

Learnings



Austin's Homelessness Advisory Committee

What has the City of Austin's i-Team learned from working directly with people experiencing homelessness in our city? This report contains Learnings from developing and working with Austin's Homelessness Advisory Committee.



Who Are AHAC?

AHAC stands for Austin's Homelessness Advisory Committee.

A diversity of voices from people with lived experience of homelessness is still missing from the overarching conversation in policymaking. The participants of AHAC represents the diverse service connections and lived experiences throughout the entire community, not simply one subgroup or population.

AHAC was created in the fall of 2017 by the City of Austin's Office of Innovation's Bloomberg iTeam in coordination with the Department of Public Health and the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO). Collectively, these entities are the "Organizers" for the committee. We started with a 6-months pilot project that included 13 members who have previously or are currently experiencing homelessness to help with the development of research tools, consult on findings, and test possible solutions. By March 2018, we had grown to 16 members with a 90% attendance rate for each meeting.

The role of the Advisory Committee is to have conversations, share stories, and provide feedback in order to reach these goals:

- Educate and inform policy makers on the realities of homelessness, including disability, mental health, substance use disorder, and other issues faced by individuals who are homeless
- Obtain feedback on current services and resources for persons experiencing homelessness
- Better understand the realities of homelessness and to inform the improvement of services
- To inform the design of materials and outreach for individuals experiencing homelessness

AHAC Learnings

- The following few pages list what we as Austin's Innovation Team have learned from building out and working with the members of Austin's Homelessness Advisory Committee.
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- 1. Participants benefit from additional support for:
 - Mental and emotional needs during the workshop
 - Use mindfulness activities at the beginning of each meeting to increase their focus
 - More time to absorb materials and activities
 - More time to talk to the organizers about the issues they are facing while homeless or housed
 - Improving the problems they encounter during current living situation
 - 2. A forum is needed for continued community and support.
 - 3. Facilitators are successful when:
 - They are skilled at compassionate redirection and can keep the group focused on tasks and topics
 - They are trained in Trauma Informed Care practices so that agendas and activities are sensitive to possible re-traumatization.
 - 4. The regular meetings provide a sense of positivity, hope, and camaraderie for the members. By doing so, we are building trust between the i-team and the community and laying the groundwork for future work with service providers.
 - "Having positive interaction and a healthy meal was stimulating and encouraging. The diversity of our group is very interesting and informative. My thoughts were how real this all is that we are no longer just statistical data on pages; we are before one another and you all, living examples of the tragedies of bad choices."
 - "I enjoy coming and hope we can really get some changes made!"
 - "I appreciate this group. Gives me something to look forward to. Maybe experiencing being homeless can be of some value and alleviate some pain that goes along with it."

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- 5. Abandonment or alienation from family is one of the root causes of homelessness. This was also the main insight derived from the i-team's in-depth interviews of 120 individuals.
 - "My family alienated me. You're screwed without family."
 - "When it became clear I was never going to have that family unit, I blamed myself, I said I'm gonna kill myself."
 - "My own sister had a spare room, and she escorted me to the ARCH."
 - "I wanted everything to be bright and clean before I connected with my family. That never happened so they thought I was dead and buried. I never got clean or perfect."
- 6. There is no standardized way members sought help while experiencing homelessness. It all depended on the resources they had available and their most urgent needs."
 - L's friend at a campsite she stayed in introduced her to a caseworker.
 - T went to Integral Care to seek a housing specialist.
 - C went to the ARCH to get on Case Management
 - K found places to stay in exchange for work, and they go to the library to find resources.
 - B mapped out the system starting from Salvation Army > ARCH > Caritas > APD > ECHO > St. David's > Integral Care
- 7. A certain upkeep of a fighting-spirit and pride is needed to survive. This sense of grit could provide an opportunity for providers and the media to shift perceptions of homelessness.
 - "I'm proud of being homelessness, 'coz I can do anything. I can survive."
 - "It's different when people tell you how strong you are for surviving instead of feeling sorry for us."
 - "When you have no place to live, no money, start believing you're worthless...One of the biggest downfalls of being homeless is when you start having a depressed attitude about yourself."
 - "Even though you've been homeless, you know more things than other folks who have not been homeless. Everyone in this room knows survival."

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- 8. Housing means more than just having four walls and a roof over your head. The essence of home also means a connection to a community and a sense of safety and comfort.
 - "People get into housing and don't have a support network. And then they die, either of a broken heart or of other issues. Sometimes they just give up."
 - "Once you get in, what else is there?"
 - "The spirit is broken, and society still looks at them with a stigma - still low-income housing, still stigma, doesn't go away."
- 9. Maintaining positive and supportive relationships needs to be holistic and extend beyond specific phases of the housing process.
 - "There should be a direct-care person who is in communication with the residents to discuss issues with housing like fears and potential problems, and work with them to come up with a solution. To let the people who just got into housing know that they're not alone."
 - "There is no place to vent. You're not supposed to have a relationship with staff. No forum to talk about it."
 - "I'd want an emotional and friendly support system who can check up on you. A peer support."
 - "It is hard to leave people behind that you have been through things with. When you go hungry with somebody, it bonds you."

Thank You!

For more information about Austin's Homelessness Advisory Committee, visit our website at www.austininnovation.wixsite/solveforhomelessness/AHAC.