

## What is Street Outreach?

[Street outreach](#) is an important component of a community's homeless response system that identifies and engages people living in unsheltered locations such as in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, and encampments or on the streets. It involves meeting people where they are, on their terms, to develop authentic relationships and provide linkage to community resources with the primary goal of connecting them to stable housing. Street outreach workers engage people experiencing homelessness of all backgrounds who may not otherwise interact with a community's homeless response system and play a critical role in ensuring equity in the provision of homeless and housing resources by using trauma-informed and culturally sensitive best practices. A well-coordinated housing-focused approach to street outreach can also dramatically [improve systemic responses to homelessness](#) and outcomes for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness by quickly connecting them to safe, stable permanent housing without requiring them to first enter emergency shelter or imposing other prerequisites to housing services.

## How Does Housing-Focused Outreach Differ from Traditional Street Outreach?

Street outreach has historically centered around providing wellness checks, basic goods or light services, and connections to emergency services including emergency shelter. While these critical resources can be used to help fulfill temporary crisis needs of persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness, they fall short of achieving the primary objective of housing-focused outreach: connecting people as quickly as possible to permanent housing with the necessary supports needed to remain stably housed. Housing-focused outreach fulfills the goals of traditional outreach through the provision of support for basic health and safety needs, but with a greater emphasis on the need to work with people experiencing homelessness to develop and implement a housing plan.

### *Emergency Shelter*

Some communities have designed their homeless response systems to include linear pathways to housing that require persons experiencing homelessness to enter emergency shelter before they are connected to housing opportunities. Such a policy does not align with a housing-focused approach or [Housing First](#) principles, which prioritizes rapid placement and stabilization in permanent housing that does not have service participation requirements or preconditions. There are several reasons that emergency shelter may not be an ideal placement for a person or household experiencing homelessness, including the client's concerns about entering a congregate setting. Furthermore, many communities do not have the emergency shelter capacity to support the volume of unsheltered households, so requiring a stay at an emergency shelter prior to receiving housing services imposes an unnecessary barrier. While emergency shelter services should be offered to clients when they are available, clients have a choice about whether they would like to utilize those services and their refusal to enter emergency shelter does not make them ineligible for referral to housing programs or other housing services. Housing-focused outreach explores all pathways to housing, including housing people directly from the street and other unsheltered locations.

## Transitioning From Traditional Street Outreach to Housing-Focused Outreach

The adoption of a housing-focused street outreach approach requires a shift from the perspectives and practices that have informed traditional street outreach programs to those that are responsive to the communities' needs, are client-centered, and are informed by people with lived experience.

To realign street outreach to support housing-focused strategies, communities and outreach providers will need to reimagine their current outreach model, elevating and incorporating the voices of persons with the lived experience of homelessness in their outreach design. This document outlines key strategies communities can use to transform their street outreach efforts and implement a housing-focused approach.

## *Develop a Community-Wide Outreach Strategy*

Outreach efforts should be coordinated at the community level to maximize their reach and effectiveness. Communities should start the transition process by convening an inclusive group of community partners—including [people with lived expertise](#); Black, Brown, Indigenous, and people of color; outreach teams; culturally specific organizations; service providers; Continuum of Care (CoC) leadership; etc.—to assess the current state of local street outreach efforts, redefine community goals and expected outcomes of street outreach, and co-create a plan for adopting housing-focused outreach strategies. Local [quantitative](#) and [qualitative data](#) should be analyzed to determine how people are moving through the homeless response and baseline data should be documented for future use.

This workgroup should consider ways to improve processes and ease burdens for persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness through the street outreach effort, such as eliminating prerequisites for access to housing services (i.e., mandatory stays at emergency shelters prior to referral to housing programs). Persons with the lived experience and expertise of homelessness can offer critical insight into the ways that theoretical outreach policies actually impact people experiencing homelessness when they are applied in the real world; therefore, the concerns of people with lived experience must be meaningfully elevated and embedded in outreach policy. They should also be adequately [compensated](#) for their contributions and their involvement should not end once a new outreach strategy is adopted, but should continue well into the implementation and monitoring of the strategy. Other key considerations include:

- **Cross-sector outreach integration:** Are there crisis response teams in mental and behavioral health, homelessness medical health, law enforcement, etc. that could be [folded](#) into housing-focused outreach? How should these conversations and communication be streamlined across sectors?
- **Housing First:** Is your outreach strategy aligned with [Housing First](#) principles? Have you imposed barriers to access to outreach? Does your outreach strategy impose barriers after outreach has begun? What strategy can you employ to eliminate those barriers?
- **Equity:** Does your outreach policy inadvertently produce [inequity](#) in access to housing services? What deliberate steps can you take to promote equitable access through outreach?
- **Accessibility and coverage:** Does your outreach model include coverage across the community's entire geography? Should you include new outreach locations in response to movements among your unsheltered population? How are you coordinating/collaborating efforts with multiple CoC jurisdictions?
- **Barriers:** Where are people experiencing unsheltered homelessness being held up within your homeless response system? What barriers are impeding their swift movement into stable housing? What strategy can you employ to eliminate those barriers?
- **Capacity:** What is the current state of your outreach capacity in terms of staffing? What are your outreach capacity goals and how can you increase outreach staffing to reach those goals?
- **Team:** Who are your outreach workers? Have your outreach workers been adequately trained in trauma-informed, person-centered approaches? Are your outreach workers reflective of the population you serve?
- **Coordinated entry:** How is your outreach strategy integrated into your larger community plan for ending homelessness? How is outreach connected to your [coordinated entry](#) system? Are there opportunities to improve the linkage between outreach and coordinated entry?
- **Homeless Management Information System (HMIS):** How do your outreach workers utilize HMIS? Are they recording client contacts in accordance with [HMIS data standards](#)? Are they entering and updating case notes and housing plans?

## *Train Outreach Workers in Housing-Focused Strategies & Evidence-Based Practices*

Communities and outreach providers should provide training to all outreach workers to include foundational knowledge of the [core components of effective street outreach](#), the principles of Housing First, cultural competency, several [evidence-based practices](#) for engaging with people that are experiencing the trauma of homelessness, and [housing problem-solving](#) approaches. Outreach workers should also understand their role in the larger community-wide homeless response system, have a basic understanding of the state of local homelessness, and be able to convey consistent messaging to clients to avoid confusion and potential resistance to services. Communities should also train outreach workers in the appropriate use of HMIS and data collection and quality standards, including the importance of regularly updating client data in HMIS, and principles of confidentiality and safe data-sharing.

Outreach workers will not be able to share resources with the people they serve or make referrals on their behalf if they are not knowledgeable about the existence or availability of programs and resources. To keep outreach workers

informed on the latest information related to the existence and availability of community resources, such information should be communicated regularly through several channels, including during community case conferencing meetings and provider team meetings as well as via social media, email listservs, CoC and service provider web pages, etc. Because housing-focused outreach requires cross-coordination between multiple community partners such as mental health service providers and substance abuse treatment programs, outreach workers must be diligent in establishing and maintaining working relationships with community partners. Outreach workers should also be encouraged by their organizations to participate in [HUD's Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs \(SNAPS\) Office Hours](#), webinars, and other virtual and in-person learning opportunities related to service delivery or that provide information about emerging housing programs.

It is also critical that communities acknowledge the sensitive nature of outreach work and offer outreach workers training on how to identify when they are feeling triggered or overwhelmed by their work. Outreach workers are required to meet people where they are to form authentic relationships with the people they serve, thereby entering into some unsettling environments and constantly processing the traumatic stories of those experiencing homelessness. This type of work can be demanding and can sometimes take an emotional or mental toll. Outreach workers should be provided outlets to practice self-care and offered support from their agency and the community to help them maintain their well-being and avoid burnout. Providing culturally relevant and responsive care is often needed to address the unique needs of outreach workers that identify as Black, Brown, Indigenous, and/or people of color, as they often experience an emotional tax and retraumatizing effects of outreach activities due to the overrepresentation of these groups within the homeless population.

### ***Strengthen the Link Between Outreach and Coordinated Entry***

The provision of housing-focused outreach should include integration into the [coordinated entry system](#). Exactly what this looks like in a given community depends on the capacity of the providers, the structure of the system of care and coordinated entry process, and the needs of the coordinated entry system. However, at a minimum, housing-focused outreach providers should be prepared to serve as an access point for the coordinated entry system, guiding people experiencing homelessness through the initial phases of the coordinated entry process. This could include an escalating set of responsibilities including identifying and engaging people experiencing homelessness, directing clients to an access site, conducting assessments, providing housing and/or system navigation services, helping clients obtain needed documentation that will enable them to access housing or services, and locating people prioritized through coordinated entry to connect them with housing or service referrals.

### ***Record Data and Track Outcomes***

Traditional outreach activities have not always been appropriately or adequately recorded in the local HMIS, which makes it difficult to track their long-term effectiveness in producing favorable outcomes or to know whether a client has previously been connected to a particular resource such as emergency shelter. Housing-focused outreach requires timely, detailed records of client engagements, including case notes that outline the client's housing plan and goals. The housing plan should be co-created by the outreach worker and the client; must be based on the client's self-identified strengths, perceived barriers, and housing goals; and must include detailed actions that the outreach worker and the client will take in support of those goals.

Recording street outreach contacts, housing plans, client contact information, and other pertinent data in HMIS and any other relevant data systems can help the outreach worker and the client see the progress that has been made along the path to housing as well as the steps that lie ahead. HMIS data records also allow for continuity of care and services when clients come in contact with different outreach workers or homeless service providers that utilize HMIS, eliminating the need for clients to have to retell their stories to multiple provider staff or to restart their housing plan with each new provider they engage.

### ***Revisit Plan Effectiveness and Adapt to Community Resources/Capacity***

Once a community has developed and implemented its housing-focused outreach strategy, the work of monitoring the impacts and effectiveness of the strategy begins. Communities should plan to regularly review street outreach data and solicit qualitative feedback from people with the lived experience of unsheltered homelessness and outreach workers to determine whether there are opportunities to improve upon the outreach policy approach. Written housing-focused outreach policy should include flexibilities that allow it to be adapted in response to evolving public health and safety concerns, such as a spike in community COVID-19 levels or other communicable diseases.

### ***Implementation Challenges***

Recognizing that the implementation of housing-focused outreach is influenced by many factors including the availability of community resources, staffing capacity, and local affordable housing inventory, communities may find it challenging to execute a complete overhaul of their outreach strategy all at once. This reality should not deter

communities from making a concerted effort, utilizing the resources at their disposal, to implement housing-focused outreach strategies wherever possible throughout the homeless response system.

## CONCLUSION

A housing-focused outreach approach requires a systemic reimagining of the street outreach model to include changes in community-level and provider-level policies and practices. People can move straight from homelessness (and thus outreach) to safe, stable, permanent housing when supported appropriately. By implementing the housing-focused strategies and outreach best practices outlined above, communities can better equip their outreach programs to support people as they make the transition from homelessness to being housed. The additional resources below are available to assist your community in its effort to conduct this necessary work to improve outcomes for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness:

- [COVID-19 Planning and Response: Lessons Learned from Outreach Workers](#)
- [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Special Population Rehousing Strategy: People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness](#)
- [Closing the Gap: Homelessness to Housing Webinar Series—Street Outreach](#)
- [Using Smart Outreach and Housing First to End Unsheltered Homelessness in Nevada](#)
- [Lessons Learned from SAMHSA’s Expert Panel on the Role of Outreach and Engagement](#)
- [Unsheltered Homelessness: Trends, Causes, and Strategies to Address](#)
- [Core Elements of Effective Street Outreach](#)
- [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Evidence-Based Service Delivery](#)
- [NAEH Rapid Re-Housing Toolkit](#)
- [SNAPS in Focus: Integrating Persons with Lived Experiences in Our Efforts to Prevent and End Homelessness](#)
- [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Housing Problem-Solving](#)
- [Housing First in Permanent Supportive Housing Brief](#)
- [Coordinated Entry Policy Brief](#)
- [HUD Exchange: HMIS Data Standards](#)
- [SAMHSA’s Homelessness Resources: Self-Care for Providers](#)
- [Data Quality and Analysis for System Performance Improvement](#)
- [Strategies for System Performance Improvement](#)
- [Homeless System Response: Qualitative Data 101](#)
- [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Paying People with Lived Experience and Expertise](#)