



Homeless System Response: Engaging Individuals with Lived Expertise

First and foremost, communities need to prioritize providing effective services to address the crisis. Communities need to weigh the effort associated with the project setup and the benefit to the data setup choice. HUD will be flexible in understanding and accounting for data quality issues in required reporting and communities should assess the feasibility of increased or complex data collection strategies to ensure efficient crisis systems are created and maintained.

As communities implement strategies using their supplemental allocation of Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) program Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (ESG-CV) funding to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, they will need the support of local partners, providers, subrecipients, and subcontractors. [An inclusive network of system stakeholders](#) must include individuals with lived expertise to support planning and implementation efforts and to strategically target resources to increase housing placements, prevent homelessness, and improve our homeless system by advancing equity throughout. [Meaningful engagement](#) results in system and programmatic implementations that are more relevant and responsive. Engaging people with lived expertise is an urgent and necessary matter as communities grapple with how to create more [equitable systems](#). A mix of professional experience and personal lived expertise is essential for creating impactful solutions.

The following guidance was prepared by consultants who are individuals with lived homelessness expertise.

Value of Meaningful Engagement

Benefits for People with Lived Expertise

Being valued as an equal partner in planning and decision-making can improve struggles with self-esteem, depression, and morale, which people with lived expertise often face because of both the trauma of homelessness and the multigenerational impacts of systemic and institutional oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, ableism, etc.).

Engaging with people with lived experience of homelessness can also create space for them to get a sense of their own power and support personal growth and leadership development.

Individuals who have never experienced homelessness or housing instability may have difficulty recognizing the humanity of those who have. Shifting power dynamics and focusing on meaningful engagement approaches to addressing homelessness allows for a better community understanding of homelessness and more compassion for those who have experienced it, thus creating a safer and more affirming community for people with lived expertise.

Benefits for the Homelessness Response System

People with lived expertise can offer relevant solutions that would work best for the people in their community.

This also allows for more collaborative, innovative, creative, and accessible solutions, particularly for persons often considered to be “hard to reach.”

Policies and practices are developed with the full and direct participation of the members of the group(s) that will be most affected by them.

Essential Considerations for Meaningful Engagement

When engaging people with lived expertise, it is important to lead with race equity and social justice, ensuring the same level of input, decision-making, and access to organizational resources.

[Understand who is accessing your system](#) and make sure that those groups are fully represented in all aspects of decision-making. For example, if most persons experiencing homelessness in your community are also Black, then your Continuum of Care (CoC) Board and governance structure should mirror that.

Understand [racial trauma](#) and the [racial disparities](#) that exist within your homelessness response system. Institute a “Racial Equity Team” that will develop specific equity core beliefs and goals that can be integrated into all other CoC goals. Ensure that there are [policies and procedures](#) in place for accountability to uphold these values.

Be willing to give up control and get uncomfortable using [best practices and strategies for engaging persons with lived experience](#). Promoting the power of people with lived expertise requires an understanding of the historical missteps that CoC leaders have taken by taking away the power from the people accessing their services. Some potential missteps to monitor for include not sharing decision-making power with people with lived expertise, information hoarding, or relying on one-off collaborations such as focus groups and surveys. Ensure that people with lived expertise are included in the process at the genesis, be as transparent as possible, and build up a collaborative relationship with individuals with lived expertise while allowing their views or experiences to lead the process.

Ensure your system [authentically engages by creating space for people with lived expertise](#) to have voting, hiring, and decision-making power.

Ensure people with lived expertise are compensated for their time and contributions. This includes providing meals, transportation, Wifi, and other technology that allows for full participation—access to technology is critical for participation during COVID-19.

Devote the necessary resources to make the programming successful (i.e., budget, staff, time, space).

Do the personal and professional development work. Staff and leaders must intentionally work on identifying the ways in which their own implicit racial bias has done harm and do the work necessary to allow for more equitable and [trauma-informed approaches](#).

Not everyone with decision-making power will be ready for authentic engagement. However, individuals that make up the leadership structure can delegate their own seat at the table to a person with lived expertise to start elevating those voices. Many communities have even reserved two specific voting seats for people with lived expertise, making that a standard for operation.

Meaningful Engagement for Community Planning Processes

Authentic and meaningful engagement of individuals with lived expertise means including them in all decision-making processes related to policy, funding, program design and implementation, etc. Before any decisions are made, CoCs and recipients of CoC, ESG, and ESG-CV funding should collaborate with people who have lived expertise, centering their voices and experiences and considering them to be the most valid and informed. This requires people who have held those decision-making spaces to consistently share power with and relinquish power to those individuals. Engagement can and should occur in a variety of spaces and ways including conducting listening sessions, inviting persons with lived expertise to serve as an advisor or as a member of a Community Action Board, or inviting them to be a member of a CoC’s Board.

Inauthentic Engagement	Meaningful Engagement
<p>Showy engagement is when a person with lived expertise is brought to the table simply for appearances. This often involves inviting a person to an event to speak about their often traumatic and negative experiences of homelessness and attempting to navigate the system. This type of engagement is for the benefit of the meeting organizers and does not result in true system change.</p>	<p>Foster relationships with those persons with lived expertise whom you plan to engage. Allow them to be a part of the planning process from the very beginning and center their voices and perspectives at all times. Be sure to uplift the impact of their work, challenging any personal self-esteem issues and raising community understanding of their humanity.</p>
<p>Tokenism is when people with lived expertise are invited to the table solely to fulfill a requirement or check a box. Their participation is seen as a means to an end.</p>	<p>Create a collaborative environment that is informed by placing the highest value on the perspectives of those persons with expertise. Therefore, including people with this experience who are willing to share is of the highest priority—not just something that has to be done.</p>

Inauthentic Engagement	Meaningful Engagement
<p>Decisions are often made behind closed doors and those in power decide what information is shared with whom and when it can be shared. This lack of transparency leads to a lack of trust and buy-in.</p>	<p>Transparency allows for open recognition of challenges and mistakes and acknowledges that every mistake is an opportunity for growth and development. Sharing missteps with community members allows for people with lived expertise to recognize the humility and dedication to improvement in the system.</p>
<p>White-dominant culture norms are pervasive in most organizations and leadership structures, setting standards that are unattainable and unrealistic for people who have been historically marginalized and/or have intersectional needs.</p>	<p>Organizational and system leaders should shift approaches to working, creating more accessible spaces for people with lived expertise to meaningfully engage. In practice this could mean:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting outside of regular business hours. • Providing acronym sheets to meeting participants. • Leaving professional titles out of introductions. • Being flexible with language in meetings. • Meeting in neutral spaces. <p>When deciding what is needed to accomplish this, input from persons with lived expertise is centered.</p>
<p>Expecting people with lived expertise to volunteer their time in a manner that accommodates the organization and decision-makers.</p>	<p>The contributions of persons with lived expertise are valued and prioritized. Therefore, the organization and decision-makers should make efforts to accommodate persons with lived expertise, which may include providing transportation, meals, Wifi, and other technology that allows for full participation. Most critical, persons with lived expertise are compensated for their time and contributions.</p>

Additional Resources

- [Rehousing Activation and Racial Equity: Equity as the Foundation](#)
- [Staff Orientation to Racial Equity](#)
- [Disaster Response Rehousing Equity Toolkit](#)
- [Beyond Mere Principle: Strategies for Truly Partnering with People Who Have Lived Experience in our Work](#)
- [Engaging Community Residents with Lived Experience](#)