



Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Lessons from Dallas, TX

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 Dallas, Texas, we spoke with Cindy Crain, President and CEO of the Metro Dallas Homeless Alliance. That conversation is summarized here.

How have your approaches to addressing encampments evolved?

The City of Dallas began responding to encampments approximately 18 months ago, when crews began conducting ‘cleanups’ of several larger encampments in the city. At the time, street outreach to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness was virtually nonexistent. While social workers with the Dallas Police Department’s crisis intervention team were on-site to assess residents, their primary focus was to determine whether a mental health warrant should be issued. In instances where offers of shelter or permanent housing were made, the rate of refusal was typically very high. Instead, encampment residents would often simply pick up their things and move to another unsheltered location.

Beginning in May 2015, the Metro Dallas Homeless Alliance (MDHA), the lead agency for the Dallas City & County/Irving Continuum of Care, began pulling together an interagency team of volunteer outreach workers to assess the housing and services needs of encampment residents. By October, MDHA had secured state ESG funding for a comprehensive street outreach team, and had developed a by-name list of people living in encampments and in other unsheltered locations, prioritized by level of need. As of the time of this writing, the most vulnerable individuals on that list—which includes many individuals over the age of 50—have been housed. The team continues to focus on the remaining individuals on the by-name list, which includes many women fleeing domestic violence, and people with substance use and mental health disorders.

Who were the most important stakeholders to have at the table?

As the city began its cleanups, the only outreach to encampment residents was from social workers with the Dallas Police Department’s crisis intervention team. Therefore, as the CoC began developing its approach to encampments, the police

Why? What strategies were the most effective in engaging them?

department was one of the first stakeholders they had to engage in order to coordinate and build upon their existing outreach efforts. Other key partners included state and local officials, street outreach providers, low-barrier emergency shelters, private landlords, and the Dallas Housing/Community Services Department, among others.

To engage the city, MDHA approached officials and asked for enough time to identify shelter or permanent housing for at least half of encampment residents before a cleanup began. They also offered to send outreach teams into encampments to provide notice to residents, explain logistics, and more importantly, conduct intake assessments. This proved to be an easy sell. The more individuals they could house, the fewer individuals would remain unsheltered, and the less likely that existing encampments would reappear or that new encampments would form.

What strategies did you find most effective for conducting outreach and engagement?

The team in Dallas knew they would get the best results by targeting their outreach to those individuals with the highest needs and longest lengths of time homeless. Using the housing priority list, they first focused on the most vulnerable individuals with the greatest needs. Once those individuals had been housed, the team moved on to the next 15-20 individuals on the list, and so on.

How did they improve your outcome?

The Dallas outreach team operates under the assumption that, given the choice, most people will not choose to remain unsheltered. If a client is initially hesitant to accept a housing offer, the team follows up and makes repeated offers until they are willing to come inside. The team also places great importance on developing trust by demonstrating follow-through on offers of housing and services.

The community has also moved away from the use of the term ‘cleanups.’ Outreach to individuals in encampments and other unsheltered locations is case management first and foremost. The primary goal is to connect people to appropriate housing and services, not to move them to another unsheltered location.

Because many individuals remaining on the list are struggling with substance use or mental health disorders, behavioral health providers often accompany outreach teams and distribute information to residents. This has been a shift for recovery services providers, who are generally used to people seeking out their services, rather than actively performing outreach, engaging people, and offering services. As a result, the team has begun re-thinking the way they offer treatment to people experiencing homelessness, recognizing that sometimes outreach can be a more effective means of helping people understand the treatment options available to them.

What strategies do you use to provide low-barrier pathways to permanent housing? How do those strategies help?

The CoC emphasizes a Housing First approach, which makes it easier for people experiencing homelessness to access and retain housing. Each intake assessment includes identifying potential housing barriers and creating a tailored housing strategy to address barriers and meet the individual’s needs.

In 2016, the CoC hired a Housing Resources Director to manage, monitor, and grow the Continuum’s portfolio of housing, and adopted a ‘no empty bed’ policy with the goal of ensuring maximum utilization of resources.

The CoC has also emphasized the importance of tailoring housing and services to individual needs. When outreach to encampments began in early 2015, a common assumption was that the only pathway to permanent housing was through a Dallas Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8 Voucher). MDHA has helped the community think more broadly about the variety of housing and services interventions available to people, including shorter-term rental assistance, or help with security deposits, utilities, or arrearages. Funding from the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas has allowed MDHA to create a flex fund that can pay for minor but impactful expenses that can help individuals resolve their homelessness.

Other strategies used to streamline pathways to permanent housing include using rapid re-housing beds as bridge housing while a permanent housing option is being identified, partnering with low-barrier emergency shelters, and utilizing the flex fund for temporary hotel or motel stays, move-in costs, or other small but impactful expenses. To house many vulnerable seniors, the community partnered with agencies receiving HUD funding that could pull from Medicare and Medicaid to cover some of their services needs.

What are your next steps?

Going forward, MDHA will continue to focus on housing the remaining individuals on the housing priority list, while conducting assessments on every person experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Dallas. The community is working on upgrading its technology to allow for more real-time data entry into HMIS and to improve documentation of chronic homelessness.

The community has also begun envisioning the creation of a circulator bus system, similar to the [Project Access](#) system in Houston, specifically to help people experiencing homelessness get to and from shelters, clinics, grocery stores, local VA facilities, social security offices, and other destinations around the city. Not only does this help people experiencing homelessness meet their needs, it might also help them avoid citations or fines for riding public transportation without paying.

What has been your greatest challenge, or the thing that surprised you the most?

Efforts to address encampments, which are one of the most visible signs of a breakdown in the homelessness response system, require continual messaging to the general public. No matter how many individuals are housed, the community will tend to focus more on those who are not yet housed, and new encampments that form. To help people better understand the nature and extent of homelessness, MDHA developed a public-facing [community dashboard](#) to report on the community's progress in making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. The work of closing down encampments is a heartbreaking, pressure-filled, and often thankless endeavor. For homelessness services providers, the work is first and foremost about the clients—moving people from the streets to permanent housing, and providing them with the opportunity to build the future they want from a safe and stable foundation.