

When Homelessness and Mental Illness Overlap: A Cross-Sector Conversation

SPEAKERS

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BACKGROUND

- Recent HUD data estimate 14% of people in shelters and 43% of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness have a serious mental illness. However, there are substantial limitations with the data, including measuring the true scope of the population and their health needs.
- The majority of people with serious mental illness in the U.S. are not homeless. Serious mental illness combined with structural issues – such as poverty, mass incarceration, a lack of affordable housing, and gaps in the social safety net – create risks for becoming homeless.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

There is substantial agreement across sectors about challenges and solutions to concurrent experiences of homelessness and mental illness. Examples identified in this seminar included:

- A lack of coordination between healthcare, homeless services, and other social services systems;
- A lack of community-based treatment options and difficulty accessing existing options;
- Difficulty establishing long-term connections to care from hospital settings;
- Negative stigma around mental health; and
- A lack of affordable housing and permanent supportive housing.

Current systems work around the margins of the problem. Hospitals and the shelter system are built to be at or near capacity 24/7 and serve as safety nets for other systems failures. This presents challenges to appropriate placement, discharge, and flexibility to meet patient/consumer needs.

People experiencing homelessness and serious mental illness require services tailored to their specific needs. Small shelters with intensive services are preferable to large shelters, but availability is limited.

Investments must be increased to match the need for:

- Mental health care, including community-based care and short-, medium-, and long-term options.
- Affordable housing and permanent supportive housing.

“The experience of people with mental illness is as broad as the experience of all humanity.”

“It is not what is wrong with people, but what has happened to people.”