

## Trauma-Informed Care Do's and Don'ts for Street Outreach Teams

### Do

- **Approach with respect and empathy:** Greet people warmly and use a calm, non-judgmental tone. Treat each individual with dignity, regardless of their situation. Show that you genuinely care and want to help. Ask “how can I be helpful” and “what’s most important for you right now?”
- **Listen actively and validate feelings:** Give the person your full attention. Allow them to share their story at their own pace and listen without interrupting. Ask “what would you like me to know about you” and acknowledge their emotions and experiences (e.g., “*I hear you. That sounds really difficult.*”). Let them know their feelings are valid and understandable – saying “I’m sorry this happened to you” shows empathy.
- **Respect personal space and boundaries:** Ask permission before entering an encampment or touching someone (even a simple hand on the shoulder) and be mindful not to crowd them. If someone avoids eye contact or stands apart, respect that distance – it may help them feel safer. Give them a comfortable amount of space so they don’t feel cornered or threatened.
- **Be patient and allow the client to set the pace:** People who have experienced trauma may need time to trust you. It’s okay if there are moments of silence or if they struggle to share – don’t rush to fill the quiet. Give them time to process. Let the conversation proceed at a pace they are comfortable with by saying “Please let me know at any time if you would like a break” and “It’s no problem if you prefer not to answer any questions – just tell me to pass, and we’ll move on.”
- **Offer choices and encourage the person’s voice:** Whenever possible, give the individual options instead of issuing directives. Obtain informed consent prior to taking actions on their behalf and get their feedback on every step along the way. Involve them in decisions about their care (for example, choosing where to meet and which issues to address first). Offering choices empowers them and restores a sense of control.
- **Be transparent and build trust:** Explain what you’re doing and why, so there are no surprises. Clearly explain the process to access housing and services. Keep your promises – if you say you will follow up or provide something, do so. Honesty (even about bad news or limits of what you can do) and consistency help establish trust.
- **Recognize strengths and resilience:** Point out positive steps the person has taken and personal strengths you notice. Focus on their skills and successes (“You showed a lot of strength in handling that situation”). This shows that you see them as more than their trauma or homelessness. Recognize that substance use can be a way of coping with trauma and trying to feel safe. By helping someone to see ways they are already trying to keep safe, it may be easier to help them find other more effective ways to cope, for example, by connecting them to harm reduction services.

- **Practice cultural sensitivity:** Be aware that cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences shape how each person responds. Respect differences in communication styles, eye contact, personal beliefs, and traditions. When in doubt, ask the person about their preferences (e.g., *“Is there anything I should know to better support you?”*). Adapt your approach to honor their cultural and individual needs.

## Don't

- **Don't pressure someone to share trauma details:** Never push a person to talk about their past trauma or personal issues. Avoid probing for details of traumatic events (don't ask things like “So, what exactly happened to you?”). Let them disclose at their own comfort level.
- **Don't blame, judge, or shame the individual:** Refrain from any language that suggests the person is at fault for their homelessness or trauma. For example, never say “What were you doing in a place like that?” which implies blame. Likewise, do not suggest they “should be over it by now” or judge their coping methods. Maintain a non-judgmental attitude at all times.
- **Don't overwhelm them with questions or talk:** Bombarding someone with too many questions can feel like an interrogation and may shut them down. Also avoid talking *at* them or giving advice when they just need to be heard. Don't talk over them or interrupt; let them speak and take pause.
- **Don't make promises you can't keep:** It's important not to say things like “I'll make sure you're in housing by next week” if you can't guarantee it. False promises (even if meant to comfort) can erode trust. Instead of unfounded assurances, be realistic and honest about what you can do.
- **Don't use patronizing language or trivialize their experience:** Avoid clichés or minimizing phrases like *“Everything happens for a reason”* or *“This will make you stronger.”* These can come off as dismissive. Similarly, don't make light of their feelings by saying others “have it worse” or that “maybe it's time to move on.” Take their experience seriously.
- **Don't react with anger or take it personally if a client is upset:** People who have lived through trauma may have moments of anger, mistrust, or other strong emotions. If a person yells, cries, or shuts down, stay calm and do not retaliate or argue. Getting defensive or angry will only escalate the situation. Remember, their reaction might be rooted in pain or fear that isn't about you.
- **Don't stereotype or make assumptions:** Do not assume things about someone based on their race, gender, culture, or appearance. For example, don't presume a client's needs or capabilities just because you've worked with “similar” individuals. Every person's story is unique. Avoid biased comments and check any stereotypes at the door – if you're unsure about something (like what someone prefers to be called), just ask respectfully.
- **Don't punish:** Feeling easily frustrated, irritable or angry, even at minor things, is a common trauma response. Reacting to challenging behaviors with punitive measures like withholding services or restricting facility access undermines a trusting, collaborative relationship and makes it harder to build a safe and supportive environment. Instead, look to understand what caused the behavior and partner with the client to explore options and avoid triggers moving forward