

A Training To Implement A Homelessness Diversion Program

To help divert a person from entering the homeless system, a mind shift for case managers, housing specialists, and coordinated entry staff is needed to gain the necessary skills to hold a diversion conversation. This takes more than a training, it requires ongoing peer support and client feedback to help with the process to shift habits, behaviors, and belief systems. Along with the Pierce County Diversion Pilot project, the Center for Dialog & Resolution learned that skill training is JUST the beginning.

A diversion conversation guides a person to be empowered to explore creative options for housing and other solutions on their own. In this situation, a staff person does NOT offer solutions, housing options, or a plan. This is a radical shift in mindset for housing specialists, case managers, social workers, and human service providers. This type of diversion conversation includes the following elements:

1. Create a safe, calm environment, staying focused on the human in front of you and allowing yourself to respect choices that are different than yours.
2. Meet the client where they are at, this might include emotions regarding trauma due to imminent homelessness, feeling disconnected from a support system and/or general hopelessness.
3. Use key communication skills that de-escalate the crisis and open up the conversation for creativity.
4. The client will develop a housing plan and next steps. Your role as the thought partner is to offer some, yet limited, resources.

The concepts we explore in depth are more profound than "knowledge" or "skills". Here at the Center, we use interactive exercises so each person can feel the shift in the role from problem solver to thought partner:

- Impartiality and suspending judgment
- Self-determination and respect
- Confidentiality and trauma informed conversation
- Empathy vs. Sympathy
- Leading with deep listening skills
- De-escalation and Crisis

This required mind shift is hard and it will not happen in a one day session. We have found that it works best to return to a workshop to practice a couple of weeks after this training, followed by quarterly peer learning and support sessions. This type of shift requires a supportive cohort, either within the organization or with others.

In these practice workshop sessions, the learning builds upon additional strength based conversation skills (motivational interviewing, appreciative inquiry, etc.). These type of skills provide social workers, case managers, or housing specialists with tools to NOT TELL the client what they should do.

Our Pierce County partners from Associated Ministries and Catholic Community Services found it useful to add the Center's 40-hour mediator training solely to gain mediator skills – listening, validating, acknowledging, summarizing, impartiality, withholding judgment, and creating a safe place – so the client/guest can think out a situation.

This training and the subsequent peer learning workshops provide the skills necessary to shift the mindset of staff and has shown to be a positive impact in Pierce County, Washington. Results indicate that nearly 20% of people experiencing homelessness in Pierce County did not enter a shelter. This Diversion program offers 30-days case management to coach conflict resolution (double up housing options) and up to \$500 for temporary or longer term options.