



**Contra Costa  
Building Authentic Partnerships with  
People with Lived Experience of  
Homelessness**



## Overview

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This guide was developed by C4 Innovations to support the Contra Costa CoC in their efforts to develop and strengthen partnerships with individuals who have lived experiences of homelessness. We believe that if communities center the experiences of those most impacted by homelessness and create more inclusive decision-making processes, they can redesign service systems to be more culturally responsive, trauma-informed, equitable, and effective.

There are many ways to amplify the voices of people who utilize the homeless response system in your planning efforts. Some communities integrate feedback from client satisfaction surveys or focus groups; others engage partners with lived experience on their Boards or CoC committees; many have developed and supported advisory/action councils made up, primarily, of partners with lived experience. As long as these interactions are not exploitive or tokenistic, they can be extremely beneficial to those with lived experience as well as network providers and system leaders. These partnerships can be even more impactful when communities go beyond raising up narratives and experiences and ensure that partners with lived experience have decision-making power and paid positions throughout the CoC.

## Objectives

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1. Develop the resources, infrastructure, and inclusive CoC culture to support and sustain partnerships with people with lived expertise in the ongoing work to end homelessness.
2. Better understand the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and people of color who are using the homeless response system in order to center the experiences of those who are most disproportionately impacted by homelessness when developing strategies to end homelessness.
3. Cultivate and support partnerships with experts who can identify and build solutions around the specific challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness, ensuring strong representation from Black, Indigenous, and people of color.
4. Develop leadership opportunities and shared decision-making processes across the CoC so partners with lived experience can meaningfully engage in system planning, service delivery, and evaluation.

## Preparing for This Work in Community:

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There are many established best practices when it comes to recruiting, engaging, and supporting people with lived experience. It may be helpful to establish a small local team to ensure that people are oriented to the system and supported as needed while working with the CoC. Some key decisions will have to be made in advance. Consider the following:

- *What type of partnerships does your CoC hope to develop? (e.g., Advisory Board/Action Council members, CoC Board/committee members, peer support positions, CE staff, etc.)*
- *Who will be responsible for recruiting partners?*
- *Who will be responsible for ensuring that each partner has the support necessary to actively participate in the process?*
- *Who will be responsible for advocacy and ongoing support at the leadership level to ensure that the CoC values and centers the voices of partners with lived experience and shares decision-making power?*

## Recruitment, Outreach, and Engagement Strategies:

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Prior to conducting any outreach, clarify your ask.

**Who:** Determine the number of individuals you would like to recruit based on the level and type of engagement you hope to establish. For focus groups or listening sessions, we recommend including six to eight participants per group. Your community may want to conduct separate groups for individuals, families, or youth. If you are engaging partners to participate on specific committees, we suggest engaging at least 2 individuals per committee so new members can also support one another in the process.

**Where:** Determine if partners will be attending meetings and if so, will they be virtual or in person. If the meeting will take place virtually, consider the following:

- What platform will you be using?
- How will you address any barriers to access (e.g., WiFi, technology)?

If the meeting will take place in person:

- How can you create a comfortable, private, safe meeting space that will be easily accessible to everyone?

**When:** Make sure expectations around the level of effort are made clear. How many hours per week will partners be engaged in the work? If partners will be engaged in listening sessions or committee meetings, specify the dates and times to ensure

availability. It may be beneficial to offer meetings/groups at different times during the day to accommodate participants' scheduling needs. Remember that partners with lived experience may be in different stages of housing stabilization, and they will have competing priorities.

**How:** Partners should be compensated at a living wage for their involvement.

Compensation rates vary across communities but the suggested amount for an hour to 75 minutes of someone's time is \$20-\$50. We can provide written guidance specifically about compensation if helpful.

- Payment options include: Visa gift cards, specific supermarket, restaurant, or store cards, cash, cash apps, or checks. It is best to ask people what form of payment they would prefer and try to meet those requests.
- Note that your CoC will need to be well informed of any requirements of the funding source. Ensure that compensating partners with lived experience is an eligible cost and that you understand tracking and reporting requirements as well as whether or not you need to take out taxes.

When conducting outreach, create some standardized language that can be shared with frontline staff as well as language that they can use to engage their clients directly.

- Language matters. How can you draft an invitation/job description that is engaging, welcoming and inclusive?
- What information is needed to ensure people understand the level of commitment needed, and what they will receive in return?

### **Facilitation and Support:**

Establishing long-term partnerships may require some facilitation and support. There will need to be at least one person in the CoC, a liaison, who can be responsible for on the ground support as needed. Support will look different for each partner depending on their individual needs, but it may include:

- reserving the physical meeting space for partners or ensuring access to a virtual meeting platform (i.e., technology, Wi-Fi)
- securing and distributing funds to compensate partners fairly and at a rate that allows them to prioritize this work
- working to understand and work through any challenges (e.g., childcare, work schedule, transportation, etc.)
- providing background information about how the service system is currently designed and how different programs operate
- providing a glossary of commonly used terms and acronyms

- preparing partners prior to any meeting with an understanding of the agenda items and/or decisions that may need to be made as well as re-engaging partners who may have missed meetings

### Six Critical Considerations:

1. **The importance of a trauma-informed approach.** The individuals coming into these partnerships will bring with them all of who they are and what they have experienced. This includes their stress, pain, fatigue and/or anxiety, but it also includes their humor, insight, resilience, and empathy. It is important to acknowledge that people may be tired and may be hurting even if they do not name it.
2. **Don't use system jargon, technical terms, or acronyms.** If you need to discuss parts of the homeless response system that may be unfamiliar to some, provide definitions.
3. **Establish a rapport by being genuine, honest, and transparent.** Be clear about your purpose and intent. Be transparent about what partners can expect. Provide reassurances about confidentiality when appropriate. Inform people that they can be honest without fearing any retribution. Let them know how their involvement will benefit the system or lead to transformative system change. Acknowledge that you cannot begin to understand each person's individual experiences. Express gratitude for all that people are willing to share and contribute.
4. **Honor each person's story.** Be respectful of the fact that people may want to go in a different direction than your agenda or share personal experiences. Do not talk over people or be dismissive of people's contributions. Be patient and make space for all voices.
5. **Actively listen and engage with people around their contributions.** Ensure people do not have to share personal experiences to participate in system planning and decision-making. Pause in your process and allow others to weigh in. Believe what people tell you. Summarize what people have said to make sure you clearly understand them. Empathize when people share their experiences rather than just moving on to the next question/agenda item.
6. **Be respectful of people's time.** Be prepared. Let people know what time the meeting will end and stick to that time. Establish guiding principles with meeting participants that challenge people who tend to talk more than others to step up their listening and challenge those who are less vocal to step up their participation. When someone has a lot to share, ask them if you can follow up with them after the meeting.

7. **Develop leadership opportunities based on people's strengths.** Partners with lived experience should be seen as experts. Each person will bring unique strengths and assets to the table. Sustaining these partnerships will require succession planning and the development of pathways to advance to leadership-level roles.

### **For Advisory Boards or Action Councils, Support the Development of By-Laws and Workplans**

Board/Council members can work together to establish the values and objectives in their work to drive system change and end homelessness. Having a document such as by-laws can make onboarding easier, as long as the language is accessible, and the content is developed and updated by members. It can also help to strengthen the long-term foundation for committees and ensure they are truly led and governed by partners with lived experience. Members can set expectations for participation, establish how decisions will be made, and decide how new members will be recruited/nominated, hired, onboarded, and or terminated/replaced. Board/Council members should have the autonomy to decide what CoC projects and initiatives they would like to be more involved with and have a clear understanding of the work ahead. They may want to develop a workplan so that each member knows what their responsibilities will be and so they can see the impact they are having.

### **For Listening Sessions, Co-Facilitator's Can Develop a Facilitator's Script**

Having a script can ensure you don't miss any important information when the meeting starts and ends. However, you should be familiar enough with the script to make it conversational. It should not be read word for word.

What do you want to accomplish with your introduction?

- Define purpose
- Create a safe space
- Welcome participants and let them know what to expect
- Anything else?

What information do you need to share with participants before you begin?

- Confidentiality/anonymity
- If recording the session (for transcription purposes), be clear about why it is being recorded, who will have access to the recording, and obtain written consent before proceeding.
- How the information will be used
- Anything else?

What information do you want people to know when the meeting ends?

- Express gratitude for the time and information they shared
- Inform them of how to collect their compensation
- Inform them if there are more ways to stay involved in this work and collect contact information if people express interest
- Anything else?

**Resources:**

1. [Nothing about us without us: Seven principles for leadership & inclusion of people with lived experience of homelessness](#) (from the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness)
2. Also from Canada, the [Engagement Toolkit](#)
3. True Colors developed a really nice [toolkit](#) on collaborating with youth with lived experience
4. [IHI's](#) is also great
5. [HCH](#) guide
6. [National Coalition's tip sheet](#), which has some good content but I think could frankly be a lot more ambitious...