



## Services to People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness and Collaborating with Law Enforcement

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As communities see increased numbers of their fellow community members experiencing unsheltered homelessness, an odd pairing commonly occurs between homeless services providers and law enforcement. Communities take differing perspectives to the issues of unsheltered homelessness. Approaches can range along a continuum from a housing and engagement focused approach to a more law and order approach of forcible movement of persons away from encampments and locations where community leaders prioritize that no persons remain on the streets.<sup>1</sup> Community approaches can change over the years and commonly do change when political leadership changes. System leaders need to be effective at engaging with a variety of local stakeholders that have differing agendas around unsheltered homelessness. The cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing and communities with lesser amounts of affordable housing or great disparities between income and housing costs, will likely have greater amounts of unsheltered homelessness. Shelter system capacity, or lack thereof, can also have an impact on rates of unsheltered homelessness in a community. This document raises a variety of questions that communities, advocates and their leaders need to consider as they design an effective and placed based strategy to address this issue.

### Differing priorities

The priority for those who work with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness is to help get them to the housing option that will end their homelessness long term. The priority for law enforcement is community safety. These two priorities are usually aligned but when in conflict, the conflicts can occur at highly charged times. Police spend a lot of time literally walking the beat and best practices in community policing recommend that local law enforcement know the residents of their beat, both sheltered and unsheltered. Police can be a valuable resource for outreach staff, and can communicate valuable information if appropriate. Outreach staff may also have need of police support in community situations, when outreach workers feel unsafe or possibly in danger. Relationship building and regular communication between community leaders in this area will be a helpful strategy that can lead to an effective systemic response to unsheltered homelessness.

When a crime has been committed and a person experiencing homeless is a suspect, how does outreach respond? When an outreach worker or team feels unsafe in a situation, how does local police support? When police want to assist a person on their beat, how do they engage outreach assistance? How are the two workforces introduced to each other? How do they stay accountable to each other? These and other questions will need to be considered in each community and community specific policies to address will need to be developed for each community?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nlchp.org/documents/Housing-Not-Handcuffs>

QUESTION: How will your community's outreach staff intersect with police? How do they get to know each other? Know when to call each other and when to allow the other to do their job?

### Potential Solutions

1. Train both police and outreach staff on the role of the other entity and how most effectively to intersect with the other. Best Practices in policing highlight Police Departments that offer Crisis Intervention Team training to their officers and this can be an opportunity to also train police in working with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness.<sup>2</sup>
2. Offer regular times when police leaders and outreach leaders are able to communicate about issues effecting both their work. Learn to communicate and trust each other.

### Collaboration- Close but not too close

Given the differing priorities and how law enforcement is perceived in diverse communities, while collaboration is essential, it's important that people experiencing unsheltered homelessness do not perceive the outreach workers as an arm of law enforcement. The resources that are offered by outreach should be unique to outreach workers. The outreach workers perspective is as an advocate for the person experiencing unsheltered homelessness and the outreach worker's basic stance is engaging and relationship building. Outreach staff at all times are of course required to follow a community's laws and ordinances, similar to any other citizen. However, at times, police may have reason to request to move persons from specific locations. Those requests may occur due to community activities, due to a request of a local business or community leader or due to one officer making a decision. Outreach staff need to understand and communicate the impression and impact this activity may have on the people they serve. Learning how to balance these competing needs will be a challenge for outreach staff, their supervisors and leaders and one that needs to be negotiated over situations and over time. A similar balance is being struck by law enforcement and communication between groups can help both groups better serve their community in their unique role.

### Encampments

Communities are recommended to have policies and procedures regarding encampments that have been developed from a far-reaching community dialogue. Breaking up encampments, when no housing resources are available only serves to move the issue from one location to another. When encampments are cleared, people often lose vital documents and their few possessions, and their ability to trust others to assist them lessens even further. Encampment clearings, if not done with the engagement of the leadership of the encampment and with a clear plan where people will be moving to, and their willingness to move, can be severely re-traumatizing to the people who are experiencing homelessness. Vital questions need to be answered before an encampment can be cleared include:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://cit.memphis.edu/>

- ✓ Does the community have viable options for where people can move to? Have those options been tailored to meet the needs of the people who currently call the encampment home?
- ✓ Does the community have public health resources to address any evident or potential communicable diseases? Some encampments have been found to have outbreaks of Hepatitis A or other diseases.<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ Have encampment leaders and residents been engaged in the clearance process? Has their voice been heard as options are being developed?
- ✓ How long will the process take? Have residents been notified and prepared? Localities may have legal requirements for the process? Have those requirements been adhered to?

Addressing these and other issues raised by encampment residents, can help communities ensure that the encampment does not just rise up on a different block, sidewalk, part of town or the county over. If the process engages all parties impacted, the persons living in the encampment, outreach staff and law enforcement can all work towards vital steps forwards for a community.

### Panhandling vs Unsheltered Homelessness

Commonly members of the community confuse the issue of panhandling (one person, unsolicited, asking another person for money) with the issue of unsheltered homelessness. While many people who panhandle are also experiencing homelessness, there is not a 1:1 correlation between the issues. Many people who pay more than 30% of their income on housing, need to panhandle to in order to meet basic needs such as food or clothing. Many people who panhandle have addiction challenges, and have a need for ready cash. Many people who experience homelessness would not panhandle and would resent being considered someone who panhandles. For higher income persons, these issues may seem to be the same issue, but they are not. While poverty impacts all these persons, distinguishing between the issues and ensuring separate strategies to address the differing issues that these activities raise will be essential to community success in addressing both issues.

### Emergencies

Communities may have times when government will decide that no one can remain on the streets. These are most commonly weather emergencies such as hurricanes, stretches of extreme cold or heat or during community events or even National Special Security Events.<sup>4</sup> In any case, when this occurs, special strategies will be needed to ensure the safety and respect for persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness. This is another case where law enforcement and outreach workers commonly need to collaborate to ensure the safety and respect for those living unsheltered in our communities.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/health/sd-no-hepatitis-redux-20180209-story.html>

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Special\\_Security\\_Event](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Special_Security_Event)

Joint planning of activities is recommended, for weather related events on an annual basis. Coordinated protocols should be developed between outreach and law enforcement for weather related emergencies. Regular coordinated training efforts, can build effective networks for cooperation between law enforcement and outreach staff. Joint celebrations of positive community events, also serves to enhance the cooperation between outreach and law enforcement.

For less predictable occurrences such as hurricanes, while the timing of the event is not predictable, the season can be and planning efforts need to be focused on 'when' not 'if' such an event occurs. Sporting events such as the Super Bowl or visit from the President can also mean that security in certain areas requires no one on the streets. Preparing outreach staff and the people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, can ensure an event that respects the rights of all and showcases the best of your community.

This list is by no means comprehensive. Outreach activities are by definition community wide and literally ANYTHING can happen. But these issues have been found commonly throughout communities and preparing for them with concrete strategies highlights leadership, forethought, planning and success for the efforts to end unsheltered homelessness in your community.