Making the Case for a Low-Barrier Shelter

Low-barrier solutions for high-barrier communities

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[A shelter's] political significance is traced to the way in which it partakes in boundary work by defining who is worthy of support, who is to count as a citizen, and which lives matter.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

+ Differentiate between high- and low-barrier practices
+ Evaluate local needs and advocate for change
+ Implement a variety of low-barrier practices
Low-Barrier Shelter
Low-Barrier Shelter

Planning

Implementation
A Low-Barrier Shelter is...

+ People, property, partners, pets
+ Driven by actual community needs
What happens in a high-barrier shelter?

- Prioritize the least vulnerable
- Unresponsive systems
- Increase in Chronic/Unsheltered populations
- Rule enforcement
- Outreach works harder
Although mandated policies claim to prioritize [the most vulnerable], this group is excluded from services precisely because of the complexity of their needs...

CASE STUDY

Gainesville, FL

+ 114-bed LBES
+ Full* LB since 2016
+ 25% jump in housing placements
+ 2x CH rate
CASE STUDY

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CASE STUDY
Gainesville, FL

People Served in Shelter:
+ 2012: 500 CoC-wide
+ 2018: 1500 CoC-wide

Past 5 years:
+ 36% ↓ PIT Count
+ 48% ↓ Unsheltered
CASE STUDY
Gainesville, FL

2005
+ 900+ Unsheltered
+ Empty beds

2019
+ 461 unsheltered
+ 99.8% occupancy
Low-Barrier Solutions
Basic Assumptions

➔ Homeless people are... people.
➔ People have a right to food, shelter, dignity, respect.
➔ Integrity is critical.
“Despite being widely used multifunctional institutions, emergency shelters cannot ‘fix’ the very complicated problems homeless people face.”

"We need to do background checks on every person who comes into shelter!"

- Background checks on every person who enters
- Look up DOC and SO info, make a case note
- No one is precluded from receiving services
“We need RULES! SO. MANY. RULES!”

+ Expectations set the tone for the campus
+ There are already laws against crime
+ What do people want? To feel safe
Campus Expectations

+ Respect the rights, peace, and property of everyone
+ Work on a housing plan to the best of your ability
+ No sex, drugs, weapons, gambling on campus
Focus groups yield expectations that work

+ Are any current rules unnecessary for us to provide a safe environment?
+ What expectation is hardest for you to follow? Do you think it’s reasonable?
+ Do you feel they are being upheld consistently?
“Low-barrier shelters are not safe.”

- One major incident in 5 years
- .0075% (1 in 13,300) of people served
- .0001% (1 in 819,000) of service interactions
“We don’t have enough staff to be low-barrier!”

- Re-train existing staff
- “The GRACE Way” training
- Housing-focused... *volunteers?*
- Where are your conflicts starting?
Low-Barrier Solutions: PEOPLE

“If we don’t tell people how to live their lives, how will they know what’s best for them?”

+ Shelter workers. Not saviors
+ Your guests are in crisis. Fix the crisis
This programmatic environment encompasses a much greater degree of tolerance for disruptive behaviors than would be found elsewhere in the shelter system (Parr, 1997, 1999). 

Low-Barrier Solutions: PROPERTY

“We don’t have the ___ to accommodate property!”

+ In-kind storage units
+ Locked storage for valuables
+ Amnesty boxes
Low-Barrier Solutions: PARTNERS

“We don’t have the ___ to accommodate partners!”

+ Security cameras?
+ Rearrange existing space
+ What are you doing if you don’t allow partners?
“We just don’t have the _____ to accommodate pets!”

+ You must allow trained, working service animals
+ “Is that a service animal?”
+ Expectations built on safety
“If we build a good shelter, people will come from everywhere!”

+ Prioritize beds for local residents
+ GRACE: 80% of beds are locals
+ Local ID, ties to community
Low-Barrier Solutions

“If we don’t limit how often they can get help, they’ll keep coming back!”

+ 30-day LOS
+ People can return to shelter after exit
+ Who wants to be homeless, anyway?
+ Get the answers with your PIT
“Shelters must be low barrier, focus on assessment and triage, and intentionally link to permanent housing resources so that people move through to housing quickly — this is ‘Housing First’ at its best.”

"Housing First means we don’t need a shelter!"

+ Key element of the system
+ Local acuity scores
+ Housing First requires... Housing