



Reimagining California's Housing Inventory

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Beneath the housing crisis headlines, untapped data shows that across California, significant space already exists. It just isn't being used.

According to the [American Community Survey](#) (ACS, 2024), more than one million homes in California are recorded as vacant. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of occupied homes contain underutilized spare rooms, all while the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reported thousands of shelter and transitional housing beds sat empty on the single night in January that the department's Housing Inventory Count (HIC, 2024) is conducted to assess shelter services.

Homes without people, rooms without occupants, and emergency shelter beds without matches, together they reveal a deeper challenge: California's housing shortage is not only about supply, but about connection.

Disconnection and Inaccessibility

[ACS 2024](#) data show that a significant share of California's vacant homes are not available for rent or sale as they remain empty held for family use, investment purposes, or are pending decisions by owners.

In the shelter system, unfilled emergency shelter beds point to similar misalignment. Staffing shortages, eligibility criteria, and facility constraints can render available beds unusable for those who need them most. Across every layer of private homes, shared spaces, and public programs the same pattern emerges: capacity exists, but access is blocked.

Solution Landscape

Other regions have started to bridge this gap by treating vacancy as a solvable design problem rather than an inevitable byproduct.

Across Europe, cities such as Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Paris have launched data registries, activation deadlines, and targeted vacancy taxes to bring unused housing back into circulation. As described in Social Europe's 2023 article, "[Unlocking vacant properties to tackle homelessness](#)," these efforts rely on coordination, transparency, and time limits that create pathways for idle housing to reenter community use.

In the United States, the Philadelphia Community Land Trust initiative remains a powerful cautionary example. In 2020, after years of organizing, residents secured 50 vacant homes for permanent community ownership and affordable reuse. The effort demonstrated how public-community partnerships can convert unused properties into long-term housing. Yet, [follow-up reporting](#)^[MG2] revealed that some homes still lacked

promised repairs and operational support, underscoring the importance of sustained investment and clear accountability structures once properties are transferred.

Together, these cases highlight that activating vacant housing is not just about transferring assets, but also about building durable systems of stewardship.

Policy Recommendations

The data suggests solving homelessness and housing insecurity in California will require more than new construction, it will also require activation of existing resources. Addressing these gaps requires coordination across the entities already shaping California's housing landscape. State agencies, regional Continuums of Care, local governments, nonprofit housing providers, community land trusts, philanthropy, and residents with lived experience each hold distinct roles in identifying underused space, supporting activation efforts, and sustaining long-term stewardship. Clarifying these partners strengthens the pathways for implementation that follow.

Vacant homes, underused rooms, and empty emergency shelter beds all point to an opportunity to reimagine housing as a shared ecosystem, where coordination and innovation matter as much as building permits.^[GA3]

The challenge is not only how to build more, but how to better utilize what already exists. Here are some opportunities for what can be done to leverage current inventory:

1. Map and Disclose Vacancy:

Create regional dashboards combining U.S. Census, assessor, and utility data to track long-term vacancies and align them with local housing need.

2. Incentivize Reuse

Expand shared housing programs, vacancy conversion funds, and home-matching platforms that enable safe and voluntary sharing of underused space.

3. Activate Public-CoC Partnerships

Partner with California's 44 Continuums of Care (CoC-regional bodies of government agencies, nonprofits, and community members that coordinate funding, local resources, and strategies to end homelessness) to identify and steward vacant or underutilized housing for reuse through community land trusts or local nonprofit ownership models. CoCs' existing planning and reporting infrastructure can ensure long-term oversight, maintenance funding, and alignment with regional housing strategies to address accountability challenges.

4. Unlock Program Capacity

Invest in flexible operating support and policy review to reduce administrative or staffing barriers that keep publicly funded beds empty.

5. Adopt Adaptive Vacancy Measures

Pilot region-specific tools inspired by Europe such as short-term activation agreements or time-limited vacancy taxes to nudge idle housing back into circulation.

These strategies are about aligning systems to ensure that every public, private, and community asset California already holds can be effectively connected to those who need housing.

Implementation Strategies

To move these recommendations from concept to practice, California can rely on its existing regional and state infrastructure rather than create new systems:

1. Establish a Vacancy Activation Fund

Create a revolving or matching fund to help CoCs, cities, and nonprofit partners acquire, rehabilitate, or lease underused housing stock. Align funding with existing programs such as HHAP or Homekey+ to streamline implementation and avoid duplicative structures.

2. Develop a Statewide Vacancy Data Exchange

In partnership with the California Interagency Council on Homelessness and regional CoCs, integrate data from the Census, local assessors, and the Homeless Data Integration System (HDIS) to build a live, transparent picture of vacant units and reactivation progress.

3. Pilot Regional Activation Projects

Select a cohort of CoCs representing urban, suburban, and rural contexts to pilot shared housing, adaptive reuse, or community land trust activation models. Evaluate outcomes using shared metrics such as time-to-occupancy, cost efficiency, and resident stability.

4. Embed Lived Expertise in Implementation

Ensure that individuals with lived experience of homelessness or housing insecurity are part of CoC planning teams overseeing activation projects. Their participation strengthens accountability, equity, and relevance in design and decision-making.

5. Track and Report Long-Term Outcomes

Incorporate reactivated units, shared-housing matches, and sustained occupancy rates into annual CoC Housing Inventory Counts (HIC) and public dashboards to measure impact and maintain transparency.

When viewed together, California's empty homes, spare rooms, and unfilled emergency shelter beds represent more than underutilized assets – they mark the spaces where systems fail to connect. Each vacancy is a missed opportunity for stability, safety, and belonging.

By pairing data transparency with community-led innovation, California can shift its focus from scarcity to activation.