How to be an Awesome Shelter

Bringing the Training Home
Shelley McKittrick
Homelessness Program Director
City of Aurora

Center For Capacity Building
National Alliance To End Homelessness
Objectives

- Position shelter within an effective service response system
- Challenge dominant mythologies
- Be real about what it takes to be:
  - Trauma informed
  - Harm reducing
  - Housing focused
- Make you feel really uncomfortable at times, and hoping that discomfort fuels change in practice
Homelessness is Misunderstood & It Impacts Shelter Practice

- While there are over 43 Million people living in **poverty**, less than 600,000 will be homeless on any given night. (1.4%)

- Federal **rent assistance** programs only assist **5 Million** people annually.

- 4.2% of the population in the United States lives with a **Serious Mental Illness**. Only 42% receive treatment or counseling.

- 7% of the population has an **addiction or dependency on alcohol**. 93% receive **no treatment or assistance** with their problematic alcohol use.

- 3% of the population uses **other illicit drugs**. 88% receive **no treatment or counseling**.
• Almost everyone with poor credit history is housed, not homeless.

• Almost everyone with a history of evictions is housed, not homeless.

• Almost everyone with a felony conviction is housed, not homeless.

• Almost everyone who is a registered sex offender or sexual predator is housed, not homeless.

• Even in the tightest rental markets of the control, severe overcrowding rarely reaches 2% and general overcrowding is rarely above 5%.
A BRIEF HISTORY OF SERVING PEOPLE THAT ARE HOMELESS...

PEOPLE ARE SINNERS. THEY NEED TO REPENT AND FIND JESUS.

PEOPLE ARE MENTALLY ILL. THEY NEED TO BE DIAGNOSED, MEDICATED AND TREATED.

PEOPLE ARE ADDICTED. THEY NEED TO GO TO DETOX AND/OR TREATMENT, AND BECOME SOBER.

PEOPLE ARE BROKEN AND MISSING CRITICAL LIFE SKILLS. THEY NEED TRANSITIONAL HOUSING.

PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE. THEY NEED HOUSING.
What Do We Know About Shelter Stays?

• The majority of families and single adults who become homeless have relatively short stays in the homeless assistance system and rarely come back to it. (Culhane: “transitionally homeless”)

• Approximately 20 percent stay for long periods of time

• A small proportion cycles in and out of shelters repeatedly

• In general, families with long stays are no more likely than families with short stays to have intensive behavioral health treatment histories, to be disabled, or to be unemployed

Dennis Culhane, Testing a Typology of Family Homelessness Based on Patterns of Public Shelter Utilization in Four U.S. Jurisdictions: Implications for Policy and Program Planning, 2007

What Do We Know About Shelter Stays?

The results suggest that policy and program factors, rather than household characteristics, are responsible for long shelter stays.

Dennis Culhane, Testing a Typology of Family Homelessness Based on Patterns of Public Shelter Utilization in Four U.S. Jurisdictions: Implications for Policy and Program Planning, 2007
What Does this All Mean?

- Large portion of people self-resolve or seek help from another system

- Most people can exit homelessness with a light touch of services and assistance to exit homelessness for good (RRH)

- Minority of people need more intensive services and long-term housing supports (PSH)
10 Critical Questions for Effective Shelter Delivery
Critical Question #1

Is shelter a process or a destination?
Critical Question #2

Are the people getting shelter in your community those that need it the most, or those that were lucky enough to get in?
Critical Question #3

Do you attempt to heal or fix people?
Critical Question #4

Do you provide social service or exercise social control?
Critical Question #5

Does the built form and layout promote dignity and decrease conflict?
Critical Question #6

Do you believe homelessness should be infrequent & short in duration - and that shelters have a role to play in that happening?
Critical Question #7

Do you restrict services only in limited circumstances? And for what purpose?
Critical Question #8

Is there any group of persons that you automatically disqualify from services?
Critical Question #9

Do you provide professional staffing with the right training?
Critical Question #10

Do you measure what you do, and refine based upon available data?
Shelters As Part Of Your Crisis Response System

- **Emergency shelters** are a vital part of the process of ending homelessness.

- **Emergency shelters** play an **important role** in a homelessness crisis response system.

- The effectiveness of emergency shelter greatly impacts your system’s performance.
Key Components of Emergency Shelters in an Effective Crisis Response System

- Housing First approach
- Immediate and easy access
- Housing-focused services
- Rapid exits to permanent housing
- Measure outcomes to improve performance
Where are you in your Transformational Change?

Old Shelter Model

Need for Change

Confusion

Anxiety/Loss

Clarity

New Shelter Model

Restructuring

Integration

New Vision

New Vision
How are you feeling?

- Nervous
- Excited
- Confused
- Exhausted
Philosophy Shift  ➔  Housing First Principles

- Homelessness is foremost a housing problem
- Everyone is ready for housing *now* if they choose
- Permanent housing is a right to which all are entitled
- People should be returned to or stabilized in permanent housing as quickly as possible and connected to resources necessary to sustain that housing

National Alliance to End Homelessness
Issues that may have contributed to a household’s homelessness can best be addressed *once they are permanently housed*.
Does our shelter provide immediate and easy access?
Why do you think some people experiencing homelessness avoid shelter?
Low-barrier Shelter is a Cornerstone of a Functional Crisis Response System that Prevents and Ends Homelessness.

−USICH Federal Benchmarks and Criteria
I tell my staff,

“If you’re not talking about housing, you’re having the wrong conversation”

Deronda Metz, Salvation Army, Charlotte, NC
How Can I Help You?

How Can I Support You to Find Housing?

-Iain De Jong, “How To Be An Awesome Shelter”
Rapid Exits to Housing Practice Shift

What services do we need to increase rapid exits to permanent housing?

• Rapid re-housing

• Connections to mainstream services

• Develop community partnerships
Measuring Success in Shelters

- DECREASE Average Length of Stay/Time Spent Homeless
- INCREASE Exits to Permanent Housing
- DECREASE Returns to Shelter
What Do You Know About Shelter Stays In Your Community?

LOOK AT YOUR DATA!

- Average length of stay?
- Which populations are using shelter? Which populations are not using shelters?
- Frequent users?
- Long stayers?
- Exit destinations after shelter? Returns to shelter?
The Service Orientation Required for Effective Sheltering

5 Key Elements

1. Safety
2. Trust
3. Choice
4. Collaboration
5. Empowerment
1. Safety

Traumatic experiences violate our fundamental belief that the world is a safe place and people can be trusted.

Creating a safe, supportive, welcoming, and respectful environment is essential in any service setting.

To what extent are we ensuring safety?
2. Trust

Programs, services and staff must maximize trustworthiness through task clarity, consistency, and interpersonal boundaries.

To what extent are we establishing trust?
Housing stability service planning involves helping consumers regain a sense of control over their daily lives and build competencies that will strengthen their sense of autonomy.

Outlining clear expectations, providing opportunities for consumers to make daily choices in their life are necessary for the recovery orientated model.

To what extent are we encouraging and honoring choice?
Let’s talk about rules…

– Is this policy or rule necessary?
– What purpose does it serve?
– Who does it help?
– Who does it hurt?
– Does the policy facilitate/hinder consumer inclusion and control?
– Were consumers included in its development?
– Could this policy or rule re-traumatize the consumer (e.g., limit consumer control and power, lead to fear and confusion, etc.).
Recovery and success for trauma survivors is largely based on their ability to regain or develop skills that put them back in control of their lives. Services can facilitate empowerment by giving consumers a voice in what happens on a daily basis.

To what extent does our work maximize collaboration and sharing of power between staff and participants?
5. Empowerment

Trauma survivors often enter service settings with past experiences that include being mistreated, ignored, and silenced.

Empowerment is the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights.

To what extent does our work prioritize empowerment and skill building?
Truly Trauma Informed Shelter Delivery

- Operationalize policies and procedures that validate our consumers.
- Homelessness is traumatic
- Compound/complex trauma
- Subpopulation considerations:
  - Families and children
  - LGBTQ2
  - Military
    - PTSD
  - Women
    - DV/sexual assault
    - child abuse
  - Native and African Americans
    - Historical trauma/’soul wounds’
    - Slavery and Jim Crow
Trauma Informed Solutions

- Reframe ‘defiance’ behaviors as resilience and survival skills
- Reframe ‘consequences’ as results of decisions made
- Slow down and explain every process and step
- Let youth know that they have the right to share only the information that they want to share
- Do not expect immediate rapport and do not assume that immediate rapport means trust has been built
- Boundaries – staff should never attempt to play or replace friends or family
• Program uses “people-first” language rather than labels (e.g., “people who are experiencing homelessness” rather than “homeless people”)

• Staff uses descriptive language rather than characterizing terms to describe consumers (e.g., describing a person as “having a hard time getting her needs met” rather than “attention-seeking”).
Trauma Informed Solutions

- Train all staff
  - How trauma impacts the developing brain
    - Youth experiencing homelessness
    - Families experiencing homelessness

- Review program policies and procedures
  - client centered
  - center consumer voice and collaboration
  - Don’t shame or retraumatize
Harm Reduction in Sheltering

Intervention strategies to help people reduce the negative consequences of high-risk behaviors by addressing the conditions and situations of risk rather than focusing solely and immediately on cessation of the behavior.

Harm Reduction makes improving the quality of the individual’s life, health and wellbeing the primary criteria for success.
Harm Reduction in Sheltering

- Affirms choice and self-determination
- Opens door for honest communication about drug use and other risk factors which allows for a stronger service interaction and intervention
- Supports a trauma-informed framework
- Supports a client-centered, strengths based intervention
- Supports a Housing First model
  - Behavior doesn’t correlate to ‘readiness’
  - Promotes a ‘low barrier’ response
Harm Reduction

• The principle of Harm Reduction can be applied to several areas, not just substance use
  – Relationships (ex: exploitation, violence)
  – Tenancy/good neighbor
  – Young families; child welfare
  – Revisiting trauma – coaching boundaries

• We are interested in the application of Harm Reduction strategies in the context of housing stability
Let’s Ask Ourselves...

- Does your program view substance use from a harm reduction or sobriety perspective?
- When working on budgeting with participants, do you openly and honestly discuss substance use?
- Do you and your participants discuss substance use from a perspective of housing stability?
- Do you find your own values around substance use inform or impact your work?
Housing Focused Narrative

• All staff need to be trained on the housing first approach

• Staff interactions must be housing focused

• Daily check-ins should be to determine progress toward housing goals

• Daily activities or workshops should be related to housing

• Diversion (self-resolve) conversations need to happen regularly (especially for 1st time homeless)
What’s the Message

What exactly do we mean when we say everything housing:
• If there is a roommate complaint
• If they don’t like the food
• If they don’t like the beds
• If they don’t like YOU!

Take the conversation back to what all these things may look like for them in housing........
Resistance to Change

• Financial Resources
  – We don’t have the financial resources to do what we want to do
  – No one will fund us if we do not do X

• Protecting the Status Quo
  – What will be my role in the new mix of services (I like where I am now)?
  – Naysayers get in the way

• Sticking to outdated concepts
  – Don’t believe in housing first concepts
  – People need to earn housing

• Culture
  – External
    • Lack of buy-in from partners, government, and other stakeholders
    • Like things the way they are
    • Don’t want to lose resources/contracts
  – Internal
    • Organizational values
    • Staff don’t buy-in
So......What’s the Message?