POLICY PAPER NO. 3

Follow the Money: What a Real Public Spending Dashboard Requires

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The Problem

Los Angeles is not short on homelessness spending data. The city publishes budgets. The county publishes budgets. LAHSA publishes performance reports. Providers submit invoices and outcome summaries to whichever agency funds them. On paper, the system looks transparent.

In practice, none of it connects.

A dollar appropriated by the city council for interim housing does not arrive at a shelter bed in one step. It moves from the city to an administering agency, from that agency to a lead provider, and often from the lead provider to one or more subcontractors actually running the program on the ground. At each handoff, the public record gets thinner. By the time the money reaches the point of service, there is frequently no single document — and no single person — who can show the unbroken path from appropriation to outcome.

This is the difference between spending transparency and flow transparency. Spending transparency tells you how much was budgeted and how much was disbursed. Flow transparency tells you where each dollar went, who touched it, and what it produced. Los Angeles has built extensive systems for the first. It has built almost nothing for the second — and the second is the one that actually lets the public, journalists, or auditors catch waste, duplication, or failure before it becomes a scandal.

What Exists Today

To be fair to the systems already in place: Los Angeles is not starting from zero.

- The city budget portal shows appropriations by department and program at a high level — useful for understanding priorities, not for tracing individual contracts.
- LAHSA's public reporting includes point-in-time counts, program inventories, and periodic performance summaries, but ties spending to broad program categories rather than individual contracts or subcontractors.
- County dashboards under Measure H report aggregate outcomes — people housed, people served — without a public, contract-level accounting of which providers received which funds for which results.

Each of these tools stops at the same point: the boundary of the agency that built it. None follow a dollar across an agency boundary, which is exactly where most of the accountability gap lives. A resident can find out how much LAHSA spent on interim housing this year. A resident cannot easily find out how much of that went to a specific provider, how much that provider passed to a specific subcontractor, or how many people that subcontractor actually served for the money it received.

What "Following the Money" Actually Requires

A functional public spending dashboard for homelessness funding needs four things that none of Los Angeles's current tools provide together:

1. Multi-layer tracing. The dashboard must follow a dollar through every organizational layer it passes through — city or county appropriation, administering agency, lead provider, subcontractor — not just the first or last stop. Today, that trail typically has to be reconstructed manually, agency by agency, often only through a records request.

2. Contract-level, not just program-level, detail. Aggregate program totals hide the individual contracts that make up those totals. A usable dashboard needs to show spending by specific contract and specific vendor, so that patterns — a provider consistently underperforming across multiple contracts, for instance — are visible rather than buried inside program-wide averages.

3. Automatic flagging of gaps. When funds move between layers, the dashboard should surface where the documentation trail breaks — a disbursement with no corresponding outcome report, a subcontract with no public record at all. Right now, these gaps exist silently. Nobody is notified when a link in the chain goes missing; it simply isn't there to find, unless someone happens to go looking.

4. Public searchability. The information exists to be usable, not just to exist. A resident, journalist, or oversight body should be able to search by provider name, contract number, or neighborhood and see the funding history — without filing a records request and waiting weeks for a response that may or may not be complete.

This is precisely the infrastructure the proposed Homelessness Spending Transparency, Accountability, and Oversight Charter Amendment calls for: a standing, public-facing system built to trace funds through every layer of the homelessness response system, not a one-time report or an annual summary.

Why This Isn't Radical

It's worth being direct about something: none of this is a new idea, and none of it requires inventing new technology.

USAspending.gov, the federal government's public spending tracker, already does contract-level tracing for federal awards — showing not just that an agency spent money, but which vendor received it and for what purpose. Several state governments maintain comparable transparency portals for state contracts. The engineering problem of tracing public funds through multiple organizational layers and making that trail searchable has already been solved, repeatedly, at larger scale than what Los Angeles's homelessness spending would require.

What has been missing in Los Angeles is not the technical capability. It is the requirement that the capability be built and maintained — and the independent authority to make agencies and providers report into it consistently, rather than voluntarily and inconsistently.

How This Connects to the Rest of the Amendment

A spending dashboard is not a standalone fix. It is the infrastructure that makes the other two pillars of reform — independent oversight and honest outcome measurement — actually possible.

An Inspector General with subpoena authority (Policy Paper No. 1) still needs a starting map of where the money went before an investigation can begin. Without flow transparency, every inquiry starts from scratch, reconstructing contract chains by hand. A dashboard turns that starting point from a research project into a matter of public record.

Outcome verification (Policy Paper No. 2) depends on connecting money spent to results delivered. If the dashboard doesn't show which dollars reached which provider, there is no reliable way to connect a provider's reported outcomes back to the specific funding that supported them — which means outcome claims can't be checked against spending at all, only accepted or rejected wholesale.

In short: oversight authority and outcome measurement are only as strong as the data trail underneath them. The dashboard is that trail.

What This Would Look Like in Practice

Strip away the policy language, and the goal is simple. A resident of Los Angeles should be able to open a public website, type in the name of a provider operating a shelter or interim housing program in their neighborhood, and see:

- How much public funding that provider has received, and from which agency
- Which contracts and subcontracts that funding flowed through
- What outcomes were reported in connection with that funding
- Whether any part of that trail is missing or unverified

No records request. No weeks-long wait. No reconstructing the chain from five different agency websites. Just a search bar and an answer.

That is not a technically ambitious goal. It is a question of whether the city is willing to require it.

BeaconStone Foundation — Follow the money, but also follow the claims.