



Developing a Coordinated Strategy to Address Unsheltered Homelessness: Policies, Tools & Templates for Communities

Introduction

Since 2014 the U.S. has seen a rise in unsheltered homelessness among single adults, including a nearly 10% increase between 2016 and 2017. In 2017, HUD reported the first national increase in people experiencing chronic homelessness since 2008 - with 70% of the population staying in unsheltered locations. While these national increases are being driven by geographic areas where the housing crisis is particularly acute, they serve as an important reminder that every community should develop robust strategies to address the needs of this especially vulnerable population. USICH has prioritized this work in their new national plan to end homelessness, "[Home Together](#)".

Outreach is defined as dedicated staff who spend time literally walking the streets and talking to persons who appear to be experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Essential to outreach is a basic human connection, from one caring and concerned person to a person who needs assistance. While many agencies may have walk in hours or may send staff to shelters or other indoor locations, where vulnerable people are known to congregate, and this is a valuable activity, this is not outreach.

A high functioning outreach system is housing focused. Communities often struggle to address unsheltered homelessness and develop strategies that balances daily - often lifesaving - outreach activities while remaining focused on accessing limited housing resources for those who are sleeping outside. Some communities have winters that are deadly to people who are unsheltered (Boston, Minneapolis) while others have summers that can be just as dangerous (Phoenix). Increasingly communities face the impact of climate change, such as hurricane or community wide events that impact the unsheltered populations. Holistic outreach and engagement strategies must include both of these priorities.

Since a high performing outreach system is housing focused, high performing communities have commonly has prioritized access to specialized resources to address the needs of this population. While much volunteer outreach may focus on handing out food, blankets or other goods that assist people on the street, the professional outreach system has a mandated focus to end unsheltered homelessness through access to housing. Outreach workers should be well versed in housing resources in a community and how to access them. In a community with a high number of unsheltered individuals, the homeless system may target specific resources such as safe havens for exclusive access for outreach teams and people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. In many communities, supportive housing will be the resource necessary to end homelessness for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Outreach capacity can be split between staff who engage people who are unsheltered, while outreach

staff may be focused on assisting those who wish to access housing and services and help them achieve those goals, through high quality case management. All outreach staff should have the orientation, the training and support to start and remain housing focused.

Communities are seeing changes in their unsheltered populations. Some communities have developed sophisticated methods of targeting and prioritization for their chronic and vulnerable populations and many people have left the life of homelessness. Populations remaining on the streets may be younger, more commonly suffer from addictive disorders, or and more commonly have a history of criminal justice involvement, than persons living on the streets in years and decades past. To achieve success communities will need be aware of how the populations is changing and modify practices and programs to meet the changing needs.

Unsheltered homelessness also brings together a diverse group of stakeholders such as business districts, local police and resident associations, as well as homeless advocates. Each of these groups may have different reasons for wanting to end unsheltered homelessness, and may advocate for different strategies to address the challenge. Bringing all stakeholders together around a common goal of ending homelessness and improving life in the community of all members is a necessary step in the development and implementation of a coordinated strategy.

Developing a coordinated strategy to address unsheltered homelessness – in any community – can face challenges. These can include:

- A lack of affordable and supportive housing options for permanent housing placement;
- Insufficient or poorly implemented emergency shelter/crisis response options to assist with immediate needs;
- Low levels of coordination with mainstream systems that persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness often interact with (jails and hospitals);
- Not enough - or not the right type - of funding available for outreach activities;
- Outreach worker burn-out; or challenges maintaining a workforce that builds the relationships needed for success.
- The need for specific training for outreach workers and planners on effective models.

This suite of tools is designed to assist communities in identifying and leveraging local champions and strengths, as well as to address challenges that may arise during the development and implementation of a comprehensive outreach and engagement system.

Tools and Resources

CSH recognizes that key components in the development or enhancement of outreach and engagement systems that are part of an overall coordinated response to homelessness must include:

- Data and Analytics
- Policies and Partners
- Agency Coordination
- Communication

With these key components in mind, CSH has developed a suite of tools and resources designed to help communities build on work already done in this area, or to start the work of developing a coordinated outreach approach. This suite – developed around the central theme that unsheltered homelessness is unacceptable for any community in our nation - includes examples of policies, ideas for what issues should be addressed at different stages of implementation, best practices and easy adaptable examples of materials for each community. These tools are expected to need to be adapted for each community, but they give community leaders a place to start and highlight issues of importance before the crisis arises that will demand an immediate solution.

The suite also includes important guidance on developing a “By Name List” process and enhancing data driven responses to individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Communities with diverse populations and homeless systemic responses at various stages of development, can benefit from available best practices and community examples regarding persons who remain unsheltered, persons who are engaged in services but are challenged to manage these services while unsheltered, and effective messaging activities to engage the broader community.

Let’s Get Started

The templates and tools included will need to be adapted to your local community and the specific challenges faced. The tools build on lessons learned from other communities and can be a starting place for your community’s solutions to develop. As your community develops or enhances your outreach system, be sure to reach out to CSH to let us know the impact of these tools, new lessons learned and how these tools are adapted to more effectively assist persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

CSH’s *Community Toolkit to Address Unsheltered Homelessness* suite can assist communities at any phase of developing an effective outreach and engagement system.