U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness
7 Principles for Addressing Encampments

Purpose

This document provides a set of principles to help communities as they develop and implement their response to encampments.

Background

Communities across the United States face a crisis of unsheltered homelessness and encampments. 2020 marked the first time that more individuals experiencing homelessness were unsheltered than sheltered. The COVID-19 public health crisis has only exacerbated this ongoing emergency, with unsheltered people confronted by a global pandemic on top of daily threats to health and safety. These daily threats take the lives of thousands of people experiencing homelessness each year.

Local decision-makers are caught between demands for swift action and the reality that permanent, sustainable solutions—housing with voluntary supportive services—take time and investment to bring to scale. With rising housing costs and limited resources, elected officials, nonprofit providers, businesses, the faith community, advocates, and people with lived experience often struggle to find common ground and effective solutions. Some communities turn to strategies that use aggressive law enforcement approaches that criminalize homelessness, or they close encampments without offering shelter or housing options. These approaches result in adverse health outcomes, exacerbate racial disparities, and create traumatic stress, loss of identification and belongings, and disconnection from much-needed services. While these efforts may have the short-term effect of clearing an encampment from public view, without connection to adequate shelter, housing, and supportive services, they will not succeed. When people's housing and service needs are left unaddressed, encampments may appear again in another neighborhood or even in the same place they had previously been.

Homelessness is a complex social problem with roots in racial inequities. As communities continue to build political and public will and mobilize the resources necessary to provide housing and services to end homelessness, we must acknowledge that homelessness is a failure of systems, not individuals and that we all have a constructive role to play in addressing it. Addressing encampments and ending unsheltered homelessness will require a system-wide, coordinated effort to promote healthy and safe communities where all can live in dignity.

We know that each community is different, and no one-size-fits-all solution exists. We are, however, beginning to see effective practices emerge from communities that successfully address unsheltered homelessness and move people from encampments into housing and support. Based on these efforts, the principles outlined here are intended to help communities as they develop and implement their responses to encampments. As we come together to create comprehensive, community-wide solutions to encampments, our communities will become safer and more welcoming for all.

Principle 1: Establish a Cross-Agency, Multi-Sector Response to Encampments

Engaging people in encampments requires cross-departmental and community-wide collaboration and coordination. Effective coordination includes all relevant partners and may vary depending on the size of the community:

- City and County officials, including the Mayor, City/County Manager, and other public officials
- The homelessness response system including:
    - Continuum of Care
    - Coordinated Entry
    - Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)
    - Homeless outreach providers, including peer specialists
    - Emergency shelter providers
    - Transitional housing providers
    - Permanent housing providers
- Encampment residents
- Public housing authorities
- Behavioral health departments and community providers
- Public health departments
- Law enforcement
- Parks departments
- Departments of public works
- Departments of transportation
- Emergency management agencies
- School districts and McKinney-Vento liaisons
- Advocacy groups, especially those led by people with lived experience of homelessness
- Neighborhood volunteers and mutual aid groups
- Faith community
- Business community
- Landlords and housing developers

Such collaboration facilitates communication to account for the needs of encampment residents as well as the neighborhood. To this end, some communities have found it helpful to utilize a "command center" approach by establishing daily coordination meetings among all providers, volunteers, and city/county agencies involved with encampment planning and response. This command center approach involves daily updates and "huddles" to ensure continued communication and coordination.

While law enforcement may need to play a role in decommissioning an encampment, law enforcement should not drive the process, but instead, serve as one of many collaborative partners in designing and implementing effective strategies.

Resources:

- [Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Advancing the Dialogue](#) (USICH)
- [Effective Police-Mental Health Collaboration Responses to People Experiencing Homelessness](#) (Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance)

- [Sharing the Solutions: Police Partnerships, Homelessness, and Public Health](#) (Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and The Center for Court Innovation)

Principle 2: Engage Encampment Residents to Develop Solutions

Successful strategies rely on connecting early and often with encampment residents and centering their identified needs. Like with all aspects of an effective homelessness response, engaging with encampments should prominently and meaningfully include elevating the lived expertise of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. To the extent possible, encampment residents should take part in discussions and decisions related to their living environments.

Encampment residents may choose to identify an encampment spokesperson or liaison to speak on behalf of the group. When an encampment is going to be closed, ample, visible public notice must be given. Encampment closures should occur only after outreach teams have had time to engage with residents to find alternative shelter, housing, and service options.

Resources:

- [Engaging Individuals With Lived Expertise](#) (HUD)

Principle 3: Conduct Comprehensive and Coordinated Outreach

The most effective outreach responses connect people directly to shelter and housing, mental health and treatment services, and health care. They are part of an overall coordinated homeless response system, linked by sharing data and information, using a coordinated map to identify coverage and or gaps in outreach across the city/county.

Ideally, outreach is not solely focused on encampment removals but occurs regularly and consistently well before an encampment closure. Multidisciplinary outreach teams can help meet many of the immediate needs of encampment residents while providing connections and resources to support successful transitions into housing. These efforts should coordinate with a broader network of programs, services, or staff who are likely to encounter individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. These teams might include peer outreach workers, law enforcement, and other first responders, hospitals, health and behavioral healthcare providers, child welfare agencies, homeless education liaisons, workforce systems, faith-based organizations, and other community-based providers. Approaches that center public health, including deploying alternate response teams, such as mobile crisis teams, Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams, or Homeless Outreach Teams (HOT teams), are proven outreach models that help build trust and save lives.

Resources such as street medicine and harm reduction strategies can help meet the health needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, especially those with mental illness and/or substance abuse disorders. Outreach and services should be person-centered, trauma-informed, low-barrier, and voluntary.

Additionally, a coordinated neighborhood-by-neighborhood outreach approach in which teams have ample time to build trusting relationships in specific geographic areas can result in higher acceptance rates for housing, shelter, and services and stronger communication and support from neighbors and businesses.

Resources:

- [Core Elements of Effective Street Outreach to People Experiencing Homelessness](#) (USICH)

Principle 4: Address Basic Needs and Provide Storage

Thoughtful, effective strategies to address encampments can take time to implement. While people are still living in encampments, we encourage public restrooms, parks, and other community spaces to remain open and for cities to continue public services such as garbage collection, provision of sharps containers, facility maintenance, and regular cleaning. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the urgency of promoting public health for both sheltered and unsheltered individuals and ensuring that all residents have safe and sanitary places to wash their hands and use the restroom.

Providing access to storage for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness is also important. Communities should take special care to avoid destroying personal belongings when an encampment closes and provide storage for an adequate period to allow a person the opportunity to collect their belongings. Fear of losing belongings can be a determining factor in whether a person chooses to move into a shelter or not. When an encampment is closing, or a person chooses to go into a shelter or treatment program that cannot accommodate all of their belongings, providing secure, accessible storage options can ensure that they do not lose personal items, including clothing and identification.

Resources:

- [Interim Guidance on People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [Protecting Health and Well-being of People in Encampments During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](#) (HUD)
- [Infectious Disease Toolkit for Continuums of Care: Preventing & Managing the Spread of Infectious Disease within Encampments](#) (HUD)

Principle 5: Ensure Access to Shelter or Housing Options

Encampments should not be closed unless there is access to low-barrier shelter or housing. Moving encampment residents around without a place to go to will only cause further instability and trauma. The urgency to end homelessness is often stymied by significant barriers to locate or construct permanent affordable housing. Emergency shelters are often full. Community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic tested new models of non-congregate shelter in hotels and motels with success when congregate shelters had to reduce capacity by half. However, in some cases, this was not enough. Communities had to turn to alternative sheltering options, such as "tiny houses," safe parking lots, and sanctioned encampments or safe sleeping sites. When communities need to deploy these alternative shelter options, they should ensure that they account for personal choice, that they are voluntary, sanitary, safe, and connect people to services and housing. It is important to offer a range of shelter and housing options that meet the needs of an individual or family unit. Across each encampment engagement strategy, planning and budgeting should ultimately focus on the primary goal, which is how people can exit homelessness and move as quickly as possible into permanent housing.

Communities may need to deploy many of these interim solutions as they work to create more permanent affordable housing options. Interim shelter solutions should ensure voluntary, sanitary, and safe shelter with few programmatic requirements to serve all those in need. Interim solutions should include a range of person-centered options, with as

much individual choice as possible, including trauma-informed services and other models based on principles of harm reduction, which keep people alive and create pathways to mental health care, substance use treatment, and housing.

Providing interim solutions should not come at the expense of a community's commitment to developing permanent housing and service solutions but should instead be viewed as a necessary emergency response to the crisis of encampments.

Resources:

- [Caution is Needed When Considering "Sanctioned Encampments" or "Safe Zones"](#) (USICH)
- [Model Transitions from Non-Congregate Shelter: Joint Recommendations for Assisting People Experiencing Homelessness](#) (FEMA and HUD)
- [Exploring Homelessness Among People Living in Encampments and Associated Cost: City Approaches to Encampments and What They Cost](#) (HUD and HHS)

Principle 6: Develop Pathways to Permanent Housing and Supports

To end homelessness for everyone, we must link people experiencing unsheltered homelessness with permanent housing opportunities with the right level of services to ensure that those housing opportunities are stable and successful. When adequate housing options and voluntary wraparound supports are readily available, Housing First strategies have been shown to be effective in ending homelessness for people with complex health, mental health, and substance use issues. However, the challenge remains that many communities do not have access to enough units or supportive services to scale up this approach. Cities, counties, and states must coordinate their efforts to mobilize available resources—including significant funding from the American Rescue Plan—to move people as quickly as possible from homelessness into housing. Close coordination with their local CoC's Coordinated Entry System (CES) is also important to determine how people in encampments will be prioritized for housing and services.

Whether directly from unsheltered homelessness into permanent housing with supports or through the interim step of dignified shelter, our efforts to address encampments must be focused on providing access to both housing and services to help people stabilize and reconnect with friends and family, and the community.

Resources:

- [Case Studies: Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments](#) (USICH)
- [Planning a Housing Surge to Accelerate Rehousing Efforts in Response to COVID-19](#) (HUD)
- [Housing Surges—Special Considerations for Targeting People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness](#) (HUD)

Principle 7: Create a Plan for What Will Happen to Encampment Sites After Closure

Some encampments are in places that are not safe. Encampments located in medians near highways and in spaces that have been identified as hazardous waste sites are not safe, and communities should take measures to secure those locations to keep encampments from returning.

For encampments in public spaces like parks, communities should engage neighborhoods, the faith, business communities, and formerly homeless individuals to reimagine and invest in these public spaces so that all residents can

benefit from their use. Plans for former encampment sites should emphasize safety, accessibility, and inclusivity. Communities can invest in infrastructure improvements in former encampment sites. Examples include curb cuts to increase mobility access and enhanced lighting to encourage safety.

Additionally, communities can facilitate local coordination among public works, service providers, and volunteer organizations to establish coordinated strategies to serve people experiencing homelessness who may continue to use the public space after the encampment is gone.

Resources:

- [Crime Prevention through Environmental Design: It's More than Just Lighting](#) (2016 Choice Neighborhoods Conference)
- [The Curb-Cut Effect](#) (Stanford Social Innovation Review)
- [Coexistence in Public Space: Engagement tools for creating shared spaces in places with homelessness](#) (SPUR and Gehl)

For more guidance:
- Read "[Responding to the Growing Crisis of Unsheltered Homelessness and Encampments](#)," a blog by USICH Regional Coordinator Katy Miller.
- Read "[What Other Cities Can Learn From Boston's Public Health Approach to Encampments](#)," a blog by HUD Senior Advisor of Housing and Services Richard Cho.
- Subscribe to the [USICH newsletter](#) to receive future guidance and resources.
- Contact the [USICH regional coordinator](#) for your state.