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New Real-Time Resources for Austin's Unhoused Population

Digital map Open Now, Hotline Pod look to reduce wait times and address urgent needs

BY FELICITY GUAJARDO, SEPTEMBER 19, 2025, NEWS

The city of Austin's Homeless Strategy Office launched the [**Open Now digital platform**](#) on Aug. 6 to act as a real-time resource for the unhoused community.

The push for the platform came from years of feedback from unhoused residents, local homeless service providers, and advocates who expressed a need for a resource that could keep up with changing business hours and could serve as a main point of information for unhoused neighbors.

Open Now is an interactive tool that uses mapping and geographic information system software to pinpoint a user's distance from the nearest cooling centers, showers, bathrooms, and more.

Charles Loosen, community engagement consultant for HSO, said that Open Now allows quick updates in resource availability. "The challenge with anything that is in print form is that it's static. And our system and our community is dynamic," Loosen said.

Though most of the unhoused community has limited access to mobile devices, HSO said they've learned that information is often spread via word of mouth or social media and the platform is one part of the solution for quicker access to day-to-day resources. "I think that it does reflect that a portion of our population is digitally connected and digitally literate, and we want to make sure that those folks can serve as ambassadors and popular opinion leaders to the broader unsheltered community," Loosen said.

Open Now is the latest addition of real-time homelessness services. In partnership with the city, the [**Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center**](#) also launched a Hotline Pod at the Trinity Center which allows patrons to chat with Sunrise case managers via video call.

The Hotline Pod is a cubicle which allows patrons to have face-to-face interactions and includes Ring doorbell technology to alert service providers of a patron and connect them with Sunrise Center case managers.

Mark Hilbelink, the executive director of the Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center, said the cellphone hotline processed over 5,000 calls last month. Now with the pod service they aim to reduce foot traffic across town.

"For a lot of people who are experiencing homelessness, one of the reasons they oftentimes don't get help is because if they leave their camp behind, it's possible somebody could – the police or somebody else – could remove their camp while they're gone," Hilbelink said. Most of the Sunrise Center's in-person services can be provided digitally, something they learned during the COVID-19 lockdown.

With the addition of the Hotline Pod, Open Now has potential to be an added feature to the pods. “[Open Now] dovetails really nicely with the hotline, because the hotline is kind of an in-person version of the app,” Hilbelink said.

No-interaction technology is changing the landscape of the service industry, like the new Whataburger digital kitchens, which has inspired ideas for the future of homelessness providers.

“You could see like an Amazon locker and screens set up in different parts of the community where people could walk up to it, talk to the hotline on their phone or on a video screen, figure out what they need, and then a box pops open and a bus pass is there, or a box of food is there,” Hilbelink said.

The Sunrise Center is working on piloting a second pod at the Marshalling Yard and has future plans to install pods in Downtown hospitals.

HSO is requesting community feedback about Open Now and is available via mobile phone and desktop. Visit opennow.maps.austintexas.gov to learn more. □

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