



How to Ground Pandemic Policies With Homeless Experiences

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There are many problems with policies that address homelessness in the U.S., which were apparent before the pandemic. However, the responses from cities, states, and the federal government attempting to support people during the pandemic have made it evident how often policies are created without thinking of the most socially and economically disadvantaged. In my research with LGBTQ+ young adults experiencing homelessness throughout Chicago, I have interviewed over 40 participants and spent over 200+ hours in shelters to see what life is like in a pandemic as the City of Chicago shutdown. To address the questions and concerns of Chicago area service providers, I draw on my research on the topic to provide a way forward for social service providers and policy makers, which can ground COVID relief efforts and future policy with the perspectives of people who have experienced homelessness.

LIVING WITHOUT A HOME DURING COVID

The economic shutdown has disproportionately affected workers in the service and gig economies, including contract and “under-the-table” workers—the types of work most common among homeless young adults. These young adults often work without health insurance or job security, and—because of length of work and base pay requirements—individuals experiencing homelessness often do not qualify for unemployment. With job training centers closed, temp agencies on pause, and few new jobs posted—large groups of these young adults are living in a dangerous limbo.

Young adults already experience the highest rates of poverty in the US and social policies have largely failed to successfully target this age group with support. As is noted elsewhere, teenagers and young adults have been left out of the CARES Act—the major federal stimulus package meant to alleviate the burden of the economic shutdown. Although they are legal adults, many of these young people’s parents have claimed them as dependents, have not filed taxes (or have tax addresses sent to different addresses), and have problems accessing their identification documents. Many I spoke with explained how their parents still claimed them as dependents—which lowers the relief stipend amount from \$1200 to \$500 per person—and many could not return home to receive the money. Homelessness as a life stage is incredibly stressful. People without a home live with constant concern where they will sleep, eat and shower, how to find a sustainable job, if they can start or finish a degree, if they will be able to provide for dependents or other family members, and address their health and safety concerns. It is important that throughout our attempts to help secure resources for them during COVID, we take note of and provide support for their mental health in addition to their physical health.

SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDER

In addition to the work they are doing to protecting clients from possible COVID transmission, social service providers should consider the following to help clients with the immediate and longterm realities of the economic shutdown, including:

- Educating clients about the new COVID unemployment options (PUA: Pandemic Unemployment Assistance) and the CARES Act Economic Impact Payments (EIP) and help them apply. Consider enlisting legal aid for assistance.
- Working on creative housing solutions. Collaborate with the Continuum of Care (CoC) to contract with hotels and ask for donors specifically to help with emergency and immediate housing relief. Helping clients leave the streets is imperative both for reducing COVID transmission, but also for protecting them from increased city policing designed to cite individuals for not following shutdown protocols.

- Recognizing the disparity in how COVID affects racial group differently. Latinx and Hispanic are the most likely to contract the virus while Black and African-American people have the highest mortality rates. Talk with your clients about their social networks, their pre-existing health conditions, and create tailored plans for each client on how to protect themselves and what to do if they become sick.
- Assisting with legal aid to help clients remove themselves as dependents. Before doing so, however, make sure clients consider whether this will reduce access to healthcare or other needed services.
- Finding online job, career, and educational development programs for clients to learn skills while waiting for the economy to renew. Make sure they are tailored towards the population and life experience of your clients.

Advocating for cities to establish emergency funds geared towards people experiencing homelessness. Check the departments that run homeless services in your city and state government as well as your Community of Care. Chicago had a limited amount of grants called the Mutual Aid Fund.

- Creating opportunities for youth involvement and employment. Consider creative positions for your clients instead of outside help. Many shelters have created “Youth Advisory Boards” to provide clients both paid positions and responsibilities in running the services of the shelter/center. True Colors United has a toolkit to help with Youth Collaboration.
- Being especially mindful of transgender clients who may have lost access to hormone therapies and to clients who are at risk of STI transmissions. Partner with accessible and inclusive healthcare facilities.

LEGISLATORS AND CITY LEADERS

- Ground new legislation on stimulus bills, like the HEROES ACT, for those experiencing homelessness. Extend payments to adults and unaccompanied children regardless of status as dependents.
- Continuums of Care should partner and negotiate with hotels, vacant property owners, and other creative housing solutions to place individuals experiencing homelessness in housing immediately.
- Establish relief funds and grants similar to the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance or Mutual Aid Funds for homeless individuals.
- Pass specific funding packages to homeless centers who can distribute funds or resources directly to clients without needing a SSN, ID, or tax number
- End police-citation practices for pandemic shutdowns. Instead, task police and city employees with distributing protective equipment and information about service centers.
- Keep public, open spaces (parks) open so people without homes are not confined to shelters during the day. Many shelters are poorly ventilated, overcrowded, unable to effectively institute social distancing and thus create a higher risk of COVID transmission.

THE FUTURE

As with any crisis, this has brought the flaws of our current system in sharp relief. Never before has the lack of a universal right to housing been cast into sharp relief. Our country's reliance on employment as both the safety net and the means for distributing relief packages (requirements of tax or SSNs) consistently hurts the most vulnerable members of society. Social policies from the outset must be grounded in the lived-realities of homelessness rather than as second thoughts— particularly as this country prepares itself for the possibility of another outbreak or “second wave.”

Read more at Lovell, Erik, Brent Hutchison, Ke’ala Cabulagan, John McMullin, and Curtis Child, “Homelessness and the High Performance Cycle: A New Lens for Studying Exit Strategies,” *Journal of Social Service Research*, 41, 4. (2015): 508-529.