



## Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Lessons from San Francisco, CA

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 San Francisco, California, we spoke with Emily Cohen, Manager for Policy & Special Projects at the San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH). That conversation is summarized here.

### How have your approaches to addressing encampments evolved?

Like many West Coast cities, San Francisco has a large population of people living unsheltered, many of whom are living in encampments. For many years, “hot-spot crews,” consisting of Department of Public Works sanitation crews and outreach workers, have performed regular maintenance cleanings and outreach at encampments throughout the city.

When the San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH) launched on July 1, 2016, one of their first steps was to create an Encampment Resolution Team (ERT) with three primary aims:

1. Connect as many people living in encampments as possible with shelter and housing;
2. Ensure that housed neighbors of encampments feel safe and secure; and
3. Disrupt the notion that large encampments are inevitable.

To accomplish these aims, the ERT began by identifying encampments with the greatest need – based on factors such as size, impact on the surrounding community, and health of those living in the encampment – and focusing on resolving one at a time. ERT coordinates a multi-departmental effort to engage, serve, and resolve the encampments. The ERT coordinates the encampment resolution efforts of San Francisco Public Works, the Department of Public Health, the San Francisco Police Department, and the Human Services Agency.

HSH has dedicated capacity within its Navigation Centers specifically for people exiting encampments. Once an encampment has been identified for resolution, the ERT conducts individual assessments with residents and provides both verbal and

	<p>written notification that the encampment is scheduled to be closed. Over the next 30 days or so, residents are assisted with urgent health needs, provided opportunities to downsize their belongings (although the Navigation Center offers storage), and assisted with other items that might eventually become a barrier to shelter or housing (e.g., TB tests, identification, etc.). Since August 2016, the city has resolved 16 encampments, with 74% of the impacted people accepting offers of placement into shelters, Navigation Centers, or treatment programs.</p>
<p><b>Who were the most important stakeholders to have at the table? Why? What strategies were the most effective in engaging them?</b></p>	<p>The presence of people living in encampments has an impact on a city’s neighborhoods and living environment, therefore engaging housed neighbors and the surrounding business community is critical. To do this, HSH holds community meetings with surrounding neighbors and businesses, both leading up to and after resolution of an encampment. These meetings serve to provide information about the process and timeline for resolving an encampment, but also to help neighbors develop a plan to prevent re-encampment.</p> <p>Strategies to prevent re-encampment have included trimming trees or bushes, improving lighting in areas where encampments tend to form, ensuring regular police patrols, or hiring private security, among others. San Franciscans pride themselves on their compassion, and are generally willing and eager to partner with the city, particularly when they see that the city is using a deliberate, coordinated strategy.</p>
<p><b>What strategies did you find most effective for conducting outreach and engagement? How did they improve your outcome?</b></p>	<p>Persistent, daily outreach was critical to developing trust, and allowed the team to begin working with residents on their health and housing needs even before they entered the Navigation Center. HSH has partnered with non-profits and other city departments to bring services directly to encampment residents as needed at a given resolution site. ERT has conducted health information and screening fairs and has periodically deployed portable toilets, hand-washing stations, and receptacles to help residents downsize their belongings (if desired) while resolving encampments.</p> <p>Deliberate, transparent communication with encampment residents regarding the timeline and next steps has also been essential. The ERT does not resolve an encampment unless there are enough beds at a Navigation Center to accommodate everyone who wants to go inside. This ensures that the team can deliver on its promises to residents, but can also present a challenge, as the city’s ability to resolve encampments depends on capacity at the Navigation Centers.</p>
<p><b>What strategies do you use to provide low-barrier pathways to permanent housing? How do those strategies help?</b></p>	<p>Once people enter a Navigation Center, it generally takes about four weeks to connect them to other systems of care. One of the team’s first priorities is to get individuals onto the shelter waiting list. Even if they ultimately elect not to enter traditional shelter, this leaves the option open, and allows them to begin addressing any barriers they might encounter—such as needing to downsize personal belongings, obtain a TB test, or obtain identification documents.</p> <p>Individuals assessed as meeting San Francisco’s “Priority 1” criteria—meaning they have been experiencing homelessness for 13 years or longer—are prioritized for</p>

permanent supportive housing (PSH) placement and are able to stay at one of the Navigation Centers until they are able to be placed into PSH.

For those individuals not assessed as “Priority 1,” case managers work to connect them to other systems of care—whether that is traditional shelter, drug treatment, or reunification with family or friends.

The team is piloting providing additional housing assistance—through diversion or Rapid Re-Housing (RRH)—to individuals who are not prioritized for PSH. The city is currently piloting RRH and diversion with adults, and plans to apply strategies and lessons learned to people entering the Navigation Center from encampments.

### **What are your next steps?**

HSH is in the process of expanding coordinated entry across our system. While the city already uses a coordinated entry system for its federally funded housing units, these units represent a minority of all available housing units. Part of implementing full coordinated entry will involve merging 14 different data systems into a single data system—the Online Navigation and Entry (ONE) System. The resulting, integrated system will allow for more effective case management, data-sharing, and outcome tracking at both the client and system levels.

In addition to the original 75-bed Navigation Center that opened in March of 2015, the City has since opened three more Navigation Centers with an additional 277 beds. With these new beds online, the ERT is expanding its ability to resolve encampments. Since these Navigation Centers are all located on temporary sites, the city is also exploring sites that could host a Navigation Center in the longer-term.

The city will continue to focus on strategies to prevent encampments from re-forming once they have been dispersed. Thus far, 10 of the 12 encampments resolved by the ERT have remained clear.

Finally, the ERT has recognized a need to track the work being done with encampments in a more real-time way, to ensure the most vulnerable individuals are being prioritized for supportive housing and services.

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

Shelter capacity has presented the most significant obstacle to the city’s ability to resolve encampments. Currently, the ERT’s work is driven by capacity at the Navigation Center. Individuals who are not assessed as “Priority 1” are placed on a waiting list for traditional shelter and offered a variety of other services and supports. The city is confident that the addition of new Navigation Centers will help alleviate this issue.

Despite having more permanent supportive housing per capita than any other city—with more than 7,000 PSH units in their portfolio, and an estimated 500 units in the pipeline by 2023—there are still not enough PSH units to meet the needs of the most vulnerable individuals. The city is in the process of advocating for additional units from affordable developers to become PSH, and has used master-leasing of SRO buildings as a key strategy to create units.