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## SNAPS In Focus: Integrating Persons with Lived Experiences in our Efforts to Prevent and End Homelessness

SNAPS partnered with young people with lived experiences of homelessness to develop the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP), from its initial planning and ongoing through its implementation. Young people identified the key concepts that were included in the Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA), helped review project applications, and provided technical assistance to the selected sites. This partnership continues to be crucial to the success of the program, and our goal is to apply those lessons to all our work.

In addition to improving the quality and effectiveness of homelessness assistance, more meaningful partnerships with people with lived experience of homelessness can help dispel dangerous and counterproductive myths regarding homelessness. Meaningful partnerships can demonstrate the expertise and motivation of people with lived experience and engage communities to implement effective solutions to homelessness.

Those with lived experiences of homelessness typically have the best understanding of the reality of our work to prevent and end homelessness – both in terms of the problems that exist and the knowledge of the services and interventions that are the most effective solutions. This is why it is so important to *meaningfully* and *intentionally* integrate them into the decision-making structure of our work at the system and program level. When we consult the experts, service implementations are made more relevant and responsive.

We in the Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs (SNAPS) are looking carefully at our requirements and practices and identifying areas in addition to YHDP where we can more meaningfully engage persons with lived experience of homelessness in our work. The CoC Program interim rule requires the CoC Board to include at least one person with lived experience of homelessness. But *meaningful* integration seems to require more than that. Having only one person, particularly if that person cannot influence policy or priorities, is not enough. It also risks tokenizing that person and their experience. Instead, reciprocal relationships should be a priority. What will people with lived experience gain from their involvement? What will the organization and community gain? How is their time being compensated and what training and professional development is being offered? How will their participation lead to changes in policies and priorities?



Baltimore City has created a Lived Experience Advisory Committee as an official standing committee of the CoC. While the group started informally, the CoC restructured their Governance Charter in 2016, formalizing the group and increasing the number of persons with lived experience on the advisory committee, their executive board, and all the CoC subcommittees. Members of the Lived Experience Advisory Committee sit on almost every CoC committee, including those that make decisions about funding and system-wide policies. Through this work, members of the Lived Experience Advisory Committee have worked with the city to monitor and reform shelter policies and operations, promote affordable housing solutions, and recommend best practices on engaging people with lived experience.

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*“As a person experiencing poverty after being homeless, I continue working hard every day with people experiencing homelessness and people like me to embrace our experiences and use them to create the will for justice and change the system.”*

*Anthony Williams, Board Member and Chair of the Lived Experience Advisory Committee Baltimore City CoC*

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*“It’s difficult to imagine moving the needle in this work without the right context. The lived experience within our CoC is the context. Too many times, a system tries to create a solution for a problem, real or imagined, without the voice of the beneficiary. We’re grateful for the work of our team members with lived experience.”*

*Winston Phillip, Board Chair, Baltimore City CoC*

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The City of Austin’s Housing Advisory Committee (AHAC) was created through a partnership with the Downtown Austin Community Court and the Innovation Team (i-Team) working on a grant funded by Bloomberg Philanthropy’s i-Team Program. Initially, the i-Team planned to conduct research with people living or having lived experience of homelessness, generate ideas, and

prototype and test those ideas to see if they would work. The i-Team needed a focus group to advise their process. Case managers and members of the Homelessness Outreach Street team referred a diverse group of 25 individuals for inclusion in the focus group. Fifteen of those attended the focus group and then kept meeting. As Lincoln Neiger of the i-Team said “We spent six months meeting. It was important to create deep relationships with and amongst people experiencing homelessness.”

Learn more about both of these communities and how they set up and structured their advisory committee in this [video from a call that SNAPS held with CoC leadership on this topic last June](#).



As we work to prevent and end homelessness, it is vital that people with lived experience be at the forefront of policy development, implementation, and evaluation. Borrowing from disability activists, youth organizations use the phrase, “Nothing About Us Without Us.” It means that no policy should be decided by any representative without the full and direct participation of the members of the group(s) affected by that policy. This approach is challenging to implement but is vital for our work to end homelessness. SNAPS is looking forward to hearing from people with lived experience of homelessness and all of our partners in communities to improve our work to prevent and end homelessness.

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*“People whose lives have been impacted by homelessness are highly motivated to prevent others from experiencing similar traumas. Continuum of Care have a particularly important role in assuring federal resources are effective in transforming the lives of people who become homeless. We must be able to facilitate dialogue between service providers and service recipients, public officials and the public, housed and unhoused folks; in order to build healthier and more compassionate communities.”*

*National Coalition for the Homeless*

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