Ending Homelessness:

Using Creative Outreach Strategies to Reach the Hardest to House

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Who are we?

• We are a municipal Community Action Agency (CAA) serving a two county area in Northern Illinois (Boone & Winnebago) about 90 miles Northwest of Chicago. Rockford is the largest city in that area with 147,651 people. Total population of the two counties is approximately 340,000 with a combination of urban and rural areas.

• Some of our services include: LIHEAP, Weatherization, Emergency Services, Head Start, Employment Programs, Summer Food, DCFS Housing Advocacy, Scholarships, ESG Rapid Rehousing, and Single Point of Entry (SPOE) for the homeless.
What will we be discussing?

- Our agency has drastically increased our work with the homeless since January of 2015. At that point, we began acting as the Single Point of Entry for the homeless in our area. Also signed on to participate in the Mayors’ Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness and the Built for Zero Campaign.

- During our efforts working to end homelessness, it was vital to implement creative approaches when working to engage the hardest to house individuals. This session will look at examples of creative approaches to getting individuals off the streets and into permanent housing. The session will also discuss ways to work with the criminal justice system to decrease barriers to housing such as diverting homeless offenders out of the criminal justice system and into housing options.

- Objective 1- To understand why homeless engagement is necessary to the goals of ending homelessness

- Objective 2- To understand the importance of using creative ways of engaging homeless persons

- Objective 3-To understand why ending homelessness is important and how it transforms your community.
What is outreach?

- Street outreach involves moving outside the walls of the agency to engage people experiencing homelessness who may be disconnected and alienated not only from mainstream services and supports, but from the services targeting homeless persons as well.

- Outreach is designed to help establish supportive relationships, give people advice and support, and hopefully enhance the possibility that they will access necessary services and supports that will help them move off the streets.

- Outreach strategies require a personalized assessment that aids in the development of an understanding of the individual circumstances, as well as cultural barriers that may prevent people from accessing homeless/mainstream services.

- Develops positive relationships which help in the attainment of the larger goal of helping people access the services and supports they need in order to help them move forward.

- The overall goal of street outreach should be tied to the larger goal of helping people move off the streets as quickly as possible. In order to achieve this goal, outreach workers need to be familiar with, and have access to, a range of mainstream and community services.
Why is outreach so important?

1. It’s important to know who you are working with & the extent of your homeless issue
2. Much easier to help people find housing when you know their actual needs
3. When you build relationships with people, they are more likely to open up and trust that you will assist them
4. Helps to access hard-to-reach individuals and link them to community resources
5. Focuses on those persons that are the hardest to house (usually the chronically homeless)
Who did we provide outreach to & what was the scope?

• Outreach (and in-reach) was provided to anyone that was literally homeless. Our strongest efforts worked to engage those that were living on the streets and usually chronically homeless.

• Our outreach began to expand in conjunction with the Built for Zero Challenge.

• Our community was given a target of 42 veterans and 70 chronically homeless people to house. To date, we have housed 104 veterans and 140 chronically homeless households.
Point in Time Homeless Data

- S-ES
- S-TH
- Unsheltered
Where should outreach be conducted?

- Anywhere that homeless people may be....so that literally means “anywhere”
  - This can be at common homeless locations such as shelters, drop-in centers, food banks, known homeless camps, etc.
  - It can also be public locations like bus stops or public transit depots, libraries, fast food locations or stores (places with free Wi-Fi are great for finding homeless youth), parks, or lake/riverfront locations.
  - My #1 location to find chronically homeless individuals who were not connected to services was a liquor store parking lot about 2 blocks from a Community Center that serves as a pantry with food and clothes.
Who Should be doing outreach?

- We have established a Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) comprised of various providers from the PATH team, Coordinated Entry staff, Veterans Administration staff, shelter staff, housing providers, paramedics, medical providers, and police (if needed).

- It's important to have outreach staff that can actually connect with the homeless on the streets regardless of their “position”

- We have utilized private citizens who volunteer with the homeless as a way to get a connection with the hard to reach.
  - For months, a local news anchor, Whitney Martin was part of a group that went out of Sunday afternoons to help feed the street homeless. Every Monday, she would contact me to give me a report of what she found. She really was able to build a connection with one man, who she assisted us to get housed. Because she had a connection with him, she took our staff out to meet him. Because he trusted her, we were able to step in because she assured him that we could help. He has been successfully housed since November 2016.
Sometimes you need to be creative...

Mike (below) would not engage with any agency staff.

After he was photographed by the local newspaper, we figured out that he liked to talk to women (opposed to many of the male outreach staff who were attempted to engage with him). We also knew that he loved to drink coffee.

We started sending out female caseworkers with coffee. Slowly we were able to get him engaged. We placed him temporarily into a hotel so that he could get a taste of housing. It took about 4 attempts to get him to sign the paperwork for the Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) unit that we had found for him. He had become comfortable in the hotel and did not want to return to the streets.

He has been housed in PSH since 4/18/17.
More creativity....

Jeff had been on the streets for nearly 10 years. Severe alcoholism was/is his biggest barrier.

Recently he did not have a set sleeping place, rather it was where ever he passed out, often times a broken down pick-up truck outside a local garage.

We also gave him a “taste” of housing with a hotel voucher where he was very excited to watch the Cubs in the World Series. Too much “celebrating” caused him to get kicked out of the hotel. He begged for another chance.

Using Rapid-Rehousing, we were able to find a landlord willing to take a chance on him despite his criminal record (mostly all “homeless crimes”).

When we went to find him to tell him of the lease up date for his apartment, we found out he had been arrested for trespassing.

Called the State’s Attorney Office, told them of the situation, and begged them to let him out.

They allowed our staff to check him out of jail, something we never even knew was possible. He got out the morning of the lease up. He was clean, sober, and ready to move-in.

Jeff has been housed since 1/28/17.
Myths...


Street Outreach Worker: At least 90% of the people I work with do not want to be housed.
Me (Iain): That seems way, way too high to me. How do you know they do not want to be housed?
SOW: I just know. I have been doing this 20 years. You can just tell by looking at a person.
Me: Have you actually asked all of them if you can help them get housing?
SOW: No. That would be a waste of time.
Me: So, of the 100% of people you work with that you have never asked if they want housing, at least 90% you know will say no.
SOW: Yes.
Me: Have you considered maybe a different profession than Street Outreach?
SOW: Why would I? I love this job. My people love me too. We’re like a big family.

There is a very common myth that many homeless do not want to be housed. We have found this to be false. Sometimes in the initial phase of doing outreach with people, they will say they do not want help.

Since we have begun working under the Housing First Model and participants understand that we are not forcing them to do things they do not want to do, they are almost always open to being housed. Since the beginning of 2015, we have only had 2 individuals turn down permanent housing. Both of these individuals are severely mentally ill and outreach staff continually tries to engage with them.
Why is ending homelessness important?

• The Promise of Community Action:

Community Action changes people’s lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better place to live. We care about the entire community, and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.

• Our agency believes that housing is a human right.

• By reducing the number of homeless persons on the streets, our community has been able to reduce the costs of public services. This includes:
  ➢ Jail/court costs
  ➢ Police interventions
  ➢ Paramedic services
  ➢ Emergency Room costs
Our accomplishments...

✓ We have permanently housed over 300 families/individuals since the beginning of 2015.

✓ Mayors’ Challenge to end Veteran Homelessness: Completed challenge of 12/15/2015 and declared at Functional Zero—have sustained 8 or less homeless veterans at a time since that date. Have the ability to house any newly homeless veterans within 30 days of identification.

✓ Built for Zero: In additional to hitting the goal for veterans, we have maintained the functional zero number (3 or less) since January, 2017 for chronically homeless. We are currently going through the official process to get the federal designation that we have ended Chronic Homelessness. It should be announced next month.
“Peace will happen not through the absence of war but through the presence of love. The kind of love that will see to it that men have enough food to eat, enough clothes to wear, enough houses to live in.”
-Sargent Shriver (1966)
Any Questions??

*Your opinion is important to us! Please take a moment to evaluate this workshop in the CAPCON17 app. Thank you!!!

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