

Meaningful Engagement of PWLEH Definition¹

What does it mean to meaningfully engage people with lived experience of homelessness?¹

Communities that have meaningfully engaged people with lived experience of homelessness create an environment where people with lived experience of homelessness are able to share their truth about what is working and what is not working in the system, without fear of retaliation.

In these communities the homeless response system leaders and governing bodies have included those disproportionately represented within the system and historically underserved and excluded, particularly Black, Brown, and Indigenous people and those who have lived experience of homelessness.

People with lived experience are paid for their time and expertise and lead on decisions affecting the community. Through this meaningful engagement of people with lived experience of homelessness a community develops and sustains interventions to end homelessness.

Introduction:

Meaningful engagement with persons who have experienced homelessness is essential for developing effective policies, programs, and services to address the complex issues they face. To ensure a respectful and inclusive approach, it is important to establish comprehensive standards that guide interactions and collaborations with individuals who have lived experience of homelessness. These standards aim to empower and involve those with lived experience in decision-making processes, advocacy efforts, and service design. Systems must **center people disproportionately impacted by the problem**. It is imperative to ensure representation of people most impacted, with the least proximity to power, creating a system with opportunities to bring them to the table in a meaningful way.

¹ It was co-created with the Housing Equity Strategists, TSTJ Consulting LLC and based off guidance of USICH and HUD

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The following standards provide a framework for meaningful engagement.

Internal Practices

- ***Be Vulnerable***, be open, honest, and transparent, allowing others to know the real problems you face, and be comfortable with being uncomfortable.
- ***Be Authentic***, be true to oneself regardless of the pressure one is under to act according to a prescribed role; get above the politics and to the heart of the issue. Be honest and proactive in communication.
- ***Be Consistent***, maintain engagement overtime, honor commitments made, be reliable and dependable to ensure people with lived experience are not being exploited.
- ***Be Accessible***, step outside of one's physical comfort zone, go to the people most impacted by the problem & integrate oneself into their schedule.
- ***Be Inclusive***, people with lived experience are not a monolith and opportunities in decision making need to include everyone and especially those who are overly represented in the homeless community. Ensuring that there is a wide variety of lived experience represented including but not limited to; veterans, DV survivors, AOD, carceral impacted, prior foster care, affected by mental injuries/mental health, and persons with disabilities

Relationship Framework

- ***Re-evaluate perception of "Professionalism"***, considerations for appearance and capacity, consistency, language need to be evaluated. De-centering the White Dominant Narrative is imperative. All contributions are needed and valued. Do not miss the message because of the method.
 - ***Create belonging***, ensure that all involved feel like they belong, that there is space and time to build true authentic relationships so that those involved; getting to know those involved, and moving at the speed of trust.
 - ***Treat with dignity and respect***, treating individuals with courtesy, acknowledging and being aware of cultural identities, actively listening, using person-first language that acknowledges the individual beyond their housing status, refraining from judgment or stigmatization, and valuing their perspectives and experiences
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- **Implement Trauma Informed Practices** lead with empathy and respect, demonstrate the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, exercise compassion, and grace. Recognize the pervasive nature of the trauma of experiencing homelessness and promote environments of healing and recovery, actively working to prevent re-traumatization.
- **Value the contribution** advocates are equitably compensated for their time, and respected for their contributions. Compensation levels and types factor in the historical disenfranchisement of participants and support needed to be effective. Compensation should be made available via different modalities (*i.e.* check, reloadable gift cards, direct deposit, and other cash handling services such as CashApp and Venmo, etc.). Additionally, credit given to ideas, solutions, practices.
- **Build partnership & power share**, lived experience partners come from a position of disenfranchisement. Create relationships that are mutually beneficial, placing lived experience on a level playing field. A space where people with lived experience have power and feel a sense of control to address issues and present solutions. Roles and responsibilities are fully discussed and outlined with people with lived experience. Additionally, decision making methods are agreed upon prior to implementation (*i.e.* consensus, majority vote, etc.)

Infrastructure Principles

- **Reflect the population being served**; be it race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, or education, need to be represented at all decision making tables
- **Address & solve for barriers** consider all barriers (*e.g.* systematic, sexist, ableist) to participation, including those that are physical, technological, geographic, language-based, and create solutions to overcome them. All engagement processes and platforms must be accessible to individuals with diverse needs. This includes considering the physical, sensory, and cognitive accessibility requirements of participants. Accommodations such as providing accessible meeting venues, offering alternative formats for information sharing, and ensuring effective communication through interpreters or assistive technologies should be made available. Accessibility also includes access to technology and software programs needed for persons with lived experience to have equitable ability to participate in all engagements.
- **Continuous learning & improvement**, provide training for sustainability (*i.e.* financial education to ensure sustained benefits), create and provide opportunities for credentialing, create a culture of continuous learning and improvement

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How will a community know if they are working toward meeting the definition²:

Good: A community is creating trusting relationships by building processes to gather feedback and/or include people with lived experience to inform how services are provided. However, decisions are still made behind the scenes and information is only shared after a decision is made.

Better: A community has built processes to gather feedback from people with lived experience through multiple means. A community uses focus groups and compensates people with lived experiences for their time in the focus group. People with lived experience serve on CoC committees, involved in initiatives, coalitions, and workgroups as equal and valuable participants, however people with lived experience are few and feel made to meet a requirement. People with lived experience are a part of decision making but there are still decisions made behind the scenes.

Best: A community has built processes to actively and consistently gather feedback from people with lived experience and uses the feedback to improve their process and system. People with lived experience are at multiple decision making tables; municipal, county, state. Policies to collaborate with people with lived experience, including positions on CoC boards are codified and instituted. People with lived experience are on the CoC executive board and on committees, employed at agencies within positions of all levels, from leadership positions to frontline staff. People with lived experience are regularly consulted by the local community and equitably paid for their time. There is inclusivity and a wide representation of those experiencing homelessness. There is an organizational and systematic shift in approaches to working and creating solutions.

² This rubric is ever evolving and is not indicative or inclusive of **all** aspects a community could be undertaking to meaningfully include people with lived experience