

California Cohort 1: 100-Day Challenge Case Study

Los Angeles County: Authentic Engagement of Persons with Lived Experience

Los Angeles County worked to intentionally and authentically engage persons with lived experience of homelessness in their 100-Day Challenge. The Team ensured that a variety of voices and perspectives of persons with lived experience were incorporated into every part of the Challenge and were continuously inform the community's Project Roomkey rehousing efforts.

HOW LOS ANGELES COUNTY MADE IT HAPPEN

Los Angeles County set out from the beginning of the 100-Day Challenge to authentically engage persons with lived experience in the process, including inviting persons with lived experience to participate as Team members and developing new processes to gain feedback from Project Roomkey guests. Team members with lived experience spearheaded the development and delivery of housing fairs across Los Angeles County, which are designed to provide information on housing options to Project Roomkey guests and to support them in navigating from Project Roomkey to permanent housing solutions. A shared housing “rebranding” campaign informed by feedback from persons with lived experience was also developed and will be utilized to support Project Roomkey rehousing efforts beyond the 100-Day Challenge.

The 100-Day Challenge also created new spaces for services providers, partner organizations, and homeless advocates with lived experience to sit at the same table with local leaders. This structure allowed for open and transparent conversations to take place about existing barriers and system changes needed to support positive housing outcomes for Project Roomkey guests. Persons with lived experience remain actively engaged in the County's Project Roomkey rehousing efforts, including ongoing work to facilitate housing fairs for Project Roomkey guests. They are also utilizing lessons learned from the 100-Day Challenge to inform their homeless advocacy efforts. The 100-Day Challenge Team is working closely with the County Director of Homeless Initiatives to establish a feedback system to ensure that persons with lived experience are consistently and authentically being engaged as new programs and initiatives to respond to homelessness are being developed by the County.

Key Takeaways:

- Engagement of persons with lived experience should be intentional and take place as early in the process as possible.
- Persons with lived experience should be full and equal partners in the work, including participating in decision-making processes and meetings with local leadership.
- Providers should support persons with lived experience in building their capacity and understanding of the homeless response system.
- Persons with lived experience need to be appropriately supported and compensated for their time and expertise, including monetary compensation and other supports such as food, transportation, professional development and emotional support.
- Authentic inclusion of lived expertise requires an ongoing commitment to change at both the systems and provider levels in order to be meaningful and sustainable.

LESSONS LEARNED

“As a person with lived experience, I’m excited about 100 people [housed], but I am super excited about the possibility that with the necessary adjustments and changes in the system, that we would be able to house over 66,000 people in our County. This goes beyond this 100 days – this is about our tomorrows, this is about my tomorrow.” - Reba Stevens, LA County Mental Health Commissioner with Lived Experience

1) Be Intentional in Engaging Persons with Lived Experience

Authentic engagement of persons with lived experience requires intentionality at all steps in the process – from outreach to involvement in local decision-making processes. Los Angeles County intentionally engaged in outreach to persons with lived experiences who already has substantial working knowledge of the housing and homeless response systems, as well as expertise in racial equity and systems change, to help anchor the 100-Day Challenge Team. Team members with lived experience have since helped invite others with lived experience into the work and are taking action to ensure that different committees and coalition groups of persons with lived experience are being more intentionally engaged in the process. The involvement of multiple persons with lived experience representing a variety of voices, opinions and outlooks was crucial to the success of Los Angeles County’s 100-Day Challenge and helped ensure that participation in the initiative was meaningful and not tokenizing for participants.

The Team also stressed the importance of engaging people with lived experience as early as possible in the process and equipping them with the knowledge and information they need to participate as equal partners. Persons with lived experience need to be provided with the same knowledge of the process as other participants, including sufficient context (i.e. What is the 100-Day Challenge? What is Project Roomkey?) and a clear understanding of the roles, responsibilities, expectations, and scope of work for the initiative. Engaging people with lived experience as early in the planning process as possible also helps ensure that their role is not limited to providing feedback on existing ideas, but rather that they are authentically engaged in the design of programs, policies, and solutions.

2) Provide Space to Ask Questions and Gain Knowledge about the Homeless Response System

Communities should ensure that people with lived experience are respected as equal partners and that they are supported in developing a deeper understanding of the homeless response system through their involvement in the work. This should include encouraging providers and partner agencies to explain acronyms and present new information in a way that is inclusive and accessible for all participants, regardless of their level of experience in the homeless and housing field. Communities should also cultivate a working atmosphere where participants feel safe and supported asking questions or requesting more information on topics that arise or components of the homeless response system. The Los Angeles County 100-Day Challenge Team stressed that inviting people with lived experience into these collaborative spaces and helping them understand the system – including what is working, what is not working, and where barriers exist to successful outcomes – informs their work as advocates and helps them more effectively advocate for change.

3) Create Opportunities to Challenge Norms and Existing Work Culture

Authentic engagement of persons with lived experience often requires challenging existing norms and dynamics of work culture that do not reflect the value of lived expertise. Communities need to consider how lived experience is being brought into all aspects of the work, including among partners systems and organizations, and establish inclusion of persons with lived experience as a priority for homeless response efforts moving forward. This includes establishing clear commitments and actions to be taken by providers and partner agencies to reimagine existing decision-making processes and internal structures so that they more authentically incorporate the perspective of

lived experience. It also includes re-evaluating existing work culture and norms to remove potential barriers to engagement that put unnecessary conditions upon inclusion for persons with lived experience. Team members with lived expertise in Los Angeles County emphasized the importance of being able to come to meetings and be present knowing that they are accepted for who they are and that their lived expertise and experiences are respectfully acknowledged by others.

Additionally, it is important that communities provide opportunities to reflect upon and challenge existing norms that inhibit the inclusion of lived expertise in the day-to-day work. This includes regularly creating time and space during program design, delivery and implementation to receive constructive feedback from persons with lived experience and to reflect on how current actions are impacting clients. The Los Angeles County 100-Day Challenge Team encourages providers to regularly stop and ask, “are we including everyone in this conversation as we move it forward?” and to think proactively about requesting feedback from persons with lived experience as the new norm for work that is moving forward.

4) Provide Appropriate Support for Persons with Lived Experience Engaged in the Work

Communities must commit to providing appropriate support and compensation for persons with lived experience in order for engagement to be authentic and sustainable. This includes identifying a stable source of funding to provide monetary compensation that accurately and meaningfully reflects the value of time and expertise contributed to the work. This should include compensation for time spent on travel and conducting additional research to build capacity and understanding of the homeless response system. Communities also need to consider other barriers to participation, such as transportation and meals, and include these supports in compensation plans for persons with lived experience. Non-monetary supports such as professional development opportunities are also important for developing mutually beneficial partnerships and demonstrating to persons with lived experience that their professional development and success is a priority. Finally, it is important to recognize the emotional nature of this work and to be conscientious of the mental health needs of staff, with particular attention to the needs of staff and partners with lived experience. It is important to be transparent with persons with lived experience about potentially re-traumatizing topics before they are discussed and to provide opportunities for self-care and emotional support when difficult conversations or situations arise.

5) Understand that Authentic Engagement of People with Lived Experience is a Systems Change Process

Authentic engagement of persons with lived experience is not a one-time action or goal; it is an ongoing process that requires time and dedication in order to sustain change at both the systems and provider levels. The Los Angeles 100-Day Challenge Team is working to develop strategies to build the intentional and authentic inclusion of lived expertise into the “scaffolding” of the homeless response system. Team members with lived experience identified having someone with deep knowledge and understanding of the homeless response system to serve as a liaison between persons with lived experience and provider organizations as an important structural support for inclusion of lived experience. This liaison role would advocate for lived experience and hold providers accountable to expectations for intentionally engaging and involving persons with lived experience, without placing the burden of this effort on persons with lived experience themselves. Los Angeles County recognizes that this is a challenging process and that they will face setbacks, but the community is committed to consistently and authentically engaging persons with lived experience in homeless response efforts beyond the 100-Day Challenge.

“Inclusiveness of the lived experience community has been absolutely critical to this [work] – it has helped us think this through, it has helped us be sensitive, and it has helped us make sure that we have been thinking of inclusivity and racial parity all along the way.” – Kris Freed, LA Family Housing