

Introduction

The goal of this Best Practices Guide is to identify ethical and sensitive ways to advocate for individuals facing homelessness in order to respect their **humanity** and **individuality**. This document guides us to meet work in line with our core values of: **Community, Respect, and Integrity**.

In order to do so, we must first understand the experience of homelessness. **Homelessness** is a situation experienced by an individual, family, or community without stable, safe, or permanent housing.¹ On every given night, more than 35,000 Canadians experience homelessness, yet this number excludes individuals in temporary living situations such as those temporarily staying with friends or relatives due to the lack of an immediate place to live.² This state of being able to conceal homelessness is referred to as **hidden homelessness**, a situation that nearly 1 in 10 Canadians experience every year.³ As such, we use our platform to highlight and amplify the voices of individuals experiencing homelessness and those serving in the community.

Pillar 1: Community

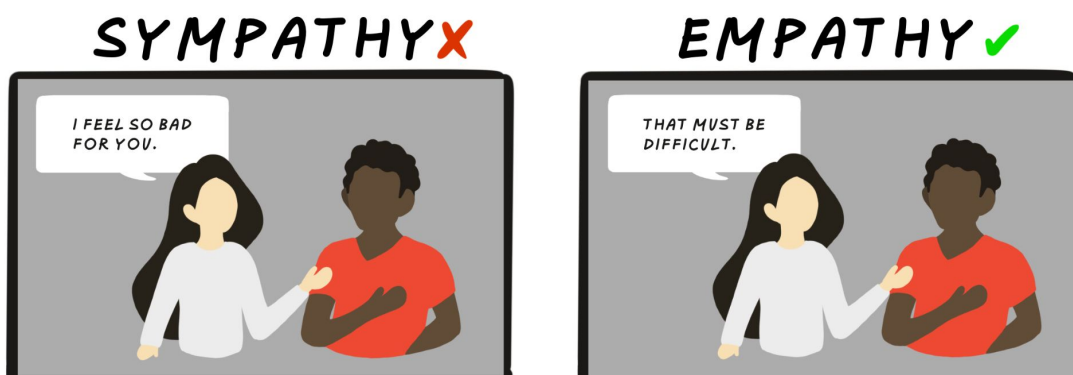
We exist to make our community a better and more equitable place for everyone. We build partnerships to maximise our impact.

Renowned French sociologist Emile Durkheim established that people often fear what is foreign to them.⁴ Thus, fear leads to ignorance and marginalisation.

Although the lack of consistent shelter, food, income, and many other struggles faced by individuals experiencing homelessness might be unfamiliar or unknown to us, our *motive* as youth engaging with socioeconomic inequality is to (1) **recognise** ignorance and misconceptions in ourselves and in others, and (2) **address** any prejudices in ourselves and in our community.

BEST PRACTICE 1

To better understand the unique experiences of individuals experiencing homelessness, we do not presume that we understand each individuals' situation. Therefore, **we empathise rather than sympathise** when we learn about their experiences.



Following this, we recognise the work of well-established organisations and support systems in the community. Extending from soup kitchens to homeless shelters, we acknowledge the immense contributions that exist.

As such, our work is centered around leveraging existing resources and building upon the work currently being done to serve individuals experiencing homelessness. We use our platform to amplify and complement work in the community through involving youth in their classrooms.

We speak with, and have our work consulted by the different stakeholders of homelessness, including frontline workers, academics, and individuals with lived experience.

BEST PRACTICE 2

We **build partnerships** with people and organisations that have greater experience and information. We seek the expertise of individuals in the community who can help to contribute towards the projects and resources we create.



A big thank you to the organisations and individuals that we've collaborated with.

Pillar 2: Respect

We respect the space and dignity of those we want to help. We listen and learn first, and use our voices only when and where it is appropriate.

We cannot reduce individuals experiencing homelessness to a number as the causes and conditions of homelessness differ from one individual to another based on multiple social factors, including race, gender, age, and sexual orientation.

BEST PRACTICE 3

We **avoid adopting a "one size fits all" approach** to socio-economic inequality and refrain from making generalisations, including stereotypes and assumptions about an individual's social conditions.

Up until this point, you may have noticed that the term used to refer to individuals experiencing extreme poverty has been “individuals experiencing homelessness”. The language we use holds significant importance when discussing and conversing about homelessness.

BEST PRACTICE 4

We **use the correct terminology** to respect the dignity of individuals facing extreme poverty.

~~HOMELESS~~

INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING

HOMELESSNESS

Why do we use “experiencing” or “facing”?

Homelessness is a state that does not define someone’s identity. The term “individual **experiencing/facing** homelessness” can be used to describe people at-risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. It is a situation an individual experiences and should not be used to label an individual.

Why is terminology important?

It is extremely difficult to determine how homelessness begins. From rough sleeping and statutory homelessness to hidden and at-risk of homelessness, homelessness is a fluid and individual experience instead of a static state that is widely applicable to anyone.¹

Pillar 3: Integrity

We act morally and ethically in serving our mission to the best of our ability. We always try to do the right thing.

Our organisation exists to serve and respect the space of individuals experiencing homelessness.

Trauma and homelessness are often correlated; for example, addictions, domestic violence, child and sexual abuse, depression, and PTSD may be cause by or result from experiences of homelessness.⁵

BEST PRACTICE 5

We **must always be trauma-informed** as insensitive interactions or questions that recreate or evoke a past traumatising experience can unintentionally provoke negative emotional responses or re-traumatise an individual⁶.

It is also important to be aware that as individuals who have not lived the experiences of the individuals we strive to serve, we too, must recognise our own misconceptions, especially when we hold them within.

BEST PRACTICE 6

We **recognise personal biases and privilege** in ourselves and others, and work towards overcoming them in order to stay sensitive to people's experiences.

Think:

1

How does your *social position* influence your perspective of socioeconomic inequality and your attitude towards individuals experiencing homelessness?

Many factors determine your social power and privilege, including: social class and level of education, physical and mental ability, sense of belonging to a **primary and secondary group**, race and ethnicity (white privilege), sexual orientation (heterosexual privilege), etc.

2

How can you avoid *selective exposure* in your daily life (i.e. seeking out information that fits with your existing views, knowledge or experience)?⁷

Seeking to challenge and question one's beliefs by verifying whether they are backed by facts instead of assumptions is key to avoid selective exposure.

3

How can you become an *ally* to individuals experiencing homelessness?

An ally does not seek to "fix", "help" or "sympathise" but rather to "stand up" for and "empathise" with those whose voices are unheard.⁸

BEST PRACTICE 7

We **remain open-minded and impartial** to our findings.

- We are open to unexpected findings, reactions, or answers because **there is no "normal" response** to traumatic experiences. Instead of backing off from the unforeseen by refusing to delve into a particular topic, encourage further exploration without probing and aim for comprehensive findings.
- We are not **judgemental of experiences**. We never take a position of evaluating an individual based on their past decisions. It is not our place to judge nor to question. Our role is to *actively listen* and ensure that the voices of individuals are heard.
- We keep in mind that **different subpopulations** face distinct issues in regard to their experience of homelessness. We avoid generalisations, and recognise/convey the complexity of socio-economic inequality through our material.

Summary

The main objective of this Best Practices Guide is to highlight equitable and sensitive practices to respect the humanity and individuality of individuals experiencing homelessness.

With that, we strive to dismantle misconceptions surrounding homelessness, yet we do not presume we understand the situations and realities of individuals experiencing homelessness. Rather, when possible, we empathise with those who have lived experiences and build partnerships with people and organisations that are more informed than us.

Finally, we avoid adopting a “one size fits all” approach to socio-economic inequality by using the right terminology and staying trauma-informed. Being trauma-informed means remaining sensitive to interactions or questions that may evoke past trauma in an individual. To do so, we recognise biases in ourselves and others, and adopt an open mind towards diversity.

Glossary

Rough sleeping/unsheltered/experiencing absolute homelessness: A situation where an individual or household is living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation, such as empty buildings and subway stations

Statutory homelessness/emergency sheltered: refers to those staying in temporary accommodation, such as overnight shelters and shelters against family violence

Hidden homelessness/couch surfing: situation where a person or household is staying with friends or relatives temporarily due to the lack of an immediate place to live

At-risk of homelessness: condition referred to people who are not yet experiencing homelessness, but whose economic and/or housing situation does not meet public health and safety standards (e.g. spending more than 50% of their income on rent or live in unsuitable housing)

Primary social group: small social group whose members share personal, enduring relationships (e.g. family or circle of friends)

Secondary social group: group that comprises of impersonal and temporary relationships that are goal- or task-oriented (e.g. co-workers or student/teacher relationships)

References

1. "Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. (2012). *Canadian Definition of Homelessness*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press. www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/COHhomelessdefinition-1pager.pdf
2. Gaetz, S., Donaldson, J., Richter, T., & Gulliver, T. (2013). *The State of homelessness in Canada 2013* (Publication). Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.
3. Rodrigue, S. (2016, November). Insights on Canadian Society: Hidden homelessness in Canada. Retrieved from www150.stactan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2016001/article/14678-eng.htm
4. Carleton, R. N. "Fear of the unknown: One fear to rule them all?" *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*. (2016), vol. 41, pp. 5-21, doi: doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2016.03.011
5. Homeless Hub. Trauma Informed Care. Retrieved from www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/mental-health/trauma-informed-care
6. I. Gervais, personal communication, June 29, 2020
7. Krueger, V. (2017, February). *4 factors that influence people's attitudes towards facts*. Poynter. Retrieved from www.poynter.org/education-students/2017/4-factors-that-influence-peoples-attitudes-toward-facts/
8. Atcheson, S. (2018, November). *Allyship-The Key to Unlocking the Power of Diversity*. Forbes. Retrieved from www.forbes.com/sites/hereeatcheson/2018/11/30/allyship-the-key-to-unlocking-the-power-of-diversity/#6a96431a49c6



Find more resources at
hotpotatoinitiative.ca/resources