



Tip Sheet: Supporting Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

Background: Understanding the Situation

Lack of stable, safe, and functional housing affects millions globally, with about **580,000 people** experiencing homelessness in the United States on any given night and **more than 200,000** accessing shelters annually (de Sousa et al., 2022). **Over 35 percent** of these individuals experience chronic homelessness, often struggling with mental health issues, substance use, and physical disabilities and facing a higher risk of victimization.

Key Considerations When Working with Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

1. Acknowledge the Complexity of Their Situation

- Lack of stable housing can be caused by multiple factors including economic hardship, lack of affordable housing, trauma, mental illness, substance use, and family issues.
- **Avoid making assumptions** about their situation. Listen actively, empathize, and remain nonjudgmental. **Validate** their feelings and acknowledge **systemic barriers** they face, such as discrimination and limited access to resources.

2. Assess Immediate Needs

- Immediate or primary needs may not be obvious. **Explore the situation.**
- Work with the individual to prioritize their **basic needs** (food, shelter, safety) over mental health or emotional support.
- If the individual is in immediate danger, contact emergency services and stay on the phone with them in a safe place until help arrives (with their consent, you may speak to the police on their behalf).
 - Be familiar with how to search your internal **resource database to identify local resources** (shelters, food programs, medical care, legal aid, etc.) that best meet the individual's needs.

3. Be Aware of Trauma and Mental Health Concerns

- Many people experiencing homelessness experience chronic stress, mental illness, or post-traumatic stress disorder from trauma such as violence or instability.
- **Assess for safety**, recognizing that mental health conditions may influence behavior. Approach trauma-related discussions with caution, being prepared for emotional reactions.

4. Consider Substance Use and Dependency

- Substance use disorders are common among people experiencing homelessness. Approach these topics with **compassion**.
- **Avoid confrontation or judgment**, focusing on harm reduction and treatment options.
- Be mindful that individuals actively using substances may not be ready for therapeutic interventions.



5. Offer Crisis Intervention Plans

- Use **collaborative problem-solving** to discuss next steps, such as finding shelter or accessing care.
- Guide the individual in co-creating a **safety plan** for emergencies or potential relapse, ensuring the person knows how to reach support during crises.

6. Be Mindful of Language and Communication

- Use **person-first language**, such as “individual experiencing homelessness” or “person without housing” instead of derogatory terms.
- Avoid labels that reinforce stigma, and focus on empowerment by highlighting **what the person can control**.
- Lead with that feels most comfortable to the individual.

7. Emphasize Continuity of Care

- Provide clear instructions on **how to access immediate support** if needed, and ensure the individual knows who to contact for further help.
- If appropriate, assist in connecting the person with longer-term resources such as legal aid, shelters, or urgent mental health services.
- Ensure the individual understands the importance of ongoing support, and **empower** them to take an active role in their care.

Sample Language Crisis Counselors May Use When Supporting Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

<i>“I want to make sure I’m hearing you correctly. Your experience is valid, and there can be many reasons why someone might be without stable housing. I’m here to listen and support you, not to make assumptions.”</i>	<i>“Quiero asegurarme de que le estoy escuchando correctamente. Su experiencia es válida, y pueden haber muchas razones por las que alguien no tenga una vivienda estable. Estoy aquí para escucharle y apoyarle, no para hacer suposiciones.”</i>
<i>“If you are in immediate danger, it’s important that we contact emergency services right away. While you wait in a safe place for help to arrive, I can stay on the phone with you for support. If you’re comfortable with it, I can also speak to the police on your behalf to make sure they understand your situation and can assist you quickly.”</i>	<i>“Si está en peligro inmediato, es importante que contactemos a los servicios de emergencia de inmediato. Mientras espera en un lugar seguro a que llegue la ayuda, puedo quedarme en la línea con Usted para brindarle apoyo. Si está de acuerdo, también puedo hablar con la policía en su nombre para asegurarme de que comprendan su situación y puedan asistirle rápidamente.”</i>
<i>“I want to check in on your safety first. Sometimes, mental health conditions or trauma can influence how people react in</i>	<i>“Quiero asegurarme primero de su seguridad. A veces, las condiciones de salud mental o el trauma pueden influir en cómo las personas reaccionan en situaciones estresantes, así que</i>



<i>stressful situations, so we'll take it slow and make sure you're feeling safe."</i>	<i>tomaremos las cosas con calma y nos aseguraremos de que se sienta seguro/a."</i>
<i>"We can create a safety plan that ensures you know what to do if you feel unsafe or if things start to feel overwhelming again. It's important that you have clear steps to follow in case of an emergency."</i>	<i>"Podemos crear un plan de seguridad que asegure que sepa qué hacer si se siente inseguro/a o si las cosas vuelven a ser abrumadoras. Es importante que tenga pasos claros a seguir en caso de emergencia."</i>
<i>"I want to make sure that our conversation is about empowering you and helping you make choices that are best for you."</i>	<i>"Quiero asegurarme de que nuestra conversación se trate de empoderarle y ayudarlo a tomar decisiones que sean lo mejor para Usted."</i>
<i>"I want to make sure you know that there are resources available to support you right now, and I'm here to help connect you with the ones that best meet your needs."</i>	<i>"Quiero asegurarme de que sepa que hay recursos disponibles para apoyarle en este momento, y estoy aquí para ayudarlo a conectarse con los que mejor se adapten a sus necesidades."</i>

References

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