

MEANINGFUL INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERTISE

When communities aim to transform their Coordinated Entry system to be more effective and equitable, the heart of the question they are trying to answer is — how is this system working for people experiencing homelessness?

The best place to get answers to that question is from the people most proximate to the question itself. People experiencing homelessness in each community have invaluable knowledge, direct experience, and clear and actionable ideas about how these systems work (or don't) and what would make them work better.

Some key components of meaningful inclusion of people with lived expertise of homelessness are:

Compensate people for their time and expertise — no one wants to work for free, and most people can't afford to. Respecting lived experience as a source of expertise means paying people for contributing to this work.

Reflect system diversity — Involving a diverse set of people in data analysis (both qualitative and quantitative) has a direct impact on how a system makes decisions. More diverse perspectives can dramatically change what conclusions a community draws from their data and what decisions they ultimately make about what to do about the issues they identify.

Ensure people with lived expertise have real access to power — all decision-making bodies throughout a Continuum of Care (CoC) should have significant (not just token) representation from and accountability to people with lived expertise. To support these aims, communities may also consider establishing decision making processes that incorporate accountability to community advisory boards, made up of people with recent lived experience of homelessness.

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Steward a culture of inclusion in decision making spaces — Communities should adjust practices to accommodate people's needs and ensure opportunity for full participation, especially when this has not always been the norm. This must be done in conversation and relationship with people experiencing homelessness in a community and their specific needs, but a few examples are things like:

- Explain what all acronyms mean
- Use less technical language
- Move meeting locations or times to be more accessible
- Slow down on making decisions when not everyone is able to attend a meeting

Build authentic relationships — For people to speak up, they have to feel safe. Experiencing homelessness comes with trauma and marginalization, which can make it hard for someone to trust that their voice will be heard, or their experiences will be valued. Communities can grow the trust that allows for more honest communication by taking the time to cultivate real and intentional relationships among people involved in this change work at every level.

Support people in building their skills, context, and technical vocabulary — Communities should invest the time and effort into bringing people with lived expertise up to speed on the technical aspects of homelessness systems. This may include aspects that are driven by federal and state regulations, the configuration of local government or human services entities, and other technical information that is necessary for understanding how a CoC and its Coordinated Entry system functions.

Ensure multiple ways for people to engage — not everyone is going to serve on a leadership team or even fill out a survey. Communities should go to where people are having touch points with the homeless serving system and ask them for their feedback in ways that are convenient for them. Street outreach workers, shelter workers, and other frontline staff can also help gather feedback. However, communities should take care that feedback isn't always filtered through a service provider so folks don't have to worry they will lose access to services if they have honest critique to offer.

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“We have to work with what we’ve got!”¹ — Communities should leverage research partnerships where possible (i.e., universities, government, technical assistance), but don’t need multiple data analysts or several community engagement staffers to do this effectively. In smaller communities with fewer staff and financial resources, this work can happen by putting in the time, leveraging community relationships, and engaging the people who are already doing this work in efforts to gather genuine feedback from people experiencing Coordinated Entry and homeless services.

This is by no means a comprehensive list of ways to ensure meaningful engagement of people with lived expertise within a community’s CoC. It is intended to offer a potential starting place and antidotes for some of the more common pitfalls that communities face in their efforts towards inclusion.



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