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Transit Agency Responses to Homelessness

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Issue

For many of the more than 500,000 Americans unhoused each night, transit settings provide a common location for shelter, especially since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Transit operators must address the impact of homelessness on their service, while at the same time upholding their social responsibility to serve all riders, housed and unhoused. Agencies large and small have therefore begun implementing programs and partnerships to respond to homelessness.

In order to assess the range and effectiveness of these strategies, the researchers documented and analyzed case studies of the ways U.S. transit agencies are addressing homelessness on their systems. Building on the research team's prior nationwide survey, the authors identified 10 key operators and interviewed 26 relevant staff people, as well as staff from other partnering organizations, in order to learn how they initiated and carried out each strategy. The study also investigated the scope and resulting impacts of each strategy, the challenges each strategy has encountered (especially since the pandemic began), and the lessons learned during its implementation. The identified programs vary in terms of scope, impact, resource burden, and organizational complexity but can be grouped in the four following categories.



Figure 1: The Hub of Hope in Philadelphia

Research Findings

Hub of Services

Given the uneven distribution of unhoused people on many transit systems, some agencies have concentrated services for the unhoused in one place. Located at a central transit station, the Hub of Hope in Philadelphia offers case management, showers, laundry, snacks, primary medical care, and limited behavioral and dental health care to people experiencing homelessness (See Figure 1).

Mobile Outreach

- At the Sacramento Regional Transit District and Denver Regional Transportation District, a social work intern and a full-time mental health clinician, respectively, de-escalate confrontations and link unhoused people with shelter services and counseling.

- Los Angeles Metro has deployed three sets of mobile outreach teams run by law enforcement agencies and one by a social service agency. In April 2020, LA Metro also initiated “Operation Shelter the Unsheltered,” in which police officers and outreach staff at key end-of-line stations ask unsheltered riders to disembark and give them referrals and transport to open shelters.
- The San Francisco Bay Area’s transit regional homeless outreach program also has deployed civilian outreach teams with crisis intervention training, who respond to dispatch calls. These teams are part of broader efforts by Bay Area Rapid Transit that also include “Pit Stop” restrooms, elevator attendants, unarmed transit ambassadors, and anti-fare-evasion efforts.

Discounted Fares

Among other operators, Seattle’s King County Metro, Portland’s TriMet, and San Francisco’s SFMTA provide reduced or free fares to people experiencing homelessness that enhance their mobility.

Transportation to Shelters

Transportation to shelters is a direct way that transit operators can aid those experiencing homelessness. Metro Transit in Madison, Wisconsin, provided free transportation between daytime and nighttime shelters during the pandemic. On New York City’s MTA, the city has partnered with a nonprofit to transport unhoused riders at the end of lines directly to shelters.

Conclusions

- Keeping law enforcement distinct from routine homeless outreach appears to be a more effective

outreach strategy, based on program performance data analyzed. A number of the police officials interviewed discussed the benefits of doing so.

- Operators should focus on mobility for both housed and unhoused riders. In that vein, providing free fares to unhoused people both allows them to use transit with less threat of an unnecessary escalation with staff and makes it easier for bus drivers, who often find themselves resolving altercations over fares. As indicated by some interviewees and studies, many unhoused riders already skirt around fare collection; therefore, agencies would not forfeit much revenue.
- The transit industry cannot respond to homelessness alone. External partnerships, the key to each of the case studies above, can fill crucial knowledge and skill gaps, bring in additional resources, and make a powerful public case for the importance of the issue.
- The transit industry is dealing with the downstream effects of a structural problem. Though transit operators must respond, ultimately more housing and services are needed.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the “Homelessness in Transit Environments Volume II: Transit Agency Strategies and Responses” research report by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies. The full report can be found at www.its.ucla.edu/publication/homelessness_in_transit_environments.

Further Sources

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