Law Enforcement is a Critical Component of the Coordinated Effort to End Homelessness

Kevin is a divorced 60-year-old Vietnam War veteran who no longer has contact with his family. After his wife left and he wasn’t able to find work, Kevin started drinking. He has been living on the streets for the last few years. Without a clear system for accessing services, Kevin would be responsible for navigating loosely affiliated programs on his own and might knock on many doors before finding help. Even if he found an organization that would hear his request for help, the best an organization could do would be to determine if Kevin was a good fit for their project, and if not, he’d be back to square one.

Does this story sound familiar? Imagine having the chance to partner with a system that has an effective, coordinated process that identifies the individual needs and preferences of people and can connect people experiencing chronic homelessness, like Kevin, with appropriate services and supports. With a coordinated system, when Kevin asks for help, the intake worker will be able to ask “What housing and services strategy available in the community would be best for Kevin?” And the process would be seamless, easily accessible, and consistent regardless of where the person asks for help.

Luckily, this vision is now being put into action across the country. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and its partners on the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) are working with Continuums of Care to develop coordinated systems. Continuums of Care are regional and local planning bodies that coordinate housing and services for people experiencing homelessness by integrating efforts of local police departments, health care agencies, homeless service providers, and other public and private partners.

All too often, at the point at which law enforcement gets involved, it is to take action such as arresting people or forcing movement to other areas, which is costly both in terms of the financial cost to the community as well as increasing distrust and conflict. One of the main purposes of building a coordinated system is to ensure that people with the most severe service needs and levels of vulnerability are prioritized for housing and homeless assistance in a timely manner. For law enforcement officers working with some of the most vulnerable individuals in the community, this is good news.
Homeless service agencies and law enforcement agencies have the same goal in mind: to reduce the incidence of homelessness, particularly for people who are staying out on the streets. Law enforcement agencies can be a critical partner in local efforts to end homelessness. Communities that have developed these partnerships have seen reductions in the number of persons experiencing homelessness and the number of arrests for life-sustaining activities such as panhandling.

Searching out Solutions: Constructive Alternatives to Criminalization (https://www.hudexchange.info/news/snaps-in-focus-the-case-against-laws-that-criminalize-homelessness/), a document developed by HUD, USICH, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), and state and local partners, offers three strategies. Each of these strategies builds on the effort to develop a coordinated system and is designed to seek to divert people from sleeping outside toward housing and services they needed to achieve stability.

- **Engage in cross-training.** Cross-training and sharing information among providers and law enforcement provides insight into practices and policies of partnering agencies, facilitates coordination of activities, and enhances sensitivity in working with people experiencing homelessness. Law enforcement agencies can offer expertise on public safety and protection of vulnerable individuals. Homeless service providers can share their expertise and leverage the expertise of the health care system to share how to engage with people experiencing homelessness and how to identify and respond to mental health or substance abuse crisis.

Broward County, Florida, Homelessness 101 was created as a police sensitivity project intended to reinforce the police department's policy on homelessness, raise awareness to the reality and causes of homelessness, and address the most effective intervention techniques.

- **Coordinate outreach and engagement.** Close coordination and communication between the outreach teams and law enforcement agencies is essential for assuring the safety of outreach teams and of people experiencing homelessness and quickly connecting people to housing. In some communities, law enforcement personnel participate as core members of outreach teams. In other instances, law enforcement officials call upon outreach teams for assistance when they encounter people who are experiencing homelessness and are at risk of arrest.

The Police-Homelessness Outreach Program (P-HOP) in Ramsey County, Minnesota, brings outreach workers and police officers together to respond to situations involving people experiencing homelessness. A P-HOP worker is stationed at a local police station and acts as a liaison to the homeless community.

- **Form a crisis intervention team.** Last, communities can deploy crisis intervention teams (CIT) that involve specially trained police officers working with behavioral health professionals to respond to crises involving people with mental illness, some of whom are homeless. Police officers learn to recognize the signs of psychiatric distress and how to de-escalate a crisis and seek to divert those individuals in crisis away from jail or arrest into treatment. Concurrently, through the Continuum of Care, the coordinated system is designed to quickly connect people in need with housing and services and make available other low-barrier crisis supports people may need.
The Memphis, Tennessee, Crisis Intervention Team is a specialized unit that responds to crises involving people with mental illnesses. University of Tennessee studies report that the CIT program has contributed to a decrease in arrest rates for people who are mentally ill, an impressive rate of diversion into the health care system, and a resulting low rate of mental illness in the jails.

Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to connect with their local Continuum of Care to explore the possibility of implementing one or more of the strategies discussed. Collaborating around shared goal creates a win-win situation for everyone involved. Visit the HUD Exchange website (https://www.hudexchange.info/) for contact information and for more information about local Continuums of Care and what HUD is doing to end homelessness.

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