Engaging People Who are Homeless with a Mental Illness

THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
DIVISION OF MENTAL HEALTH
HOMELESS ACTION COMMITTEE

**Myths about people who are homeless with a mental illness**

*And they don’t know the circumstances or the situations that led to the homelessness. And it comes straight down to the assumptions that you’re illiterate, you’re an alcoholic or drug addict, and that you’re lazy. That you’d rather be out on the streets than to follow the rules.*

--Odie (formerly homeless)

MYTH: Mental illness is rare.
FACT: Mental illness is more common than cancer, diabetes or heart disease. One in five families is affected by a severe mental illness.

MYTH: Mental illness is a form of mental retardation.
FACT: Mental retardation refers to lower intellectual functioning while mental illness refers to a biochemical brain disorder, unrelated to a person’s intelligence. People with mental illness are of average or above average intelligence.

MYTH: Mental illness is caused by personal weakness.
FACT: Mental illnesses are brain disorders. Many things cause mental illness such as genetics, changes in brain chemistry, emotional and psychological stress, and trauma.

MYTH: People with a mental illness can control their behavior.
FACT: People with mental illness have a disease and they cannot control much of their behavior. Chemical malfunctions cause delusions and hallucinations. Behaviors are a part of the illness and should not be taken personally.

MYTH: People with mental illness are violent and dangerous.
FACT: The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent. Often, they are far more likely to be the victims of violence than to be violent themselves. In cases when violence does occur, the incident typically results from the same reasons as with the general public, such as feeling threatened or excessive use of alcohol or drugs.

MYTH: There is no hope for people with mental illness.
FACT: Mental illness is a diagnosable and treatable disorder of the brain. Eighty percent of people treated for severe depression and 70 percent of people treated for schizophrenia have a decrease in symptoms.

MYTH: Homeless people suffering from a mental illness have little chance of recovery.
FACT: There are effective treatments for homeless people with a serious mental illness. Research demonstrates a decrease in homelessness when outreach activity is blended with case management, medical treatment, housing and other supportive services.

MYTH: People who are homeless are lazy and irresponsible.
FACT: Homelessness is a result of many complex factors, including mental illness, substance use issues, the lack of affordable housing, and living wage jobs. Fires, natural disasters, domestic violence or the loss of a job also cause homelessness. Anyone can become homeless at any time.

**Basic engagement skills**

*If they would approach you on an equal level and just give you reassurance that you are part of society, that would help.*

--John (formerly homeless)

While engagement skills are simply effective ways of relating to people, their goal in social service programming is to initiate, develop, and strengthen a relationship leading to a person accepting services and working towards change. To overcome the multiple barriers presented by homelessness and mental illness, including loss of trust and disenfranchisement from systems of care, providers must be willing to take the time to engage people.

To engage someone effectively:

- Convey interest and concern
- Communicate empathy
- Demonstrate attentive listening
- Manifest belief in the person’s ability to change
- Show that you are there to help
- Be receptive and responsive when they walk into your agency

By omitting this step, it is possible that a person who is homeless with a mental illness will not receive services or treatment for a long time, if ever. Sometimes a person will accept services quickly, but this is rare. For this population, especially for those living on the streets, the ability to build a relationship – to engage – is everything. Without it, the person is alone, homeless and untreated.