

Relational Outreach and Engagement Model

Adapted from unpublished papers by
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The **Relational Outreach and Engagement Model (ROEM)** provides a theoretical framework for understanding the outreach and engagement process, offers specific practices appropriate to each stage of the work and suggests benchmarks by which movement along the outreach and engagement continuum of care can be assessed. In the ROEM view, life has a profoundly relational character. The implication for outreach is not whether one can establish a relationship with another, but rather how will any given relationship develop and take shape from moment to moment over time.

For teaching purposes the outreach and engagement process is envisioned in four phases: **approach, companionship, partnership and mutuality**. Each phase is marked by a predominant quality in the emerging relationship as seen from the perspective of the outreach worker and the experience of the homeless individual. The model is a theoretical ideal. It is not intended to suggest that the outreach and engagement process flows in a neat linear progression or that the four phases are discrete, clearly bounded stages.

In practice the relational field in which the outreach worker and the homeless person move is extraordinarily complex and filled with many subtleties and unknowns. Outreach is necessary precisely because the more general and generic processes by which people come into care (referral, appointment, walk-in, screening, intake etc.) have not proven successful in leading to treatment.

Outreach and engagement practice seeks to build a relationship of trust and care with those who present unusual challenges and are the most difficult to serve. The process can take days, weeks, months, even years. The outreach worker must be present in a variety of ways with the individual, in brief moments and over long hours, on an unpredictable schedule, as the person is ready. While this model has a certain simplicity and elegance, it is an abstraction from the many earthy, involved steps which lead from the street to stability.

The Relational Outreach and Engagement Model provides an orientation to the challenges before us. It is a reminder, in the midst of the difficulties of practice, that we are involved in a complex but ultimately hopeful process.

Isolation and distance characterize the relational field of the homeless individual without care. The individual has few and minimal interactions with others. In the **approach** phase the outreach worker honors the tentativeness of the relationship. This phase is marked by the intention of the outreach worker to be present, and to weave, if possible, a fabric of connection, thread by precious thread. Meetings are random, spontaneous, loosely planned. Visits are brief, with little or no agenda. The role of the outreach worker is at its most diffuse -- neighbor, a caring observer, a passerby willing to stop and listen.

In the approach phase, specific activities are minimal -- a smile, a nod, an inquiry, a brief offer to help, a cup of coffee placed beside the person. No one thing and many

little things embody the outreach intention. The worker waits carefully for the smallest sign, the littlest hint of a response. No one moment suggests that we are making progress. There are setbacks, pauses. These too are part of the process. Our occasional notes reflect the tenuous nature of the work. "Saw John at Westlake Park, said hello." A week or two or more of no contact. Another brief encounter.

The transition from the approach to **companionship** phase occurs as the outreach worker offers and is permitted to share the subject's journey. The worker is recognized, greeted, welcomed. In this phase the outreach worker is experienced as an increasingly trustworthy and established dimension of the person's life in the world, something of an anchor point if you will.

In the companionship phase the outreach worker provides a reliable presence, listens to the person's story, offers empathy and acts with knowledge and proper timing and in response to the individual's issues and concerns. The worker is attuned to the individual's current situation, how they see themselves, their perceptions of the world around them, and their ability to meet needs for care, safety and survival in the midst of homelessness. Personal strengths as well as deficits are noted. The presence of a physical, mental and/or substance abuse disorder might be observed and assessed.

Benchmarks of companionship include time spent walking or riding together, agreement on a regular meeting place and sharing hospitality moments such as a cup of coffee or a meal together. It may include a small task shared, help with some necessity, going together to check out a resource such as a drop-in center or shelter, or any of a hundred activities. No one instance determines the beginning of the companionship phase. A series, an accumulation of occasions together suggests the shift from approach to companionship is being accomplished. The dyad is growing stronger.

In the course of companionship there are increasing opportunities to introduce the homeless person to others who can assist in the journey from the street to stability. Key to the transition from companionship to **partnership** is the capacity of the outreach worker and the individual to open their relationship of trust to include a significant third party - a social worker, case manager, nurse, doctor or counselor who offers specific support for the person. The partnership phase is marked by the individual's acceptance of a growing circle of care in which the triad of subject, outreach worker, and a primary care provider form the core. The outreach worker's companionship role continues to be critical in this phase to provide a trustworthy presence, information, and encouragement to the homeless person who is connecting with other providers and services.

The outreach and engagement process is completed as the worker and subject move into a phase of increasing **mutuality**. It is precisely the growing, common human bonds which the worker and individual share which permits the relationship to be brought to fruition and eventually to an appropriate termination. The worker celebrates with the individual such basic experiences as making a home, developing a daily routine, discovering arenas of work and recreation. In this context of a real and growing life with others, the worker prepares for separation and the transition into ongoing journeys along clearly differentiated paths.

In a relational model, outreach and engagement begins with an approach to the homeless person based on an affirmation of our common humanity and the possibility and potential for relationship. At the heart of companionship is a trustworthy dyadic relationship. In partnership a triadic relationship emerges at the core of the process. The final phase of the relationship is marked by the multiplicity of relationships, a sense of neighborhood and community in which the subject has a healthy sense of self and place.