

## Homeless Encampments Organizational Values Statement

Homeless encampments are highly visible and troubling reminders of the housing crisis in our country and in our region. Pathways to Housing DC fundamentally disagrees with policies that create homelessness and recognizes that **encampments occur because there is a pervasive lack of affordable, permanent housing** in our communities.

**Pathways to Housing DC is fundamentally opposed to the forced closure of encampments during the COVID-19 public health emergency.**

When a health emergency is not in effect, we are still opposed to forced closures except in extreme situations where encampment residents' and/or the community's health and safety are in imminent danger and cannot be mitigated through other means.

As a homeless services provider for more than 16 years, we know there are two essential elements to connecting people experiencing homelessness to housing and health care:

1. We meet people where they are: We engage them on their terms and build relationships with them to earn their trust and make them full partners in their care.
2. And because housing is health care, we work with them to secure permanent—and where needed, supportive—housing.

Forced encampment closures puts our relationships with people experiencing homelessness at risk, which makes it more challenging for us to connect them with housing and services.

**As local jurisdictions respond to encampments, Pathways to Housing DC must meet various roles as a service delivery/housing first organization, as community partner, and as advocate to end homelessness.**

Homeless encampments are a rational response to the dangers of living isolated on the streets. People congregate in encampments seeking safety, companionship, pooled resources, and other practical needs. They can be a rare place of stability for individuals who may normally move place to place, and our outreach teams provide ongoing services to encampment residents in our geographic coverage area. Unfortunately, encampments can also present threats to health and safety. Local actions to close encampments permanently or periodically conduct “clean-ups” (often throwing away personal belongings, medications, identification papers, etc.)—without first ensuring safe housing—can put vulnerable persons at great risk for additional trauma as well as fracture relationships between service providers and encampment residents, disrupting continuity of care.

### As Housing First and Homeless Service Providers:

We contend that homelessness is a public health crisis and, as such, must be met with structural public health interventions such as the provision of safe, affordable housing and supportive services as warranted. Local governments have a responsibility to provide for the health and safety of their residents, regardless of whether they are housed or homeless. Increased access to affordable, safe housing is the best response in communities facing growing numbers of people living unsheltered, and encampments should not function as an alternative to permanent housing. Yet, where encampments are created, it is crucial to address the health care and hygiene needs of residents. For all people who are experiencing homelessness, proper planning must take place to ensure public health, safety, and adequate access to services such as:

- Medical and behavioral health care services
- Case management & other support services
- Clean restrooms
- Drinkable water and washing facilities
- Harm reduction & overdose prevention
- Access to safe storage for possessions
- Trash removal & vermin control
- Care for pets and/or companion animals
- Biohazard/hazardous waste removal
- Fire safety services and supplies

Homeless services providers such as Pathways to Housing DC take a lead role providing outreach, medical care, behavioral health services, and case management to encampment residents in coordination with public agencies and other providers. Ensuring restrooms and adequate washing facilities are especially important to prevent the spread of communicable disease (such as Corona Virus, Hepatitis A, influenza and shigella). Pathways to Housing DC can also help support leadership development among encampment residents to facilitate greater safety, security and conflict-management. Other roles can be to facilitate inclusive conversations between encampment residents, community members, and local officials to find common ground and mutually agreeable solutions. **Our ultimate focus is ensuring health and safety while bridging residents to permanent housing.**

### As Housing First & Service Delivery Partners:

As housing first and outreach providers, we aim to deliver high quality, comprehensive services designed to improve health and end homelessness. To do our work effectively, we need trusting relationships with our clients and our community partners. We value working together with our elected and appointed officials, law enforcement, and other community partners on a wide range of issues, but poor responses to encampments can strain our relationships with those receiving our care. This is especially true when forced closures or “clean-ups” undermine the effectiveness of our services and damage trust. Forcible moves such as these often prioritize

community aesthetics over human dignity. They also contradict well-established principles of trauma-informed care, re-traumatize the people who are displaced, and potentially cause adverse health consequences when individuals are disconnected from care. Pathways to Housing DC works with local officials to help craft constructive, team-based approaches to encampments, reduce stigma and violence, as well as decriminalize homelessness. We firmly recommend that community leaders coordinate well with homeless service providers to ensure consistent communication to reduce confusion and misinformation. Pathways to Housing DC will continue to engage in robust street outreach to isolated individuals in need of care and connect them to comprehensive health care and housing services.

### **As Advocates to End Homelessness:**

Homelessness is a violation of human and civil rights. Encampments do not end homelessness and are never a substitute for permanent housing. All too often, the controversy surrounding encampments diverts needed attention and resources away from long-term solutions such as providing housing, adequate health care, decent wages, and needed support services. Pathways to Housing DC advocates for public policies at the federal, state, and local level that both reduce the health and safety risks for those living in encampments and prevent and end homelessness through long-term solutions.

### **Advocacy Recommendations**

- Jurisdictions should avoid destruction of encampments and instead focus on rapid creation of permanent, affordable housing with appropriate support services as needed.
- As an interim measure, services should be provided at encampments to promote safe and sanitary living conditions for residents and the broader community.
- As an interim measure, public buildings or other facilities should be opened to provide options for shelter for people without homes. No one should be evicted from an encampment without a safe, stable alternative.