

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already significant risks for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, particularly among the large subset with significant unmet healthcare needs. People experiencing unsheltered homelessness are more than four times as likely as sheltered people to report a physical health condition (84 percent vs. 19 percent), nearly one-and-a-half times as likely to report a mental health condition (78 percent vs. 50 percent), more than five times as likely to report a substance abuse condition (75 percent vs. 13 percent), and 25 times as likely to report all three conditions concurrently (50 percent vs. 2 percent), according to a recent analysis of homeless system assessments.¹ During the pandemic, the closures of businesses and public facilities that once provided access to restrooms, shelter from the elements, safe spaces, WiFi, and other necessities has compounded pre-pandemic challenges, as illustrated by this firsthand account: [What it's like to live outside in a pandemic: One Seattle man's personal story](#). Communities should make every effort to expand safe and healthy avenues for exiting people experiencing unsheltered homelessness directly into housing while also lowering barriers to and expanding emergency shelter options for those individuals for whom permanent housing is not immediately available. To reduce risks for people who do not immediately move into either permanent housing or shelter, some communities have employed "inclusive public space management" approaches aimed at keeping all people who use public spaces, both housed and unhoused community members, as healthy as possible. This person-centered model runs counter to enforcement or punitive approaches that criminalize homelessness and often undermine interventions aimed at addressing its underlying health and social causes.

Definition: "Inclusive Public Space Management" includes regulating uses, managing conflicts between uses, and coordinating interventions in the uses of public spaces to be inclusive of all, including people who are unsheltered and have no other feasible options. [Research & Results: Nine U.S. localities offer human-centered solutions to unsheltered homelessness](#)

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While inclusive public space management is not a solution to homelessness, it is a helpful way to mitigate the consequences of unsheltered homelessness on people and communities. This approach works with a plan to scale permanent housing in a reasonable time frame to eliminate unsheltered homelessness. The following are key steps to developing and implementing an inclusive public space management strategy that will be detailed in this document:

- 1) Build the community to test inclusive public space management as part of a community response to addressing unsheltered homelessness and encampments.
- 2) Create a collaborative plan for inclusive public space management built on a real-time assessment of needs that incorporates these principles:²
 - i. Centering [racial equity](#).
 - ii. Creating adequate time for planning.
 - iii. Collaborating across sectors and systems.
 - iv. Conducting intensive and persistent outreach and engagement.
 - v. Promoting low-barrier pathways to permanent housing.
 - vi. Ensuring the highest level of sanitation and health.
 - vii. Communicating with the public and key stakeholders.
- 3) Execute and manage the plan.
- 4) Monitor progress and revise the plan.

¹ California Policy Lab (2019). [Health Conditions Among Unsheltered Adults in the U.S.](#)

² Adapted from San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (2016) [Strategies for Addressing Encampments](#).

1. Build the Community to test Inclusive Public Space Management as Part of a Community Response to Addressing Unsheltered Homelessness and Encampments

There may be a high level of skepticism about whether inclusive public space management is an appropriate approach to encampments and unsheltered homelessness, so building the support of key leaders and stakeholders is critical. Although community leaders may feel public pressure to clear encampments and remove people inhabiting unsheltered settings, there are several reasons to move forward with an inclusive public space management approach instead of a punitive one:

- Evidence indicates that encampment closures, sweeps, and other “clearance” policies do not resolve issues. Instead, they often result in the movement of encampments and unsheltered individuals to other locations, or encampments reopening later in the same place.³
- The consequences of punitive approaches are harmful and traumatic for individuals, often resulting in the destruction and loss of personal property, identification, and other legal documents, as well as missed work and disconnections from healthcare and other services. In addition, they can trigger fear, shame, and anger, which further isolates people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and makes it more difficult for service providers to support transitions to emergency shelters or permanent housing.
- When punitive actions lead to arrests, citations, fees, and incarceration, the individual is burdened with a criminal record that makes it harder to find jobs and housing. These consequences can also lead to job loss and further destitution, making it even more difficult to exit homelessness and prolonging the prominence of unsheltered homelessness in communities. The impact of these punitive actions is exacerbated when the individual is Black, because of the ongoing over-arresting and incarceration that makes securing housing and sustainable employment almost impossible.
- Communities must also consider the legality of closing encampments on, or removing individuals from, public land. The case [Martin v. Boise](#) rules that people experiencing homelessness cannot be arrested for sleeping outside on public property if no other viable living options are available to them.

The Continuum of Care (CoC) will likely need to engage and educate partners on why inclusive public space management could lead to improvements in their community. Key leaders within the municipal and county governments and the business community will need to agree to participate in designing and testing these approaches. Government officials are essential since they control public safety, public health, and code enforcement which are likely already engaged in restrictive public space management (e.g., encampment clearance, sweeps, etc.). The business community is often representing interests that want greater enforcement actions.

The CoC should also engage people who are currently living in encampments and unsheltered settings and outreach providers to understand and document current conditions. A baseline assessment will be critical for the planning process. This assessment should include information about the current number/types of locations and number/needs/characteristics of people who are living in unsheltered settings; current conditions and unmet needs at these locations; current strategies to address basic needs and hygiene; etc. The assessment should also document the impacts of COVID-19-related closings of businesses and public facilities such as libraries, public parks, and other locations previously utilized by people experiencing homelessness to meet basic needs.

2. Engaging Partners to Create an Inclusive Public Space Management Planning Team

Once the CoC or other organization has compiled an initial baseline assessment and secured the willingness of key community leaders and stakeholders, a planning team should be assembled that will be responsible for creating a strategy for inclusive public space management.

Planning Committee

Successfully implementing inclusive public space management in order to support individuals living in encampments and other unsheltered locations requires engaging many partners. These partners will represent a variety of interests. Many partners who need to be engaged will want to close or move encampments and remove individuals living unsheltered. Educating these partners on the reasons why closing an encampment or forcing relocation may not be

³ Rebecca Cohen, Will Yetvin & Jill Khadduri (2019). [Understanding Encampments of People Experiencing Homelessness and Community Responses: Emerging Evidence as of Late 2018](#) US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, and Abt Associates, page 13.

the best option and introducing them to inclusive public space management as a strategy is essential for all the reasons described in the previous section.

Key partners for the planning committee include:

Stakeholder	Role
People Currently Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness	Those currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness have the best understanding of the living conditions and needs of encampment residents and other people living in unsheltered situations, and they also have ideas for solutions. Work to recruit a group that is representative of the race/ethnicity, gender identity, age, and sexual orientation diversity of the encampment and compensate them for their work.
Mayor/City Manager/Executive Staff and City/County Councils	These stakeholders can play a crucial role in helping to mediate the competing needs of the committee. Elected officials are often feeling the greatest public pressure to address visible unsheltered homelessness and encampments. It is important to engage them on the public health risk of closing encampments and other unsheltered settings to discuss alternative strategies that connect people to permanent housing.
CoC and Providers, Including Faith Communities	Groups that serve people experiencing homelessness are necessary partners to help engage people living unsheltered. Providers can assist with connecting people to housing and supporting the health and safety of people living unsheltered. Faith communities that conduct street ministries can be allies by helping reduce and remove the trash associated with feeding programs.
County Executive/ Manager/Board of Supervisors/ Commissioners	These stakeholders play a critical role in providing leadership to support non-punitive approaches, as they are often the primary entity responsible for healthcare and social services that can bring meaningful assistance to people who are living in unsheltered settings. They may handle code enforcement actions, which is helpful when encampments are on county land.
Public Health Departments	Public health departments have a vested interest in keeping communities healthy, as well as the tools and resources to support this end. They can make sure the committee follows public health guidelines and best practices for keeping people living in encampments and other unsheltered locations healthy during a pandemic.
Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)	BIDs are usually focused on keeping public areas clean and safe while some provide outreach services and can even fundraise for special projects, so they can be invaluable partners in this work. Educate BIDs, which are often supportive of encampment sweeps/closures, around public health risks and inefficacy of sweeps so they can more effectively partner in this work.
Law Enforcement	Law enforcement receives the 911 calls and complaints about encampments and people who live in unsheltered settings. As members of law enforcement may have been involved in previous efforts to clear encampments, it is important to engage them as a partner in planning efforts and find ways to minimize harm.
Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs)	EMTs respond to medical emergencies in encampments and other unsheltered settings. They can provide significant information about the types and frequencies of health emergencies and can help identify strategies for improving health.
Sanitation/Solid Waste Departments	Trash removal is an often-overlooked key to keeping people living in encampments healthy. Work with sanitation departments to coordinate frequent trash pick-ups and supplies of trash bags to encampments. Some cities have developed “purple bag” programs to limit the harmful impacts of improperly disposed waste. Other cities offer free waste-pumping for recreational vehicles (RVs).
Homeless Activists and Advocates	Local homeless coalitions and others engaged in advocating for individuals living in encampments and unsheltered settings have expertise and the trust of people living in these spaces that can be utilized in keeping camps healthy and safe while working toward permanent solutions.
Culturally Specific Organizations	Culturally specific organizations (CSOs) have a mission to serve individuals from a specific culture and are primarily staffed and led by people from that culture. CSOs are crucial partners for both planning and implementation to ensure that the needs of people from historically marginalized groups living in encampments and unsheltered settings are understood and addressed.
Neighborhood Organizations	Neighborhood organizations can be valuable partners in crafting and supporting inclusive public spaces. They can also mobilize volunteers to assist with projects that help people living in unsheltered settings and encampments.

The committee should address the following focus areas in creating the plan:

- Centering racial equity—Homelessness and COVID-19 disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other historically marginalized populations, so racial equity must be explicitly and thoughtfully addressed in your plan. Conduct a Racial Equity Impact Assessment (discussed in [Homeless System Response: Equity as the Foundation](#)) to understand how different racial and ethnic groups are being impacted by current strategies and how they may be affected by proposed decisions in order to identify strategies for reducing inequities. Engage people living in encampments and other unsheltered locations from populations most impacted by structural racism and oppression and use culturally specific organizations as partners throughout the process of assessment as well as development, implementation, and monitoring of the plan.
- Creating adequate time for planning—In addition to the baseline assessment, the planning committee should review existing policies, practices, and protocols to determine what changes will be needed to support inclusive public space management approaches.
- Collaborating across sectors and systems—Inclusive space management requires a broad collaborative approach; see above for suggestions on the types of positions and organizations needed to develop and implement the plan.
- Conducting intensive and persistent outreach and engagement—This will be necessary to help people establish and support plans to exit unsheltered settings, as well as help them maintain healthier environments. This should also include helping people meet their basic needs and access healthcare.
- Promoting low-barrier pathways to permanent housing and shelter—Plans for how people can access low-barrier crisis shelter and permanent housing should be a part of the inclusive public space management plan.
- Ensuring the highest level of sanitation and health at encampments and other unsheltered settings—This is the meat of the inclusive space management plan. This includes dealing with access to restrooms, handwashing, showers, and laundry; providing trash receptacles with regular trash pickup; providing a means for safe needle disposal and exchange; meeting basic nutritional needs and medical care; providing safe daytime and longer-term storage for personal belongings; establishing a means to support healthy pets; and implementing Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), protocols including social distancing. The plan should also address how to support people living in cars and RVs, as locally relevant, and providing waste removal from RVs. Planners should consider how to protect people in unsheltered settings from climate- and weather-related dangers, such as heat stroke or frostbite. Plans should include contingencies for quickly connecting people to low-barrier shelters or other options in the face of extreme temperatures and storms, and planners should work to develop plans for emergencies such as natural disasters. The plan should also address when conditions warrant clearance/closure based on serious public health and safety concerns along with the process to provide clearance with intensive outreach and support for all residents, as well as adequate notification.
- Communicating with the public and key stakeholders—Encampments and visible homelessness are often controversial, so the plan should address how and what information will be shared with the public and key stakeholders. Do not create a hotline for public reporting about homeless campsites for enforcement purposes; if you already have one, convert it to a method for deploying services (outreach, public health, and sanitation services).

3. Execute and Manage the Plan

The inclusive public space management plan should include a timeline of actionable steps and clear accountability for each step, along with key metrics to measure progress. Metrics should be designed to be disaggregated by race and ethnicity in order to identify any inequities that arise. The planning committee, or a subset of it, should transition into a committee charged with overseeing implementation and monitoring progress.

The CoC and its providers will have primary responsibility for intensive outreach and connecting people experiencing homelessness with permanent housing wherever possible, or to low-barrier shelters or other options. Outreach workers will play a critical role in engaging residents of encampments and unsheltered settings. Hiring people with lived expertise is particularly effective for these positions. As much as possible, law enforcement should be kept out of encampments. When law enforcement receives calls and complaints about encampments and people living in other unsheltered settings, they should have a system to refer these complaints as much as possible to outreach workers.

The CoC, the coordinated entry system, and permanent housing providers will be responsible for working together to lower barriers and ensure that eligible individuals willing to enter permanent housing can access it quickly.

Public entities will have the primary responsibility of providing basic services (sanitation, trash removal, etc.). Maintain a regular site monitoring schedule to be sure the highest level of sanitation and health at encampments is achieved.

4. Monitor Progress and Improve the Plan

The committee charged with implementation and oversight should meet routinely to monitor operations, troubleshoot issues that arise, track progress on the plan's implementation, and review the key outcomes metrics established in the plan. The implementation group could also be responsible for preparing and presenting reports to city/county councils in order to increase accountability and transparency. The implementation committee should be empowered to make changes to the plan as needed and appropriate based on information collected about progress and outcomes.

The group should pay close attention to outcomes disaggregated by race and ethnicity to identify any inequities that emerge. The committee should also routinely seek out qualitative feedback from people who are living in unsheltered settings and encampments on how the implementation is progressing. It may also be helpful to establish an ombudsman who can be contacted to troubleshoot issues that arise.

Related Resources

- [Research & Results: Human-centered solutions to unsheltered homelessness—Inclusive public space management](#) (Arnold Ventures)
- [Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments](#) (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness)
- [Preventing and Managing the Spread of Infectious Disease within Encampments](#) (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development)
- [Protecting Health and Well-being of People in Encampments During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](#) (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development)
- [Understanding Encampments of People Experiencing Homelessness and Community Responses: Emerging Evidence as of Late 2018](#) (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development)

Community Policy Examples:

- COVID-19 Response: [Policy Statement](#) on Supporting Safe Outdoor Space Practices for People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness (Madison, WI)
- [Policy Guidelines](#) for Regional Response for Addressing Unsheltered Homelessness and Encampments Throughout San Diego County 1/16/2020
- [Philadelphia Encampments Resolution](#)