

TIP SHEET: Strategies for Building Client Engagement

Practical Advice from Frontline Homeless Service Providers

JANUARY 2014



This tip sheet is drawn from the National Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) Council's Outreach & Enrollment Quick Guide¹, which provides practical strategies for outreach and enrollment activities. One foundational element of outreach and enrollment is building client engagement. Clients are engaged when they are regularly interacting with outreach staff, making their clinic appointments, and/or generally showing an involvement in the process. However, achieving this level of engagement often requires much effort on the part of frontline staff. This tip sheet highlights advice from the quick guide's key experts—including outreach workers, community health workers, case managers, hospital liaisons, and disability assistance staff—regarding strategies they use in their everyday work to build client engagement.

Get to know the individual's personal narrative.

Frontline workers emphasized the importance of getting to know the individual in a laid back, open-ended manner. Try to learn about the individual's personal narrative, including where he/she is from, how long he/she has been homeless, and what life circumstances may have led to an unstable housing situation. Show empathy and understanding, while not pushing an agenda.

Have a consistent presence in the community.

Reputation, approachability, and visibility are important elements for building client engagement. Because it often takes several encounters to increase someone's comfort and willingness to engage, key experts emphasized the importance of establishing a consistent and regular schedule at outreach locations. Make an effort to be out in the community more than inside the office.

Follow up and follow through.

In the early stages of relationship-building, make sure to follow up often with clients. If it has been a week since you have had contact, meet the client in the community or give them a call if they have a phone. If you tell the client you are going to complete a task, always follow through. These acts of consistency build trust and encourage engagement on the client's part.

Encourage clients to set goals.

Goal-setting is perhaps the most effective way to build client engagement. Encourage the client to identify goals he or she would like to achieve. Consider both short- and long-term accomplishments. Ensure that you are not imposing your own goals or those of your agency, but encouraging the client to pursue his or her personal goals. Express to the client how you can provide assistance toward achieving these goals and develop an action plan together. Always keep your end of the deal to continue building trust.

¹ The Outreach & Enrollment Quick Guide is available at: <http://www.nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/outreach-enrollment-quick-guide.pdf>

TIP SHEET: Strategies for Building Client Engagement

Practical Advice from Frontline Homeless Service Providers

NATIONAL
HEALTH CARE
for the
HOMELESS
COUNCIL

JANUARY 2014

Let the client lead.

All engagement should be driven by the client. Key experts should share the resources they can offer, but always allow clients to follow through. Client readiness is imperative to successful engagement. If a client is not ready to engage—for a host of reasons, including fear, lack of trust, or mental illness—he or she has the power to decline. Continue to show support and a consistent presence, and clients may eventually become willing to engage.

Work toward small steps.

Key experts emphasized the power of achieving small goals. For instance, if a client's main goal is to obtain permanent housing, work toward the smaller steps that could lead to housing, such as obtaining lost identification or enrolling in Medicaid. Achieving small goals gives clients a sense of accomplishment and empowerment and builds their trust of frontline workers, increasing their willingness to continue engagement.

Move at the client's pace.

Similar to letting the client lead, key experts emphasized the importance of working at the client's pace. Although it might seem helpful to address all client needs at once, some clients may desire a more gradual process. Trying to accomplish too many objectives at once could leave clients feeling overwhelmed and less interested in future engagement. Have an open dialogue with clients regarding pacing to ensure that you are working at a comfortable speed.

DISCLAIMER

This publication was made possible by grant number U30CS09746 from the Health Resources & Services Administration, Bureau of Primary Health Care. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Health Resources & Services Administration. All material in this document is in the public domain and may be used and reprinted without special permission. Citation as to source, however, is appreciated.

Suggested citation: National Health Care for the Homeless Council. (December 2013). *Tip Sheet: Strategies for Building Client Engagement*. [Author: Sarah Knopf-Amelung, Research Associate.] Nashville, TN: Available at: www.nhchc.org.

NATIONAL
HEALTH CARE
for the
HOMELESS
COUNCIL

P.O. Box 60427, Nashville, TN 37207 | (615) 226-2292

For more information on building client engagement or our other research topics, contact Dr. Darlene Jenkins, Director of Research and Evaluation, at djenkins@nhchc.org.