

Background

In creating any type of new homeless program, it is important to have a strong concept of the program design and structure, from the moment a person enters the program, through the duration of his or her stay, and through any follow-up period. This memo begins to examine various components of program design, highlighting issues of particular importance to safe haven programs, and presenting potential solutions from other communities and publications. The issues discussed in this memo are just a few of the many program design features that merit attention during the planning process. Many other key issues, such as crisis management, coordination with the continuum of care, and long-term fiscal strategies may be addressed at future meetings.

For most safe haven programs, a successful program design embraces the low-demand philosophy, while engaging and partnering with clients to develop trust, stability, and, ultimately, a combination of housing and services designed to meet the needs of the individual.

Outreach

Problem: Safe havens target the most difficult to serve chronically homeless population. Individuals who are chronically homeless tend to have mental illness or co-occurring disorders that make them inherently distrustful of people and programs.

Solutions:

- Many safe havens conduct direct outreach, through daily visits to streets, parks, bus stations, social service agencies, etc. Pathways to Housing (NYC) uses ACT teams for direct outreach to the street population.
- Many safe havens offer drop-in activities and services, which act as an additional source of new clients (Pathways, MHA of Springfield, MA).
- Most safe havens accept referrals from other community organizations, though some limit the number of such referrals.
- Most safe havens have dedicated outreach staff, who are charged with brokering relationships with other community organizations and organizing street outreach efforts.
- In some safe havens (Pathways to Housing), the outreach worker who brings an individual into the program transitions to the role of case manager for that individual. This adds stability to the client's experience, and helps to build trust between client and staff.

Intake/Assessment

Problem: Certain information must be gathered about program participants, to comply with HUD reporting requirements, and to assess client needs. However, clients may have a number of problems communicating important information to program staff, due to lack of knowledge, stigmatization, or mental health issues.

Solutions:

- *In From the Cold* recommends limiting initial intake to the bare minimum – keeping in mind that it may be the client’s inability to complete a traditional intake process that has brought them to the safe haven.
- Many safe haven providers believe that the only assessment that is absolutely necessary at intake is whether the individual is likely to pose a violent or criminal threat to the other residents.
- MHA of Springfield believes that assessment must be a continuing process to be conducted informally, as the client feels ready.
- Providers can often learn a great deal through observation, during the client engagement phase of the program.
- Assessment may begin before someone formally enters the program, either on the streets, or through other services offered at your facility.

Engagement

Problem: The philosophy behind the safe haven model dictates that housing and services be delivered in a low-demand, coercion-free environment. Yet supportive services are crucial to achieving long-term housing and occupational stability for the target population.

Solutions:

- All successful safe haven providers agree that it’s essential to build a trusting relationship with clients, and allow individuals to make decisions affecting service delivery.
- At Harbor House, a safe haven in Nashua, NH engagement is a top priority for the first two to four weeks after intake, and then maintained indefinitely.
- *In From the Cold* recommends avoiding coercion as much as possible, as coercion tends to create distrust.
- Involve the client in every aspect of the program, allowing clients to determine for themselves what services they need or want.
- Remember that client engagement may take place before the client even enters the program: on the street, through outreach workers, and even while the program is being designed/implemented. This was the case with Pathfinder, a safe haven in Lowell, MA, where clients were involved in planning the design and structure of the program.
- MHA of Springfield recommends engaging residents in every aspect of the day-to-day program activities, such as meal planning, cooking, cleaning, and entertainment.
- Think of client engagement as a fluid, interactive process between each individual client and program staff.

- Remember that low-demand does not necessarily mean low-expectation.

Rules and Expectations

Problem: Targeted clients often find their way to safe havens precisely because they have been unable to meet the stricter rules of other program designs. Yet it is vitally important that the safety and well-being of staff and other program participants is insured.

Solutions:

- Focus on safety and harm reduction, rather than restrictive rules
- HUD’s safe haven guide, *In From the Cold*, suggests the following *Five Principles of Effective Rules*
 - Rules should reward positive behavior
 - Consequences should be explained and enforceable
 - Rules should relate to living situations
 - Rules provide opportunities for engagement
 - Rules provide a safety net for residents
- Safe havens run the gamut from dry (no alcohol or substance use permitted), to damp, to wet, but no facility that receives federal funding can allow the use of illegal substances on premises.
 - Many “wet” safe havens use a “motivational interviewing” or “stages of change” approach when helping clients overcome substance problems.
 - Many safe havens have all staff trained in the above methods, rather than relying on a single substance abuse counselor.

Staffing

Problem: The nature of the target population requires a broad range of expertise. Furthermore, providing a low-demand setting for homeless clients also tends to create a high-demand setting for staff, who must actively work to cajole clients, provide services, and conduct difficult outreach work.

Solutions:

- During the planning phase, try to anticipate all of the service needs of potential clients.
- Determine ahead of time which services will be provided on-site, by dedicated staff members, and which services may be provided by other agencies and/or at other locations.
- Anticipate staff coverage issues (i.e. 24-hour need) and plan accordingly.
- *In From the Cold* recommends additional staff training in the following areas:
 - Low-demand, high-expectation approach
 - Life on the street
 - Stable, secure, highly supportive environment
 - Portal of entry concept

- Continuum of Care
- Transition to permanent or permanent supportive housing

Community Relations

Problem: Neighbors have a variety of fears concerning the development of a homeless assistance program in their area, leading to problems with site selection and ongoing program operation.

Solution:

- Many successful homeless programs (Pathways, Community Shelter Board of Columbus) have begun community outreach efforts prior to development of homeless programs.
- CSB and other providers use good neighbor agreements to pro-actively address any concerns that a community may have over the siting of a program.
- Many providers, including CSB and Pathways hold regular neighborhood meetings to address any problems in the community. This often prevents problems from escalating, and allows the provider to address the problem first.
- Regular meetings and good neighbor agreements present a great opportunity for community education, reducing the influence of the stigmata that lead to community opposition and NIMBY syndrome in the first place.
- The most important aspect of community relations is allowing neighbors to feel involved and respected.
- *In From the Cold* lists seven steps that developers can use to address NIMBY issues:
 - Know the likely concerns and anticipate potential opposition
 - Plan thoroughly
 - In siting & design, keep NIMBY issues in mind
 - Engage in community outreach and education
 - Adopt and implement a good neighbor policy
 - Cultivate and utilize non-traditional allies
- Develop a legal strategy... just in case