

Consumer Input Forum
Focus Group Report
April 2018

Submitted by Dr. Catherine L. Troisi, PhD
Associate Professor, Divisions of Management, Policy, & Community Health and Epidemiology
Coordinator, Leadership Studies Concentration
Center for Infectious Diseases
The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston School of Public Health

Notes taken by Benjamin King, Doctoral Student UTSPH

Two focus groups were held on April 26 and 27, 2018 comprised of members with a current or recent lived experience of homelessness. The first took place at Hope Impacts in Katy, TX and the second was held at the Conroe House of Prayer in Conroe, TX. The content of the semi-structured interview focused on assessing service access and identifying needs for clients in these outlying areas outside of the City of Houston or Harris County.

General

The various pathways into the experience of homelessness described were wide ranging (Q1&2). Many stories described interpersonal conflict or medical illnesses /injuries immediately preceding the loss of housing. No one in either group included Harvey in the causal factors for their homelessness and nearly everyone was experiencing homelessness prior to that storm. The narrative of interpersonal conflict was sustained when participants were prompted about their ability to stay with another individual in their lives and the existence of anyone relying on them for support (Q3&4). The primary response to this was to describe friction with individuals that they had previously or could choose to stay with temporarily. One couple, both participating, and one other participant referred to peers they camped with as 'with them'. A few participants referred to their pets as relying on them. One participant reported children (5) in their care.

Clients often reported some current or recent work history (Q5). The HI group dedicated considerable time to a discussion of the decision balance in choosing to ask for money on street corners, i.e. 'flying signs' or panhandling. Nearly all of these individuals identified as being employed to some extent. Those who engaged with day-labor or informal employment opportunities emphasized that the income from their work was not sufficient to lift them out of homelessness. Several participants brought up the ability to make significant income at a higher rate than hourly employment offered, although the nearly unanimous response was that this experience was highly inconsistent day to day. Two female participants discussed the financial and risk balance of flying signs versus prostitution (neither had engaged in prostitution).

The CHOP group focused more on the limited employment opportunities available to those experiencing and presenting /identifying as homeless, Workforce Solutions options, and disability. The Workforce Solutions in Conroe received considerable focus in the discussion, with concerns raised about their ability to provide jobs in the area and willingness to work with those presenting as homeless. Receipt of disability income was mentioned by several participants as precluding the ability to search or engage in any formal employment. Both groups also frequently described their lives prior to their time experiencing homelessness based on the work they had at that point, their training /certification, their industry or job title.

Services Accessed

Participants had experience with several types of services in their local communities (Q8 & 10). In both groups, the site hosting the group received the most favorable reviews by the participants. The lead case managers in each organization were repeatedly pointed to as helpful and supportive individuals compared to the other services discussed.

The HI group focused primarily on safety net income sources of disability and workers compensation, emphasizing that they are helpful but do not provide enough to change their situation. The CHOP group participants chose to discuss their access and experience with food stamps (Health and Human Services) and employment (Workforce Solutions) resources in their local area. Both sites were described as treating those perceived as homeless differently, withholding or making access to their services more difficult. Participants also described lack of transportation, particularly in these more outlying areas, as an issue in accessing services. Lack of ability to clean themselves or their clothes was also mentioned as preventing them from having more positive interactions with such service providers (in addition to potential employers).

Medical care was frequently not discussed until specifically prompted (Q11). However, both communities discussed finding ways to access primary care, either through free clinics in the area, or by accessing federal social support benefits. The Gold Card was reviewed favorably by those who had it and no one mentioned an inability to access this resource. Participants in both groups described frustration with the lack or limited availability of dental and vision-care resources in their communities. The group in Conroe did have access to free dental care but voiced concern that receiving such services requires a full day commitment in order to wait on site. Mental health services in Katy were described as lacking as well. Tri-county was pointed to by one participant in the CHOP group as superior care to 'government' mental health resources.

Service Needs

There were many challenges identified by the group participants (Q6). Transportation, maintenance of documentation and records, and similar logistical concerns were frequently represented. The need to secure sources of income, regardless of their consistency, was also described by many participants, with issues such as barriers to employment, criminalization of other sources of income such as flying signs, being banned from recycling centers, and ability to secure safety net income approvals.

The participants also brought up attitudes toward the homeless community as a challenge in their lives which they hoped would change. Attitudes of potential employers toward hiring those in homelessness, attitudes of individuals being asked to give money on street corners, and attitudes of employees in service organizations, shelters, and the public libraries were all described as challenges facing these individuals. Relationships with the police came up in both groups as well. Both groups had positive things to say about at least a couple of officers in their community which they interacted with. However the group expressed a need for better relationships with the police overall, describing common experiences with perceived harassment and wrongful arrests by officers. The HI group referenced the Homeless Outreach Teams in particular as being helpful instead of punitive and wished for their return to their area and the expansion of such programs.

There was a strong response regarding the services that were not available but that would be helpful (Q12). Once again, transportation was a frequent theme receiving endorsement in both groups. Additionally, logistical resources such as temporary storage and communication (phone and mail) and basic domestic services such as laundry and hygiene were frequently mentioned and endorsed by the

group. The opportunity to store backpacks or other items temporarily was referenced by multiple participants as a resource that would be useful to individuals who also described the stigma of carrying their possessions with them.

Another theme of resource needs was the extension of services 'available downtown' to those living in outlying areas, as with both of these groups. The Katy /HI group mentioned that they used to have access to a medical outreach bus from Healthcare for the Homeless Houston that would deliver care, screenings, and provide medication refills at their site and that they wished this service would return. A large, central, multi-organizational resource center for the local area was suggested by both groups. This was presented as a potential solution to both the larger transportation issues and a way for participants to avoid having to interact with service organizations and the homeless community located downtown. Several participants also expressed a desire for a summary (that could fit on a card) of the resources available in their local area and not just across all of Houston.

Appendix A. Notes

Hope Impacts

The first group consisted of 13 clients who were convened by Hope Impacts (HI) to represent the clients of that organization. There were also 2 focus group facilitators, 2 HI site staff, and one representative of The Way Home who provided gift cards to all participants at the end of the session. Hope Impacts provides day shelter services, including laundry and showers.

Both sites self-identify as religious mission-driven institutions and operate as 501c3s. Neither organization is a member of The Way Home, the Houston-area Continuum of Care nor do they serve on the CoC steering committee.

1. *When did you first become homeless? Where did you become homeless? Have you been in and out of housing or staying in shelters?*

- Had a job & got hurt, lost income; didn't have a place so slept on the pavement in for of where I worked; 2 years ago until this July;
- 3 years; Florida and bought a ticket here
- 2013 in Houston
- 2014 in San Antonio; Mom was sick in the hospital
- NJ – 2007 working and living inside until I got injured...

2. *People become homeless for many reasons. What are some of the reasons you became homeless? (prompts if necessary: job loss, divorce or other separation, mental health issues, substance use, Hurricane Harvey, domestic violence)*

- Frostbite, 1st time in Houston, described the temperature shift in/out of sleeping locations & mechanism of injury;
- Thanksgiving 2013, removed from the house by police
 - Divorce
 - Deaths in the family and lost a job

- Oil field, then a chemical plant in Pasadena; Police involved.
Didn't realize I had diabetes until I was on the street
Diet on the street worsened the diabetes
- Harvey – (no one identified Harvey as the cause for homelessness)
 - That was seriously scary to be outside during that storm
 - I lost my job, but I was already homeless

3. *Have you lived with family or friends in the past? Can you do that again?*

- No. To both.
- Yes I have but I wouldn't do it again.
- My brother wouldn't be ok with that
- If I was ready (i.e., had dealt with substance abuse issues), I could
- I don't want to because you get taken advantage of;
- Last time, they said I was too hungry

4. *Who (else) relies on you for support? Who currently stays with you? Are you alone or with someone? Do you have any children?*

- I stay with a couple of guys
- 2 clients (male & female): We're together
- Does my dog count? He's my buddy
- I have a cat. I live in a truck trailer and the cat can find all the cracks in it and goes hunting.

5. *Have you been employed at any time during your period(s) of homelessness?*

- I'm employed, 7 days a week but it barely pays. I don't care about Uncle Sam either, but it's not steady enough to help out enough
- (Case Manager at HI) helps. She'll find you a job. I'm flying an 8 foot sign for Babies R Us. It's a terrible job no doubt. Sign busts me in the face, and there's women's issues.
- I have a job, landscaping work right now
- Day labor - it's not a guarantee but otherwise, the options are tough
- When not too strung out I can find work
- Nothing's guaranteed (with flying signs) though sometimes you don't make anything. With my age and the felonies I can't get a job so that's how it goes
- Peer pressure – tell me to fly a sign and I'll try it
 - a. I've got a college education (several others: Don't we all)
- If you get a ticket, how are you going to pay it unless you work on that corner? (Moderator: How can we fix that?) People need to be more understanding.

6. *What are the biggest challenges do you face in trying to find a more stable situation?*

- Medical - Described a very long course of care involving injuries to legs

- 7 days a week flying a sign, people see you drinking a beer out there. Why would they hire you? So I don't even try? Don't have to deal with all the BS.
- I'd rather have a taxed job with benefits and everything
- People don't care about the situation but you need to help yourself.
- Documentation – major barrier
- We need a big resource center like downtown, but out in Katy
- No bus system; if I get a job, I couldn't get there.
- Orgs get you short term gaps but can't help you get a job
- Employment Assistance; it's about pride working for money instead of taking handouts;
- Criminal history & credit score forgiveness
- Being judged before the hiring process; change managers' attitudes
- (Moderator: fix what?) Hygiene – place for showers and to get clean
- I work at Specs and managers gave someone a job with no experience because they looked good
- More shelters, can't walk anywhere without judgement
- Public library – treats people bad /judged & won't give them access; but they help me out when I'm by myself;
- I get arrested in a heartbeat in the library
- Help with physical things happens, but spiritually /emotionally I need to give my whole life up to change
- Still around same thing you've been doing you're not going to change;
- You go to rehab and when you come out Boom; right back under the bridge & doing the same thing

7. *Sometimes circumstances make it hard for people to obtain permanent housing. What help could be offered that would support you getting into or staying in permanent housing?*

- Rehab housing to get access to a house while recovering
 - Violent crime prevents entry to programs
 - Food pantry – get housing but still don't have job so can't get food.
 - Don't have toilet paper. It's hard.
- Food stamp barriers to receiving:
 - 1,2: Time in office vs \$ available and Transportation “How to get Dave to the food pantry in his wheel chair?”
- Prostitution vs flying signs – balance of risks and choices; described being mocked by prostitutes while flying a sign
- Supportive housing goes to younger people with 'less homelessness'. Minorities and kids get you into housing faster.

8. *What kinds of services have you received?*

- “Disability but it don't pay enough”
 - Blames the government for funding priorities
- \$150.00 /month is barely enough to live on.
- Disability SSI – “took over 10 years to get”
- Workers comp

- (Case manager at HI) helps with employment
- Connect the resources together because it's disconnected

9. *If you have not sought help from public or non-profit agencies, why not?*

- A. Why?
- B. Location location location
- C. Quoting someone else "Backbone they have comes from the supports they receive"
- D. Give housing, but its high crime and all minorities so feel out of place

10. *What are some of the services you use and find helpful?*

11. *How do you access medical care?*

- Downtown that's all I know
- Beacon
- Hospital – they have to see you, I just got out of there
- (Case Manager at HI) helped with my Medicaid
 - Now I have a Dr. down the street
- Christ Clinic in Legacy – free
- There was a bus that came once a month & gave us our medicine but it went away. We miss it.

12. *What kind of help or services do you wish were there for you that are not available now? (i.e., transportation, housing, shelter)*

- We want that medical bus back
- And the police used to come help, Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) was really useful
 - Deputy Kelly & Deputy Dida – provide food & kind conversation
- Better Police Relationships
- Described multiple cases of harassment & wrongful arrests

13. *Anything else you'd like to share with us?*

- Housing access & inclusion lists change for us
- ADA – glasses
- Housing applications turned down for bogus reasons
- (In terms of political change) - Electronic voting mistrust – many voices

Conroe House of Prayer

The second focus group, held at the Conroe House of Prayer (CHOP), consisted of 10 client attendees, 2 facilitators, 2 CHOP site staff, and one representative of The Way Home who provided gift cards to all participants at the end of the session. CHOP is a day shelter facility that provides a range of services including meals and religious services.

1. *When did you first become homeless? Where did you become homeless? Have you been in and out of housing or staying in shelters?*

- In and out starting in Conroe
- Once I was not allowed to work in January; Disability status awaiting approval; “Government talking to lawyers”
- Homeless for 5 years and no services in New Caney so she came to Conroe and found support and made friends
- In and out since ‘91, and there are no services between Houston and Huntsville, then I met (PATH Case Manager) and decided to stay in this area

2. *People become homeless for many reasons. What are some of the reasons you became homeless? (prompts if necessary: job loss, divorce or other separation, mental health issues, substance use, Hurricane Harvey, domestic violence)*

- My old lady threw me out
- Mine is health and waiting for disability to come in
- Background (referring to criminal background preventing housing)
- Unemployment
- Domestic violence situation and a lack of help at the time, and then inability to work afterward

When questioned about Harvey –

- Ruined my campsite
- Didn't cause homelessness for anyone
- Resources became harder to find since then
- Changed where the food was /schedules
 - New schedules had to spread by word of mouth

3. *Have you lived with family or friends in the past? Can you do that again?*

- I could with my sister, if I didn't drink; ...I'll still stay with her sometimes.
- No - Rules
- It's [homelessness is] a choice

4. *Who (else) relies on you for support? Who currently stays with you? Are you alone or with someone? Do you have any children?*
- 1 client: My puppy dog
 - 1 client: 5 children
 - Others: no one
5. *Have you been employed at any time during your period(s) of homelessness?*
- I'm a carpenter, but I have 3 cracked ribs
 - They won't hire me. I'm crippled.
 - If you don't have a job, how do you get one when you're carrying all your luggage around with you to interviews and stuff.
 - Day labor
 - I worked on golf courses until I got sick...
6. *What are the biggest challenges do you face in trying to find a more stable situation?*
- ..., but now I enjoy homelessness and feels like a choice. I have Jesus Christ in my life & don't identify think of myself as homelessness. There's no pressure living in the woods, and I deal well with... I don't like unnecessary pressure. It was terrifying in the woods the first night (describes experience of first night, darkness, scary noises, etc.) but now it's normal.
 - Homeless steal from homeless – do things no one else does to the homeless.
 - Salvation Army isn't a good resource, in humane, 'wouldn't stay there even if paid him \$100 a night'; treat you like trash and they don't help, say they can't fix anything;
 - If you walk and carry a backpack you 'have a mark on you'.
 - They write you a ticket for taking your shoes off in the park;
 - Cops make rules up as they go. Not all, some bad apples.
 - Transportation mentioned three times
 - Not having a phone
7. *Sometimes circumstances make it hard for people to obtain permanent housing. What help could be offered that would support you getting into or staying in permanent housing?*
- I would like permanent housing but I don't want the headaches
 - Too many rules
 - Rules about having friends over, trips to the store (too frequently), no freedom
 - What's the point if I can't help someone who needs to share with me?
 - Las Cruces – tent city held up as an example of possible living situation
 - Alcohol use messes even that up, they'll ask you to leave for intoxication
 - Some opportunities for employment in that scenario if you can find employers, but most still won't hire someone living there.
8. *What kinds of services have you received?*
- Disability application
 - High blood pressure & anxiety condition – can't get fixed and delays
 - Social Services can't talk to me now that I've hired a lawyer
 - Phones get stolen so others can sell them for drugs or money

- Very hard in Montgomery County to get food stamps if homeless. They want prove you have somewhere to cook food.
 - Food stamps for 1 month only
 - Have to go to Workforce Solutions every week; they don't help you find a job, just tell you to get a job
- "Tri-county" – don't like. I have a doctor and don't like to use the MPC, MHMRA docs with all the abuse I've seen all the hospitals; don't agree with government hospitals how the staff treat you.

9. *If you have not sought help from public or non-profit agencies, why not?*

- With multiple sites for services, have to travel with a backpack and stuff and you get tired
- Emergency Assistance (*now called Crisis Assistance Center*), told I had to go to Workforce Solutions to fill out new applications; too many rules!

10. *What are some of the services you use and find helpful?*

- Crisis center can receive mail; House of Prayer and a few service sites will receive mail for individuals
- Kindness of strangers keeps us going.
- *(*PATH Case Manager*)** at this site
- Food- soup kitchens, lots of nonprofits & churches; Food stamps need to step up to help the local churches
- Food stamps – helped me
- Diabetics need better treatment at the Salvation Army – refuses to give snacks, can't manage medication;
- Salvation Army meals at dinner but won't work with timing of long or short acting insulin and residents can't save food

11. *How do you access medical care?*

- Tri-County
- Crisis Center (mental health)
- Usually get a Gold Card
 - My mom set that up for me through Pasadena
- Medical & Dental care available at Under Over Fellowship
- Need more dental care, lines all day arrived at 7a and seen by 4pm
- Vision care nonexistent; someone stepped on one client's glasses

12. *What kind of help or services do you wish were there for you that are not available now? (i.e. transportation, housing, shelter)*

- Transportation
- Locker to leave stuff
- We have no safe place to rest

- A place to do laundry, stuff gets stolen
- A card with information on it just for Conroe area; 211 exists and helps with this, but everyone needs to know about this service immediately;
- Somewhere you can go to check out the resources all in one place
- Place to recycle cans where they don't kick you out for bringing back cans or packing too many cans together;
- Security in your medication; get your medication to you regularly – chronic medications with automatic refills for antianxiety, heart meds, etc.
- Transportation to and from resources and work, especially when raining;
- More resources & not just prayer
- More housing
- Medications
- Locker
- Housing
- Clothing for smaller people /different sizes
- Day shelter – somewhere to pay a small fee per day to stay ... because you can't stay during daytime at Salvation Army even though you've paid \$10 for the night
- Charter school or some programming for the kids in the shelter

13. Anything else you'd like to share with us?

- It ain't easy
- It's a full time job
- Since Harvey still trying to recover
- Rain and bugs ruined all my stuff