

# Strategies and Resources to Reduce Homelessness

## It's in our DNA

Centers for Independent Living (CILs) have a strong commitment to being cross-disability and serving unserved and underserved populations. With the growing number of individuals across the U.S. who are experiencing homelessness, there is a need to improve outreach and services for this population. Housing affordability has been the key driver of increases in homelessness since 1980, (NAEH, 2021). The number of people experiencing homelessness (580,000 individuals) in the U.S. has increased for four years. That number includes 209,413 unsheltered adults living outside and 106,000 children, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), ([NPR, 2021](#)).

Local, state, and federal support systems were not designed to provide adequate funding to address the complex needs of those who are experiencing homelessness. Additional barriers include red tape and the restrictions of local and government agencies. A growing number of the 400+ CILs across the country are addressing this challenge in innovative and creative ways. None of these CILs would claim to have solved the challenges, but they have moved proactively to better understand housing systems and community/state/federal resources to ensure that individual consumer needs are being met.

Terminology is changing in this area to reflect people first terminology. The 2020 Associated Press updated stylebook states that calling people *the homeless* is dehumanizing and indicates that people experiencing homelessness have the same experience. However, every person's experience with homelessness is unique. These individuals often experience discrimination and stigma. As always, consumer preference for terminology and treating people with respect are the most important considerations, (Slayton, 2021).

Better terms to use include *people without housing, unhoused consumers, or people experiencing homelessness*. People can experience homelessness but are "sheltered" if they are able to stay in homeless shelters or transitional housing. While, "unsheltered" refers to people who do not have access to any type of housing or shelter, (Slayton, 2021).

## Conduct Outreach Where Consumers Are

In working with those who are homeless, CILs first need to reach them. This is often a complicated process. Frequently, those who are homeless gather in central locations in parks, abandoned buildings, under highway overpasses or bridges, etc. Frequent sweeps of homeless camps force people to move on with nowhere to go. Usually no guidance is provided on how or where to obtain temporary or permanent housing.

It is much easier to find consumers where they are instead of expecting them to come to the CIL office. People who are homeless may have difficulties with transportation, finding the office and other resources, and communication. Other ideas to reach consumers experiencing homelessness include:

- Spend time in shelters to meet consumers, build relationships, and learn what their eligibility requirements are.

- Visit with people when they are homeless in the hospital, rehabilitation center, care office, or other locations.
- Attend and actively participate in community meetings.
- Partner on services and outreach with nonprofits, veteran organizations, shelters, and local housing agencies. It is better to work collaboratively.
- Consider a mobile office. Atlantis Community, Inc. in Denver, Colorado, purchased a customized mobile van similar to a paratransit vehicle. A mobile unit provides the opportunity to drive to every part of their catchment area and serve all of their communities. The mobile unit is fully staffed with two full-time independent living specialists.

### **Complicated Work is Better with Partners**

This is difficult work that is better completed in partnership with the city, county, housing authorities, healthcare agencies, and nonprofits in order to coordinate services and overcome barriers. It may be helpful to jointly identify these barriers, determine the best strategies, and plan next steps when bringing organizations on board or joining established groups/organizations.

Central Coast Center for Independent Living (CCCIL) seeks local nonprofit partnerships that will bring programs and sometimes funding to their CIL. A lot of funding may not be needed in some instances where partnerships can be utilized. Coalitions jointly provide needed services. Partners and CIL staff educate each other about their services and the needs of people with disabilities. CCCIL works to expand their contracts to include homeless services and leverage resources. Community surveys are used to inform CCCIL on what additional services are needed and the next steps to be taken.

Atlantis partners with many organizations, including the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, shelters, libraries, parks, and human service providers that support basic needs, including a dental home. Project Homeless Connect connects unhoused people with many needed services to gain their independence. The annual Day of Dignity provides people with resources, screenings, hot food, kits, and more.

Atlantis's community transitions pilot program places consumers in hotels if they meet nursing home level of care, or are coming out of congregant settings, until housing and community supports are secured. The program provides an opportunity to work outside of the typical long process involved with transitioning someone out of an institution.

### **Develop Relationships with Housing Authorities, Developers, and Landlords**

Sometimes building relationships with affordable housing developers and the local housing authority is difficult and time-consuming, but can make a difference. CCCIL staff educate local landlords on the benefits of renting an apartment to someone with a section 8 voucher that provides a rental warranty. Consumers may need to be taught how to communicate with landlords, as well as interview for housing and jobs.

Atlantis staff immediately contact consumers and submit interest cards when section 8 lotteries open up while they continue to search for housing. Leasing agencies and landlords let staff know when apartments are available. It is beneficial to keep lines of communication open. Developing relationships with landlords makes it easier to discuss needed accessibility features.

Atlantis ensures that consumers can receive IL services and create their own goals whether or not they have a place to live. Hotels or transitional apartments keep a roof over someone's head as they continue their housing search and work on other goals.

Sometimes thinking outside the box means connecting consumers interested in roommates or shared housing. Many individuals, not necessarily specific to individuals in the disability community, may be willing to rent a room to supplement their mortgage or rent.

Relationships with mental health centers and other services are also helpful. Atlantis works with their local Veterans Administration (VA), so eligible consumers can get a VA case manager. Both organizations work together to qualify veterans for vouchers.

### **Work with Shelters**

Some consumers are ineligible to stay in any type of shelter, such as single males who may not access shelters for families or women. A women's shelter may not accept a transgender consumer. A family shelter may not allow a single male parent to stay. Some shelters may not accept a consumer's companion animal.

CCCIL works with consumers to see if there are ways to increase eligibility while also educating shelters. It's helpful to know the reason why the client is not able to access the shelter, whether they are full, or if there is an issue with the process. Reviewing the shelter application, eligibility requirements, and whether funding comes from federal, state, county, city, or private sources improves the chance of overcoming barriers.

### **Other ideas - Shelter-in-Place Kits, Technology Packages, and Grocery Gift Cards**

Atlantis develops and distributes shelter-in-place kits while staff work on obtaining housing. Kits include a backpack, tent, sleeping bag, personal protective equipment, and water bottles. These materials make self-quarantine possible during the COVID-19 pandemic, so consumers can protect themselves instead of going into a congregate setting.

Atlantis partners with an organization providing emergency food boxes to address food insecurity. Homeless individuals do not have a place to store or prepare food. Grocery store gift cards make it possible to buy prepared hot cooked meals and other usable grocery items. Another Atlantis partner refurbishes computers and puts together technology packages that include laptops with wireless hot spots and six months of internet service. Those packages have helped immensely with maintaining contact.

### **Commit to Diversity**

It is important to address the barriers and lack of services for underserved populations, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) who are multiply marginalized. HUD found that a disproportionate share (39%) of those experiencing homelessness were Black, although they make up only 13% of the nation's population, while 23% of those who were homeless last year identified as Hispanic or Latino (NPR, 2021).

Diversity is not just an annual discussion, but a commitment to systematically addressing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). It is also important to listen and get feedback from the target community regarding their barriers, gaps, and services needed.

Atlantis wanted to learn more and provide better services to their BIPOC community. A consulting company helped create objectives and an action plan to improve their EDI work. An internal EDI committee and subcommittees were created. From there, Atlantis started meeting with agencies, service providers, and racial justice organizations within BIPOC communities to develop relationships. They invited BIPOC members for lunch and learn events in order to listen to what their needs were.

Atlantis assessed their marketing and outreach materials to ensure that there was representation across racial and ethnic lines. A translation line offers an extensive list of language interpreters. Staff know how to utilize that line, including their mobile office. To access training resources on this topic, see [ILRU's diversity and inclusion trainings \(https://www.ilru.org/topics/inclusion-diversity-underserved-populations\)](https://www.ilru.org/topics/inclusion-diversity-underserved-populations) and the [National Alliance to End Homelessness racial equity resources \(https://endhomelessness.org/resources/?fwp\\_content\\_filter=toolkits-and-training-materials\)](https://endhomelessness.org/resources/?fwp_content_filter=toolkits-and-training-materials).

### **Find Out What Consumers Want**

Consumers experiencing homelessness usually need guidance and education about available options, along with the pros and cons of each option. However, it is always the consumer's choice whether or not they want to receive rapid housing, homeless prevention services, or work with the CIL. Determining the consumer's needs may be an extended process since homelessness is often accompanied by mental health, substance abuse, and disability challenges. Determine if:

- Receiving housing and other services is desired?
- A unit or apartment is sustainable with income?
- After the assistance ends, are they back to being unhoused?
- Voucher qualifications are met? Housing authorities can help them apply.
- A criminal background will show up on background checks?
- The consumer is a registered offender? There is often no available housing because of requirements to stay away from schools.

Partners, nonprofits, and housing officials need to understand that the CIL works with the whole person and the consumer is the lead on the services they are getting.

### **Accessing Funding**

The federal government has the largest amount of funding to address homelessness. The [National Alliance to End Homelessness](https://endhomelessness.org/resource/alliance-resource-series-using-covid-19-federal-funding-to-end-homelessness/) provides a guide of available COVID-19 federal funding to end homelessness at: <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/alliance-resource-series-using-covid-19-federal-funding-to-end-homelessness/>. Other funding sources may include states, counties, cities, and foundations. CCCIL has received funding through all of these and is growing. CCCIL obtained emergency hotel vouchers from the Cares Act program and Salinas COVID-19 funds prioritizing people with disabilities at high risk of getting COVID-19. CCCIL also placed over 100 homeless people in the successful but challenging fairly new motel program.

The Salinas Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) provided CCCIL funding to educate people on tenant rights, housing, and IL services. The city started a program based on CCCIL's work with homeless veterans around whole person care. Santa Cruz County awarded CCCIL a contract to work on placing consumers in affordable housing. Support for rapid housing and emergency vouchers was provided by a local foundation. Project home team converted some California motels into permanent housing, moving 50 people, and housing 30 more in the community.

### **Advocate, Advocate, Advocate**

Advocacy is needed at the systems level to find viable solutions to homelessness, grow the supply of affordable and accessible housing, and increase state and federal funding for homelessness programs through HUD. The housing problems of people with disabilities are often more about poverty than disability. The more informed and

knowledgeable staff become on housing and homelessness, the more seriously they will be taken when advocating for more resources. Joining homeless coalitions or groups addressing poverty will increase advocacy strength and effectiveness. Start a local community group or state coalition if one doesn't exist!

### **Individual Sustainability**

An important aspect of sustainability is to increase independence for unhoused consumers. CCCIL has been working within the core services to teach and empower consumers experiencing homelessness to be independent, access their benefits, self-advocate, budget, find accessible transportation, and learn other IL skills to sustain housing after funding ends. CCCIL helps consumers apply for Social Security, family or general assistance, workforce services, or other funding or social services. Youth who are experiencing homelessness and might be running away for various reasons receive services.

CCCIL brings funding sources together to provide consumers with services that help them get in a better place. Staff have noticed that when consumers are placed into permanent housing, they are able to access medical care, be healthier, work on their employment goals, and sustain their housing. CCCIL is then able to help more people.

### **Next Steps**

The following are some suggested next steps:

- Partner with local leaders to address community needs and coordinate services.
- Build working relationships with housing authorities, developers, and landlords.
- Participate in community meetings to raise awareness and find solutions to increase rapid and permanent affordable and accessible housing.
- Educate and advocate with community leaders, funding agencies, and legislators.
- Seek and leverage local funding and resources to start and continue programs.
- Access resources such as the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#).

This factsheet was developed from the IL-NET National Training and Technical Assistance Center webinar titled "How CILs Can (and Should!) Support Consumers Experiencing Homelessness." View this on-demand training on the ILRU website at <https://www.ilru.org/training/how-cils-can-and-should-support-consumers-experiencing-homelessness>.



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