



Homeless Emergency and Active Readiness Toolkit (HEART): Be Informed

Alameda County Case Study:

Including People Experiencing Homelessness in Disaster Preparedness

ALAMEDA COUNTY AT A GLANCE

- Population: 1.692 million
- Location: Urban
- Median Income: \$122,488
- Sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January (2024): 9,450

SUMMARY

Like many California communities, Alameda County has faced significant emergencies and disasters that have impacted people experiencing homelessness. In response, Alameda County exemplifies what it means to “be informed” by actively engaging with individuals with lived experiences of homelessness to shape their response strategies. Through collaboration with community advocates, outreach workers, and leaders from encampments, Alameda County has developed a collaborative approach to emergency preparedness that addresses immediate needs and prepares for proactive response and future planning. This proactive and inclusive strategy played a pivotal role in mitigating the impact of infectious disease outbreaks, fires, and the COVID-19 pandemic, serving as a model for other counties in building resilient communities.

DEVELOPING RESPONSE CAPABILITIES

In 2017, Alameda County faced the threat of a hepatitis A outbreak, prompting the public health department to develop a response strategy. Understanding that building trust and rapport with those experiencing homelessness was crucial, the county engaged community activists, outreach workers, and leaders from encampments to disseminate information and administer vaccines. Importantly, individuals with lived experience of homelessness played a pivotal role in creating informational materials, such as flyers, ensuring the content resonated with the target population. This collaborative approach facilitated the successful prevention of a widespread outbreak in Alameda County and began a response network comprised of people experiencing homelessness, providers, the Continuum of Care, and emergency services.

This same community-centered, collaborative model proved essential once again when a significant fire broke out at a housing site. Drawing on the networks and partnerships strengthened during the hepatitis A response, Alameda County swiftly mobilized resources to address response and recovery, and to mitigate future instances. The county leveraged its networks and partnerships to provide immediate assistance to the Red Cross by bringing in providers adept at serving people experiencing homelessness. Alameda County recognized the urgent need to understand the needs of people experiencing homelessness and sought to involve individuals with lived experience in the decision-making process to better understand and meet their needs. This included how Alameda County actively addressed the dangers of fires outdoors, light sources, and cooking strategies. Utilizing a preventative approach, the county began distributing fire extinguishers, solar lanterns, and tips for cooking in safer places.

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EXPANDING RESPONSE CAPABILITIES

At the onset of COVID-19, it was imperative to proactively respond to prevailing circumstances by swiftly reaching out to the most vulnerable individuals with complex health conditions and rapidly distributing masks as needed. This necessitated a comprehensive understanding of these individuals' geographical locations and the cultivation of strong, enduring relationships with them. A foundational network of trusted partnerships spanning churches, advocate organizations, and formal partners to public health departments facilitated the prompt dissemination of critical information and supplies while fostering healthy community partnerships. The development of these trusted partnerships allowed for expanded response capabilities. The delivery of tangible and valuable resources to the community was prioritized to encourage engagement and involvement among those experiencing homelessness. This included serving individuals experiencing homelessness by implementing street-based healthcare and establishing and developing service centers that integrated health care and support services in sheltered, unsheltered, and housed sites. Emphasis was also placed on efforts to provide Narcan training and access, as well as other interventions aimed at preventing overdoses, as part of ongoing daily disaster response initiatives. Effective collaboration within a county framework and with community partners was essential for expanding these response capabilities.

INVOLVEMENT OF PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

The success of Alameda County's response both in the threat of the hepatitis A outbreak, and during the onset of COVID-19 was greatly due to the active involvement of individuals who have experienced homelessness. Their insights, resilience, and ingenuity were crucial in shaping response strategies, ensuring that the county's efforts were effective and compassionate.

The county conducted several focus groups to gather input and better understand the range of climate-related emergencies faced by people living in shelters, vehicles, or on the streets. Insights from these focus groups informed the development of targeted interventions for people experiencing homelessness during emergencies or disasters. To ensure the process was grounded in real experience, the Alameda Consumer Community Advisory Board also recruited individuals with lived experience of homelessness. Recognizing that emergencies for people experiencing homelessness may not align with traditional disaster response approaches, the county focused on identifying resources and establishing reliable response partners.

Recruiting staff with lived experience as trusted messengers during active engagement was critical in conveying messages effectively and extending the reach of initiatives within the community.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

Alameda County's experience underscores the critical importance of incorporating the voices of individuals with lived experience and expertise in disaster response efforts. By actively involving individuals with lived experience of homelessness, the county was able to build trust, tailor interventions, and effectively mitigate the impact of disasters. Looking ahead, the county aims to strengthen its partnerships further and continue centering the perspectives of those most affected by disasters in its ongoing resilience-building initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Alameda County demonstrates how “getting informed” by listening to and learning from people with lived experience strengthens outcomes. Learning from experts with lived experience has supported Alameda County with successful practices that are built around the needs of people experiencing homelessness, that support a compassionate and educated disaster response. This leads to more positive outcomes, which means more people experiencing homelessness have options to stay safe. By prioritizing inclusivity, collaboration, and empathy, the county has set an example for other jurisdictions seeking to build resilient and equitable communities.

Special thanks to:

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