Homeless Outreach Practises in BC Communities - Highlights

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Outreach models that offer direct access to income assistance and permanent accommodation have been operating in BC since 2005 when the first pilot outreach project was initiated in the city of Vancouver. Research has concluded that homeless outreach services improve housing and health outcomes for homeless persons. The present research aimed to identify effective practices in homeless outreach service provision and how this may differ in small urban, urban, and suburban communities. The study is presented in two volumes: Volume 1: Summary Report and Volume 2: Outreach Program Profiles.[1]

The top three outreach practices identified in this study are:
- treating homeless persons respectfully so they feel valued,
- maintaining links with housing providers, and
- maintaining links with community service agencies.

Some key elements of these practices are:

Hiring the right staff: Empathetic staff able to develop ongoing relationships of trust with their clients is central to the outreach model. In fact, successful outreach speaks more to the qualities of the outreach worker, their training and support, than specific outreach practices per se. It requires staff who understand the experiences of homeless individuals, and are able to relate to clients by being non-judgmental, being able to express humour, able to listen, are respectful, and promise only what they can deliver.

Being client centred and flexible: Meeting the homeless where they are and focusing on the needs of each unique client are key outreach characteristics or principles. Outreach workers must be flexible and provide the assistance needed whatever that may be. This usually means getting to know each client and developing a case plan that meets their individual needs. A suitable mix of housing, income assistance and support would be tailored to each client to address their issues (short-term or long-term) and help them take steps toward stability.

Evolving client intake strategies: A notable feature of the outreach program in several of the sites studied has been the evolution of engagement from being primarily focused on street outreach to a combination of street outreach and office appointment and referrals. It appears to have been adapted naturally over time as the program has become known within the community, and may enhance staff capacity as less time is spent finding clients.

Maintaining ongoing relationships: All programs established long-term relationships with clients whenever possible. There was generally no such label as "former" clients: programs

accept clients multiple times if housing stability is lost. Some programs reported providing services to clients for several years.

Empowering the client: Empowering the client to move forward, at their own pace, in their own way was seen as critical practice. Effective outreach aims to find that middle ground between facilitating or enabling independence versus creating dependency. On a day-to-day level this might mean providing a client with a list of rentals with phone numbers and asking that the client make contact with landlords instead of making calls on the client's behalf.

Accessing service networks: Access to the services and expertise of other agencies (whether through formalized service networks that use an integrated case management approach, or through informal relationships between outreach staff and other service providers) was critical for these outreach programs. Positive relationships/links with housing providers in the community and with other community service agencies was also seen as critical. It didn't seem to matter if these networks were formal or informal.

Liaising with landlords: Staff in most programs actively liaised with landlords, enabling them to build relationships that would facilitate their clients' access to housing. It would also provide a basis for a phone call from the landlord in the event of an issue with a tenant, letting them know of the situation, and thereby offer an opportunity for the worker to attempt to mitigate the situation. One agency is managing to house its clients without landlord engagement.

Providing rent supplements: Rent supplements appear to provide opportunities for clients to gain access to some better quality housing in the private market, although many agencies still struggle to find adequate affordable housing.

Community engagement and support: Having staff actively involved within the broader community helps raise awareness of homelessness, promote support for initiatives and develop long-term strategies for addressing homelessness in the community.

Variations by community type

Outreach programs operating in all community types identified the same three practices as most important:

- treating homeless persons respectfully so they feel valued,
- maintaining links with housing providers, and
- and maintaining links with community service agencies.

The following practices were less important in small urban outreach sites than in suburban and urban sites:

- hiring staff with special knowledge of homeless people and the problems they face
- taking a team approach to staffing i.e. outreach workers share a caseload
- debriefing and/or counselling for staff

Some of the factors that affect outreach in communities of various sizes:

In small urban sites
- Fewer local services affects outreach ability to connect clients with services
- Transportation and access issues arise due to limited public transit and serving residents of outlying communities

In suburban sites
- More services in place than in small centres, as well as more diversity in affordable housing options
- Suburbs in close proximity to urban centre may have fewer services
- Suburban communities may have little purpose built rental housing to mitigate the expensive regional housing market
- These outreach sites had large wooded areas where homeless people camp, so that finding the homeless makes outreach efforts more challenging.

In urban sites
- A wide range of social services are available, many centred in the downtown core.
- Able to develop large, resilient and effective service networks capable of adopting an integrated case management approach and ensuring that services aren't duplicated.
- Travel can be an issue for clients located outside downtown cores where services are focused.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are more similarities than differences in outreach practises and perceptions of effectiveness of these practices across communities of various types.   Providers experience a number of challenges as identified in this study and addressing these challenges would help facilitate more effective outreach.

1. Measures that would address human resource concerns such as such as caseload size, recruitment and retention, staff coverage and job security would strengthen staff capacity.
2. Consideration might be given to focusing outreach in agencies that are members of existing service networks or can engage with one. Alternately, this could be expanded to agencies indicating a willingness to and the capacity to develop new service networks with other agencies in their community.
3. Multi-service agencies providing services to the homeless may be better placed to facilitate follow-up and provide support.
4. Addressing the limited mental health and addiction service capacity identified in some communities would improve outreach effectiveness. A referral model that depends on the presence of a sufficient and diverse service network means this is critical, as lack of services will affect outreach delivery and success.
5. While not a challenge but a positive aspect of some outreach programs, availability of rent supplements through outreach programs facilitates access to private sector housing, and permits use of higher quality housing which is likely a factor in promoting housing stability.