

I coped with the pain, frustration, and despair of homelessness through self-medication, which only exacerbated efforts to end my homelessness. In my case, the few service providers who reached out to me were *always* more concerned with my substance use and mental health than they were with assisting me to obtain housing, a livable wage, or physical health care.

At the time, I was living in a rural area—a services and supports desert—and I needed affordable housing and a living wage. To me, it felt like the providers were putting a Band-Aid on a hangnail, while my head was fully engulfed in a raging fire. Their approach to supporting me was the exact opposite of what I needed.

Many service providers labelled and stigmatized me for being *noncompliant*, which was true. I was noncompliant because the pathway they were offering felt coercive, shaming, counterproductive—and even dangerous. Here’s a good example. My access to housing was contingent on my attending 90 12-step meetings in 90 days before providers would even *talk* about putting my name on a waiting list for housing. I found the experience a painful, traumatizing cruelty.

None of my needs were being met. Everywhere I turned, I was turned away. Today, we know unequivocally that if we are to end homelessness, we *must* put people in homes. This is *the* most critical, *basic* need. Housing *is* a **basic** human right, and without providing individuals and families access to affordable housing, we are waging an unwinnable war against homelessness.

Recalling the time I was homeless, I had other unmet basic needs:

- Temporary housing or “safe space” sleeping access until permanent housing became available.
- A basic smartphone with free or low-cost minutes.
- State identification and a birth certificate; without either document, you do not exist in the eyes of most service providers.
- Access to primary and behavioral healthcare services, as well as access to medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD) without cost, barriers, or conditions.
- Peer support—meeting someone who had “been there” and could offer me hope would have been life-changing.
- Free or affordable transportation to access health care, MOUD, job connection services, and critical appointments, as well as to facilitate running general errands such as grocery shopping.
- Employment support, resume writing services, and interview coaching.
- Expedited access to food stamps or SNAP benefits, a small monthly cash stipend, and other social service supports to mitigate the trauma of homelessness.
- A place to store belongings safely, and a location to send and receive mail that isn’t marked by the stigma of the return address.
- Extended access to computers and technology that isn’t on a first-come, first-served basis with a 15-minute time limit, which is typical of the local library.
- Clothing and footwear, including clothing suitable for employment interviews.

While these things would have helped tremendously in surviving life on the streets, I had one more essential need that was vital. I needed people who believed in me and supported me in a strengths-based and trauma-informed way. I desperately needed to feel hope, and be treated with respect, dignity, empathy, and compassion.

I desperately needed someone to care. No one ever did.

That was 25 years ago. While we can still do a better job caring for those experiencing homelessness, we’ve made significant progress in addressing many of the needs I’ve mentioned. Today’s providers inspire hope for a better, brighter future and meaningful, satisfying lives in our communities for our neighbors experiencing homelessness.

Recommended Resources:

Core Elements of Effective Street Outreach to People Experiencing Homelessness, U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/core-elements-of-effective-street-outreach-to-people-experiencing-homelessness>

Whole-Person Care for People Experiencing Homelessness and Opioid Use Disorder Toolkit: Part I, Homeless and Housing Resource Center, <https://hrctraining.org/knowledge-resources/toolkit/87/whole-person-care-for-people-experiencing-homelessness-and-opioid>

What is Harm Reduction? Harm Reduction International, <https://www.hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction>

