



Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Lessons from Philadelphia, PA

Across the country, communities are striving to create solutions for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness—including people sleeping and living in encampments—within their efforts to implement effective and efficient coordinated entry systems. As with all efforts to end homelessness, those solutions focus on creating meaningful pathways to permanent housing opportunities. We recognize, however, that given constrained resources, such opportunities may not be immediately available. While permanent housing opportunities are being scaled and secured, communities can implement strategies to ensure the safety and wellbeing of people sleeping and living in encampments.

In August 2015, we released [Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Advancing the Dialogue](#) to support community-level discussions to refine and strengthen strategies for addressing the housing and services needs of people living in encampments. We recently checked in with several communities to learn about their ongoing efforts. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, we spoke with David Holloman, Director of External Affairs for the Philadelphia Department of Homeless Services. That conversation is summarized here.

How has your approach to addressing encampments evolved?

The City of Philadelphia began developing its response to encampments several years ago, partially to address growing concerns from community members and business leaders in the downtown area. This response is implemented within the context of the city's comprehensive outreach strategies, which include consistent outreach and engagement efforts with people sleeping and living in encampments.

For many years, the Philadelphia Police Department has had a special detail assigned to individuals experiencing homelessness, including those occupying encampments. Beginning in the spring of 2010, the city began conducting periodic "service days" to try to identify and assess the needs of individuals living on the street.

When an encampment has been designated for cleanup, outreach teams and social workers provide residents with 72 hours' notice, and use the opportunity to assess their housing and service needs and connect them to low-barrier, permanent housing. Outreach teams also use a 'focus list' to target outreach to those individuals with the highest level of need.

Who were the most important stakeholders to have at the table? Why? What strategies were the most effective in engaging them?

Key stakeholders have included the Philadelphia Police Department, business district representatives, Office of the Mayor, Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health, and the state of Pennsylvania. The Mayor's Office has been one of the strongest supporters of the city's approach to encampments, and is committed to ensuring residents of encampments are not criminalized or burdened with unnecessary fines, citations, or penalties.

To engage stakeholders, the city holds quarterly "combined outreach meetings" with a broader set of partners, and monthly "focus meetings" for outreach teams. The

quarterly outreach meetings provide an opportunity for entities involved or interested in outreach activities (i.e., behavioral health providers, law enforcement, hospitals, homelessness service providers, faith-based organizations, city staff, etc.) to discuss strategies and challenges. During the monthly “focus” meetings, a smaller group of providers spend an entire day reviewing the focus list of individuals with the highest needs, identifying available housing and service interventions, and dividing up the list for targeted outreach.

The city also conducts numerous trainings to engage new stakeholders and educate providers and community members on the importance of using a low-barrier, Housing First approach.

What strategies did you find most effective for conducting outreach and engagement?

How did they improve your outcome?

Because of Philadelphia’s 24/7/365 outreach presence, outreach teams have developed relationships and trust with residents of encampments. The city also conducts quarterly point-in-time counts, which help providers better target their outreach to locations where individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness are most likely to be found.

During large events that attract sizable crowds, such as the Philadelphia Flower Show, outreach teams and Philadelphia Police Department provide additional notice to residents of encampments, beginning their outreach two weeks in advance.

Crisis intervention training for law enforcement has been another key strategy, helping to ensure that encounters with individuals in encampments do not escalate, particularly for those individuals who may be experiencing a substance use or behavioral health disorder.

What strategies do you use to provide low-barrier pathways to permanent housing? How do those strategies help?

Outreach is conducted with a priority on connecting residents of encampments directly to permanent housing wherever possible. If available, a permanent housing unit or subsidy is offered prior to offering shelter or transitional housing.

While an emphasis is placed on permanent housing, housing options are also available for individuals who may want recovery or treatment supports prior to entering permanent housing, such as the [Journey of Hope](#) program, which provides treatment stays of six months to one year, followed by placement in permanent housing.

What are your next steps?

As with any high-cost, low-vacancy housing market, ensuring a pipeline of affordable permanent housing units is an ongoing challenge. The community has been working to create public-private partnerships to assist individuals in encampments, which has initially been met with positive responses from both the Mayor and the business community. The city is also planning to open several “engagement sites” to quickly assess and triage individuals experiencing homelessness, and is hoping to continue strengthening relationships with faith-based organizations, which play a vital role in the homelessness crisis response system. Finally, like many large cities, Philadelphia is exploring strategies to address the growing trend of opioid abuse, particularly among the young adult population.

What has been your greatest challenge, or the thing that surprised you the most?

Many individuals who occupy encampments actually earn income as day laborers, or through other part-time or temporary employment, but have either had a bad experience with shelter, or do not trust government or outreach teams. One hope in creating more public-private partnerships is to engage those individuals who may be more likely to trust a housing offer from a non-governmental entity.

We have also noticed that the population in our encampments has gotten younger. It used to be that most individuals were in the 45-50 range. Now we are seeing a lot more young people, from around 19 to 26 years old, who have been in the foster care system, or who struggle with opioid addiction.