

# Guide two

## ENGAGEMENT AND BUILDING RAPPORT

Effective engagement is essential to establishing a trusting relationship between a worker and individuals and households. Engagement is an ongoing process, and it can take time to build up a meaningful rapport with consumers. This guide highlights the key practices that workers can undertake to enhance consumer engagement.

### **Effective engagement**

Consumers accessing the Specialist Homelessness Sector (SHS) come to a service seeking expert advice and assistance about housing situations that they are unable to resolve by themselves. Consumers may be experiencing homelessness or housing crisis for the first time, or may have had repeat experiences of housing instability. Workers should operate from a strengths based and rights focused perspective, and must be able to confidently assist consumers to navigate a service system with which they may be unfamiliar, or even deeply suspicious.

The following practices were identified by advanced practitioners and consumers as underpinning successful engagement.

#### ***Active listening skills***

- Allow consumers to tell their story in an environment that is non-judgmental, compassionate and empathic
- Acknowledge the challenges faced by consumers.

#### ***Promoting consumer involvement***

- Acknowledge consumers' own expertise in relation to their lived experience
- Ask consumers about their expectations and needs

- Encourage consumers to be actively involved in their housing search
- Use a strengths-based approach to build consumers' capacity and confidence in resolving their housing and ongoing support needs
- Acknowledge children are clients in their own right, and make an effort to involve children in assessment and build rapport with them.

#### **Transparency and honesty**

- Manage consumers' expectations about what the agency or service can and cannot offer
- Manage boundaries by explaining the worker's role, and how you as the worker are able to work with the consumer (including time frames)
- Explain the service system to the consumer, and where this program fits within the service system in a way that the consumer can understand

- Present information in a manner that is easily accessible to the consumer
- Seek feedback from consumers on the services provided by the agency.

#### **Flexibility**

- Provide flexible outreach to meet consumers where they are if the office is too daunting, if there are transport or access issues, or to ensure children are included in assessment
- Do not rush the engagement process
- Allow consumers to take in the information you are giving them, ask questions and come back to things they do not understand.



## **ABOUT THE HOUSING-FOCUSED SUPPORT PRACTICE GUIDES**

*The guides to providing housing-focused support were developed by the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) to assist workers in the specialist homelessness sector (SHS) gain and maintain housing for consumers. They articulate good worker practice in providing housing-focused support to consumers, and are informed by a literature review, focus groups and consultations with consumers and advanced practitioners. The development of these guides was made possible by a grant from the Mercy Foundation. This guide is the second in the series of five.*



## TOOLKIT: SPECIALIST SKILLS USED IN ENGAGEMENT

The following table has been produced to explain why the key engagement strategies are used and the potential benefit for consumers and workers.

STRATEGY	USED BECAUSE	POTENTIAL BENEFIT	SPECIALIST SKILLS
Allow consumers to tell their stories in a safe environment through flexible engagement strategies.	Consumers may have experienced distressing and/or traumatic life events. Different environments will feel safe for different consumers.	Consumers may respond better to workers in an environment which is familiar to them. A safe environment promotes calm.	Trauma informed practice. Understanding of different outreach and in-reach practices. Active listening skills.
Allow consumers to tell their stories and be non-judgmental, compassionate and empathic.	Allows consumers to have their experiences acknowledged.	May help a consumer gain trust with the worker.	Trauma informed practice. Understanding of the causes and impacts of homelessness. Active listening skills. Self-knowledge & care.
Acknowledging the challenges faced by consumers.	Allows consumers to have their experiences acknowledged.	Allows consumers to feel heard. Acknowledges their journey.	Trauma informed practice. Understanding of the causes and impacts of homelessness.
Respond to potential power imbalances.	Consumers may have had negative experiences with workers in the past. Consumers may have limited knowledge of the SHS.	Promotes the worker and consumer working together to resolve homelessness.	Understanding of appropriate and inclusive professional boundaries.
Promote consumer involvement.	Consumers are empowered by being actively involved in resolving their housing crisis or homelessness.	Consumers who are actively involved in resolving their housing crisis or homelessness may have improved outcomes.	Understanding of the importance of consumer participation. Understanding of potential power imbalances. Age appropriate assessment.
Manage expectations.	Builds a relationship based on honesty and trust.	May reduces risk of consumers feeling let down or failed by the system.	Understanding of the SHSS. Understanding of the agency and programs.
Managing boundaries by explaining your role and how you are able to work with the consume.	Builds a relationship based on honesty and trust. Enhances transparency.	May reduces risk of consumers feeling let down or failed by the worker, program or agency.	Understanding of professional boundaries. Understanding of the worker's role.

## CASE STUDY: SUCCESSFULLY BUILDING RAPPORT

Tony had a long history of rough sleeping and had spent many years in and out of jail. He says of his life prior to gaining secure housing: *"I've never had consistency and support. Places where I did find those things, they weren't really out here in the public. I used incarceration a lot. It was a place I felt safe. There was consistency, support, structure"*.

Tony had received supports from specialist homelessness services in the past, but after cycling through crisis accommodation and rooming houses, he felt safer rough sleeping. Reflecting on his previous experiences, Tony says he was deeply untrusting of workers. *"Everything was done before I went in for an appointment – I'd show up and it was 'I've done this, I've done that'... All the options were taken out of my hands, rather than me being given the options"*.

While he was rough sleeping Tony came into contact with an assertive outreach worker. *"There were 30 people living down there... It'd be nothing seeing her at two or three in the morning going through, opening up the tents, seeing who was sleeping there... She was always around... she knew the community"*.

The worker maintained frequent and consistent visits to the people rough sleeping. Tony watched her for a number of months, seeing how she interacted with his friends, her provision of advice, material aid and health supports. Over time, Tony slowly began to ask people about her. Her informal and flexible approach allowed him to build up enough confidence to be able to sit down with the worker and discuss his situation and support needs. By this time, Tony says: *"She'd earned her stripes"*.

The worker did not rush the discussion around housing, instead dealing with Tony's immediate needs. This allowed Tony to take his time to decide what options he wanted to explore. He was adamant that he did not want to be disempowered again: *"I wanted a little bit of guidance and direction - the best avenues to pursue. Giving advice from her experience, but not taking it away from me... My housing is my issue. And it's something that I wanted to resolve"*.

Tony understood that through their informal discussions, his worker was indirectly assessing suitable housing for him. *"She wanted to work out why I couldn't keep a tenancy before. Was there one specific reason? Or, multiple reasons? ... She knew the situations we're in. She knew our mental health situations, why we couldn't hold our tenancies. A lot of us had issues with aggression and frustration... and she addressed all of those things before she sat down with a housing application"*.

By the time he was ready to consider permanent housing, his worker had developed an in-depth understanding of him and could complete most of the application on his behalf. His application was accepted within weeks, and Tony was housed three months later. His worker continued to provide outreach support to him throughout this time: *"Any time that I had any questions or queries I could just ask her – even though I had a [new] worker – I hadn't grown to trust him yet"*.

Tony has now been in supported accommodation for over two years. He still sees his former worker, and her commitment to his wellbeing spans beyond housing. *"She's housed a lot of people, and she's still there if we need her"*.



### Questions for workers to consider

1. What may have caused Tony to not engage with workers in the past?
2. What skills did Tony's worker use to build a trusting relationship with Tony?
3. Why was outreach an effective way to engage Tony?