

Knowledge and Solutions for our Unhoused Community Members: Public Mental Health and Social Support

PAA's mission is to advance the science-based profession of psychology and to promote the well-being and potential of all Albertans. Psychology can benefit services for unhoused community members informing culturally competent program design, empirically supported, trauma-sensitive interventions, culturally competent training, relevant assessment and treatment, and advocacy around issues and policies associated with racial and socioeconomic injustice.

Actionable Recommendations / Solutions

When community members are unhoused there are increased public health and social problems. These community members are disproportionately likely to be members of oppressed groups (race, sexuality, poverty, immigration status, disability, age, legal involvement, education, or mental/physical illness).

1. Decriminalize homelessness
2. Increased access to safe and affordable housing
3. Decrease structural and bias-based health care barriers
4. Do not abate temporary encampments

Successful interventions require changes in policy as well as programs, rules, and procedures.

Decriminalize Homelessness

When activities associated with being unhoused (eg., sleeping outdoors or congregating in settings) are criminalized, encounters with law enforcement cause further stigmatization, increased hardship, and further curtail legal rights of citizens. Law enforcement should not address concerns about people who are unhoused when it involves low-level nonviolent crimes, and violations of minor nuisance ordinances. Cash bail is a further hindrance.

Increased access to Safe, Affordable, Supportive Housing

Safe, stable, affordable, accessible, and permanent housing is a human right. Those unhoused are unlikely to benefit from neighborhood revitalization and economic recovery investments. Funding for supportive housing needs to be on parity with such investments. Affordable housing and comprehensive services for education and job training, affordable childcare, health care, and increased mental health and substance use services supports rapid re-entry into housing.

Decrease Structural and Bias-Based Barriers to Health Care

Housing instability is a significant public health concern with deleterious health impacts and increased societal costs. Community-based prevention, intervention, and treatment services, and job training opportunities remediate the high levels of psychosocial stressors common for unhoused community members. Lack of comprehensive services is the greatest contributor to those with health needs becoming unhoused.

Do not use Abatement for Temporary Encampments

Forced relocation and property seizures strips citizens of health resources and necessities required to survive unhoused, drives unhoused people into hazardous, isolated, less visible spaces (increasing health risks and reducing service access), and increases negative encounters with law enforcement (furthering distrust of supportive services).