San Francisco is using Google to spy on and track every single undesirable

Aria Bendix   18h

A homeless man in San Francisco holds a sign asking for spare change. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

- San Francisco's new tracking system could soon identify the history and future needs of every homeless man, woman,

and child in the city.

- The platform is a much-need solution to the city's outdated and inconsistent databases.

- Homeless tracking systems have showed promise in places like Salt Lake City, which reduced its chronic homeless population by 91% in a decade.

Not too long ago, San Francisco's homeless tracking system consisted of a pile of papers in cardboard boxes. Now, the city is launching a high-tech platform to identify every homeless resident and his or her level of need.

The launch represents a growing effort, led by newly-elected Mayor London Breed, to crack down on the city's visible homeless crisis. San Francisco is one of the top-ranking cities for homelessness in the country, with an estimated homeless population of 7,500.

The new system intends to track the health, housing, jail, and counseling history of every homeless person in the city. It's a far cry from the old method, which spanned 15 different databases across multiple agencies. This allowed homeless residents to slip through the cracks, with people who might be registered in one system left out of others.

The new solution — known as ONE System (Online Navigation and Entry System) — aggregates this data into a single platform. As part of the test process, the city solicited feedback from volunteer consultants at Google and other tech companies. The final product allows homeless outreach professionals to log in to an app and view the state of homelessness in the city in real time. But first, it requires individuals to be registered at shelters or one of the city's two

walk-in centers, which are run by Episcopal Community Services.

Upon registration, homeless residents are asked 17 questions that relate to their history of care and future needs. This helps determine which residents are in dire need of housing, and which can have their concerns met relatively quickly. By next year, the database will have collected enough names to begin the housing placement process for individual residents.

As of late last year, the system has already begun to track homeless families throughout the city. According to Jeff Kositsky, the head of the city's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, the platform has slashed wait times for families at local shelters from one week to just two days. "I know it's going to make a difference," he t old The San Francisco Chronicle. "Maybe not right away, but it will happen."

If the systems in other cities are any indication, Kositsky could be right. In Salt Lake City, where a program records every time a homeless person receives shelter, counseling, or another service, the city managed to reduce chronic homelessness by 91% in a single decade. That's a big challenge for San Francisco, but one the city may now be more equipped to handle.