

**Ending Homelessness: How to effectively outreach the homeless population**

**Chi Kan Wong**

**University of Washington**

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	3
1.1ProjectGoal.....	4
1.2. Background .....	5
Literature Review.....	6
Methodology.....	15
Findings.....	19
Implication and Recommendations.....	21
References .....	22

## **Abstract**

In metropolitan areas, homelessness is part of the community and also a problem to local government which need to address or end. To end the homelessness, the profit, nonprofit organizations and local government are providing shelter, mental health service and food to homeless people. But there are still a lot of homelessness loitering and sleep in the street. Except the help from profit, nonprofit organizations, how can we as a resident to help ending homelessness. The best is we learn how to outreach homelessness and understand their situation and experience. But what is the best way to successfully outreach homelessness? This project seeks to determine what is the best way to outreach homelessness and the barrier which will experience when outreaching homelessness, through a comprehensive literature review, interviews with profit and nonprofit organizations.

## **Project Goals**

Homelessness is a serious problem in Seattle, we often heard problems that associated with homelessness in news. Seattle government puts a lot of works dealing with homelessness, they chose sites to be encampment. However, we can still see a lot homelessness loitering and sleep in the street rather living in the homeless shelter. Homeless people are just same with us, but what they have experienced are far less fortunate than us. I believe everyone is the same and equal. The negative stereotypes shaped the imagine of homeless, but if we put a little bit more cares and helps, the world will be better. Therefore, we should have more awareness on helping homeless population. As Seattle population keeps growing, at the same time, the homelessness population is also growing. So, understanding what homelessness needs are important to end the homelessness. The goal of this project is to provide a comprehensive research on effective ways to outreach homelessness. I will also address the barriers when outreaching the homelessness. There are no right or wrong way to approach homeless people, but my project will provide an effective way to outreach homelessness. Furthermore, I might use what I learn through research and interviews to outreach homelessness and recruit homeless people to participle a street soccer event.

In this project, I will learn how to communicate with homeless people, the process of social workers outreaching homeless people and how they persuade or help homeless people to get to the shelter. During interview with local nonprofit organizations, I will have a chance to understand the homeless people daily needs and condition, barriers when outreaching and what can we as a normal person can do to end homelessness. As I want to become an urban planner, community outreach is always part of the job. Having chance to outreach the minority is a valuable experience.

## **Background**

Seattle is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country. At the same time, rent is increasing, and many people cannot afford the rent, so they have no choices and decide to live on the street. According to Zillow data, Seattle has 3rd largest population in the United States. (Levy, Zillow data) Homelessness is a serious problem in Seattle, back in 2005, King County had a plan to end homelessness in 10 years. The plan describes that Plymouth Housing Group will provide housing for single adults who are homeless in King County, also, the Housing First programs aims to achieve a one-year housing retention. The plan also includes mental health service, services for chemical dependency and primary health care to the homeless who live in the St. Regis building with long-term homelessness and/or chemical dependency. (Srebnik, Ten years plan)

To end homelessness, it has involved many organizations profit or nonprofit. Tent Cities are providing indoor shelter to homeless people mainly in the City of Seattle. Tent Cities need more shelters because there is not enough shelter for all who need in King County. Therefore, organizations are building homeless shelters and reaching out to the homeless people but seems like homelessness is not that easy to end. Homeless people need homes, but they also need other things such as mental health support and addiction treatment.

## **Literature Review**

For my senior project, my topic is how to effectively outreach the homeless population. Homeless was a fluid category than is commonly recognized. Municipal committees are formed to implement ten-year plans to end homelessness. In Seattle, back in 2005, King County had a plan to end homelessness in 10 years. The plan describes that Plymouth Housing Group will provide housing for single adults who are homeless in King County, also, the Housing First programs aim to achieve a one-year housing retention. The plan also includes mental health service, services for chemical dependency and primary health care to the homeless who live in the St. Regis building with long-term homelessness and/or chemical dependency. (Srebnik, Ten years plan) However, the plan doesn't seem effective because the population is unabated from years to years. Many homeless people escaped to receive the helps or services provided by the city. Therefore, street outreach or outreach worker becomes important at this point, they build trusting relationships with individual who are experience homelessness to accept appropriate helps and placement where they can begin to stabilize their lives.

In order to find out the most effective ways to reach out the homeless population, the first thing I have to define what is homelessness. The word 'homelessness' may have different meanings to people, there are no one exact definition of homelessness. Phil (2008) had quoted Fitzpatrick, Kemp and Klinker's definitions of homelessness which are under different scenarios that they describe. Homelessness can be interpreted as 'Rooflessness' or the lack of any shelter of any kind. This definition is the narrowest and the most commonly we defined the word 'homelessness'. Another one is 'Houselessness', this definition includes people who are living in

all different kinds of emergency or institutional accommodation, the reason is they couldn't afford to rent a house. (Robinson, 12) These two definitions of homelessness are very broad, and it is hard to have a definition which covers all situations which homeless people is exercising or had experienced. These terms underestimate the social dimension of homelessness and fail to address the impact aspects of their life. So, there can be no consensus on definition of homelessness, if I just use the simplest to explain the word, the 'homelessness' means people who do not have a place to sleep which causes them sleeping through all kinds of accommodation or street. The word is subjective so that everyone's definition of homelessness will be differ from people to people.

I have introduced the definition of homelessness from the public perspective, and it is difficult to have a consensus on the definition because it will always ignore some of the minorities. However, it would be the best to understand what homeless people define themselves. Phil (2008) had cited the study from Fitzpatrick (2000), which homeless people defined homelessness as having no permanent or secure house. (Robinson, 14) They explained the street or area they lived in just as a community, knowing the people around themselves and the area. The definition defined by homeless people are really similar to the one that I mentioned earlier, 'Rooflessness'. This becomes clear that homeless people are without a permanent house to reside, so they have no other choice but sleeping rough in the street. However, based on the definition defined by the study and the perspective from the homelessness, I have settled on the 'rooflessness' that will be the definition of homelessness.

According to National Alliance to End Homelessness, a nonprofit organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness in the United States, reported that there are 555,742 people in the United States experiencing homelessness which estimated at January 2017.

("The State of Homelessness in America.") The homeless population is made up by diverse groups in terms of age, ethnicity, family circumstances, health problems and addition. However, most of the people who experience homelessness are single adults. They are the result of the unaffordable housing price or rent. The imbalance of cost of housing and incomes, low education level, life crisis or drug addiction which cause them losing the ability to afford a housing and become homeless. Young people as a future of our society, they occupied significant numbers in the homeless population. Family homelessness is often associated with the unaffordable housing market, at the same time, the homelessness among young single people is particularly high. Also, young people growing under the homeless family and those who involved in child welfare will be continuously become homeless. Few of those young people through hard work, education or good luck can pull themselves out of poverty. The reason is simple, they have the economic pressure from the family and fewer opportunities to have an equal education and studying environment. Youth homelessness is often involved in the family conflict, this is a primary reason why they choose sleeping or loitering on the street rather than living with family.

Beside this two groups of homelessness, chronic homelessness is always a long-term problem that city wants to focus on. Chronically homeless includes conditions such as serious mental illness, physical disability or medical conditions. The Federal government's definition of a chronically homeless people is either "an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more, or an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years." (Defining Chronic Homelessness: A Technical Guide for HUD Programs) It is difficult for them to stabilize their life after becoming homeless, the conditions they have is a barrier while they try to



apply for a job. People with mental illnesses are more likely to become homeless, they lose the ability to self-care and react rationally. This often results in pushing away by family and friends which cause them homelessness. Furthermore, not every homeless people have the physical or mental disability are qualified for federal disability subsidy. Even with the subsidy, the amount is too low for them to cover rent, utilities and the essential needs for daily life. Therefore, it is not easy for them to maintain a house without any incomes expect the subsidy. Also, people with mental illness is easily to have problems with alcohol or drugs. This result in hard to get a job in order to go back the normal life. Some of the homeless people with mental illnesses because of their conditions and without family and friends, they don't know that they are qualified for the subsidies from federal government or the local city, or even don't know where they can apply for the subsidies. Therefore, street outreach or outreach worker through outreach to understand their situation and condition, in order to help them to connect with the services and shelter that they can escape from the street to live in a place where is safe and protected.

Outreach doesn't have a clear definition and many people do not know what outreach really is, what is the process during outreaching? Outreach is contacting socially marginalized populations in their physical and social environment. The street outreach is mostly funded by federal outreach grants from federal government and distributed to community-based and non-profits to do the outreach on street. (Gibson, 80) Therefore, street outreach worker's primary object will be the homeless population. How to successfully approach people who are experiencing homelessness is a question also required certain skills in order to understand his or her problems and issues. So, it is important to know the work that the street worker has done and the techniques they use while outreaching the homeless people.

Homeless outreach is a process of reaching out to homeless people and building a bridge between homelessness and the shelters or clinics. Organizations giving the essential needs from donation to the homeless population. Many long-term homeless people no longer feel alarmed by the environment, instead, they adapted to the street culture which without any expectation to change. Social workers need to build a relationship with homeless people in order to get their trust and believe they can help the homeless people. According to the report written by Michael and Aimee, who is from Common Ground Community and Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Emory University, stated "Reason why homeless refuse services include a pervasive mistrust of outreach workers and the agencies that employ them." (Kryda, Mistrust of Outreach) Then, outreach cannot be effective if the homeless population doesn't trust outreach workers. And those services that are ready and offered to them are being rejected. Therefore, the value of outreach and the services become meaningless. The report analyzes the reasons for mistrust of outreach workers, first, homelessness desires outreach worker spending more time with them, engaging and listening to them. Second, they are being stereotyped by the outworking worker and the public as lazy, addicted to drug. Those negative stereotypes made them hard to make a change in their lives. Third, the outreach workers fail to show interest or positive while treating them. Forth, they feel disconnected with the outreach worker because the outreach workers have never experienced the life of being homeless. The reasons show me when outreaching homelessness, social workers needs to spend more times and a positive attitude toward the homelessness. Giving a good impression to the individual who is homeless will help them to consider developing a strong relationship with service organizations.

The challenge for the outreach worker and homeless people is becoming working partners in a common ground. Outreach worker should aim to have a nonjudgmental stance

while approaching homeless people and encourage them to tell their story. One thing to remember is don't judge people by their outlook or issues. This creates a positive attitude toward the homeless people and opens up a conversation rather than immediately focusing on stereotypes and diagnoses. Then, outreach worker should ask some questions to explore the person's personality and strengths. This encouraging conversation makes outreach worker understand the person's concept and values, and build up the level of caring, trust, and sense of safety with the object. However, identifying and understand the language used by homeless people are really important. Jay Levy, has 14 years of experience working with homeless individual and currently provides consultative services for a residential treatment program, stated "Developing a common language is a critical guiding principle of homeless outreach and engagement. How well outreach clinicians and homeless individuals communicate is dependent on the success of these efforts." (Levy, 372) To discover homeless people's world, outreach worker has to carefully listen to homeless people's communication style, word used and its meaning. This will help to reveal their life and things that deep under his or her mind. Outreach worker aims to develop a bridge that connected him or her with the homeless people, don't think that they will open up their feelings within a day, developing a long-term relationship that the homeless people is willing to accept or consider outreach worker's ideas or solution. Being patient and willing to accept the homeless people as a friend will benefit the both sides, and trying to insert the benefits of available helping services after building a stable relationship with the homeless people. This enhances the engagement with those hard to reach homeless individuals. The common language development can be applied to different types of homeless population.

There are a lot of barriers when outreaching the people who are homeless. Outreach workers try to make contact or conversation with a homeless who is apparently isolated himself or herself. The homeless person shows too cautious to develop a conversation with a stranger that he or she doesn't familiar with. So, the outreach workers have to think about some strategies to challenge the boundary. Sometimes, "The worker may struggle with being overly directive, or with fostering complete client autonomy without providing adequate guidance." (Levy, 364) The challenge is to guide the homeless people to explore their interest and at the same time to understand their needs throughout the outreach process. As I discussed the mistrust toward outreach workers earlier. But, in the real world, the Partnership for Strong Communities, an organization that plays a vital role in planning solution to end homelessness and a leader in policy development and research in Connecticut, found the homeless assistance and housing system are difficult to find. "When a crisis occurs and a person or family is faced with housing loss, individuals and families become clients of a fragmented and under-resourced crisis response system where they primarily receive their information of available services and programs through peer-to-peer to interactions. Caseworkers juggle several cases a month and front-line staff in shelters are provided with incomplete information around available resources for their clients and the eligibility criteria for the array of programs that do exist. The result is a homelessness assistance system that is increasingly difficult to navigate." (Barriers to Ending Homelessness) Another issue is, people who are homeless with lifelong damage need a huge amount of help to claim the benefits. The outreach workers have to know the process of claiming different benefits in order to help the clients to get full benefits that they deserved. (The Secret Life of a Homeless Outreach Worker)

Outreaching is not only specific for or limited to outreach workers. As a normal person or student, we can be a volunteer to perform homeless outreach. Volunteer outreach is largely faith-based or self-motivation. It is not hard to find a volunteer opportunity in anywhere, basically just search on the internet to find outreach volunteer, there are many organizations recruit volunteers to service the homeless community. People are giving back to the community and trying to help out those people who are in needs. Like Seattle Homeless Outreach, the organization is an all-volunteer run and non-profit. Their goal or mission is to meet their client where they are and providing basic survival supplies including food, water, sleeping bags tents and coats. Sometimes what the volunteers have done is more than just giving out supplies or preparing the supplies. It may be a chance to give hope and help saving life. If you are too busy or don't want to be a volunteer, there is still something that you can do to support outreach workers or help the homeless population, which is the donation. Many of non-profit organizations rely on the donation which donated by companies and individual. For example, Facing Homelessness, a non-profit organization in Seattle, they rely on the donation donated by local companies like Amazon, Microsoft. The money that you are giving is really helpful to homeless people because organizations can use the donation to buy essential needs like tint, backpacks, sleeping bags, and coats, and transfer those essential needs to people who are homeless.

However, it is not a case for every organizations doing street outreach, the season may be limited staff or expenditure. We may ask, how can the homeless people know there is an organization which giving out supplies and essential needs. This phenomenon called Self-referral, it is where a service is well known, and the location is easily accessible. (Homeless Children: Problems and Needs,145) This also means that the services provided by the organization have a positive feedback from the homeless population. Self-referral can be spread

through word of the mouth, where staff develops a trusting relationship with the homeless people and they recommend the organization to other homeless people. This is what the organization, Facing Homelessness, has been doing. They do not do outreach, but they are giving out supplies to all homeless people come to their front door and also advise, counseling and other support if the homeless people need.

## **Methodology**

I had interviewed three organizations that work with homeless population around the Seattle area. I selected the organization based on the established date and profit or not-profit. In order to have a comprehensive interview, I prepare a list of interview questions which aim to understand how the organization does outreach and their experiences when outreaching the homeless population in Seattle. The organization shares their background and works they have done. After the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify similar ways to outreach and significances from the conversations. Lastly, I applied the concept and barriers I found from the literature to explain the interview findings.

### *Facing Homelessness*

Facing homelessness established in 2010 and they believe the way to end homelessness is to invite community to be part of the solution. They are a non-profit organization and located near University of Washington Campus. They partnered with different organizations to help launch the first block home in Beacon Hill, unfortunately, they don't do street outreach. When I went to their office, I saw a number of homeless people standing outside of their office, they were handing out supplies and talking with those people. One question popped up in my mind, how do people know they have the supplies to give out while they don't do any street outreach. The name of the person I interviewed is Sarah, she said it is based on the reputation they had. When someone came to their office looking for supplies or needs, they will provide it immediately without any judgements. Once people started to know they are giving help and supplies, homeless people will spread the organization by mouth or word. Then, Facing

Homelessness becomes a well-known organization around the people who are experiencing homelessness in U-District area.

The supplies they are giving out included socks, clothes, blankets, coats, tents and sleeping bags. These supplies are all come from donation which mostly donated by the Seattle community and companies, Sarah mentioned some employees from Microsoft and Amazon will donated money to the organization to support their work and pay the expense for buying the supplies. Sarah recommended us as a part of a Seattle community can do is just say hello to the people who are experiencing homelessness and making new friends who are from the street. It is an effective way to show that we care about them, and we are more than welcome to accept that they are just a normal people, but they are having a terrible time in their life. They are a part of our community. Sarah also recommended us to bring a sock in your bag or handbag and giving out the sock to homeless people. She said socks are a real need to homeless people, the homeless population is constantly at risk of serious foot disease and severe danger posed by cold in the winter time. Socks make the homeless people feel great and warm while wearing new socks and help to defend from several health problems.

### *Seattle Homeless Outreach*

Seattle Homeless Outreach is a non-profit organization founded by five friends and volunteers as a response to Seattle homelessness phenomenon, they are all volunteer who spends their own time to meet once or twice to help the homeless in Seattle area. I interviewed the board member who named Brad. He said that they prepare and deliver sandwiches, snack, fresh fruit, water, warm clothes, socks, bus passes, pet food and survival need to people who are experiencing homelessness. They build relationships with the homeless people and other



organizations in the Seattle area. They have the connection to help or to connect homeless people to the services they need. They meet homeless people where they live and the vehicle they are using is all volunteer's personal vehicle. The volunteers have a great heart and they do really care about the homeless people. I asked what is the most effective way to outreach homeless population, and he responses that the effective way is through providing basic needs to start a conversation with the homeless people without any expectation or judgement. Once they started building relation with the homeless people, homeless people will let down their guard and tell their stories or the needs. Then, it will be easier to understand what services they need so that they can improve their ability to succeed and help them move off the streets. After the interview, I went with them to do outreach. We went to the jungle in the SODO and giving the supplies to camped in the hill.

#### *Seattle's Union Gospel Mission*

Seattle's Union Gospel Mission is a non-profit organization and they started serving thousands of homeless during the Great Depression. It has a long history for severing the homeless people in Seattle. Darren, emergency outreach administrator, he has been working with homeless people more than ten years, is who I interviewed with. He provided a lot of information about homeless population in Seattle. The organization also provides addiction recovery program, one-on-on consultation, male shelter, mental health services and dental services. It provides the most all-round service to homeless people out of the three organization that I interview. They have an Outreach and Search & Rescue teams go out every day to search out and find those people who are experiencing homelessness. They get to know the homeless people and deliver the essential supplies to help them go through every single hungry day and night. They engage people with giving supplies to them to build the relationship. Darren said the most

common industry barriers for outreaching are people without their ID card, social security number and having a domestic violence background. Homeless people with physical or mental disability are problems that cause people not able to work. However, the biggest problem is homeless people addict to street drug. I asked why there are many homeless people live in the street, and he said that it is because they couldn't afford the housing in Seattle and Seattle is where they from, so they don't want to leave the comfort zone. Seattle has a good weather that not too extremely hot in summer and not extremely cold in winter, so that homeless people will choose to stay at Seattle.

There are a lot of things along getting people a bed, outreach workers need to consider the homeless people about their health, education, skills in general, age and physical ability. Darren thinks the most effective way to outreach the homeless population is fit their need which means providing foods, supplies and shelter to attract them feel comfortable and save while building a relationship with them. They have to going out in a consistent basis in order to build the trust from the homeless population. Their organization needs a lot of volunteers in order to be succeed, Darren recommend to public signing up to become a volunteer.

## **Findings**

Homeless outreach is outreach working going out to the street and engaging people who are experiencing homelessness which have disconnected from the mainstream services and supports. Therefore, building a strong relationship with homeless people is essential because there are barriers that prevent homeless people access services like mental health services and homeless shelter. Homeless outreach requires the understanding of the homeless people individual circumstances and the need. As the interview found out, organizations are using food and supplies to attract homeless people and build a relationship with them. The supplies that homeless people desired the most are tents, sleeping bag, blankets, coats or warm clothes, cleaning products and socks or shoes. Through the development of positive relationships, outreach worker must possess a strong interest and passion to help homeless people connect the services and supports they need in order to enhance the possibility to help them move off the street as soon as possible. Homeless people can feel the outworker's passion and love while talking with them. To achieve effectively outreach the homeless population, outreach worker needs to familiar with the services provided from different organizations, government agency and community services. Outreach worker also needs to understand where homeless people concentrated and their encampments, through the conversation with the homeless people, homeless people may connect outreach worker with more people that are never discovered or escaping from the mainstream services for long years. Therefore, homeless outreach is an important process to end homelessness, and also connecting with the hard to reach homeless people with a numerous effort. Ending homelessness is not just only rely on outreach worker, as

the public, what we can do is donating clothes, backpack or money to those organizations which are actively helping the homeless population. In addition, we can just say hello or start a conversation with homeless people by showing we do care and love them and let them know that they are not alone. Ending homelessness is not impossible, but it requires the community, organization and city government's support.

## **Implication**

To help the outreach workers improve their work and to be more effective outreaching the homeless population, based on the analysis result, I transform this research study to a list of recommendation for outreach workers. These recommendations may potential improve the outreach strategies they were using.

- To show interest and care while outreach the homeless population and without any stereotypes and judgement
- Understanding what homeless people needs and use the supplies to build a relationship with them
- Knowing the services that provided by the local organizations, government and local community.
- Learn more different types of communication style
- Connecting the best services that the homeless people need and help them move off the street as soon as possible

## Reference

Levy, Nat. "Zillow Data: Seattle Has 3rd Largest Homeless Population in U.S., as Rising Rents Take a Toll." *GeekWire*, 3 Aug. 2017, [www.geekwire.com/2017/zillow-data-seattle-3rd-largest-homeless-population-u-s-rising-rents-take-toll/](http://www.geekwire.com/2017/zillow-data-seattle-3rd-largest-homeless-population-u-s-rising-rents-take-toll/).

Srebnik, Debra. "Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness." Department of Community and Human Services Mental Health, Aug. 2010.

Robinson, Phil. *Working with Young Homeless People*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/washington/detail.action?docID=355286>.

"The State of Homelessness in America." *National Alliance to End Homelessness*, [endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/](http://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/).

Defining Chronic Homelessness: A Technical Guide for HUD Programs. (2007). [PDF] U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, p.3. Available at: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/DefiningChronicHomeless.pdf> [Accessed 10 Mar. 2018].

Gibson, Kristina E. *Street Kids : Homeless Youth, Outreach, and Policing New York's Streets*. New York, New York University Press, 2011.

Kryda, Aimee, and D. Compton. "Mistrust of Outreach Workers and Lack of Confidence in Available Services Among Individuals Who Are Chronically Street Homeless." *Community Mental Health Journal*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2009, pp. 144–150.

Levy, Jay. "Pathway to a Common Language: A Homeless Outreach Perspective." *Families in Society*, vol. 85, no. 3, 2004, pp. 371–378.

Levy, Jay. "Homeless Outreach: On the Road to Pretreatment Alternatives." *Families in Society*, vol. 81, no. 4, 2000, pp. 360–368.

"Barriers to Ending Homelessness: From Those Experiencing It." Partnership for Strong Communities.

"The Secret Life of a Homeless Outreach Worker: We Put up with Abuse That No Other Profession Would | Anonymous." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 15 Feb. 2016, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/15/secret-life-homeless-outreach-worker-abuse](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/15/secret-life-homeless-outreach-worker-abuse).

Homeless Children : Problems and Needs, edited by Panos Vostanis, and Stuart Cumella, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999. ProQuest Ebook Central,  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/washington/detail.action?docID=3015902>.