**Role of Outreach Worker**

The Outreach Worker's role is to help people experiencing unsheltered homelessness persons access housing by building relationships with outreach staff and understand alternatives to life on the street. The Worker can do this by:

* Addressing isolation by helping the individual to connect with people and services that will reconnect them to the larger community;
* Reducing fear and distrust by acting as an ambassador to services: taking the person to see a housing program, residence or introducing him or her to a support person;
* Offering hope by assisting the individual to plan realistic goals that are divided into small, achievable steps; and
* Building self-esteem by identifying small achievable steps and providing support.

Ways to build self-esteem include:

**Qualities and Skills of an Effective Outreach Worker**

What are some of the qualities and skills you will need to build rapport and help individuals you are working with break the cycle of homelessness?

**The Outreach Process**

The outreach process, whether a single encounter or many visits over time, consists of five steps: observation, engagement, assessment, assistance and follow.

1. ***Observe***

Observing the person's surrounding, belongings, appearance and behavior can tell you a great deal about his or her situation. Each observation, by itself, may not mean a lot, but added together, they can give you enough information to determine:

* + - * + Is the person likely to be homeless?
        + Is he or she at risk?
        + What is my best approach to this person?

**Table 1:** Examples of Observational Issues found in the Outreach Process

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Observation | Question | Possible Interpretation |
| Surroundings  Social environment  Location | Isolated?  In a group?  Sidewalk?  Park bench?  Bus stop? | Many individuals with mental health issues keep to themselves  Many individuals with drug addictions seek out others |
| Appearance  Clothing  Hygiene  Belongings | Appropriate?  Dirty/ ragged?  Clean/ good condition?  Clean or dirty?  Fingers, hands, face, hair  Many bags?  Shopping cart? |  |
| Activity | Sitting?  Walking?  Lying down?  Panhandling? |  |
| Behavior  Social interaction | Talking to self?  Reclusive? Angry?  Wandering in street?  Clear danger to self or others? |  |

1. ***Engage***

Setting the right tone in approaching a person is important in establishing rapport, breaking down stereotypes, and putting the person at ease

**Table 2:** Examples of Engagement Strategies in the Outreach Process

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Step | Example |
| Approach | (Observe space. Be respectful of situation.) |
| Greeting | Outreach: Hi |
| Observation or Conversation | Outreach: Sure is cold out here!  Individual: It ain’t so bad. What’s up? |
| Identification & Purpose | Outreach: I work with [outreach organization]. I’m trying to touch base with people who are out on the street.  Individual: I’m okay. |
| Information | Outreach: You have a place?  Individual: No, but I wouldn’t go back to those shelters.  Outreach: I’ve heard a lot of people say they’re no fun.  Individual: No fun! The last time I was there…  Outreach: Our idea is not to place you in a shelter, unless that’s what you want. We try to work with people to find what’s best for them. What’s your situation? |

1. ***Assess***

The formal assessment process is best done in the office with a person who is seeking help. However, outreach workers do not always have that luxury and must glean information from conversation and experience with an individual.

The assessment process begins the minute you start observing a person and is continually revised as you learn more. Assessment as an outreach step is the process of gathering information about an individual to determine what are the factors contributing to a person’s homeless and what services would best address them. Remember however that relationship building is central to the outreach worker role and whenever too many questions are hindering relationship development, those questions can be saved for later in the process.

**Information to assess a consumer’s present medical, psychological, and needs:**

* Medical
  + - Behavioral
    - Recent housing programs
    - Significant events
    - Immediate needs and wants
    - Long term goals
    - Readiness for assistance
    - Merging the individual’s wants with the needs you have assessed

Unless the individual is seeking your assistance, this information cannot be asked in the same way as if you were filling out a form or completing an application, but should be gathered by listening to a person’s history and asking questions at the appropriate time.

**Outreach:** How long have you been out here?

**Individual:** Oh, I guess about seven months.

**Outreach:** What happened that you ended up on the street?

**Individual:** (Stories vary)

**Outreach:** Are you getting any help from anyone else?

**Individual:** Yeah. I got folks that stop by with sandwiches.

**Outreach:** You said you were depressed. Are you seeing a doctor or a counselor?

**Individual:** I used to, but I stopped going.

**Outreach:** Oh yeah? Where was that?

**Individual:** Warren E. Smith (community health center)

**Outreach:** What happened?

**Individual:** Once I hit the street, I just stopped going.

**Outreach:** Do you think getting reconnected with a counselor might help?

(Other questions: medication, type of assistance, therapist, ICM, RC, last time….)

1. ***Assist***

Be ready to assist an individual in accessing services and housing. Refer to your Coordinated Entry system for Supportive Housing, Emergency Shelter or other such as 211 for health or social services support and assistance. When placing an individual, it is useful to keep in mind the following best practice:

Be knowledgeable of shelter/residence rules and criteria

Place when the individual is informed and ready (except emergencies)

Place at most appropriate level of care

Communicate with residential staff on arrival at facility

Follow-up

Next day with individual and residential staff

Provide ongoing support every two weeks