



Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Lessons from Seattle, WA

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 Seattle, Washington, we spoke with Jason Johnson, Deputy Director of the Human Services Department, and George Scarola, Policy Director on Homelessness in Mayor Ed Murray's Office. That conversation is summarized here.

How have your approaches to addressing encampments evolved?

Today, the City of Seattle has a proactive and coordinated approach to addressing the growing number of unsheltered people living in encampments. The approach is a result of bold and innovative actions that contribute to a more effective response to the problem.

In February 2017, Mayor Murray activated the Seattle Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to accelerate the city's response to unsheltered homelessness and unsanctioned encampments. The move to activate the EOC created a physical space where interdisciplinary teams made up of City and County employees and agency partners come together each weekday morning to identify roadblocks, build relationships, and focus on achieving nine action-oriented missions.

The missions are centered on creating more safe, alternative places for people in unsanctioned encampments to live, improving sanitation and waste disposal at encampment sites, and adding affordable housing resources through a new Housing Resource Center.

To maintain a sense of urgency and focus, a morning leadership team meeting brings together the heads of approximately 15 different City and County departments to work through complex policy, strategy, and administration issues. This organizational structure has led to a more efficient and effective response on the ground.

For example, this structure helped Seattle accelerate the launch of a [Navigation Team](#), comprised of experienced outreach workers, city field coordinators, and Seattle Police officers who are specially trained to engage people living in

encampments. In the first six months, the [Navigation Team](#) has made more than 3,000 contacts with 895 unduplicated individuals. Of those, approximately 36% accepted relocation to safer spaces, including shelter, permitted encampments, family reunification, or connections to another support system. Approximately 67% accepted services, including but not limited to case management, referral to substance use disorder treatment, employment support, mainstream benefit activation support, health care, and other basic needs.

To support the Navigation Team's goal to offer safe alternatives to people living in unsanctioned encampments, the EOC activation team set a target of opening at least 200 new safe spaces to help unsheltered people access safety and stability. They streamlined the approach to program development, site selection, and permitting to shepherd the opening of the city's first [Navigation Center](#) in July 2017 and an additional 100-bed, 24/7, low-barrier shelter in August 2017.

The EOC response included adding three permitted encampments on city-owned property to the homelessness response system to offer alternative options for people moving out of unsanctioned encampments. While the permitted encampments address a critical and immediate need for emergency response, the City's three-year plan, called [Pathways Home](#), focuses on breaking down barriers that may be preventing people from moving inside. As the elements of the plan are being implemented, the permitted encampments have [proven to be a good interim option](#) for people who have been living unsheltered for long periods of time.

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

The leadership and direction of the Mayor and City Council provides the authority and urgency necessary to bring diverse stakeholders together. In addition to the Mayor's Office and City Council, partners have included: the Seattle Department of Finance and Administrative Services, which is coordinating the work of the EOC; the Seattle Human Services Department; Seattle Police Department; Seattle Office of Intergovernmental Relations; Seattle Public Utilities; Seattle Parks and Recreation; Public Health — Seattle & King County; Seattle Department of Transportation; and the Washington State Department of Transportation.

Outreach partners include Evergreen Treatment Services REACH team and YouthCare, which have demonstrated expertise in outreach to adults and youth, respectively. Important community partners in this effort include many of the City's permitted encampment and emergency shelter providers, residents of the permitted encampments who provide critical lived-experience perspective, religious leaders, the business community, and the neighbors in the communities in which the encampments are located.

A common mission with clear roles and responsibilities contributes to maintaining momentum and keeping stakeholders engaged. The focus on capacity building, training, communication, relationships, and transparency have been key for inviting new partners into the process and engaging the broader community. The City's [Homelessness Response](#) page is another tool that tracks progress on all aspects of the EOC activation and offers the public a place to learn more about the issue.

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

How did they improve your outcomes?

One key outcome of the city departments and agencies working together at the EOC has been the body of work surrounding the Navigation Team. Because of the scale of unsheltered homelessness in Seattle, the team began by developing a priority list of the 40 encampments they felt posed the most significant safety and environmental health impacts. Once the unsanctioned encampment is identified, the Navigation Team goes in to get to know the people and offer individualized services and alternative living spaces. When the team encounters someone experiencing a mental health or substance use disorder, the outreach coordinator, a licensed mental health counselor, is available to conduct an assessment and make an appropriate referral.

Outreach workers on the Navigation Team have access to flexible funds, allowing them to be more creative in meeting the needs of people living in encampments. The outreach team may offer bus tickets or other resources to reunite people with their families, a motel voucher, or other resource. People with fragile medical conditions can receive interim, respite periods in motels while transitioning into a permanent housing program.

The City has been working to improve communication with service and shelter providers so that the Navigation Team has access to more 'real-time' data about the number of shelter beds available on any given night. In turn, the Navigation Team notifies shelters when they will be entering an unsanctioned encampment and expect to make a greater number of referrals. This two-way communication provides outreach workers with a greater degree of confidence that the referrals they are making are connected to an available bed, and the shelter providers are prepared to engage with the people who have been living outside for long periods of time. The City has also delivers training to City staff and homelessness service providers on how to engage encampment residents with sensitivity and a customer service orientation.

Because of these and other related strategies, the number of individuals willing to accept a referral to housing and/or services has increased by 30% since the Navigation Team was established.

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

Strategies included the creation of the City's first [Navigation Center](#), a 75-bed enhanced shelter modeled after [San Francisco's Navigation Center](#), which exclusively accepts referrals from the Navigation Team. The city funded a 100-bed, 24/7, low-barrier, co-ed shelter in partnership with a service provider and a church. This new low-barrier shelter program should be open in August 2017.

The city has also expanded year-round low-barrier shelter beds and permanent housing navigation resources available exclusively for homeless youth. Each of these new programs have performance expectations designed to expedite the movement from shelter to housing, and each program has housing navigators to help people make this transition.

Additionally, to help create more low-barrier pathways to housing, the City brought three permitted encampments online during the EOC activation, all of which are

dedicated to individuals exiting unsanctioned encampments or other unsheltered locations.

What are your next steps?

While the strategies above are encouraging more people to move inside and into safe spaces, the demand for affordable, permanent housing still far outpaces the supply. Next steps will include full implementation of the [Pathways Home](#) plan, including investments in rapid re-housing and affordable permanent housing, expansion of low-barrier, 24/7 shelter, and continued expansion of outreach to people living in unsheltered locations.

The City has already taken steps to increase the supply of affordable housing, including developing a comprehensive plan to produce 50,000 new housing units in Seattle over the next decade, with 20,000 new or preserved affordable units. In 2016, Seattle voters also voted to double the Seattle Housing Levy to produce or preserve at least 2,150 units of affordable housing for low-income families.

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

One very practical challenge was developing an updated protocol for storing and inventorying personal possessions when a cleanup occurs. In many cities with large encampments, the handling of personal belongings has become a hotly contested legal issue. Since 2008, Seattle has had very specific Multi-Department Rules (MDARs) for the removal of encampments. In 2016, a task force was formed to develop updated protocols, which were implemented in April 2017. When a clean-up occurs, crews inventory and photograph belongings, and work with encampment residents to determine what is storable and what should be discarded. Residents can then retrieve their belongings from the storage facility, or request that their belongings be delivered to them. Because people experiencing homelessness often have no identification, the city only requires that the individual identify what the items are, and from which location they were taken. The city will continue to fine-tune its encampment protocols over time.

A second ongoing challenge is balancing the provision of services and safe alternatives to people living in encampments with the health and safety benefits of removing encampments. Nearly 80% of complaints the city receives from citizens concern the visibility of litter, waste, and hazardous objects like discarded needles.

A welcome surprise was the level of response and excitement among law enforcement officers when the opportunity to join the Navigation Team was announced. More than 20 police officers applied, with eight officers and one sergeant ultimately selected.