

Homeless Encampments: Roles for the HCH Community

April 2018

Homeless encampments are highly visible and troubling reminders of the housing crisis in our country. The National Health Care for the Homeless Council fundamentally disagrees with policies that create homelessness, and recognizes that encampments occur because there is a pervasive lack of affordable, permanent housing in our communities. Unfortunately, the need to provide immediate assistance to decrease unacceptable living conditions on the street is often competing with the same resources needed to truly end homelessness through expanded permanent housing opportunities. All-too-often, divisiveness occurs over whether to pursue short- or long-term solutions, jeopardizing relationships with both clients and community partners. These relationships— together with advocacy—are critical to end the homeless epidemic across the country.

As local jurisdictions respond to encampments, the Health Care for the Homeless community must meet various roles as health care provider, as community partner, and as advocate to end homelessness.

Homeless encampments are a rational response to the dangers of living isolated on the streets. People congregate in encampments seeking safety, companionship, pooled resources, and other practical needs. They can be a rare place of stability for individuals who may normally move place to place and often serve as outreach sites for service providers. Unfortunately, encampments can also present threats to health and safety. Local actions to close encampments permanently or periodically “sweep” them (often throwing away personal belongings, medications, identification papers, etc.)—without first ensuring safe housing—can put vulnerable persons at great risk for additional trauma as well as fracture relationships between service providers and encampment residents, disrupting continuity of care.

As Health Care Providers

We contend that homelessness is a public health crisis and, as such, must be met with structural public health interventions such as the provision of safe, affordable housing and supportive services as warranted. Local governments have a responsibility to provide for the health and safety of their residents, regardless of whether they are housed or homeless. Increased access to affordable, safe housing is the best response in communities facing growing numbers of people living unsheltered, and encampments should not function *as an alternative* to permanent housing. Yet, where encampments are created, it is crucial to address the health care and hygiene needs of residents. For *all* people who are homeless, proper planning must take place to ensure public health, safety, and adequate access to services such as:

- Medical and behavioral health care services
- Case management & other support services
- Clean restrooms
- Drinkable water and washing facilities
- Food storage & preparation safety
- Harm reduction and overdose prevention services
- Access to safe storage for possessions and property
- Trash removal & vermin control
- Personal security and safety
- Care for pets and/or companion animals
- Biohazard/hazardous waste removal
- Rules for camp governance
- Encampment health standards
- Fire safety services and supplies

Homeless health care providers can take a lead role providing outreach, medical care, behavioral health services, and case management to encampment residents in coordination with public agencies or other providers. Health care providers can partner with local governments to provide basic sanitation and safety services. Ensuring *restrooms and adequate washing facilities are especially important to prevent the spread of communicable disease* (such as Hepatitis A, influenza and shigella). The HCH Community can also help support leadership development among encampment residents to facilitate greater safety, security and conflict-management. Other roles can be to facilitate inclusive conversations between encampment residents, community members, and local officials to find common ground and mutually agreeable solutions.

The ultimate focus is ensuring health and safety while bridging residents to permanent housing.

As Community Partners

As health care providers, we aim to deliver high quality, comprehensive services designed to improve health and end homelessness. To do our work effectively, we need trusting relationships with our clients and our community partners. We value working together with our elected and appointed officials, law enforcement, and other community partners on a wide range of issues, but poor responses to encampments can strain our relationships with those receiving our care. This is especially true when forced closures or “sweeps” undermine the effectiveness of our services and damage trust. Forcible moves such as these often prioritize community aesthetics over human dignity. They also contradict well-established principles of trauma-informed care, re-traumatize the people who are displaced, and potentially cause adverse health consequences when individuals are disconnected from care. The HCH Community should work with local officials to help craft constructive, team-based approaches to encampments, reduce stigma and violence, as well as decriminalize homelessness. We firmly recommend that community leaders coordinate well with homeless service providers to ensure consistent communication to reduce confusion and misinformation.

As Advocates to End Homelessness

Homelessness is a violation of human and civil rights. Encampments do not end homelessness and are never a substitute for permanent housing. All too often, the controversy surrounding encampments diverts needed attention and resources away from long-term solutions such as providing housing, adequate health care, decent wages, and needed support services. The HCH Community should advocate for public policies at the federal, state and local level that **both** reduce the health and safety risks for those living in encampments **and** prevent and end homelessness through long-term solutions.

Advocacy Recommendations:

- Jurisdictions should avoid destruction of encampments and instead focus on rapid creation of permanent, affordable housing with appropriate support services as needed.
- *As an interim measure*, services should be provided at encampments to promote safe and sanitary living conditions for residents and the broader community.
- *As an interim measure*, public buildings or other facilities should be opened to provide options for shelter for people without homes. No one should be evicted from an encampment without a safe, stable alternative.
- The HCH Community should engage in robust street outreach to isolated individuals in need of care and connect them to comprehensive health care and housing services.
- The HCH Community should advocate for the human and civil rights of all community members, including those who are homeless.

Further resources on encampments are available at <https://www.nhchc.org/homeless-encampments/>