

Why It is Important to Pay People with Lived/Living Experience and Expertise of Homelessness

People with current or former lived experience and expertise (PLEE) of homelessness have a deep understanding of the realities of their homelessness. The uniqueness of each person's life story, resilience, and journey through homelessness is invaluable. They can serve as compelling and relevant guides to systems of care for building compassion within communities in order to improve systems, services, policies, and practices. They can also help us understand the complex intersectional dimensions of homelessness including, but not limited to, critical challenges, lack of essential resources, difficulties navigating systems, and realistic solutions. More importantly, they can help communities develop a better understanding of the root causes, disparities, and breadth of homelessness. It is critical that communities actively seek opportunities for PLEE to share power at the same table with sector leaders in gap analyses, problem-solving discussions, and decision-making processes. Furthermore, engaging PLEE as meaningful partners and decision-makers while recognizing their expertise in evaluating, developing, and implementing housing solutions and other processes that affect their lives and communities is a human rights imperative.

While many leaders across government and private/non-profit sectors recognize the value of utilizing the expertise and power of PLEE to drive transformative change in their communities, there is still much work to be done. Creating community models that inclusively acknowledge and value the agency of PLEE across all decision-making aspects is essential, especially as we collectively work to advance equity and inclusion. As this capacity-building work continues in our communities, it is vitally important that PLEE are appropriately compensated for contributing their time, energy, and valuable expertise. Compensation acknowledges and affirms the contributions of PLEE, addresses inequalities between those who are and those who are not paid to engage in the work, and helps break down barriers to participation. Potential partnership opportunities with PLEE can include:

- Serving as members of governance boards.
- Serving on advisory committees.
- Being employed and performing tasks within homelessness service systems.
- Working as a peer researcher or mentor.
- Serving as a community liaison.
- Speaking at city council and other local elected official meetings.
- Advocating for organizations.
- Helping to evaluate, restructure and implement policy.

When partnering with PLEE, communities should dedicate time and effort to creating opportunities for people to use their voice and power through authentic and transformational processes that avoid tokenism. The first step in this direction is using "person-first language" in all materials and communications, such as "people experiencing homelessness" instead of "homeless people" or "the homeless."

Approaching Conversations about When and How PLEE Would Like to Be Paid

PLEE may choose to participate in efforts to address homelessness in different capacities and should be compensated accordingly. PLEE have often been expected to donate their time while others around the table are being paid. In creating equitable systems, PLEE must be seen and valued as equal partners who are paid equitably for the work. Compensating PLEE insufficiently or expecting them to volunteer without compensation is inequitable and disrespectful, and it creates financial barriers. Payment should be clearly discussed with PLEE up front before beginning the work. PLEE should also be provided sufficient information related to when and how they prefer to be paid, in addition to potential payment options and specific implications associated with each. This is especially important as PLEE are often anxious about how payments may have tax implications or affect their eligibility for public benefits.

PLEE have varying circumstances and sometimes highly individualized needs and barriers. Building in regular check-ins and creating space and timeshares and/or debriefs are crucial. Thus, a person-centered approach for determining the types of support and needed resources required for participation should regularly be prioritized and considered. It is critical to not make assumptions and to recognize and mitigate biases. Communities, entities, or groups seeking to partner with PLEE should engage with individuals in one-on-one conversations to better understand and more appropriately support their needs.

Transparency and clarity about the assigned task or project, including background information, situational context, and reason(s) for enlisting help, are key to any effective working relationship. The same is true in this relationship: explicitly and transparently articulating the expectations, processes, policies, and practices to PLEE will pave the way to their success. Be intentional in allowing sufficient time for PLEE to ask questions, voice concerns, and understand terms. Communities should designate a point person or a mentor—preferably a person who has experienced homelessness or has worked successfully with PLEE previously—for questions, concerns, support, and regular, respectful check-ins. It is also important that communities convey their intentions beyond the engagement event. In other words, clarity on how the perspectives of PLEE will be used to inform the work, and what the next steps will be after the participation of the PLEE is completed, will help avoid misunderstandings on both ends.

Compensation Considerations

Financial compensation for PLEE's time and expertise must be considered and be similar to others serving in the same capacity. Compensation should also be provided for any training, orientation, and/or capacity-building needed so that individuals feel like they are adequately prepared to contribute and engage in the work. Examples include, but are not limited to, digital literacy for participation via video conferencing, public speaking, facilitation, interviewing skills, administrative skills, board governance, bio drafting for speaking engagements, and media training. Some projects may require specialized or distinctive skill sets, which should be part of a training package as well, if applicable. Time spent by PLEE on preparation for the work (including but not limited to reading background materials, watching videos, pre-work research, etc.) should also be compensated.

Communities and entities should prioritize creating a dedicated budget to adequately compensate individuals for their participation and ensure there are resources and staff support for PLEE. The development of a compensation plan with built-in room for individualization is highly recommended. Communities should ensure that PLEE are included in envisioning and designing the compensation plan.

In addition to adequate compensation, individuals should also receive payment or reimbursement for participation-related costs which may include, but are not limited to:

- Transportation and other travel costs
 - Public transportation
 - Rideshare fees
 - Air travel
- Lodging accommodations
- Meals
- Childcare costs when applicable
 - Childcare or child-friendly meeting spaces

Payment methods can include compensation in the form of:

- Cash
- Money order
- Gift cards
- Checks
- ACH transfers (direct deposit)
- Payment apps: Zelle, Cash App, PayPal, Venmo

Based on research and focus groups with PLEE, direct payment methods are often most preferred by PLEE. Checks often have limitations such as requiring a physical address and/or needing transportation to a bank, which may provide barriers for individuals experiencing homelessness. Similarly, gift cards can be difficult for some PLEE to use due to transportation challenges and limited usability. When considering payment options, it is important to remember that filling out a W-9 can impact an individual's income sources such as public benefits. Any compensation, including payment by gift cards, totaling over \$600 requires the issuance of an IRS Form 1099-NEC. PLEE may need to seek advice from an accountant or financial advisor to ensure that compensation does not adversely impact any public assistance or housing benefits.

Potential Funding Streams

Communities and entities should take an inventory of their existing budget, including funding streams that could be used to support compensation for PLEE. Compensation for PLEE may come from various sources depending on funding availability and established guidelines (such as federal and state and local government). Ensure that PLEE are fully aware and trained on the required documentation to be paid from a specific funding source, if applicable. Some examples of funding sources to compensate PLEE include the following:¹

- Local county general funds
- Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Homeless Assistance Grants Continuum of Care (CoC) Planning Grants² (for specific activities; read guidelines and refer to the HUDEXchange for resources)
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Homeless Assistance Grants Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) funding depending on how it is earmarked (for specific activities, read guidelines and refer to the HUDEXchange for resources)
- Grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HSS), including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- Corporations (large or local businesses): many large corporations have community support and/or social responsibility grants or funding gifts, which can benefit them as well through charitable giving and tax deductions
- Nonprofits, foundations, and faith organizations
- Philanthropies and personal giving accounts such as:
 - Bloomberg Philanthropy
 - Groundswell
- Partnerships with local institutions of higher education
- Fundraising events and/or social media fundraisers

Resource List

1. [Lessons Learned From Outreach Workers](#)
2. [Guidance for Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining People With Lived Experience and Expertise of Homelessness](#)
3. [Onboarding Toolkits for ESG Funded Programs](#)
4. [Continuum of Care Planning Activities](#)

¹ Note that funding streams are dependent on various factors including legislation, funding source guidelines, and funding availability.

² [24 CFR 578.39—Continuum of Care planning activities](#). Accessed 7 Apr. 2022.