

# ***Mental Health, Substance Use, and Homelessness***

## **Native American Connections Community Town Hall**

**October 18, 2022 – Phoenix, AZ**

### **THE INTERSECTION OF MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS**

Mental health, substance use, and homelessness are connected and interrelated with one challenge often, but not always, leading to or causing the others.

For example, when someone loses a job, they and their family might then lose their home. The stress of being homeless can lead some people to self-medicate with alcohol or other substances. The stress and trauma of being homeless can also create mental health issues, especially for children. Substance abuse can also be the cause of someone losing their job and becoming homeless. Likewise, mental health challenges may lead to the use of substances and create challenges with maintaining relationships which can then cause someone to be without a home.

To solve these issues, we need to address them all together with an emphasis on programs like Native Connections that provide integrated services which address all of the issues together.

### **ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS**

One of the biggest barriers to addressing the conjunction of homelessness, mental health and substance use is the stigma associated with these conditions. Although these issues have been with us for a long time, we cover them up to hide our shame and embarrassment. Law enforcement personnel want to help people experiencing these conditions but are less successful because they categorize and judge them based on their behavior. Shame and embarrassment also deter people from seeking the help they need.

People in the treatment and helping professions should be welcoming and trusting, making it clear that there is nothing wrong with needing help and that healing is a good thing. Their first contact with people seeking help is very important. Clients should be welcomed, treated as adults, given information about available resources, and allowed to make their own choices. They should feel they are trusted. Staff should ask what the clients want to do with their lives, and how they can help.

Those who suffer from mental illness or substance use disorder must learn how to change their behavior, to act differently in response to difficult life situations. Clients need encouragement, and it is important for them to build self-esteem.

Some populations face additional barriers to success. Those with felony records have difficulty finding housing. It can be impossible to find needed resources when you are homeless, especially if you are also working and caring for your family. Even under the best of circumstances it is difficult to find transitional and supportive housing because demand so far outstrips supply. On the Reservation, where there are limited opportunities for well-paid supervisory positions, role-playing may be an important tool to prepare clients for success.

### **SETTING PRIORITIES**

The population experiencing homelessness presents an overwhelming challenge. This challenge is even greater when mental health and substance use issues are also involved. In addressing the needs of this population, it is important to recognize the special conditions that must be addressed if these needs are to be met and the condition of this population improved.

Many people are reluctant to seek help. We must let them know that it is OK to ask for help, and to be vulnerable. It is useful to share what we have in common with them and help them to share how they feel.

Most people in these circumstances have experienced trauma. Sometimes there is generational trauma, with the individual coming from a family where one or both parents were homeless, mentally ill, or abusing substances. It is important to address that trauma so that they can heal and move forward.

These clients need somewhere safe to be. Sometimes shelters enable drug use, and other unsafe behaviors. Some people may feel safer on the streets.

It is also important to teach life skills. Clients need to learn to live life on life's terms. Many people experiencing homelessness, mental illness or substance use disorder do not know how to access the resources they need, or the help that would be available for them.

It can be difficult to find the motivation that is needed to change harmful behavior patterns. Those people need hope—hope that they can be successful in changing their lives, or that their circumstances will change. Hope is like a spark that ignites a fire. With hope we can see what the human spirit can accomplish.

Many persons suffering homelessness or substance use disorder are seriously mentally ill, with no reasonable prospect of that condition changing. These people will need services over the long term.

Unfortunately, all too often when members of this population finally ask for help, it is not available. Transitional housing should be in areas where it is easy to access services and jobs. We should consider doing away with the restrictions on the number of times an individual can obtain help. Sometimes people are not ready to change, or cannot find the motivation to succeed, but that does not mean they will never be ready.

Family support can be extremely helpful, but often people lack family support. In Native American communities there is a cultural value to help those in need, but there are fewer resources with which to do so. Some families have limited resources, and others must devote their resources to providing support for themselves and other family members. When families live far away from the person who is struggling it can be very challenging for them to help.

To meet the challenges presented by people suffering the conditions of homelessness, mental illness, and substance use, we as a community must open our eyes and hearts.

## **WHAT ARIZONA'S ELECTED LEADERS NEED TO KNOW**

Vote. Elections can make a big difference in people's lives.

Adopt the Housing First model. Add wrap-around services after people are sheltered.

For some people we need to provide permanent supportive housing. The only fault in the system is that people must be required to get their lives together.

House everyone. Homelessness affects everyone, the entire society. It costs more to have people on the street than to house them. Housing is a basic right, like food and water. It is necessary to life. We could fix this problem by spending more money.

We should focus more energy on people transporting drugs. Fentanyl is killing us.

People who have overcome obstacles working in recovery are very important people, as they provide hope and encouragement to others. Sharing their stories is important. We should promote the sharing of success stories.

Funders should recognize that the three conditions (homelessness, mental illness, and substance use) go together, and provide treatment programs that address all three conditions. Often people are self-medicating because of overwhelming anxieties about life issues. They are in basic survival mode.

Too many health plans do not recognize the importance of housing to health. An effective recovery plan requires housing, employment, a sponsor, and community resources.

Leaders should speak to businesses like those that have established employee transitional housing programs to help people recover from their conditions and move out as they stabilize and accumulate enough money to support themselves in permanent housing.

We should look at the number of young people who are plagued by drug use and homelessness, those who are aging out of foster care, and the impacts of the pandemic.

We should embrace harm avoidance programs, such as needle exchange programs, suboxone distribution to help revive people who have overdosed, Fentanyl test kits, and the like.

We should destigmatize and decriminalize addiction. It makes addicts turn to desperate measures and fails to address the problems of addiction. Inmates can get drugs and use in jail.

We should create awareness of these issues and of the prospect of recovery, to give addicts hope of a good life after addiction. Native American Connections is a great model of dealing with these issues in an integrated way. It has affordable and transitional housing, treats behavioral health and substance use issues, has youth and adult programs, and offers a comprehensive treatment model.

Prevention works. Give more money to harm reduction programs and entities. They need help.

We need more boots on the ground to deal with people affected by these conditions.

Fentanyl is a huge problem. Criminalization does not help. Addicts deteriorate over time, as they build up tolerance to the drugs. We need treatment facilities for Fentanyl addiction, and we need to get people into treatment as early as possible.