



## Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Lessons from Charleston, SC

Across the country, communities are striving to create solutions for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness—including people sleeping and living in encampments—within their efforts to implement effective and efficient coordinated entry systems. As with all efforts to end homelessness, those solutions focus on creating meaningful pathways to permanent housing opportunities. We recognize, however, that given constrained resources, such opportunities may not be immediately available. While permanent housing opportunities are being scaled and secured, communities can implement strategies to ensure the safety and wellbeing of people sleeping and living in encampments.

In August 2015, we released [Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Advancing the Dialogue](#) to support community-level discussions to refine and strengthen strategies for addressing the housing and services needs of people living in encampments. We recently checked in with several communities to learn about their ongoing efforts. In Charleston, South Carolina, we spoke with Tyrale Bailey, an intern in the Department of Housing and Community Development and Liaison to the Mayor’s Commission on Homelessness. That conversation is summarized here.

### How have your approaches to addressing encampments evolved?

In February 2016, the City of Charleston released a 10-Point Plan to address encampments in downtown Charleston. A key tenet of that plan is collaboration between city departments and local agencies. These partners include the Charleston Department of Housing and Community Development, Charleston Department of Livability and Tourism, Charleston Police Department, the Lowcountry Homeless Coalition (CoC Lead Agency), Fetter Health Care Network, Charleston Dorchester Mental Health Center, and One80 Place (our local emergency shelter). The goal is to engage persons experiencing homelessness with dignity and to give them the opportunity to achieve permanent housing.

Once an encampment is identified—by outreach teams, police, or members of the community—the Lowcountry Homeless Coalition Executive Director is notified, and the Charleston Police Department conducts an initial assessment. The City of Charleston’s Community Liaison & Homeless Coordinator then enters the camp without police presence to begin to establish a relationship with the residents. Almost simultaneously, the Lowcountry Homeless Coalition outreach team enters the encampment to interview encampment residents, assess their needs, enter their information into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), and offer immediate shelter placement. If the person experiencing homelessness is willing to accept placement in the local shelter (One80 Place), they can call the Housing Crisis Line during operating hours for assistance with securing permanent housing. Those who are not yet willing to accept shelter are continuously engaged and offered services or alternative housing and services options, such as transitional housing or treatment, to help them move towards permanent housing. Once the encampment inhabitants have found shelter, the encampment is cleared of debris.

**Who were the most important stakeholders to have at the table? Why? What strategies were the most effective in engaging them?**

The following stakeholders each play a unique role in the city's response to encampments. These agencies and city departments collaborate to provide services to people experiencing homelessness and information to citizens concerned about homelessness.

- The [Mayor's Office](#) established the directive to city and community stakeholders to resolve the issue of encampments in a sensitive and succinct manner.
- The Charleston Police Department completes an initial assessment of the encampment. They can also escort outreach workers into encampments, help properly identify individuals, and quickly de-escalate any conflict that may arise.
- Livability Officers contact property owners where encampments are located and generate property ID and GIS coordinates.
- The [Lowcountry Homeless Coalition](#) establishes a rapport with encampment residents, assesses needs, ensures that resident information is entered in HMIS and the Housing Crisis Line database, and provides an encampment outreach timeline.
- The City of Charleston Environmental Services Division conducts cleanup and removal of debris once the encampment has been resolved.
- [OriginSC](#) provides direct, low-barrier financial services through the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG), Rapid Rehousing (RRH), and the Representative Payee Program.
- Charleston Dorchester Mental Health Center provides case management and mobile mental health services through Highway 2 Hope.
- Fetter Health Care Network provides outreach and low-barrier access to health care services.
- [One80 Place](#) provides emergency shelter and wrap-around services to residents of the Lowcountry.

To engage these organizations, it was important to start with a shared understanding of goals and a clearly defined strategy, provided by the 10-Point Plan. Clear, concise communication regarding process steps, roles, and responsibilities, and a constant focus on partnership between agencies, was essential.

**What strategies did you find most effective for conducting outreach and engagement?**

**How did they improve your outcomes?**

The strategy that proved to be most effective when conducting outreach and engagement was to build a solid relationship with individuals experiencing homelessness by simply shaking their hands and providing them with a listening, empathetic ear. In most cases, simple relationship-building improved outcomes.

Outreach to individuals living in encampments focuses on the following strategies:

- Building a relationship and rapport with the person.
- Addressing their immediate needs, if possible, usually by providing a meal or bus ticket.
- Distributing personal hygiene items.
- Introducing them to a case worker who can provide the appropriate assessment.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Directing them to the appropriate resources to achieve long-term stability.</li> </ul> <p>Additionally, to continue to build trust, outreach teams have begun working to identify the leader(s) of each encampment, and targeting outreach to those individuals first. The hope is that if the individual seen as the leader accepts housing, other members of the encampment will soon follow.</p>
<p><b>What strategies do you use to provide low-barrier pathways to permanent housing? How do those strategies help?</b></p>	<p>To give people opportunities to move from homelessness to permanent housing, the team connects people living in encampments directly to organizations that can meet their housing and services needs. These include organizations that provide rental assistance, case management, and wrap-around services, and landlords willing to rent to people exiting homelessness. These strategies have helped to increase the number of people successfully housed.</p>
<p><b>What are your next steps?</b></p>	<p>While the community continues to address encampments, next steps include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementing strategies to prevent homelessness.</li> <li>• Expanding the capacity of outreach workers.</li> <li>• Completing an analysis of the service provider systems, consisting of what services are provided, and what funding sources are available for the intended population.</li> <li>• Consistently providing resource information and offers of permanent housing, especially to those experiencing chronic homelessness.</li> <li>• Engaging the larger community through the Mayor’s Commission on Homelessness and Affordable Housing.</li> <li>• Working with local developers and landlords to increase the supply of affordable housing available to people exiting homelessness.</li> </ul>
<p><b>What has been your greatest challenge, or the thing that surprised you the most?</b></p>	<p>The most challenging part of this process was realizing that no single agency or entity can solve this problem alone. It takes a wide array of departments and agencies working together to provide meaningful housing opportunities to people experiencing homelessness. During the process, the team also realized that many agencies whose mission it is to serve people experiencing homelessness were unaware of the full array of resources and funding sources available in the community.</p> <p>A pleasant surprise was the willingness of members of the community to be part of the solution by donating furniture, bedding, and food, and offering employment opportunities. The biggest allies during this experience were OriginSC, Our Lady of Mercy’s Neighborhood House, Palmetto Project (Homeless 2 Hope Fund), Charleston Dorchester Mental Health Center, Highway 2 Hope, City of Charleston’s Police Department, the Livability and Environmental Services Departments, faith-based partners, local leaders, and SC Strong.</p>