

SPECIAL TOPIC

Outreach

Outreach with engagement is an essential component in a community’s response to unsheltered homelessness. The purpose of outreach is to engage and build relationships with those living in unsheltered situations and who might not seek out services on their own, with the goal of assisting them in connecting with housing, resources, and services.

Outreach should initiate relationships that lead to exiting homelessness, particularly for those who may feel isolated from and mistrustful of the broader community. In addition to assistance in securing housing, outreach goals can include social support, material assistance, and information and referral, as well as facilitating access to health care and substance abuse assistance.

CORE ELEMENTS

A systematic, coordinated, and comprehensive approach

This entails building collaborations across sectors, including homeless service providers, law enforcement agencies and other first responders, and other broadly-focused organizations. These collaborations would also include coordinated entry processes into the homeless assistance system and data sharing to help identify and assist high-need individuals.

A housing focus

Connect people to stable housing along with access to healthcare and other needed services and supports.

A person-centered approach

Focus on the individual’s needs with an understanding of the lived experience of homelessness and of traumas that individuals may have experienced.

An emphasis on harm reduction

Work to build connections with individuals and to connect them to a range of treatment options while also providing critical, immediately needed resources, including basic needs such as access to clean water and hygiene services.



“Coordinated street outreach that identifies and engages people living in unsheltered locations... plays critical roles within systems for ending homelessness... (it) reaches people who might not otherwise seek assistance... and ensures that people’s basic needs are met while supporting them along pathways toward housing stability.”

—U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness | See Resources at end of brief.

WELL-TRAINED AND SUPPORTED OUTREACH TEAMS

Outreach staff should be trained in Housing First approaches, harm reduction, trauma-informed care, and other practices like first aid, triage, and crisis intervention. Outreach teams are often multi-disciplinary and can include social workers, behavioral health professionals, medical professionals, and peer specialists, as well as representatives from law enforcement. Outreach staff should be equipped to meet basic needs and have a good understanding of community resources and linkages to shelter and housing.

DYNAMIC AND EVOLVING ROLES OF FIRST RESPONDERS

First responders are embracing tools and innovative strategies to meet the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness, including adoption of problem-solving approaches and collaboration with homeless services providers. Identifying individuals' unique needs and connecting them to social services and housing while diverting them from the justice system is both compassionate and fiscally responsible. In many communities, outreach has been identified by law enforcement agencies as a key element in addressing unsheltered homelessness that goes beyond law enforcement measures. In communities with established outreach practices, law enforcement agencies and other first responders may work with and support the actions of service providers. In communities with limited outreach from traditional sources, dedicated homeless outreach teams within law enforcement agencies develop relationships with people who are homeless and help them connect with services providers, building relationships that could provide the foundation for long-term success.

“We know we cannot arrest our way out of our homeless problem. In fact throwing people into the endless legal cycle creates barriers to permanent housing options. People deserve better than to sleep on a train or a bus with no bathroom facilities or options for food. The problems need to be viewed through different lenses – mental health and substance abuse.”

*—Lt. Mario Ruberto and Sgt. Brooke Blakey
Ramsey County (MN) Metro Transit Police Department*



Lt. Mario Ruberto and Sgt. Brooke Blakey, Metro Transit Homeless Action Team, Minneapolis, MN

Law enforcement agencies engage with homeless assistance systems

> Syracuse

Police and the downtown business improvement district call 211 instead of 911 when there is a need to address a situation involving homelessness, thereby deploying street outreach services instead of police.

> Wichita & Sedgwick County

The Wichita Police Department's Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) performs engagement and casework activities typically executed by services providers, including help finding housing. The Sheriff's Office and Kansas Department of Corrections link those they are releasing to housing and services.

> Philadelphia

The Philadelphia Police Department's homeless unit works closely with outreach teams, accompanying them when necessary.

“We cannot arrest our way out of homelessness. Partnerships are better approach.”

*Rickard F. Schoff, Jr.
Deputy Police Chief
Syracuse Police Department*

First responder agencies utilize alternative responses

> Santa Barbara

The police officers and case managers in the Santa Barbara Police Department's Restorative Policing unit engage unsheltered individuals making the greatest demands on emergency services. The team provides ongoing care and support services in ways similar to social services providers

> Portland & Multnomah County

In Portland, special law enforcement officers partner with mental health workers in the field to provide outreach and engagement. Police work with healthcare and justice institutions to avoid discharging individuals into homelessness. The Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD[®]) pre-booking diversion program redirects low-level drug and other offenders to intensive case management. LEAD teams

frequently engage people who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Outside of city boundaries, the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office's HOPE (Homeless Outreach and Programs Engagement) team works to build relationships and connect vulnerable people to needed services and a path to a home.

> Rockford

The Rockford Fire Department facilitates access to healthcare for people with chronic and complex medical conditions who frequently utilize emergency health care systems. This often includes those who are living in unsheltered circumstances. It has partnered with the Swedish American Healthcare System to provide Mobile Integrated Healthcare (MIH). The MIH team assists individuals with medical conditions and connects them to healthcare, health education, and a housing hotline.

“The mission of the Rockford Park District is to help people enjoy life. Arresting people for being homeless in the parks is not helping them enjoy life. Our approach is to solve problems, and we apply this to homelessness. We will connect the individual to services and contact the Single Point of Entry if more help is needed.”

Sgt. Ben Champion, Rockford Park District, Park Police Division



Housecalls for the Homeless is an effort by volunteers and the Upstate Medical University to provide services in shelters and during street outreach. Dr. David Lehmann leads this effort.

RESOURCES

- > Council of State Governments Justice Center and U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/law-enforcement/publications/strengthening-partnerships-between-law-enforcement-and-homelessness-service-systems/>
- > National Health Care for the Homeless Council. <https://nhchc.org/clinical-practice/homeless-services/outreach/> and <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/outreach-enrollment-quick-guide.pdf>
- > U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Core-Components-of-Outreach-2019.pdf

SOLUTIONS BASED ON EVIDENCE

Arnold Ventures (AV) is a philanthropic organization with the mission to invest in evidence-based solutions that maximize opportunities and minimize injustice. AV supported a study to identify practices and policies that promote alternatives to using punitive and enforcement-based measures as the primary responses to unsheltered homelessness. Project investigators conducted a three-day visit in spring–summer 2019 to each of nine sites for an in-person review of community-specific initiatives. The sites represent the major regions of the U.S. and include cities of different sizes as well as rural, suburban, and tribal areas and provide an array of different socioeconomic contexts and present different local housing market configurations.