

Researchers and Community Partners Launch Three-Year Project to Advance Equity and Reduce Racial Bias in Housing and Service Allocation for Los Angeles' Homeless Population

The Los Angeles County Coordinated Entry System Triage Tool Research and Refinement (CESTTRR) project aims to make housing and service triaging tools for the homeless more inclusive for Black, Latinx, LGBTQ and aging persons, women and survivors of domestic violence.

Los Angeles, CA. (X,X, 2020) – An interdisciplinary team of researchers and community partners are launching a three-year project to study and improve the way housing and services are allocated to homeless individuals and families, particularly those who are Black, Latinx, LGBTQ, aging, women and survivors of domestic violence.

The Los Angeles County Coordinated Entry System Triage Tool Research and Refinement (CESTTRR) project is a joint collaboration between the University of Southern California, University of California, Los Angeles, California Policy Lab, Lens Co, University of Missouri, Los Angeles Housing Authority (LAHSA), United Way of Greater Los Angeles Home for Good Program and the USC Homelessness Policy Research Institute.

Research will be led by the USC Center for Artificial Intelligence in Society (CAIS), a joint venture of the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work and the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, which applies science and technology for social good.

"It's not a pipe dream to expect that we will improve the lives of people with this project. By collaborating with community partners who can deploy these systems, we will more effectively place thousands of people in housing each year," said Eric Rice, co-director of USC CAIS and associate professor at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work.

The project aims to improve the effectiveness of the Los Angeles County Coordinated Entry System's (CES) triaging tools, which social service employees use to make better informed decisions when allocating housing and support services to homeless clients. The project will feature the use of quantitative and qualitative research including machine learning, data science, interviews, focus groups and surveys to glean insights that will help improve triaging tools so that they maximize the prioritization of limited resources in a fair and equitable manner.

"We're using interdisciplinary techniques to make sure that compassion and human value judgments are integrated into the system," said Phebe Vayanos, associate director of USC CAIS and assistant professor of industrial and systems engineering and computer science at the USC Viterbi School of Engineering.

Nationally, homelessness has reached crisis levels. Los Angeles is home to one of the largest impacted communities, with over 66,000 adults, families and transition aged youth experiencing homelessness each day, according to LAHSA. The project's exploration of the existing housing prioritization tools with a deep inquiry into the tools' accuracy, systemic bias, equity and inclusion, will help LAHSA and other continuums of care around the country move to the next level of impact.

"Emerging from a summer of social unrest that raised issues of equity all over the country, this work could not be more timely or critical," said Chyna Hill, postdoctoral scholar at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work and community engagement lead for the CESTTRR project.

The research study will feature critical input from individuals with lived experiences of homelessness, academic experts, community partners and policy makers, to inform the development of recommendations for triage and service allocation tools and administration processes to better address the changing and diverse nature of persons experiencing homelessness.

“We have to respond to homelessness with daily urgency while we redesign this institution to be strong and flexible enough to deliver that response at the scale of need, while keeping in our hearts the humanity and vulnerability of every person we serve,” said Heidi Marston, executive director of LAHSA.

For information about the CESTTRR project, please visit cais.usc.edu/projects/cesttrr-project.

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About the USC Center for Artificial Intelligence in Society

The University of Southern California Center for Artificial Intelligence in Society (USC CAIS) is a joint venture between the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work and the Viterbi School of Engineering. Our mission is to conduct research in artificial intelligence to help solve the most difficult social problems facing our world. When we consider what problems to tackle, we focus our efforts on low resource communities both here in the United States and globally. For more information, visit cais.usc.edu.