



## Strategic Plan 2024 – 2026

## Foundational Statements

### **Vision:**

We envision just, safe communities where every woman and gender diverse individual has a home and is on a path to fulfillment.

### **Mission:**

We end homelessness for women and gender diverse individuals by providing safe housing and supportive services centered on wellness, employment, and advocacy.

Downtown Women’s Center is the only organization in Los Angeles focused exclusively on serving women and gender diverse individuals experiencing homelessness.

### **Core Values:**

These Values are grounded in the six tenants of Trauma-Informed Care<sup>1</sup>. They guide how we work with participants and residents; among ourselves as staff, volunteers, and board; and how we engage in the community.

<b>SAFETY</b>	Providing safe, comfortable, and healthy spaces to come together
<b>RESPECT</b>	Acknowledging and uplifting the unique skills, lived experiences, stories, and interests we all bring to the table
<b>SOCIAL JUSTICE</b>	Ensuring equitable access, representation, and inclusivity across all our relationships, services, policies, and activism
<b>COMMUNITY</b>	Nurturing mutually supportive, empowering relationships in Skid Row and beyond

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<sup>1</sup> [6 Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## A Note on Language

DWC recognizes the power of language as a tool of creating inclusion and belonging. We follow the lead of those who are most impacted, celebrating and reflecting where possible the varieties of experiences and preferences.

Founded as a woman-serving organization, DWC is now trusted as a safe place for gender diverse people. DWC serves individuals whose gender expression has been historically marginalized who feel that our services and support can meet their needs and help them on their personal paths.

We appreciate the partnership of our residents, participants, and the staff of The TransLatin@ Coalition<sup>2</sup> in identifying language for this document that supports our commitment to respect and inclusion, including:

- Women and gender diverse individuals
- Program and service participants
- Residents of permanent supportive housing
- Homelessness, experiencing homelessness

We commit to remain flexible, responsive to individuals in personal interactions, and to learn and change our language over time.

## Geography

- **DWC is laser focused on ending homelessness for women and gender diverse individuals in Skid Row;** to meet their needs and goals, which may include remaining in Skid Row or going elsewhere, we provide services and partnerships across Los Angeles County (and perhaps beyond)
- **Outside of Skid Row, we build a network** of influence, relationships, partnerships, and resources where we can refer that are grounded in the DWC Model **to meet the needs of women and gender diverse people experiencing homelessness in Skid Row**, trained in trauma-informed, women-centered services
- **Outside of Skid Row, we are typically an advisor vs operator;** we train the trainer and share our knowledge to help providers outside of Skid Row deliver what's needed
- **When we contract to provide services in properties beyond Skid Row,** we negotiate units for residents from Skid Row, with full cost funding

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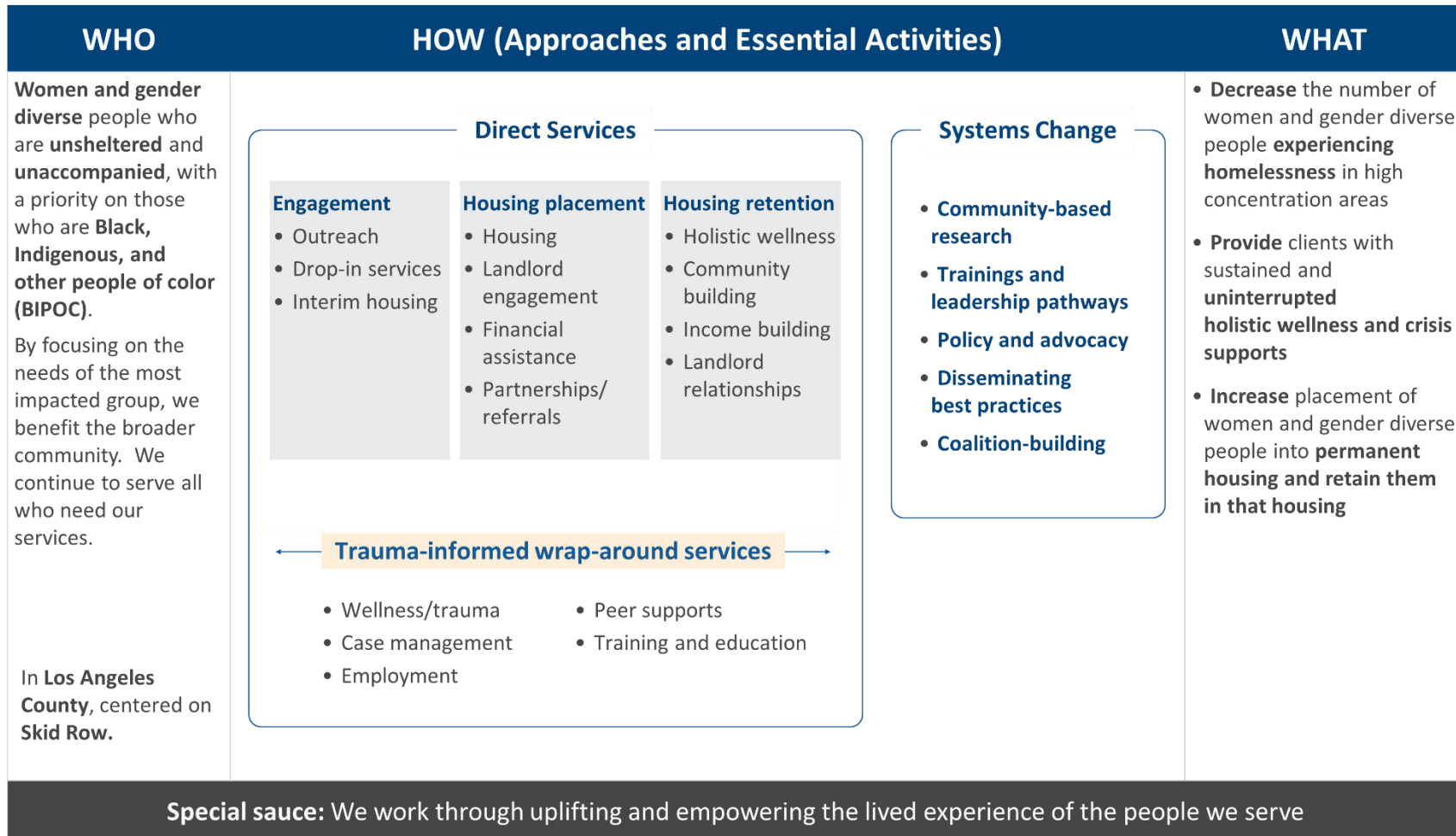
<sup>2</sup> The TransLatin@ Coalition (TLC) advocates for the specific needs of the Trans Latin@ community in the U.S.A. and plans strategies to improve trans Latinas' quality of life. TLC staff provided training to all DWC staff in 2023 and were active partners in developing this plan. DWC follows TLC's guidance on language based on their expertise with LGBTQ+ community.

# Intended Impact and Theory of Change

Downtown Women’s Center is intentional, focused, and clear in who we are and how we have a meaningful, lasting impact in our community.

Our Theory of Change lays out our blueprint for change that can be a model for ending homelessness everywhere. We focus on ending homelessness for women and gender diverse people in Skid Row, Los Angeles, creating a community that is a destination for housing and wellness rather than a destination for homelessness.

DWC is proudly recognized for our special sauce of uplifting and empowering the lived experience of the people we serve, including their experiences of homelessness, across all our services, locations, and systems change efforts.



## Participant Voice

DWC’s strategic plan and daily decision-making center on the needs, goals, and dreams of women and gender diverse individuals who experience homelessness in Skid Row. In addition to input from members of the Women’s Voices Board, the plan directly addresses the results of the most recent Women’s Needs Assessment<sup>3</sup>.

**Women Want Safe, Affordable, and Private Housing**

Location was also important; women wanted housing close to family members, doctors, and their places of employment, as well as their own units (no shared housing, shared common areas, or roommates).

**Women Need Improved Case Management and a Trauma-Informed Approach to Services**

Women expressed the need for better case management, including more respect from staff, empathetic interactions, and less staff turnover, as well as cultural diversity training.

**WHAT UNHOUSED WOMEN WANT**

**Women Need Immediate Help with Emergent Needs**

In the absence of housing, women expressed the need for access to information and resources that could help them meet immediate, urgent needs such as shelter, safety, and personal hygiene. Their most pressing concerns were safety and access to shelter.

**Women Want Community, Social Connection, and a Sense of Belonging**

Without knowing one another, women across different Service Planning Areas suggested the creation of what we call “safe circles,” or groups for women to provide meaningful space for peer interactions and reduce social isolation.

## Staff Voice

DWC’s dedicated, skilled staff are the key component in delivering and sustaining our responsive, trauma-informed model of high-quality services. The Board intentionally integrated staff voice and leadership in this planning process, resulting in a greater understanding of the demands and pressures on staff due to recent growth, the daily challenges of addressing homelessness, and systemic issues related to hiring, salaries, and retention.

This plan prioritizes supporting staff safety and wellness and commits to ongoing staff leadership in implementing all our strategic priorities in deepened partnership with the Board, to ensure that our work advances our mission and delivers meaningful impact for the people we serve.

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<sup>3</sup> Los Angeles County Women’s Needs Assessment, Findings from the 2022 Survey of Women Experiencing Homelessness

## Strategic Direction

**DWC delivers responsive, quality, trauma-informed programs and advocacy amid a housing crisis while upholding staff safety and wellness as essential to our impact and participants' success.**

DWC is recognized as a local and national expert in effective housing solutions for women and gender diverse individuals. Reflecting heightened attention to the homelessness crisis and funders' and government confidence in DWC, our budget nearly tripled from 2018 – 2023, from \$9.7 to \$27 million. DWC is not immune from industry wide trends: administrative expenditures have not grown to match program growth, significant staff openings remain in programs across the organization, and turnover rates are high.

### Commitments

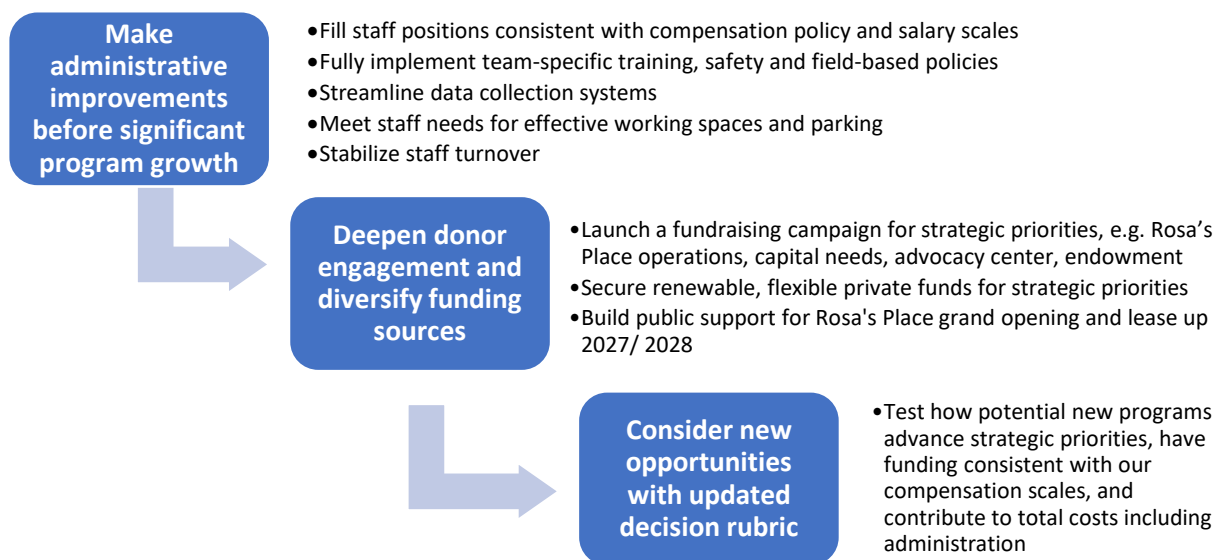
During the three years of this plan, DWC's overarching intention is to **deliver financial sustainability, safety, and wellness for our participants, staff, and the organization**. We commit to providing quality, trauma-informed programs for participants and work experiences for our employees. We recognize that true inclusion of diverse perspectives and leadership across the participants, staff and board improves our impact. By centering the needs of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), we target our services to people who have been most vulnerable and historically marginalized, which also benefits the broader community.

We can achieve our strategic priorities only with a consistent, committed, skilled staff who are able to serve, not struggling with their own financial and housing instability.

## Phased Approach

DWC enters this planning period with a clear awareness of the impact of recent significant growth, and the need to build our administrative systems, services, and staff support before adopting significant new program commitments. Over the three-year period, we will focus first on completing several administrative investments that are underway. We will expand financial contributions to support our strategic priorities, including through a fundraising campaign.

With our existing programs on solid footing, DWC will then be able to consider possible new programs using a decision rubric that has been updated to reflect this plan's strategic priorities. We will retain flexibility to meet the changing needs of participants and the community, while delivering quality services in all programs and locations.



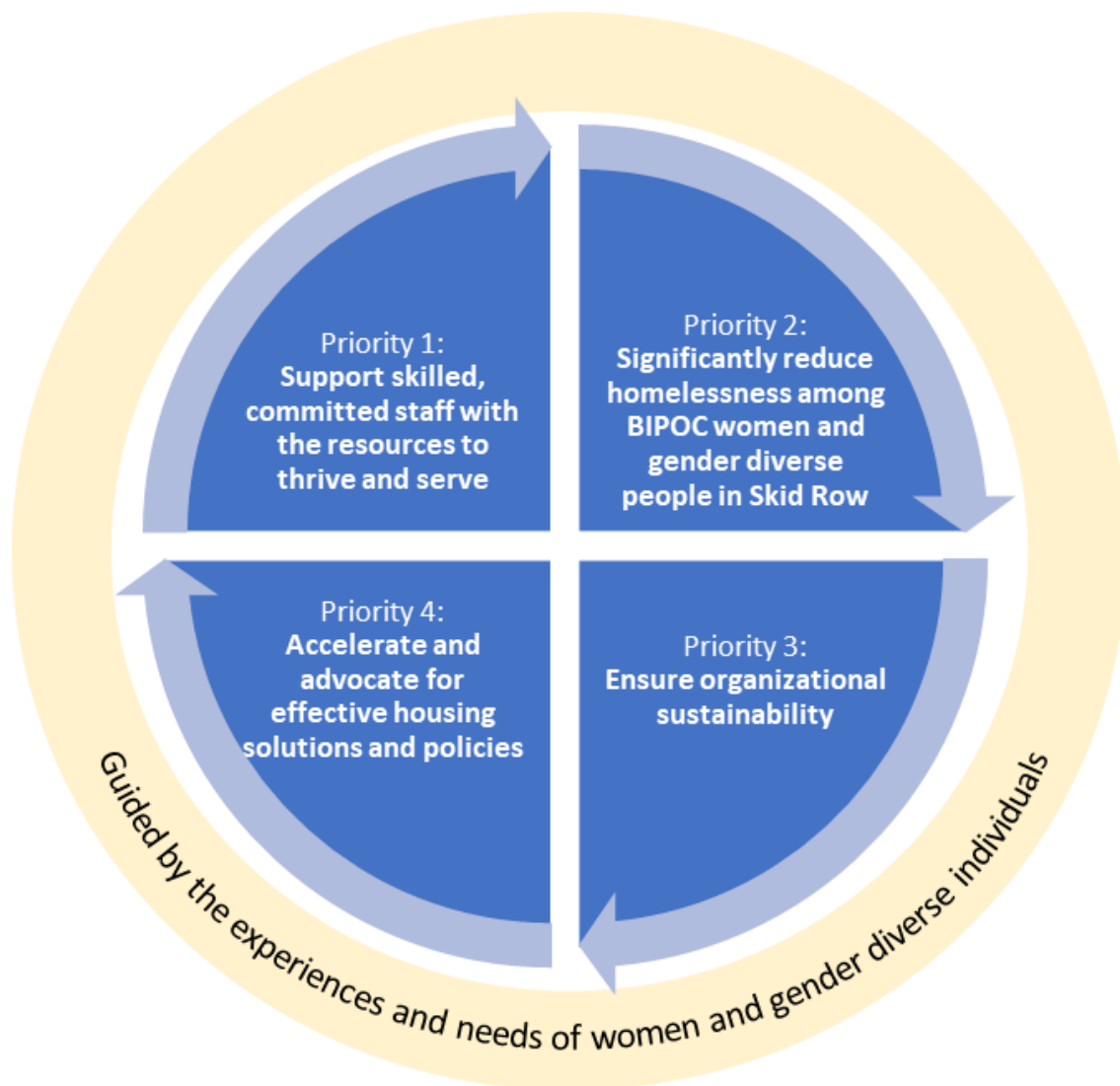
## Strategic Priorities 2024 - 2026

In deep partnership with staff and with extensive input from external stakeholders including program participants, the DWC board establishes four strategic priorities for the three-year plan period. For each priority, we identify a small number of goals. Each year, the board and staff develop work plans with objectives and milestones to advance the goals based on current conditions.

**Priorities:** Small number of focus areas where changes will most significantly advance our mission

**Goals:** Small number of actions to advance each priority over three years (#.#)

**Objectives:** Specific, measurable annual steps to achieve goals (#.#.#)





## Priority 1: Support skilled, committed staff with the resources to thrive and serve



DWC's success today and opportunities for the future are grounded in our staff.

The world is at an untenable tipping point of systems not working and resources not meeting community needs. The housing process is getting harder, with increasing rents and lack of access to deep housing subsidies. Women and gender diverse people have higher needs and face many external barriers. DWC's trauma-informed services require more resources, training, and staff than typical operations do.

As a result, staff experience compassion fatigue and burnout, especially the frontline workers. Despite these challenges, DWC staff are engaged, with a strong connection to and appreciation for the organization and mission. They are frustrated at the external systems and by not seeing a path forward.

Low salaries are an industry-wide issue with a direct negative impact for DWC staff. Many staff are in precarious financial situations themselves; some need access to the same support services we offer our clients. Inflation impacts everyone.

### **DWC is committed to pay equity, increasing salaries to match those paid by government agencies.**

Over the years, we have consistently worked to address the challenges our staff faces. While we've made progress, this is a moment when we need to move with urgency. Staff turnover and filling open positions are connected to compensation and staff safety. Vacancies burden existing staff and negatively impact quality of care, trust, and continued participation for clients.

DWC prioritizes our investment in staff sustainability, safety, and growth so we can consistently deliver our high-quality services, across all programs and locations. We extend our commitment to trauma-informed services to set the standard for how we treat each other.

### **Support Our Staff Goals:**

- 1.1 Provide for staff financial sustainability and wellness through \$30/hour<sup>4</sup> base wages by 2028, with equitable compensation and responsive benefits
- 1.2 Hire and retain a full staff team that is representative of participants' cultural background
- 1.3 Continue to ensure staff safety and security
- 1.4 Identify, grow, and sustain DWC's culture as a trauma-informed, supportive, collaborative, growth-oriented, flexible workplace
- 1.5 Deepen and sustain communication and collaboration among staff and the board
- 1.6 Foster staff professional growth, development, and education

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<sup>4</sup> Based on analysis from Living Wages in Los Angeles County's Homeless Response Sector, Rand Corporation for Social Justice Partners, 2023

## Priority 2: Significantly reduce homelessness among BIPOC women and gender diverse individuals in Skid Row



**Our North Star and primary goal:** DWC successfully prevents a return to homelessness with a 95+% housing retention rate.

DWC's success and growth means we're pulled in many directions. We are committed to delivering high quality services across our existing programs, amidst ever-more-complex challenges. With a strong commitment to our WHY, clarity of focus, and honest assessment of our capacity and impact for staff, we will decide when to say No, or Not Now, or Yes to new opportunities, grounded in our Theory of Change.

**We are focused** on providing permanent supportive housing with wrap around services for women and gender diverse individuals in Skid Row. We listen to the voices of lived experience, hearing in particular the importance of access to mental health services.

The Los Angeles homeless services system houses 207 people each day, while 220 become homeless – to end homelessness, we must collectively stem the flow into homelessness.

Older women are the fastest-growing group entering homelessness; over half of those experiencing homelessness are over 50. Domestic violence and exiting foster care are significant root causes of homelessness for women and gender diverse people.

Through our programs and our client-led, low-barrier approach, **we prevent** a return to homelessness, as well as violence and other trauma, job and income loss, hospitalization, disconnection from community, lack of resources to meet basic needs, and intergenerational harm.

Partnerships are KEY to success. DWC brings our unique experience and knowledge, while partners bring their own specialized skills and resources. We encourage flow across systems and services.

Through the expansion of our San Pedro Street campus during this plan period, DWC will nearly double the number of women-centered units in the neighborhood, mindfully designed in partnership with the community. Rosa's Place, anticipated to lease up in 2027/ 2028, will be a place that 97 currently unhoused individuals will be proud to call home. It will also provide a community gathering space, and facilities for policy advocacy that benefits people in Skid Row and far beyond.

### **Reduce Homelessness Program Goals:**

- 2.1 Sustain residents' and participants' financial sustainability and wellness through DWC's model of enhanced quality, trauma-informed programming and services across all locations
- 2.2 Prevent a return to homelessness for our residents and participants as they go from surviving to thriving
- 2.3 Move into the construction and program development phase of Rosa's Place
- 2.4 Systematically collect and publish demographic data about participants served
- 2.5 Deepen interconnection among DWC programs
- 2.6 Consider DWC contributions to continue to support the Skid Row Action Plan<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [The Skid Row Action Plan](#) was adopted by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors on June 28, 2022. Downtown Women's Center is an active participant in implementing the plan.

## Priority 3: Ensure organizational sustainability



DWC's budget nearly tripled from 2018 – 2023, from \$9.7 to \$27 million, driven by increased government grants (68% of total income). Since administrative costs have not grown to match program growth, this plan prioritizes investment in our infrastructure to support our existing programs, to grow capacity to meet the needs of committed new services outside of Skid Row (Oatsies Place and NoHo), and to prepare for future growth.

**DWC seeks a mix of diverse, reliable revenues and level of reserves** to sustain the work we do today with DWC quality, including staff support and infrastructure; prepare for and fund growth and change; and to mitigate risks of swings in funding and unexpected events.

Donors and the public see DWC as an expert, providing solutions, and showing results in the frustrating and seemingly intractable issues of homelessness. Our expanded development team has grown corporate and foundation giving; the next area of focus is individual gifts. With a fundraising campaign and other efforts, we have an opportunity to expand private giving to provide solutions where public approaches fall short, and to generate funds to strengthen our infrastructure.

Overall, we aim to increase the amount and proportion of unrestricted funds, which come mainly through individual giving and (less so) from corporate and foundation giving.

### **Growing our investment funds**

As of September 2023, DWC held just over \$4 million in investment accounts. For the next three years we will build the investment funds for extreme emergencies. While the 2024 budget does not draw from the investment account, in later years we may consider using funds to support strategic priorities.

### **Financial management philosophy**

- Incorporate full program costs in requests to both institutional and individual donors
- Aim for programs to cover full costs through restricted grants, contracts, gifts, earned income
- Use unrestricted funds to cover the remaining (unfunded) administrative costs
- Balance the budget each year without drawing from the investment fund for ongoing operations
- Budget each year to build the investment funds
- Aim for the investments to generate income through investment strategy

### **Organizational Sustainability Goals:**

- 3.1 Sustain physical quality and financial sustainability at Los Angeles Street and San Pedro Street permanent supportive housing properties
- 3.2 Expand infrastructure to support current programs, grow capacity for committed new programs outside Skid Row (Oatsies Place and NoHo), and prepare for additional growth
- 3.3 Ensure effective financial management and sustainability
- 3.4 Expand, diversify, and target fund development to support strategic priorities
- 3.5 Continue to strengthen and diversify leadership

## Priority 4: Accelerate and advocate for effective housing solutions & policies



Homelessness exists within deeply connected failed systems. While it is essential and vital to support individuals to end their period of homelessness, DWC has a responsibility to use our voice, power, and experience to change the systems that lead to homelessness.

We are a respected, authoritative, well-researched voice. We know how to begin and support meaningful, high-impact conversations. We assess the many possible opportunities for engagement and determine where to bring that voice of our specific knowledge in context of the larger picture.

DWC partners with and, when necessary, pushes policymakers to ensure a holistic approach that meets the needs of the most vulnerable women and gender diverse people on Skid Row through data-driven systems change, legislation, funding, public policy, and replication of best practices.

As experienced direct-service providers, we engage in mutual advocacy, with each organization contributing our specific expertise in partnership. Many times, our greatest contribution is to connect our residents and participants with the leading advocacy organizations, to bring the power of direct experience to policy- and decision-making.

At DWC, our policy work is guided by the following **core beliefs**:

1. A **gender equity lens** is essential to addressing the unique challenges faced by women and gender diverse people experiencing homelessness.
2. **Systemic and institutional racism are root causes of homelessness**; programs must directly acknowledge and address racial disparities.
3. **Housing is inextricably linked to both physical and emotional well-being**: the nexus of housing and health must be central to policy making.
4. Only by **advancing permanent housing solutions** can we truly eradicate homelessness.
5. **Centering voices of lived experience** ensures that policies and solutions are grounded in the perspectives, needs, and challenges of those directly impacted.

DWC are recognized experts in how homelessness impacts women and gender diverse people. We lean in as the ones who know what solutions make a real difference. Through our policy work we are bold, we raise our voices, we show up, we push to have a seat at the table, and we deliver results for the people we serve. Over time through our advocacy center, we aspire to empower communities across the country to work collaboratively to build knowledge and solutions around gender-specific experiences of homelessness.

### **Advocacy and Policy Goals:**

- 4.1 Promote and implement sustainable, far-reaching, data-driven policies to end homelessness for women and gender diverse people on Skid Row, and benefitting people elsewhere, through a DWC advocacy center
- 4.2 Build and sustain a network of influence, relationships, and resources among providers that are aligned with DWC's model of trauma-informed, gender-specific services
- 4.3 Raise public awareness of and support for women and gender diverse individuals experiencing homelessness through community-based research, advocacy, convening, training, education, outreach, engagement, and policy change

## Leadership, implementation, monitoring

Through this plan, the Board addresses its primary responsibility for setting DWC's strategic direction.

The staff Executive Team and the Board's Executive Committee share responsibility for the implementation of this plan, led by the Chief Operating Officer. Each Board committee creates annual goals with explicit connections to the strategic plan, and reports to the board on progress. Individual board members channel their efforts, resources, and attention to advance the priorities of the plan and needs identified by the staff.

The Strategic Plan Implementation Task Force comprises the full leadership team plus a representative of the Measurement and Evaluation team. The group structures its monthly reviews and discussion of challenges to advance the strategic plan based on annual goals set by the chiefs. At each monthly meeting, departments present select goals tied to the plan and seek group problem solving for any challenges. Departments will invite other staff and relevant staff and board committees to participate based on the goals under review in each meeting.

Consistent with DWC's equity goals and informed by the successful design of the strategic planning committee, select board and staff members from across the organization come together at least twice a year to monitor progress toward the plan and engage in meaning-making discussions. We will continue to use staff listening sessions and engagement with the Women's Voices Board<sup>6</sup> to review progress and gather input on the organization's direction and ways to improve. Board members will also stay informed about the issues and DWC's impact through on-site volunteering and other ways of connecting with residents, participants, and staff.

Each board meeting includes time to review progress toward one or more strategic priorities. At least once each year, the Board will review areas of progress using a visually simple dashboard and will discuss goals that merit attention. Based on changing conditions and new opportunities, the Board may consider shifting priorities or resources to better advance DWC's mission and move toward its strategic priorities.

This strategic plan joins the revised Theory of Change and decision-making rubric in DWC's tool kit to manage existing programs, allocate resources, and assess opportunities. With a continued commitment to deepen our board-staff-participant partnership, together we are excited to lead the organization into the future.

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<sup>6</sup> a committee of the Board of Directors comprised of program participants