



Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Lessons from Chicago, IL

Across the country, communities are striving to create solutions for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness—including people sleeping and living in encampments—within their efforts to implement effective and efficient coordinated entry systems. As with all efforts to end homelessness, those solutions focus on creating meaningful pathways to permanent housing opportunities. We recognize, however, that given constrained resources, such opportunities may not be immediately available. While permanent housing opportunities are being scaled and secured, communities can implement strategies to ensure the safety and wellbeing of people sleeping and living in encampments.

In August 2015, we released [Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Advancing the Dialogue](#) to support community-level discussions to refine and strengthen strategies for addressing the housing and services needs of people living in encampments. We recently checked in with several communities to learn about their ongoing efforts. In Chicago, Illinois, we spoke with Alisa Rodriguez, Deputy Commissioner of Homeless Programs at the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services. That conversation is summarized here.

How has your approach to addressing encampments evolved?

In March of 2016, Mayor Rahm Emanuel launched a [citywide, intergovernmental task force](#) dedicated to preventing and ending homelessness in Chicago. In April, that task force embarked on a [chronic homelessness pilot](#), with the initial phase focused specifically on people living in encampments. Using a standardized assessment – a local adaptation of the VI-SPDAT – outreach teams began assessing individuals in the city’s largest encampment, located under several viaducts along the lakefront. During an 8-month period, the task force identified and assessed 75 individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, and secured permanent housing and supportive services for 58. The team continues to track the remaining 17 individuals, so they can be immediately re-engaged if they present anywhere in the system. In June, the city will launch coordinated entry for individuals experiencing homelessness, and will use lessons learned from the pilot to inform those efforts.

Who were the most important stakeholders to have at the table? Why? What strategies were the most effective in engaging them?

From the beginning, residents of encampments were central to the planning and decision-making process, participating in task force meetings and informing decisions around clean-up protocols and other issues. Constantly communicating with residents, and maintaining a regular presence in the encampment, were essential to ensuring their buy-in.

Other key stakeholders included advocates and non-profit organizations, outreach providers, law enforcement, Chicago Aldermen, the Chicago Park District, and the Department of Streets and Sanitation, among many others. The Mayor played a key role in bringing these stakeholders to the table by emphasizing the importance of the initiative.

	<p>The city also contracted with a local organization, the Center for Housing and Health, to manage the pilot and coordinate key stakeholders. This coordination role proved to be vital to the success of the pilot.</p>
<p>What strategies did you find most effective for conducting outreach and engagement?</p> <p>How did they improve your outcomes?</p>	<p>Before any outreach began, the task force held a series of strategic meetings with local advocates, non-profits, and city officials, to map out specific plans and action steps. They knew they could maximize their impact by starting small, initially focusing on one encampment with a goal of housing 75 individuals. Lessons learned from the pilot could then be applied to other individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.</p> <p>When entering an encampment, outreach teams found it helpful to identify the key leader or leaders. If that person accepted housing, oftentimes, other residents would follow. To build trust, it was critical to consistently deliver on what was promised. For the pilot, we were able to provide a viable opportunity for a permanent housing unit or subsidy for each person who was assessed. At the same time, it was important to manage expectations, being honest and transparent with residents about timeline and availability of units.</p>
<p>What strategies do you use to provide low-barrier pathways to permanent housing?</p> <p>How do those strategies help?</p>	<p>To create rapid, low-barrier pathways to permanent housing, the task force ensured that the chronic homelessness pilot was aligned with key coordinated entry strategies utilized in the earliest phase of coordinated entry implementation with Veterans. A by-name list was created in HMIS, a single entity was assigned responsibility for outreach coordination, and case conferencing meetings occurred weekly to review each client and match them to the appropriate housing and services interventions. A regular data dashboard, pulled from HMIS, provided stakeholders with an at-a-glance view of how many individuals had been assessed, how many had been housed, and how many units were available.</p> <p>To identify housing units for everyone on the chronic homelessness pilot's by-name list, the task force leveraged a diverse array of resources, including partnerships with the Chicago Housing Authority, turnover units within the CoC, Chicago's local low-income housing trust fund, senior housing, and ESG Rapid Re-Housing funds for those with income. In addition, the Mayor's office sent a city-wide letter to landlords, encouraging them to consider renting to people exiting homelessness. Many Chicago Aldermen followed up the Mayor's letter with flyers to their constituents, requesting their support for the initiative.</p> <p>While units were being inspected and prepared for occupancy, clients were placed in bridge housing, allowing them to be safely off the streets and begin connecting to services and supports. Each of the 58 individuals housed through the pilot have a non-profit entity assigned to them to ensure housing stability and to intervene if necessary to prevent eviction and a potential return to homelessness.</p>
<p>What are your next steps?</p>	<p>In the coming months, the community will apply lessons learned from the pilot to scale up coordinated entry for all individuals experiencing chronic homelessness. Strategies considered critical to the success of the pilot will continue as part of the broader coordinated entry system; however, the system will prioritize residents for</p>

housing according to chronic homelessness and a vulnerability score rather than geographic location. Providers will stay connected to those individuals housed through the pilot, ensuring continuity of care and supportive services. The task force also plans to expand outreach and engagement to encampments throughout the city to ensure that all residents are assessed using the community's standardized assessment tool and become part of the overall by-name list. Finally, the task force is working to reduce the length of time it takes for units to be identified and prepared for occupancy.

What is the thing that surprised you the most, or the greatest challenge you faced?

With vacancy rates lower than 1% in some Chicago neighborhoods, honoring client preferences can be a challenge. Once a housing offer has been accepted, providers take clients to view available units and help them identify a unit and neighborhood they feel comfortable in. While the community always strives to honor client choice, managing expectations up front, and being honest that clients may not get their first choice, has proven to be important to build relationships of trust.