



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT
of HEALTH SERVICES

Extending a Hand: Engaging Individuals Experiencing Homelessness with Employment Services

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September 30, 2026

Objectives

- Learn strategies for assertive engagement through a trauma-informed lens.
- Identify and address barriers to employment.

National Snapshot

The National Alliance to End Homelessness found that homelessness increased nationally by 18% from the 2023 point-in-time count to the 2024 point-in-time count.

Homelessness in Wisconsin

- In 2024, 21,466 people in Wisconsin experienced homelessness.
- Homelessness is defined as people living in places not meant for human habitation, shelters, doubled up, or at imminent risk of homelessness.

Causes of Homelessness

- Lack of affordable housing
- Unemployment, underemployment, and poverty
- Inadequate access to healthcare and supportive services
- Social factors
- Personal challenges
- Structural and policy failures

Trauma-Informed Lens

- Homelessness itself is often traumatic.
- Homelessness also increases exposure to danger, which can cause further trauma.

Trauma-Informed Care

A growing body of evidence supports using trauma and resiliency-informed care to serve people experiencing homelessness.

- Recognizing that trauma is common in this population.
- Avoiding re-traumatization.

Trauma-Informed Care

- Creating safe, supportive environments.
- Using evidence-based therapies tailored to trauma history.
- Building resilience and self-efficacy.
- Being present and listening to a person's experience with no judgment.

Barriers to Employment

- Systemic trauma
- “Survival mode” and changing priorities
- Service providers definition of what engagement means
- Giving up hope
- Shame
- Stigma

Benefits of Employment

- Employment can be a critical step toward recovery and economic self-sufficiency for people with unstable housing and behavioral health conditions.
- Employment is frequently desired by people with behavioral health conditions, including those who are living unsheltered.

Engagement Strategies

- Building trust with individuals experiencing homelessness is key to providing effective support and services.
- Providers can foster trust and create a more supportive environment by learning about engagement strategies.

Engagement Strategies

- Understand and acknowledge experiences
- Be consistent and reliable
- Foster open communication
- Respect autonomy
- Create a safe environment
- Show compassion and empathy

Understand and Acknowledge Experiences

- Validate if appropriate
- Be an active listener
- Ask about experiences through assessment process
- Instill hope

Be Consistent and Reliable

- Follow through on appointments and information the individual needs
- Show up on time for appointments
- Promptly follow-up on phone call, texts, and emails
- Do not promise things you cannot follow through on

Foster Open Communication

- Be upfront about limitations and challenges of the system and services available
- Encourage feedback from the individual
- Use judgment free language

Respect Autonomy

Individuals have the right to make their own decisions.

- Provide options rather than directives
- Refrain from judgement

Create a Safe Environment

- Physical and emotional safety is important.
- All staff of the agency should have knowledge of trauma-informed practices.
- Meet in a welcoming space or where the person would prefer to meet.

Show Compassion and Empathy

- See beyond a person's circumstances and recognize them as a whole person with a unique history
- Be genuine
- Small gestures go a long way.
 - Acknowledge their presence with kindness
 - Listen without interruption or trying to "fix" things

Scenario

- What do you see as some barriers for Kay?
- In looking at this through a trauma-informed lens, what could be some considerations for Kay?
- What engagement strategies could be helpful in this situation?

Resources

- [Homeless Housing Resource Center](#)
- [Institute for Community Alliances](#)
- [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)