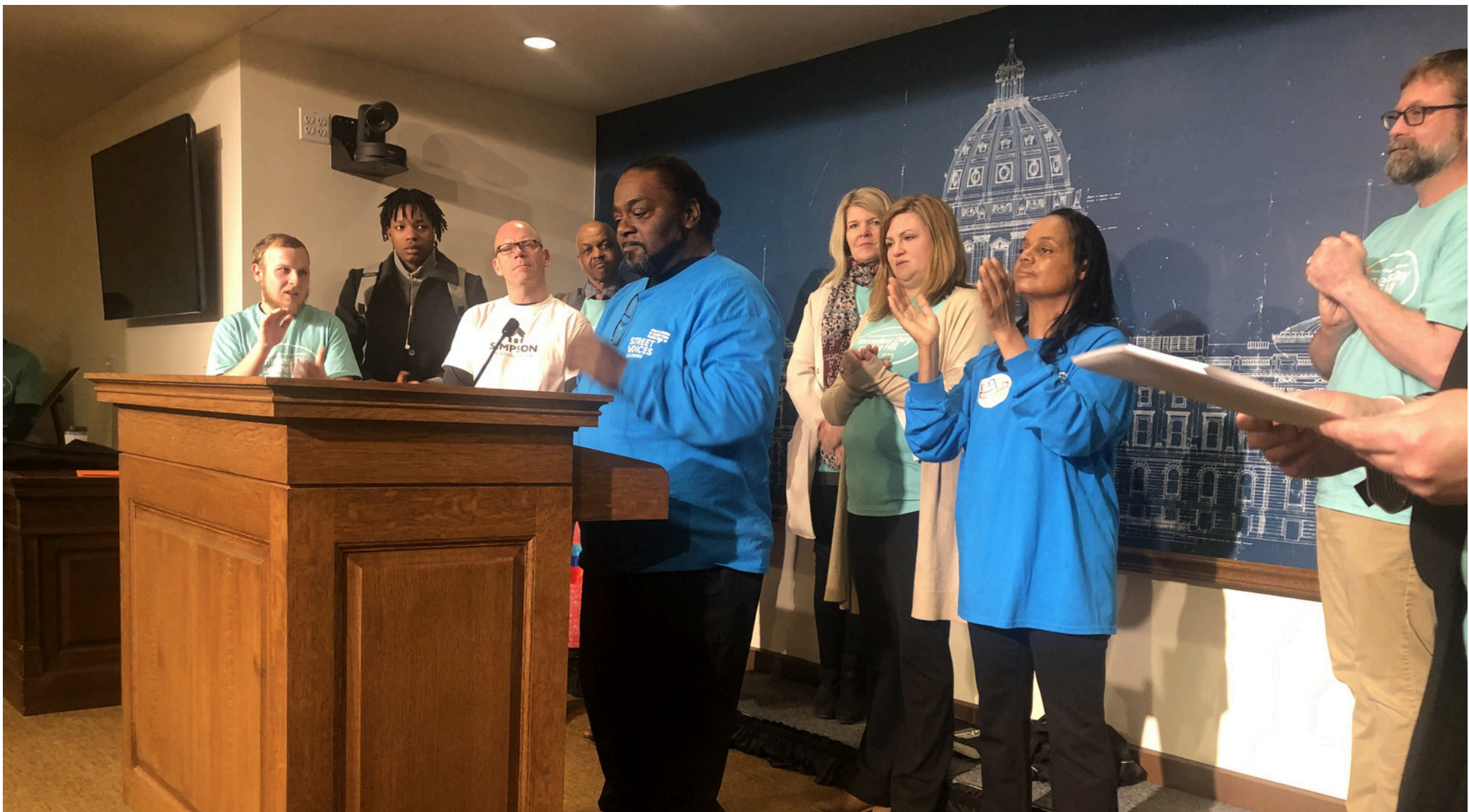
MCH Values

Three pivots to lived experience leadership

Pivot #3

In 2023, MCH launched its third major shift toward LE leadership by creating a paid two-year Fellowship Program, co-designed with the REN. Each cohort supports up to five individuals with lived experience of homelessness who take active roles in researching solutions, shaping policy, and driving advocacy. Fellows speak at events, share their stories in testimony, and meet directly with lawmakers about the bills they help craft. The program includes housing support—already helping several Fellows stay housed, with over \$45,000 used by REN members to maintain housing stability.





MCH shifted everything it does to be grounded in LE engagement and LE leadership.

By ensuring we hear from a significant number of LE communities, we have a broad picture of what is most needed to end homelessness. By investing time into cultivating LE leaders, we prioritize solutions that fit our organizational capacity and lead to the most impactful outcomes.



**Shelter saves lives.
Housing ends homelessness.**



The right messenger

Who is at the table

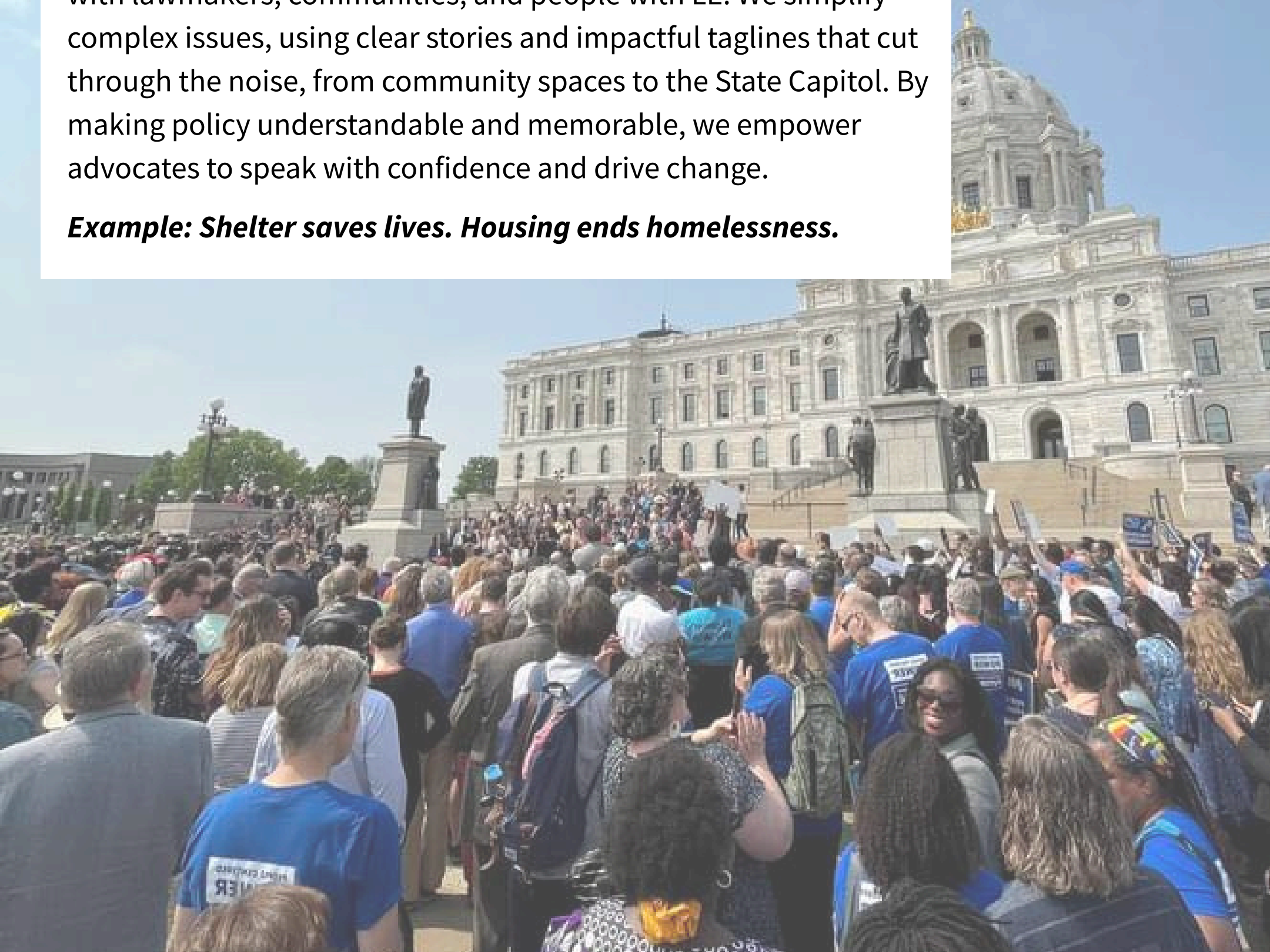
MCH works across sectors and with partners to open doors to decision-making spaces. While some organizations hesitate to share power, MCH turns that challenge into lasting impact. MCH Fellows are now shaping policies and driving priorities from within systems that rarely include their voices. **This shift continues to transform who is at the table and how we win.**

Clear messaging

Make it stick

MCH stands out for powerful, accessible messaging that resonates with lawmakers, communities, and people with LE. We simplify complex issues, using clear stories and impactful taglines that cut through the noise, from community spaces to the State Capitol. By making policy understandable and memorable, we empower advocates to speak with confidence and drive change.

Example: Shelter saves lives. Housing ends homelessness.





This is Dave and Jud.
Dave and Jud have changed since the 1980s.
MFIP cash assistance should, too.



Community-focused

Building power through digital representation

Digital campaigns are more powerful and necessary than ever. While legislative work can feel distant for those not at the Capitol, MCH recognized the need to engage advocates in a way that felt personal and accessible.

When people see themselves reflected in advocacy—through images, stories, and voices—they feel seen, heard, and empowered. This sense of connection builds momentum and a strong online community.

One example is our campaign around the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), which hadn't seen an increase in over 30 years. We launched a digital campaign using photos of advocates and lawmakers from the 1980s with the slogan: “*Name* has changed since the 80s. MFIP should change too.” It struck a chord. The campaign received over 200 submissions, featured graphics from across the country, and sparked engagement from both new and longtime advocates. **Two years later, MFIP saw its first increase—and we believe this campaign helped shift the narrative with lawmakers.**



Shelter is the starting point for gaining long-term stability.

Unsheltered Homelessness Campaign

Our creative path to victory - and its long-lasting impact

Doing what's right isn't always popular—a lesson MCH learned during its six-year campaign to end unsheltered homelessness. **While some close allies urged us to shift focus, arguing it wouldn't solve homelessness entirely, MCH recognized a critical gap: no other organization was leading with the truth that shelter saves lives and housing ends homelessness.** So we did.

MCH held listening sessions with shelter guests, people living outdoors, and frontline staff—insights that directly shaped the agenda for its unsheltered homelessness campaign. The REN played a key role throughout the process, helping lead sessions, meeting with lawmakers, influencing legislation, and activating their networks to drive change.





Key wins from the Unsheltered Homelessness Campaign included:

- “Shelter saves lives, housing ends homelessness” messaging was widely used
- \$100M to create and preserve over 1,500 shelter beds
- \$103M for homeless prevention
- Ongoing funding for three programs aimed at ending unsheltered homelessness from a combined two-year budget of \$18.88M to \$115.68 M.

These historic wins were driven by a small team, a modest budget, and the leadership of people with lived experience, highlighting the power of combining LE engagement and leadership to keep the focus on ending homelessness.

Communities and partners are inspired by MCH's focus on leading with its values even when that means going against the grain. MCH has proven that it deeply listens to people with LE and even changes its operating structure and future organizational trajectory to align with those values.

This approach garners trust from the community and builds relationships. **This approach** sets MCH apart from others and is foundational to identifying and winning on the most impactful solutions.

Minnesota
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