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National Approaches to Dismantling Encampments

20 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

By implementing evidence-based, person-centered approaches, communities can effectively dismantle encampments while protecting human dignity and public safety, thereby creating long-term stability. These FAQs provide key insights and practical solutions to help organizations and policymakers navigate the complexities of encampment resolution with compassion and clarity.

Understanding the Basics

1. **Why do homeless encampments form in the first place?**

   Homeless encampments often form when individuals have limited access to local resources that can connect them to stable housing, shelter options, health care, or social services. Affordable housing shortages, poverty, mental health needs, substance use, and lack of support systems all contribute to homelessness, and people may seek refuge in encampments. Encampments serve as community for some, make people feel safe in numbers, and may be among the few options for survival for unsheltered individuals.

2. **What are the key drivers of homelessness that contribute to the formation of encampments?**

   Homelessness results from a lack of affordable housing, poverty, untreated mental health and substance use disorders, unemployment and economic instability, and barriers to mental health care and systemic discrimination. Encampments form when individuals have no viable housing alternatives or access to adequate services.

3. **What does "dismantling encampments" mean in a sustainable way?**

   "Dismantling encampments" refers to the process of addressing and resolving unsheltered homelessness by providing structured short- and long-term solutions that prioritize both public safety and the dignity of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. A sustainable approach ensures that housing and services are accessible, reducing the need for enforcement-led actions.

4. Why is criminalizing homelessness not an effective solution?

Criminalizing homelessness through sweeps or arrests does not address the root causes of homelessness. In fact, it often makes the situation worse by displacing individuals without providing supportive services, alternatives to housing or shelter, criminalizing survival, and forcing people into more precarious situations. Approaches that are more effective in reducing homelessness include providing outreach, support, and interim and permanent housing solutions.

5. What is the role of law enforcement in encampment resolution?

Law enforcement may play a role in public safety, but effective encampment resolution should be led by service providers, peers, housing professionals, and outreach teams to ensure that solutions focus on housing and stability rather than enforcement.

Getting Started: First Steps Toward an Encampment Response

6. What are the first three steps to addressing encampments in your community?

Defining the Resources. Understanding and securing the resources your agency can bring to the table to address unsheltered homelessness is critical. Tangible resources such as service provision and interim housing options should be the first priority.

Collaboration. Partner with other organizations, and government entities that can offer services and housing. Collaborate as to how the encampment will be dismantled, while addressing health and safety concerns such as size, scope, and assisting people with disabilities.

Collecting Data. Do you know who is living in the encampments? Completing outreach and collecting demographic information enable you to determine the supportive services, housing, and shelter needed to address the needs of the individuals. By partnering with a Continuum of Care entity and using the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), agencies can see who is already in the homeless response system and enter people into the system to connect them to programs that serve special populations such as veterans, youth, and seniors.

7. How can local governments address encampments without federal funding?

- Even without federal funding, local governments can take several steps:
- Form public–private partnerships to fund housing initiatives
- Repurpose vacant buildings (hotels, motels, and warehouses) for temporary or permanent housing
- Use safe parking or camping programs for people living in their cars or who are unsheltered
- Use local taxes, donations, and impact fees to fund programs
- Provide outreach and support services through trained volunteers, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations
- Utilize nonconventional resources for funding such as cannabis tax revenue and developer impact fees

8. What is the role of outreach teams in addressing encampments?

Outreach teams engage with individuals in encampments, often employing peers or people with lived experience, by offering support and resources such as access to mainstream government benefits, housing referrals, mental health services, substance use disorder treatment, and employment support. Outreach efforts should be trauma informed and focus on building trust with individuals who may have been marginalized or harmed by homelessness response systems or other institutions. Effective outreach is critical for transitioning individuals out of encampments and into stable housing.

9. How can data help improve encampment resolution efforts?

Collecting data on homelessness helps governments and Continuum of Care entities to track the number of people experiencing homelessness, understand their needs (such as mental health services or employment), and evaluate the effectiveness of programs. Data-driven approaches allow local governments to allocate resources where they are most needed and measure outcomes, improving the efficiency of the entire system.

Operationalizing Solutions: Implementing Best Practices

10. What are the core elements of a successful encampment resolution plan?

Effective plans are person centered and solutions driven. Key components include the following:

- Assessment and planning: Understanding the population and their specific needs
- Stakeholder coordination: Engaging service providers, policymakers, and advocates
- Service accessibility: Connecting individuals to stable housing, shelter, and supportive services
- Post-encampment strategy: Ensuring ongoing supportive services, outreach and engagement to prevent people from reentering an encampment

11. How do we create an interdisciplinary team to manage encampments?

A successful encampment response requires collaboration among several entities:

- Housing and homeless services (service providers, peers, case managers)
- Public health and behavioral health services (mental health specialists, addiction treatment providers)
- Local government officials (city managers, county supervisors, legislative associations)
- Community-based organizations (advocacy groups, faith-based organizations, nonprofit providers)
- Philanthropy and volunteers

12. What is the impact of addressing homelessness on the wider community?

Solving homelessness benefits the community by

- Reducing public health risks related to unsanitary conditions in encampments;
- Reducing the criminalization of homelessness, which only perpetuates future homelessness;
- Increasing economic productivity by helping individuals transition to stable work and housing; and
- Creating a more compassionate and inclusive society, which can increase public support and cohesion.

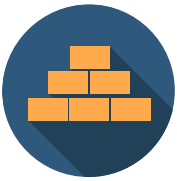### 13. How can we prevent encampments from re-forming?

Sustainable encampment responses require long-term investments in housing, policy alignment, and community outreach. Strategies include

- Expanding interim housing programs to connect individuals with stable housing;
- Providing financial assistance, rental assistance, and eviction prevention support to keep individuals housed; and
- Supporting workforce development programs to create employment pathways.

14. What metrics should we use to measure success?

Success can be evaluated by tracking

- The number of individuals transitioned into emergency housing options,
- The number of individuals transitioned into interim housing,
- The number of individuals transitioned into permanent housing,
- Improvements in housing stability and service engagement,
- Reductions in the presence of unsheltered encampments over time, and
- The number of people returning to homelessness after placement.

Building an Inclusive Response

15. What does an inclusive homeless outreach program look like?

An inclusive outreach program ensures that all individuals can access services. Effective outreach programs should

- Provide accessible services and housing options as the foundation for long-term solutions;
- Reduce unnecessary barriers to services, such as sobriety requirements or excessive documentation;
- Train staff in culturally responsive services and de-escalation techniques; and
- Offer mobile and flexible outreach services.

16. How can we ensure outreach efforts are trauma informed?

Trauma-informed outreach considers the past experiences of individuals and prioritizes safety, trust, and autonomy by

- Engaging with individuals using noncoercive, person-centered approaches;
- Ensuring follow-up and consistency in outreach; and
- Providing immediate access to stabilizing resources such as shelter and health care.

17. How can local businesses, nonprofits, and faith-based communities contribute to solving homelessness?

Local businesses, nonprofits, and faith-based communities can play a critical role in providing funding, resources, and services. Some ways they can contribute include

- Donating space or buildings to be converted into shelters or housing,
- Providing land and resources for safe parking and safe camping,

- Providing employment opportunities for people experiencing homelessness,
- Helping fund community-driven housing programs, and
- Offering volunteer services to assist in outreach and housing navigation efforts.

Alternative and Innovative Housing Models

18. How do tiny homes or other alternative housing options help with homelessness?

Tiny homes and alternative types of housing are low-cost, quickly deployable solutions that provide individuals with an intermediate stable living environment. They can be used in temporary housing opportunities or converted into permanent housing options when provided in accordance with Housing Quality Standards. These homes can be a scalable, affordable alternative to large shelters or congregate living and can offer privacy, dignity, and security.

Programs such as Los Angeles' Homekey program have successfully used converted motels, while Portland, Oregon's Safe Rest Villages use tiny homes to house people.

19. What are safe parking and camping programs, and how do they work?

Safe parking and safe camping typically describe small-scale communities where people living in tents or vehicles are provided with temporary safe places to park vehicles or a place to stay in a tent along with access to basic services. These spaces can include temporary housing, RV lots, or pods, with amenities like toilets, showers, and 24/7 security. The idea is to provide a stable, secure environment while individuals transition to interim or permanent housing and receive supportive services to meet the needs of people using safe parking or camping spaces.

Portland, Oregon, and San Diego, California, have used these models to successfully reduce the number of people living on the streets or in their vehicles.

Replacing Enforcement with Support

20. Why is using police less effective than crisis response teams for encampment issues?

Sweeping encampments without providing housing alternatives leads to displacement and worsened conditions. Successful programs lead with peer support and crisis response teams consisting of mental health professionals, social workers, and medical staff who are trained to handle the unique challenges presented by homelessness, especially mental health crises or substance use issues.

These teams can be more effective because they focus on de-escalating situations and providing immediate supportive services rather than enforcing the law. Investing in mental health and harm reduction services reduces the need for encampment sweeps.

Programs like CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) in Springfield, Oregon, show how this model reduces police costs while providing a more humane approach.

NEXT STEPS: Interested in learning how to implement these strategies in your community? Visit our Contact Us page or email us at contact@ahpnet.com.