

Why GAO Did This Study

Having an ID is essential to taking certain steps to exit homelessness, such as gaining employment, securing housing, or accessing government benefits. The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 and House Report 117-402, accompanying H.R. 8294, 117th Cong. (2022), include provisions for GAO to review issues related to ID barriers faced by individuals experiencing homelessness.

This report examines (1) barriers the homeless population may encounter in obtaining an ID and options to mitigate those barriers; (2) the types of ID assistance services supported by federal homelessness assistance programs; and (3) ID requirements for HUD housing programs.

GAO reviewed applicable laws and regulations, agency policies, and relevant academic literature. GAO also collected information from federal agencies on selected homelessness and rental assistance programs through standardized data collection instruments. GAO interviewed officials from federal agencies and homeless advocacy groups and from nongeneralizable samples of state ID-issuing agencies, public housing agencies, and homelessness assistance providers, chosen to reflect a variety of sizes, locations, programs, and strategies for overcoming ID barriers.

HOMELESSNESS

Barriers to Obtaining ID and Assistance Provided to Help Gain Access

What GAO Found

People experiencing homelessness may encounter several barriers when attempting to obtain a government ID, according to studies GAO reviewed and interviews GAO conducted. Homeless individuals often lack a reliably safe place to store IDs and other important personal documents, making these items subject to loss, destruction by the elements, and theft. Items may also be discarded when these individuals and their belongings are removed from an area. Once ID documents are lost, replacing them can be especially difficult. Further, people experiencing homelessness may have difficulty providing a residential address for the purposes of applying for an ID. These individuals also may not be able to pay for the cost of obtaining an ID or to access transportation or technology needed to apply for an ID. Additionally, homeless youth may not be able to obtain parental consent to obtain an ID.

To mitigate some of these barriers, several states allow third parties, such as social workers or shelter employees, to verify the residence of people experiencing homelessness by signing affidavits confirming their address (such as the address of a shelter). Some cities have created digital lockers to help these individuals maintain electronic copies of IDs and other essential documents. In addition, seven of the 10 states GAO reviewed offer a type of ID that can be obtained more easily than a REAL ID—ID that meets federal security standards and may be used by federal agencies for certain official purposes. This alternative to a REAL ID allows for a wider range of documents to verify identity, such as military or school records, court documents, and expired IDs. A trade-off to some of these mitigation options is that they may increase the risk of fraud.

Federal homelessness assistance programs GAO reviewed allow providers to use program funds to help individuals obtain ID. For example, agencies permit grant funds to be used to

- help individuals navigate the process of getting an ID, such as through case management;
- provide financial assistance associated with obtaining ID; and
- help arrange for transportation to ID offices.

For applicants to be eligible for the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) largest rental assistance programs, public housing agencies or property owners must verify their Social Security number and citizenship or eligible immigration status. In addition, public housing agencies and property owners may require applicants to demonstrate legal identity and age, which may present ID-related barriers to accessing these programs. However, public housing agencies reported that most applicants experiencing homelessness have the required documentation by the time they are offered housing assistance because they have typically been working with homelessness assistance providers to obtain the needed documents.