Identifying and Supporting Behavioral Health Needs in Encampments: Tips for Nonclinical Staff

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Introduction: *Encampments* are temporary structures or enclosed areas where people seek shelter but are not intended for long-term continuous occupancy. They may look like groupings of people sleeping outside with minimal cover, tents, or even sanctioned sites with temporary structures. Encampments develop in communities where there are not enough adequate housing options or where available options do not meet the communities' housing needs.

Encampments provide people with a sense of community and belonging because they often feel that the larger community isolates and shuns them. They can offer safety, security, and a feeling that others are looking out for them. Encampments can also give people a sense of autonomy that contrasts with the strict rules found in many shelter spaces, such as curfews or not being allowed to enter with a partner or a pet. Encampments also provide opportunities for individuals to engage with service providers who do outreach, and they are often in locations that provide easier access to necessary resources.

However, encampments do not typically offer access to clean water and bathrooms, nor do they offer adequate protection against extreme weather. People cannot safeguard their belongings and must often choose between protecting their personal belongings and accessing services such as food and health care. Community members and businesses may oppose the presence of encampments. This opposition can set up community conflicts as well as encounters with law enforcement and sweeps, or the forced displacement of people from a particular location, often coupled with the destruction of their shelters and removal of their belongings.

How to Engage People Living in Encampments (or Anywhere!)

As with other types of engagement, engaging people who live or spend time in encampments should start with focusing on building and earning trust. Strategies include the following:

- **Be consistent:** show up when you say you will, and don't assume you know who wants or needs help—talk to everyone!
- **Underpromise and over-deliver:** do not commit to actions or services you aren't sure you can execute or deliver.
- **Start with the individual's goals:** listen and be open to the individual's needs rather than let a predetermined agenda drive the encounter.
- **Take time to listen to individuals in the encampment to learn what they want and do not want.** The needs of the people in one encampment will be different from those of another, so it is important not to assume what everyone's priorities are. Keep asking because needs and priorities change.
- **Ask for permission to enter the encampment, and never enter a person's space (tent, partitioned area) without asking.** The encampment is a person's home, and you are a guest. Even if there are no structures, it is important to recognize that you are in someone else's private space.
- **Announce yourself by identifying who you are and what organization you represent.** It is important not to sneak up on anyone.
- **Ask for permission to return.** Just because a person engaged with you once does not mean that they will want you to return to their space. Determine where they would like to meet the next time and if it is okay for you to return to this location and ask for them.
- **Use the relationships you have built to form new ones.** The best referrals will come from other individuals you have worked with. If a person hears from someone else that you are trustworthy, it can encourage them to be open to working with you as well. It is imperative to maintain this credibility because trust is easier to lose than gain.
- **Recognize that people's goals for themselves may not always align with what you assess to be their biggest need.** Remember that having success with a self-determined goal is a great way for people to build confidence to take on other things and demonstrates that you are centering their priorities.

Behavioral Health Needs in Encampments

With 21 percent of people experiencing homelessness reporting having a serious mental illness and 16 percent reporting having a substance use disorder, there is a higher rate of behavioral health conditions among people experiencing homelessness than there is in the broader community.[1,2] In addition, living their private life in public spaces, facing extreme weather, increased risk of falling victim to violence and assault, managing exhaustion from poor sleep, and constantly living in survival mode exacerbate their stress and can create the onset of new behavioral health conditions.

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1   https://www.samhsa.gov/blog/addressing-social-determinants-health-among-individuals-experiencing-homelessness
2   https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness/

Outreach teams observe a wide range of behavioral health conditions, but their approach should always be the same. By focusing on relationships, outreach teams are likely to observe changes in a person's overall health, sometimes even before the person is aware of such changes.

Consider the following possibilities for levels of necessary support, and recognize that behavioral health needs may change from encounter to encounter:

- **The person needs behavioral health services or is interested in behavioral health care.** The person may report a history of a mental health diagnosis, that they will soon run out of medications, or that they are interested in treatment for substance use. A referral to behavioral health services, including support with transportation or other needs, is appropriate, along with instructions for seeking emergency support if their situation worsens.

- **The person is not in crisis, but their symptoms have increased or they have a more immediate need.** In these situations, utilizing supervision and case conferencing can be effective in avoiding a crisis. If the person is connected with other teams or providers and you have permission to speak with them, share what you have observed and develop a plan to support the person's needs. The timeline is often shorter, and the person may need more frequent assessments and support to get into care as soon as possible.

- **The person is in crisis.** If someone reports being in crisis or you are concerned they are a danger to themselves or others, consider how to act using your community's response system. Some communities have behavioral health crisis response teams, while others utilize traditional emergency response systems, such as calling 988 or 911.
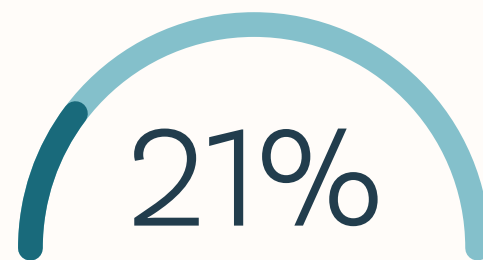
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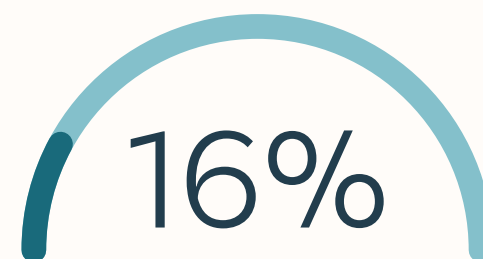
Tips for Safety

Discomfort versus Unsafe

Engaging with individuals in encampments removes many barriers to care they face, but it can also flip the power dynamic between them and the service provider. When going on outreach, regardless of the capacity in which you are acting, you lose the position of power and authority that an office setting provides, where someone must come to you. This can make you feel some discomfort, especially in new environments, but it does not necessarily mean the environment is unsafe. To help with evaluating for safety, consider the following:

- Why does this setting feel unsafe? Consider factors such as the environment, the density of people, police presence, or past or current direct threats.
- Are the residents displaying high energy (e.g., speaking loudly or energetically, moving quickly around the camp)? If so, does this indicate conflict or does the energy feel positive?
- What resources do I have to respond to an unsafe situation?

  - Mode of egress (i.e., how to leave a situation)
  - Coworkers, both present and available by phone
  - Encampment residents, who often have a better read on the situation and will readily share information about safety or threats
  - Phone to call for support
  - Safety plan, including making sure your supervisor knows your planned route and location
  - Have a code word among team members that indicates it is time to leave

Organizations can support staff in addressing feelings of discomfort in various ways. Discomfort often arises in new situations where staff confront unfamiliar conditions and are unprepared for how to respond to issues. Organizations can support staff by

- providing ongoing training on topics including effective engagement strategies, what to do when there is a safety concern, and Mental Health First Aid;
- pairing new staff with seasoned workers who have knowledge of the area and connections with people in the community;
- role-playing scenarios that might occur while on outreach and discussing how to respond;
- debriefing encounters on the street to discuss what strategies were implemented, what was effective, and what, if anything, could have happened differently;
- developing staff policies and procedures for dealing with safety issues in the community;
- implementing team-centered policies that prevent staff from conducting outreach on their own; and
- providing outreach staff with resources such as vehicles and cell phones so they can leave their environment and call for help when necessary.

The feeling of discomfort is an important lesson for everyone. It helps you put yourself in someone else's shoes and teaches empathy and understanding of how someone might feel when an outreach worker or team approaches them.

Keeping a Pulse on the Environment

In addition to helping with engagement, returning regularly to the same outreach locations helps you learn about the community that lives there. Like every community, encampments have their own culture and vibe, and spending time there will help you get to know each location's uniqueness. It is also important to know who is a regular resident and how relationships and dynamics change when certain individuals are present. This "vibe check" can be an important safety indicator. Because outreach teams are present for a relatively short period, it is important to conduct a vibe check on each visit. If even a single staff member feels that

something feels off, the team should leave and discuss the concern. A policy of "one no, no go" means that if one staff member has reservations, the team doesn't go at all or it leaves together.

Helpful Tips for Outreach Teams

- Work in teams to increase safety and offer a variety of approaches and personalities for people to engage with.
- Utilize "pinning" technology, that is, place a marker or pin on an electronic map with the encampment's geographic location. This not only provides important information that makes following up easier, but it also helps with security in case you need an emergency response. This can be especially helpful when encampment sweeps frequently displace people.
- Have a code word(s) to indicate that a team member feels unsafe. This can help team members communicate with one another without exacerbating the situation. For example, a team might use "Do you have a yellow highlighter?" when they are starting to feel unsafe and "red pen" to mean that it is time to go. The team should choose words that they can easily apply to a conversation without alerting encampment residents that they have concerns.
- Offer tangible items to encampment residents as a way of breaking the ice. Items such as water, ready-to-eat food, and clothing are often necessary and in short supply. Offering such items shows that you are interested in helping residents meet their needs and can provide an opening to start a conversation. Try to address each encampment's specific requests.
- Remember that not all residents will be comfortable with your presence, willingly share information about their behavioral health needs, or be aware of a change in their behavior or presentation. Building relationships and trust, as well as open and honest communication about any concerns you have for a resident, form the basis for providing support and opening the door to health care.

RESOURCES

Trauma-Informed Outreach and Engagement Online Course | Homeless and Housing Resource Center [HTML]

Temporary Supported Communities: Strategies for Serving Unsheltered People | National Health Care for the Homeless Council [HTML]

Interim Strategies for Responding to Unsheltered Homelessness | National Alliance to End Homelessness [HTML]

10 Strategies for Communities to Address Encampments Humanely and Effectively | U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness [HTML]

Learn More about the Homeless and Housing Resource Center

Providing high-quality, no-cost training for health and housing professionals in evidence-based practices that contributes to housing stability, recovery, and an end to homelessness.

Contact Us:

- hhrctraining.org
- info@hhrctraining.org

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