

# Engaging with People who have been Homeless

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Historically, organizations and agencies are run by nonprofit professionals who do not necessarily represent the community of people they work to help. However, it is widely accepted that the most impactful service delivery models include regular feedback and participation of those who are most impacted by an issue.

Since its inception, the National Coalition for the Homeless has integrated the voice of people who have experienced homelessness in its mission and advocacy. The only chance we have for truly ending homelessness lies in the expertise and leadership of those who have been impacted most by the experience of homelessness.

## Organizational Engagement of Clients

Here are tips for engaging people who have been homeless in your organization or agency's decision-making process:

- Be sure that people who have been homeless are paid for their time and expertise. Ideas on how to accomplish this:
  - Include homeless experience as a skill needed or desired for full time positions
  - Create Peer Support positions to provide/supplement Case Management
  - Pay all employees a living wage (\$15/hr or more)
  - For all non-employees, pay at least \$50 per meeting plus travel and child care costs (ask how best to provide - cash or prepaid card could be preferable for some over cheques or gift cards)
- Remember that your Continuum of Care is required to have representation on its Board from the community of people who have been homeless. Be truthful in your NOFA application. Note that CoC Planning Funds can be used to compensate people with lived experience for their time working on CoC planning/homeless services activities.
- Value the time and expertise of people who have been homeless. Be prepared to hear that your programs are not working the way you think. Practice active listening and show tangible results of the input provided.
- Talk in plain language. Refrain from overuse of acronyms for programs or agencies, or provide explanations of any acronyms used.
- Provide training for those who may not be familiar with program language, data points, funding processes, etc.

## Keep In Mind

People are more than their situation. Anyone can become homeless.

We are most effective when we help folks achieve what they want, or access what they need. Our aim is not to fit people into a specific program model, but to ensure our services are fulfilling people's needs.

Homelessness is traumatic. We must provide both trauma-informed care and trauma-informed advocacy.

Remember that anyone who has been homeless, is currently homeless, or is at risk of losing their home is dealing with or has been through a very difficult time. This includes being harassed by community members, or even police and other authorities, or being treated with disdain or negligence.

- For agency or city-wide Lived Experience Advisory Committees, recruit members with the assistance of case managers to start with, but then allow committee members to appoint new members.
- Most other industries have instituted strong customer feedback processes. Consider customer satisfaction surveys or other feedback loops to ensure ongoing feedback from the entire community you are serving.

Tasks that Lived Experience Committees can have ownership of:

- Reviewing COC or other funding applications
- Nominating a member or two to sit on Organization's or COC's Board
- Managing customer feedback channels - either with one organization or city/community-wide, and/or creating and overseeing shelter standards
- Hiring/overseeing Peer Support positions
- Hiring/vetting CoC Board members
- Public education - speakers bureaus, street newspapers
- Manage Voter Registration and engagement programs
- Come up with its own list of tasks, suggest what they would like to work on

## **Engaging for the First Time With Folks Who are Homeless**

With so many negative stereotypes of people who experience homelessness, many housed folks look for support in approaching people who are currently or formerly homeless. Remember, we all are human, and wish to be treated with dignity and respect.

Here are some basic tips for engaging with people who are experiencing homelessness:

- Introduce yourself. Explain why you are there.
- Ask for a person's name and address them by their name.
- Be compassionate, respectful and genuine.
- Let the person you approach dictate the conversation after your introduction.
- Encampments/tents do not have doorbells - give a shout or hello to alert residents to your presence.
- Have something to offer - bottles of water, food, gift cards, toiletries or other type of care package are all good options.
- Be prepared to answer questions about community resources:
  - where can folks get meals or access restrooms
  - what shelter is available, what vouchers are being offered (PSH, RRH - how many months?)
  - what is the process for working with an organization and how long does it take
  - with COVID - where can someone obtain masks, where can they wash their hands, where can they get tested, or isolate?
- Be honest. In most communities, there are not enough appropriate shelter beds, and definitely not enough affordable housing, for everyone who needs it. It is likely that someone who is facing homelessness has been turned away many times. Imagine asking for help and being told no, over and over again. Also, be honest about what you/your organization are doing/trying to achieve.
- Remember you are often asking people who are unhoused to share very specific information about their personal life - this is hard for any of us to do with strangers!