

Reducing the Stigma of Homelessness through Community Engagement and Reciprocity

Authors : Jessica Federman

Abstract : The current research offers a longitudinal and qualitative study design to examine how reciprocity improves relations between the homeless and various stakeholders within a community. The study examines a homeless shelter that sought to establish a facility within a community of Los Angeles, that was initially met with strong resistance and opposition from a variety of organizations due to deeply entrenched views about the negative impact of having homeless individuals within the community. The project tested an intervention model that targets the reduction of stigmatization of homeless individuals and promotes synergistic exchanges between conflicted organizational entities in communities. Years later, the data show that there has been a remarkable reversal in the perception of the agency by the very forces that initially prevented it from being established. This reversal was achieved by a few key strategic decisions. Community engagement was the first step toward changing people's minds and demonstrating how the homeless shelter was helping to alleviate the problem of homelessness instead of contributing to it. Central to the non-profit's success was the agency's pioneering formulation of a treatment model known as, Reciprocal Community Engagement Model (RCEM). The model works by reintegrating the homeless back into society through relationship building within a network of programs that foster positive human connections. This approach aims to draw the homeless out of the debilitating isolation of their situation, reintegrate them through purposeful roles in the community while simultaneously providing a reciprocal benefit to the community at large. Through multilevel, simultaneous social interaction, RCEM has a direct impact not only on the homeless shelter's clients but also for the community as well. The agency's approach of RCEM led to their homeless clients getting out of the shelter and getting to work in the community directly alongside other community volunteers and for the benefit of other city and community organizations. This led to several opportunities for community members and residents to interact in meaningful ways. Through each successive exposure, the resident and community members' distrust in one another was gradually eased and a mutually supportive relationship restored. In this process, the community member becomes the locus of change as much as the residents of the shelter. Measurements of community trust and resilience increased while negative perceptions of homeless people decreased.

Keywords : stigma, homelessness, reciprocity, identity

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