

# **SURVEYS OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS**

## **INTERVIEWER TRAINING MANUAL**

**Institute for Families in Society  
University of South Carolina**

### **RATIONALE**

No uniform statewide assessment of the number and characteristics of people who are homeless or in precarious (unstable or temporary) housing across the state of South Carolina has ever been conducted. Yet, because of its coastal resorts, major north-south and east-west interstate highways, and high rates of persistent poverty, South Carolina has been supporting homeless people in many ways for years. An accurate assessment of the magnitude and nature of the problem will allow the state and its various communities to create effective strategies to meet the need and potentially end homelessness in addition to qualifying for potential funding to achieve these goals.

In order to address this problem, South Carolina will conduct a count of all citizens who are homeless on January 27, 2005. This assessment will involve shelters and other service providers across the state, their staff, and hundreds of trained volunteers.

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of the assessment is to accomplish the following:

- 1) Provide an unduplicated count of all sheltered individuals and a reliable estimate of unsheltered individuals who are homeless on a particular day in January 2005;
- 2) Describe general characteristics of those who are homeless, e.g. age, gender, family status, veteran status, and presence of challenging conditions such as mental illness, addiction, illness/ disability, or domestic violence;
- 3) Meet the requirement of US HUD for gaps analysis to validate Supportive Housing Programs (SHP) applications; and
- 4) Provide reliable data for program and policy planning at the local and state levels.

### **INSTRUMENTS**

All of the instruments are as brief as possible while still providing essential data for an accurate count according to HUD requirements. No confidential data will be gathered on any instrument.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of each of these forms is included at the end of these instructions.

## **METHOD**

The assessment will have four parts (A through D):

### **A. CENSUS OF HOMELESS PEOPLE**

Staff, parents, and volunteers will complete the one page survey for sheltered individuals on January 27, 2005. Attempts will be made to complete the same survey for those persons experiencing homelessness in unsheltered settings such as outdoors, in abandoned buildings, etc. When that is not possible, an observation survey will be completed for all the unsheltered who have been identified through a variety of means including hospitals, food kitchens, law enforcement, information from homeless, etc.

Three separate instruments will be used for this census.

**FORM 1:** All sheltered adults and unaccompanied youth will be asked to complete a one page questionnaire by themselves or with the assistance of shelter staff or a volunteer.

**FORM 2:** An abbreviated form will be completed by parents, staff or volunteers for all children (individuals under 18 accompanied by a parent, relative or guardian) in the shelter. Attempts will be made to have unsheltered individuals complete these same two forms.

**FORM 3:** When that is not practical for safety reasons or the unsheltered are not responsive, trained staff and volunteer will complete a one-page observation form as accurately as possible.

### **B. FACILITY CENSUS**

**FORM 4:** This five-page form will be completed by trained staff for all known shelters. The survey will collect information as to the number of homeless people in the facility on January 27<sup>th</sup>, a description of the population they can serve, the facility's bed capacity for individuals and families, and a ranking of the needs of the facility as seen by staff. The facility census will be completed by staff at specified time frames on January 27, 2005 between 4 PM and midnight for shelters and over a 24-hour period for transitional and permanent housing.

### **C. IN-DEPTH SURVEY OF A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE HOMELESS**

**FORM 5:** This survey will take 15 to 20 minutes to complete with a trained volunteer interviewing a homeless individual; both sheltered and unsheltered individuals will be included. The survey will ask specific questions regarding employment, health services and needs, prior living arrangements, income and allow for homeless persons to suggest answers to their needs. These surveys will be completed at various times throughout the day and night of January 27, 2005. The homeless person will be given an incentive to be determined by the coalition in charge of the 1-day count for participating in the interview.

*The data collection for these three parts will occur simultaneously on January 27, 2005.*

### **D. SURVEY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS**

**FORM 6:** Identified service providers will be asked to complete a mail survey regarding the services they provide to the homeless.

## INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES AND GUIDELINES

### *The following information applies to use of ALL surveys.*

The surveys are a structured interview, with additional individual comments on the in-depth survey. Most of the questions request short answers (e.g., birth date) or present choices from which the respondent can choose.

### Confidentiality

Interviewers agree to keep any confidential information gathered in this project strictly confidential. This includes agreeing not to disclose any information provided by the interviewee to officers, directors, or other employees including helping professionals in the organization. The survey instruments are not case management tools. Interviewer shall not duplicate information. The only exception to confidentiality would be if the person being interviewed presented a clear physical danger to themselves or others. Explain to the interviewee (and reiterate/confirm when needed) that all information they provide is strictly confidential.

### Organization

*Before each interview, organize all documents.* Each interview will require a copy of the appropriate survey instruments. Interviewers should carefully review the instruments and definitions prior to the interview.

Before starting the interview, the interviewer should make sure each survey form has a unique identifying number in the upper right hand corner and should fill in the section for interviewer name, interview site and date. Make sure the identifying number for the survey and consent form match.

It is a good idea to keep a couple of pens handy so that interviews are not interrupted to search for working pens. A clipboard is also handy for the interviewer and participant where no desks or tables are available for writing.

Respondents completing the in-depth interview will be offered an incentive to thank them for participation in the survey, so the interviewer should make sure he or she has enough of the incentives for the anticipated interviews at each site. The interviewer will also need to get an incentive acknowledgement form, initialed by the interviewee, to verify participant receipt of the certificates.

### General Guidelines

Speak clearly and repeat the questions as necessary. It is also important to write very neatly so that the person entering data can read the answers. You may take short notes during the interview but after the interview is completed, take a few minutes to review the survey and clarify answers.

Ask the questions as written. Affirm the respondent's participation by acknowledging answers ("I see, yes, uh huh, ok.") but do not reflect any judgment of the answers ("Really? That's terrible, good point!"). Probe for specific information as needed ("What do you mean exactly? Can you tell when (where) you received those services? Can you be more specific?")

### Interview Checklist

- ✓ One copy of survey
- ✓ Remind the person they can refuse to answer any question.
- ✓ Table of programs
- ✓ Incentive (in-depth only)
- ✓ Incentive acknowledgement (in-depth only)
- ✓ Several working pens
- ✓ Clipboard if necessary

Do not prompt the respondent from any information you may happen to already know about them or answer any questions for them (e.g., income, experiences, etc.).

Don't underestimate the value of silence — quietly waiting for a response before prompting can be very effective.

### **Closing the Interview**

Thank the respondent for their time. Offer them the incentive and be sure they **initial** the acknowledgement form.

### **Completing the Interview**

Review notes for legibility, clarity and completeness and edit as necessary. Attach the consent form to the back of the survey. Turn the survey into the individual assigned to collect the surveys and keep them confidential for your coalition area.

## **FOR IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS (FORM 5)**

### **Interview Setting**

The interviewer should meet with staff at the interview site to ensure that a private room (such as a small counseling room or office) will be available at the time interviews are scheduled. For sites serving families with children, interviewers should check with staff regarding the availability of childcare. All respondents should be interviewed individually — e.g., no friends, roommates, spouses or children in the room. If necessary, reschedule the interview at a time when the person can meet without others present.

To avoid distractions, the setting should also be quiet and the respondent should be alone.

### **Interview Preparation**

#### ***Before the Interview***

- **Arrive early and make sure interview space is appropriate and available.**
- **Make sure interview materials are in order.**
- **Complete interviewer sections of the survey and consent form.**

#### ***After the Interview***

- **Thank the participant.**
- **Make sure the incentive acknowledgement form is initialed.**
- **Review survey for legibility and completeness, and edit as needed.**

### **Beginning the Interview**

The key to a successful interview is getting the respondent's cooperation. This is not always possible but there are strategies for improving the likelihood of cooperation. Above all, the interviewer's demeanor should be friendly, confident and professional. For example, the interviewer's appearance should be neat but not overly formal (no suits and ties) to avoid intimidating respondents. After introducing oneself, the interviewer should briefly describe the research, its importance and the interview process. Assure them that the interview is entirely confidential. Clear and confident answers to respondents' questions can help secure agreement to be interviewed. Attentive body language also encourages participation throughout the interview.

## The Interview

### Sample Introductory Statement (provided with survey)

**Interviewer:** *Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am (a staff member/a volunteer) with the \_\_\_\_\_ (identify agency affiliation) and we are working on a survey project to better understand homelessness in South Carolina and how people who are homeless get services and other benefits. Our goal is to make it easier for people in your situation to get the services and benefits that they need.*

*This survey will take about 15 to 20 minutes to complete. I will ask you questions about different kinds of programs like Medicaid, questions about your current or past employment, and general questions about yourself. I will also ask you questions about your housing experience so that we can understand how an individual's housing situation affects their ability to receive services.*

*The information we receive from you will help us understand ways to improve services to people in situations like yours. Anything you say to me will be kept in strictest confidence. Your name will not be used. We hope that you will help. Are you willing to participate?*

If the respondent is willing to proceed based on preliminary information make sure they know the following:

- *The survey is voluntary and you can stop it at any time. You may also refuse to answer any question.*
- *Whether you participate or not and regardless of how you answer the questions, the services you receive will not be affected.*

### Potential Respondent Questions

#### **How did you get my name?**

*You were selected for this interview because you are currently a resident of \_\_\_\_\_ (name facility or site). We believe that the residents of this housing program have the kinds of information and experiences that will make this research successful and help plan more/better services for people experiencing homelessness.*

#### **How do I know you will not use my name?**

*I will not ask for your name.*

#### **How long will this take?**

*The survey usually takes between 15 to 20 minutes.*

#### **How will the results be used?**

*The results will be used to help us (and others who can impact services) understand how to improve services and them easier to access for people who need them.*

## **Refusals**

If the respondent is adamant about not wanting to participate, thank him for his time; offer the incentive and have him initial the form acknowledging receipt of the incentive.

If the respondent offers a reason for refusing, you may respond to the reason or concern.

Examples:     **I am too busy.**

*The survey should only take 15-20 minutes OR is there some other time that would be more convenient for you?*

**I don't think I can answer your questions.**

*There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your experiences and opinions about services.*

**I don't like to give out information about myself.**

*I understand. All of your answers will be kept confidential – your name will not be used in any reports or discussions of the survey.*

**Note: To facilitate response to questions 53, 54 and 55 on pages 13 and 14, please have available a copy of pages 13 and 14 so that interviewees can see and choose from the list of services.**

## **Closing the Interview**

Thank the respondent for their time. Offer them the incentive and be sure they initial the acknowledgement form.

## **Completing the Interview**

Review notes for legibility, clarity and completeness and edit as necessary. Attach the consent form to the back of the survey. Turn the survey into the individual who is keeping them confidential.