

ENCOURAGING SAFE OUTREACH TO THE UNSHELTERED

Making connections with clients either on the street, in encampments or buildings, or even in fields can often feel intimate and vulnerable for both service providers and clients. However, these encounters are one of the most important elements in addressing homelessness, particularly during such uncertain times. It is important to acknowledge the number of unhoused people in many cities across the U.S. and the immense challenge of finding, procuring, and moving people in need into isolated units at this time of crisis. Outreach and maintaining safe protocols on the street may be the best way to control exposure and maintain COVID-free environments.

Street Protocol and Encampments

Changing its initial recommendation that sheltering individuals should be the priority, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) has issued recommendations for assisting and maintaining safe outdoor spaces. In attempt to create safe isolation, congregate, and outdoor spaces, cities are doing the following:

- **Los Angeles, CA:** Los Angeles has deployed nearly 1,000 outreach workers across the county to communicate social distancing recommendations, encourage good hygiene, and distribute personal protective equipment (PPE). On Skid Row, outreach workers use tape to help guide social distancing. The city is developing extensive community engagement strategies to ensure that clear, up-to-date information, policies, and recommendations are reaching everyone in the community. Thus far, enforcing social distancing has not been necessary.
- **San Francisco, CA:** Cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle are choosing not to disrupt some encampments and instead are focusing on outreach, constant monitoring, and testing and supportive services (hygiene, prepared meals, etc.). San Francisco is establishing safe sleeping sites which maintain 12 feet x 12 feet of space per individual or couple. In a multi-agency effort, the city has provided 40 handwashing locations and solar charging stations for cell phones. Workers are distributing tents and providing 500 people with three meals a day so that they can safely shelter in place. Initially, the city and experienced service providers faced resistance in enforcing social distancing and establishing the safe sleeping sites. However, with experienced outreach workers and a focus on education and communication around COVID-19, the City saw a change in behavior and now, sites have been maintained through participants' own self-monitoring and enforcement of social distancing.
- **New York, NY:** Outdoor settings may offer unhoused individuals more space to social distance from others; however, New York City has chosen to maintain the pre-existing density (which was already relatively low) and consistent 24-hour services within their shelter system

in order to keep people in place at all costs. Although many shelters may not be able to accommodate the recommended 6-foot distance between beds, they have been able to offer shelter, meals, running water, etc., and to strictly limit exposure to outside environments, vendors, and even staff.

Triage from the Street

Due to the nature of COVID-19, it is important to minimize exposure to new places and people. It is essential that outreach workers are armed with the most up-to-date information and resources available so they can make well-informed decisions about how to direct unhoused individuals to resources, support services, and shelters or spaces where they can isolate.

- **New York, NY:** For the first time in more than 50 years, the New York City subway closed overnight to disinfect the subway cars and conduct outreach to homeless individuals in the subway. Service providers used this opportunity to reach and engage rough sleepers, collect data, and ring the alarm on necessary services and resources needed to address homelessness and control the pandemic in New York City.
- **Los Angeles, CA:** City and county medical teams joined street outreach teams to provide triage directly on the street to unhoused individuals. Particularly when tests are scarce, the medical staff are key in assessing a client's COVID status, risk, and needs. This important information is critical to direct unhoused people rapidly from the street to the most fitting shelter or hotel spaces.
- **London, UK:** London found that it was inefficient for their medical staff to join street outreach teams. Instead, the city outreach workers continued to triage rough sleepers with the assistance of medical staff through virtual examinations. Together, the outreach and medical staff's joint and rapid examinations enabled them to direct rough sleepers to the appropriate shelter or hotel space and to other support services.
- **Houston, TX:** Houston is working closely with the city's hospitals to ensure COVID-positive patients without adequate housing are referred directly to isolation hotels. The city established a dedicated team of 10 individuals to test homeless people in a continuous cycle. Testing launches the triage process and directs clients to the shelter and resources best suited for them.

Key Takeaways and Considerations

1. **Communication and outreach** to those on the street is an essential part of keeping our environments safe, and is fundamental to avoid the need for enforcement measures.
2. **Experience and training** are invaluable for outreach workers. It is also important to arm outreach workers with the most current information available to help them make rapid, educated decisions that will reduce exposure for clients and for themselves.
3. **Accurate assessment** of individual conditions and needs is important so that workers can make competent decisions and give appropriate recommendations.