

DIGNITY

A Listening Session with Alaskans
Experiencing Homelessness

Anchorage, July 2012

Alaska Mental Health Board
Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse

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Alaska Mental Health Consumer Web

We also want to acknowledge and thank all of the Anchorage organizations and individuals who work daily to improve the lives of our neighbors who are homeless. The financial, in-kind, and volunteer contributions of the people of Anchorage and the non-profit community help provide hundreds of thousands of meals and nights of safe shelter every year.

The boards recognize the monumental efforts made to help address homelessness. This report is meant solely to provide a voice for those individuals who are themselves homeless and who want to contribute to the solutions for homelessness.

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Introduction

The Alaska Mental Health Board and the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse are Alaska's planning councils for mental health and substance abuse. Each board has a statutory responsibility to advocate on behalf of Alaskans who experience mental health and substance use disorders, their families and their communities. The boards are also responsible for assisting with the planning and coordination of publicly funded behavioral health services in Alaska, evaluating the effectiveness of that service system, and educating the public and policymakers about issues related to mental health and substance abuse.

Listening to and learning from Alaskans who experience and/or are affected by mental health and substance abuse issues is crucial to the boards' work. To ensure that board members have the benefit of listening to and learning from some of their most vulnerable constituents, the Alaska Mental Health Board and Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse partnered with Bean's Café, Brother Francis Shelter, and Anchorage Community Mental Health Services to host a listening session on July 19, 2012. This listening session was attended by more than forty (40) individuals who experience or have experienced homelessness. This two-hour roundtable discussion gave attendees a chance to share not only their stories, but also their **ideas for solving problems faced by people who are homeless.**

This report provides the information that was learned at the listening session. We note that, because most of the attendees were adults (and many were older adults) this report does not reflect the needs, perspectives, or ideas of youth experiencing homelessness in Anchorage. The boards plan to engage in a similar process with that population during FY2013.

Dignity

The pervasive theme throughout the listening session was the fact that many people who experience homelessness also experience a world in which they are not treated with *respect* or *dignity*. Listening session participants explained that it is not just that the public treat them disrespectfully – they often treat each other without respect. Some participants said that they chose to sleep outside and go hungry rather than access shelter/meal services, because they felt shamed and unwelcome.

Listening session participants suggested possible solutions to this problem. Training on issues related to customer service, working with people who experience disabilities, and cultural sensitivity was suggested for front-line staff. Participants pointed out that “language matters” – they are people first (and experience homelessness second).

Building trust between individuals who experience homelessness and service providers was identified as a need: “if people trust that their needs will be met, there is less grabbing for things” and everyone works together rather than against each other. Listening session participants recognized that this sort of change in the way individuals and organizations view each other would be hard, but it is key to ensuring that Alaskans experiencing homelessness act with and are treated with respect.



Participants suggested that policymakers spend time in the shelter or at the soup kitchen, not as a volunteer or an “important person” or a “suit,” but as someone who experiences homelessness. They noted that the Alaska Mental Health Web’s inclusive, peer-driven environment is welcoming and respectful, so there is opportunity for cross-training among service agencies.

Basic Needs

The issues of dignity and respect led to discussion of another common problem – access to basic human needs of **food**, **water**, and **bathroom facilities**. Most policy-makers and organizations trying to solve the problem of homelessness focus on access to safe, affordable housing. However, what listening session participants shared was that ready access to clean drinking water, bathroom facilities, and healthy food was a more immediate need.



Participants spoke about how hard it was to find a source of clean water or a bathroom except at the organizations dedicated to serving the homeless. They spoke positively about how, in the past, “port-a-potties” had been placed in areas downtown so that people would have appropriate bathroom facilities (and could avoid citation or arrest resulting from having to use inappropriate public places for hygiene needs). They recommended resurrecting this program.

A possible solution for this problem is a hygiene center or service center that operates during the day and offer bathrooms, showers, and laundry facilities. Some cities have incorporated street outreach services, limited food options, and secure storage with basic hygiene services. Seattle, Washington offers a good example of how hygiene centers can fill this gap (as well as others identified later in this report. For an overview of the homelessness service centers in Seattle, go to <http://www.seattle.gov/humanservices/emergencyservices/shelter/servicecenters.htm>.)

Safe Shelter

Listening session participants shared stories about sleeping “rough” in winter, how a stay in a shelter made the symptoms of their mental illness and/or brain injury worse (or how their mental illness and/or brain injury prevented them from going to a shelter), about making the choice to drink alcohol or commit a petty crime so that they could spend a cold night in jail or at the sleep-off center where it was warm. They stressed the need for more housing options – independent, supported, subsidized – but most people spent time talking about their ideas for how to solve the problem. They offered short- and long-term solutions.

Short-term Solutions:

- 👍 Establish a campsite with security and hygiene services (clean water, port-a-potties) that is near other support services
- 👍 Establish an exception to the 12% municipal bed/room tax so that people who have money for a hotel room or extended stay location can stretch their dollars further
- 👍 Streamline the application process for public housing so it is easier to navigate
- 👍 Expand street outreach to veterans to help them access VA/VHA programs and housing vouchers

Long-term Solutions:

- 👍 Develop a peer-run hostel for adults who are temporarily homeless due to job loss, etc.
- 👍 Create housing options for individuals whose criminal backgrounds prevent accessing private or public housing
- 👍 Expand shelter beds with special populations (job seekers, individuals with disabilities, etc.) in mind
- 👍 Re-imagine vacant commercial properties (like car dealerships) as housing projects
- 👍 Increase access to treatment and sober housing/shelter options for people who are seeking to recover from or maintain recovery from substance abuse

Getting Back to Work

Listening session participants spoke about the way homelessness is itself a barrier to getting back to work, which is key to having the money to get back into housing. Participants identified these specific problems:

- 👉 Lack of hygiene/laundry facilities so they look nice for a job interview or work
- 👉 Sleep deprivation due to “sleeping rough” in unsafe places or the crowded and sometimes chaotic shelter environments makes it hard to find and maintain a job
- 👉 Lack of a physical address to put on a job application makes employers reluctant to hire, so people have to “camouflage their homelessness” to find (and sometimes keep) a job
- 👉 Lack of a safe place to leave personal belongings while on a job interview or at work
- 👉 Lack of a safe place to sleep during the day prevents people from taking alternate shifts or working at night

Participants also identified solutions:

- 👍 Designate (and enforce) “quiet” sleeping areas in existing shelters
- 👍 Designate daytime sleeping areas (limited access is available at Brother Francis Shelter)
- 👍 Enlist local churches to open limited overnight shelter space (just for sleeping) specifically for people who have jobs or are actively seeking a job
- 👍 Increase access to shower/laundry facilities (limited access is available now)
- 👍 Educate employers that just because a person is homeless, it doesn’t mean they can’t or don’t want to be a good worker
- 👍 Identify a physical address and phone number that can be used when applying for a job
- 👍 Encourage Native Corporations to hire shareholders who are homeless
- 👍 Increase access to secure storage for people who need to leave their belongings temporarily while looking for a job or while at work

Recovery and Support

Many of the listening session participants reported struggling with homelessness for years. They explained that, while living without a safe place to call home is stressful and can take up “a lot of space” in daily life, they still seek opportunities to share, support, and celebrate. Several participants spoke about the need for recovery supports to maintain sobriety and to manage mental health conditions during periods of homelessness.

Participants suggested the following ways to increase recovery and support services for people experiencing homelessness:

- 👍 Incorporate peer support and peer navigation in homeless shelters and other homelessness programs: “Peers can solve [problems] together”
- 👍 Provide opportunities for supported self-employment and peer-driven employment programs
- 👍 Expand access to prescription subsidies so that people can maintain their medication regimens
- 👍 Increase access to foot care services
- 👍 Expand access to nutrition services (healthy food, vitamins and nutrition supplements)
- 👍 Organize recovery-oriented social events so that people can get together in healthy, productive ways
- 👍 Organize cultural/traditional activities, or provide opportunities to participate in community activities (especially important for people living far from their home communities)



Self-Advocacy

The listening session started and ended with comments by participants calling for increased self-advocacy by individuals who are or have been homeless. While participants expressed feelings that policymakers and municipal leaders were not contributing to solving problems associated with homelessness, the focus quickly shifted to how they themselves could help solve these problems.

Listening session participants pointed to issues related to land use and zoning, security and safety, and making housing and other social service systems easier to navigate as areas where they could make a difference through advocacy. Participants asked for training on how to be better self-advocates and the process for changing public policy. They also asked that this listening session be the first of a regular and ongoing series of opportunities to speak directly with policymakers.

Partners in Policymaking, with the Alaska Mental Health Consumer Web, is offering a free advocacy training September 11-12, 2012. The boards' advocacy coordinator will be coordinating an advocacy planning event with these partners later in 2012.



Anchorage Homelessness Services

There are agencies providing services to people experiencing homelessness in Anchorage. This list provides contact information for the major emergency and support service providers. For a complete directory of social services in Anchorage, call 2-1-1 or visit www.alaska211.org

Emergency Shelter

Brother Francis Shelter	277-1731
The Salvation Army (multiple locations)	375-3583
Anchorage Gospel Rescue Mission (men only)	563-5603
Covenant House (youth only)	339-4409
Clare House (women and children only)	563-4545

Meals, Food Pantries

Bean's Café	274-9595
Children's Lunch Box	297-5625
Brother Francis Shelter	277-1731
Food Bank of Alaska	272-3663
The Salvation Army (multiple locations)	375-3583
Lutheran Social Services of Alaska	272-0643

Peer Support and Recovery

Alaska Mental Health Consumer Web	222-2980
NAMI Anchorage Help Line	272-0227
Consumer Driven Services, ACMHS	762-8665
Alaska Women's Recovery Project	729-5190

Alaska Mental Health Board

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