Unsheltered Des Moines Study:

Perceptions of Service Delivery and Resources Amongst Des Moines-Area Persons Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness

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Executive Summary

Overview

The Unsheltered Des Moines Study, a research partnership between Drake University and several community service delivery organizations, engaged the population of individuals who had lived, or were living, unsheltered in Polk County between May 2022 and October 2022 to examine their lived experiences. The research team coordinated with local outreach workers to identify a range of individuals with experience living unsheltered in Polk County. In all, the team administered 152 surveys and conducted 37 in-depth interviews.

Findings

Our survey of 152 unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness (PEH) living unsheltered in Polk County, and 37 in-depth interviews of the same, suggest that people living unsheltered have certain strong assumptions regarding—and experiences with—emergency shelter. These data also suggest that PEH become accustomed to certain patterns of life in order to provide for their own daily physical needs, and that entering shelter is often not worth the cost of interrupting those routines, nor foregoing the kind of self-determination living outside the shelter system allows. Results from the survey show that people living unsheltered in Polk County value certain aspects of living outside, like being in a natural environment, not being subject to institutional rules, the peace and quiet they can find, and the ability to choose the people with whom they surround themselves. These notions map onto what survey respondents say are reasons they would avoid emergency shelter. Negative interactions with other people and safety concerns dissuaded respondents from going to shelter, as did unfavorable and confusing rules and issues with shelter staff. Some survey respondents were relatively comfortable with the shelters in their present form, while others said they would avail themselves of an emergency shelter in a "life-or-death" situation, but preferred being outdoors.

The survey also demonstrated that almost all respondents wanted a permanent home, such as an apartment or a house. Respondents suggested they wanted "anything" that was safe, affordable, and that allowed them to be among important supports in their lives: family, friends, and pets. Only two survey respondents said they wanted to continue to live outside.

Finally, the survey shows the enormous premium people living unsheltered in Polk County put on leaders who are willing to listen to them and display compassion. Many described their situation as dire. They stated they needed more accessible resources generally, such as food, water, regular access to showers and toilets, as well as more affordable and accessible housing specifically. Respondents often used the term "help us" when asked what they would tell someone in charge.

Our in-depth interviews with 37 people who had recently lived or were currently living unsheltered in Polk County revealed important information about barriers to seeking emergency shelter. These barriers included: 1) the physical conditions of the shelter; 2) the rules, routines, and norms imposed by the shelter; 3) negative perceptions of shelter staff; and 4) negative perceptions of other shelter clients. Additionally, we identified issues specific to the lived experiences of individuals, usually women and transgender people, who face specific 5) gender-specific barriers. 6) The final barrier arose from the way life is structured while a person is living outside, and how life becomes steered by apathy and the precarious balance of daily survival. These barriers do not represent an exhaustive list of perceived issues among unsheltered individuals, but do represent the most consistent themes that emerged across multiple responses.

The barriers we have identified by talking to people living unsheltered in Polk County are not unique to the area. Though Iowa has somewhat distinctly extreme weather in both the summer and the winter, the lived experiences of people living unsheltered in Polk County, and the barriers to emergency shelter that they face, are similar to those that have been documented in other locations. Nonetheless, this research provides a strong foundation of evidence on which to refine policy and programs for unsheltered homelessness in Polk County moving forward.

Policy Implications

This study ties the specific barriers Polk County PEH conveyed in our interviews with them to specific policy recommendations that may be beneficial in the short and medium term. We also provide longer-term structural recommendations that, while informed by the sentiments expressed by this study's respondents, primarily reflect policy recommendations and best practices that currently direct the research literature. These structural recommendations address many of the fundamental issues that the respondents discuss more holistically and sustainably than the shorter-term approaches.

SHORT-TERM ACTIONABLE NEXT STEPS: WINTER 2022-2023

To address the immediate need for physical survival during this winter, we propose three specific next steps. These proposals account for the variety of concerns PEH have about emergency shelter and, furthermore, attempt to integrate with the patchwork of strategies that this cohort already employs to navigate the winter weather. Some people living unsheltered in Polk County simply want better conditions in shelter and/or easier more access to shelter. Others told us that they would not seek shelter because they were prepared to live outside, even at the height of winter. Providers should work together to assess individual needs and employ temporary solutions flexibly to keep each individual as safe as possible.

- **Address and Change Several Comfort and Accessibility Issues at Emergency Shelter**
  As a first step, emergency shelters in the Des Moines area should assess how their practices and policies might influence individuals' ability and willingness to enter shelter

during extreme weather and implement low-cost, low-barrier changes that may increase shelter uptake. Shelters should specifically consider making overflow rooms as comfortable as possible, with beds or cots, adequate blankets, and enough quiet, lights-off time to allow for adequate nightly sleep. Additionally, emergency shelters in Des Moines should consider how consistent and efficient their systems for handling personal items and pets are, and whether these systems may deter vulnerable PEH. Finally, any changes made to increase the comfort, accessibility, and hospitality of current operations in emergency shelters should be communicated to the unsheltered population of Polk County through continued outreach and relationship-building.

- **Survival Action Plans and Follow-up with People Living Outside**

Some of the people living unsheltered in Polk County have been camping off-the-grid for so long that they will likely not want to leave their belongings and way of survival for an unknown emergency winter shelter, particularly if access to that shelter will be temporary. Polk County's homeless services should coordinate to identify these specific individuals and come up with action plans for each that include check-ins and supply maintenance at regular intervals. To the extent possible, population outreach should be systematized and coordinated across providers.

MEDIUM-TERM BARRIER-SPECIFIC GOALS

- **Warming Stations as Alternate Overflow Emergency Shelter**

For unsheltered individuals in Polk County who choose to go to emergency shelter during the winter, a place that is less crowded and less scheduled than the traditional shelter would provide necessary physical respite from the cold. Warming stations with the addition of cots and more staff could also serve as alternate emergency shelter, providing another way of access to individuals that have, in their minds, already decided to opt out of the shelter system.

- **Implement Non-Congregate Emergency Shelter**

A shift to non-congregate shelter would improve conditions on several dimensions, including negative interactions with other clients and several of the gender-based barriers. Because many Continuum of Cares (CoCs) and their providers shifted to non-congregate arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic, blueprints exist that could facilitate this change for Polk County providers. While community providers engage in the outreach and programming outlined in the suggestions above, a group of interested parties—including unsheltered individuals and frontline service providers—could construct an action plan to make more permanent changes to the physical environment in Des Moines' shelters.

- **Improve the Physical Conditions of Shelter**

Greater resources should be devoted to cleaning, maintaining, and transforming physical spaces that host services. Any improvements to facilities or physical conditions may need to be combined with outreach to homeless communities in order to communicate that changes

have been made, as well as expressing how those changes will be sustained and institutionalized. The community should also continue to pursue opportunities like purchasing vacant motels or repurposing other larger spaces with private areas for individuals, couples, and families.

- **Create Resources and Spaces that Address Gender and Family-specific Issues**

Organizations providing shelter in Polk County should make or increase services for victims of past trauma and provide clear instructions for how those services could be accessed. Such services must be combined with non-punitive procedures for reporting any kind of violent incident; staff should be trained to effectively communicate these procedures to clients when they enter the facility. Steps should be taken in the medium- and long-term to create physical spaces that facilitate privacy for families, romantic partners, or individuals seeking to preserve their sobriety, and/or their personal safety away from fellow clients. Finally, for cis-gendered and transgender women without families or partners, Polk County should institute a shelter for women, specifically.

- **Reassess Rules, Norms, and Routines**

Organizations should make efforts to promote consistency of rules. Service providers may consider including consumers in the process of drafting those rules to increase buy-in. Shelter rules could be rebranded as "expectations" with lists that are short, user friendly, and promote safety in their language. Expectations need to be well-communicated and easily accessible for reference. The ultimate goal of shelter rules should be to communicate strategies for maintaining an orderly and respectful environment without excessively dictating consumer behavior.

- **Strengthen Relationships Between Organization, Staff, and Clients**

Simply reducing the load of rules to only what is necessary may attenuate the occurrence of negative interactions between consumers and staff. Moreover, regular sensitivity training or listening sessions where staff are encouraged to give voice to the needs and desires of program clients could help to create stronger bonds between both groups. For their part, staff should feel supported and backstopped by sufficient resources to do their jobs well. Organizations should analyze their training procedures and employee handbooks for policies or guidelines that are not sufficiently client-oriented, and additionally recognize staff that go above and beyond while undertaking the mission of the organization.

- **Disrupt Conflicts Between Clients and Limit On-Site Drug Usage**

Service providers should consider ways to create separate common areas for people who need specific, non-triggering environments. Shelters should also continue taking actions to assure substances are not brought into or used in their facilities, while recognizing that their acceptance of unsheltered people who may be using substances is a critical service. A partnership between substance harm reduction[i] organizations and homeless services is

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[i] https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/harm-reduction

recommended. Transitioning long-term unsheltered individuals out of shelter and into permanent supportive housing should be prioritized.

LONG-TERM STRUCTURAL REFORMS

In addition to the proposed changes to address individual barriers above, research suggests that several system-wide reforms would improve uptake of services and, ultimately, housing outcomes.

- **Widen Data Collection Practices**

Data collection and tracking need to go beyond Point-in-Time counts to develop panels that profile and follow individuals who are living unsheltered at regular intervals with systematic methodology. This more robust model of data collection would involve taking a systematic sample or even a census of individual unsheltered people in the area and tracking them over time. This more detailed information would provide valuable insights on service uptake, delivery, and effectiveness—something a Point-in-Time count cannot.

- **Invest in Affordable Permanent Housing and Permanent Supportive Housing**

A transition from a model that forefronts temporary, emergency-style shelter, to one that focuses more specifically on permanent or semi-permanent supportive housing should be a top priority. The eligibility cycle for shelter in the Polk County system is counterproductive and perceived as excessively paternalistic by the target population. Existing best practices strongly suggests prioritizing successful transitions between emergency shelter and supportive housing systems and reducing barriers to consumption of system services whenever possible.

- **Solicit Frequent Input from Unsheltered Individuals and Frontline Providers**

Understanding the lived experience of individuals who are living unsheltered has become a best practice in homeless services. People experiencing unsheltered homelessness, or those who have recently experienced it, should be part of any decision-making team at the levels of organizations and local government. Their experience may help solve seemingly intractable problems. Additionally, providers who work directly with unsheltered individuals have a large reservoir of expertise to share with policy makers and public managers. Policy formulation and budgetary processes should include people with lived experience and frontline staff on high-level decision-making task forces. Community and government decision-makers should solicit input from these groups and institutionalize a way for people with lived experience living unsheltered and people providing unsheltered services to have a voice in the decision-making process.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Community Partners and Timeline

The Unsheltered Des Moines project was created through a collaboration between several community partners (Homeward, Anawim Housing, and Primary Health Care) and a research team at Drake University led by Dr. Elizabeth Talbert from the Department of Culture and Society. The goal of the study was to better understand the experiences of people who had lived or were living unsheltered in Polk County. Specifically, the study sought to better understand barriers to emergency shelter, and what kind of programmatic or policy changes might encourage more uptake.

Work was envisioned and commissioned by the Extreme Weather Workgroup of the Homeless Coordinating Council. Homeward was charged with securing funding for the project; the work was funded by Drake University (The Slay Fund for Social Justice and Fitzsimonds Faculty Fellowships), Wells Fargo, the City of Des Moines, Polk County, and Nationwide. All research protocols and team members were reported to the Drake University Institutional Review Board, considered, and approved.

Planning for the project began in February 2022. Initial training of the research team took place in late May with additional training and data collection continuing throughout the summer data collection as needed. Data collection for the initial survey occurred in June through early July 2022, and in-depth interviews with randomly selected survey respondents began in late July 2022 and lasted through early October 2022. Dr. Talbert presented interim results of the survey to the Homeless Coordinating Council on July 27, 2022 and presented the same results to the Homeward Board at their August 22, 2022 meeting. Dr. Talbert and Dr. Matthew Record (Drake University, Department of Political Science) presented preliminary findings from the in-depth interviews at the Homelessness Coordinating Council meeting on October 29, 2022.

Background Literature

DIFFICULTIES LIVING OUTSIDE

A rich literature has detailed the deleterious impact of homelessness on the physical health of individuals across many different contexts. Essentially, all health outcomes are materially worse for these unhoused individuals than for the housed population (Baggett et al., 2013; Fazel et al., 2014; Kushel et al., 2007). However, most studies on the physical health impacts of homelessness have either specifically focused on the sheltered population or relied on that cohort as a sample of convenience. As a result, the physical health conditions of unsheltered people experiencing homelessness (PEH) specifically are not as well understood (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021). The extant literature on unsheltered populations—though relatively sparse in comparison—suggests that both physical and mental health risks are several multiple

times worse for the unsheltered population than their sheltered counterparts (Griffith, 2017; Nyamathi et al., 2000).

The most basic threat to an unsheltered person living outside is exposure to the elements and weather. PEH risk exposure to extreme heat when they live outside, especially in certain geographic areas like the American southwest in the summer (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021). However, for the most part, heat represents a source of discomfort, rather than a meaningful threat to an unsheltered person's safety. Extreme cold, however, represents a serious threat to the physical health of PEH almost everywhere in the United States, especially in the winter and at night (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021). For that reason, shelters see a predictable increase in demand for their services during the wintertime (Culhane & Kuhn, 1998).

However, for PEH, physical threat is not limited to natural phenomena. In many jurisdictions throughout the United States, various aspects of life without a home are unlawful or are treated as if they were unlawful. Many municipalities have what M. C. Anderson et al. (2021) call Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) ordinances specifically aimed at making homelessness itself or the associated behaviors of homelessness less visible. Living outside or specifically in encampments is illegal in many locales across the United States (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021; Snow & Mulcahy, 2001; Sparks, 2010; Wasserman & Clair, 2011). Beckett & Herbert (2009) outline the increase in what they refer to as a municipal strategy of "banishment"—laws that forbid trespassing and exclude people from camping in parks. They assert these techniques signal "the return of banishment as a leading urban social control strategy: they exclude those deemed disorderly from particular urban spaces for significant periods of time" (Beckett & Herbert, 2009, pg. 15). Additionally, a greater percentage of PEH engage in sex or drug work than the general population due to a relative lack of other viable employment opportunities, further increasing incentives to avoid any potential encounter with law enforcement (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021; Meanwell, 2012). The legally tenuous circumstances PEH face living outside mean that most take any steps necessary to be out of sight—and, within communities, socially regulate one another—to draw as little negative attention from members of the community or law enforcement as possible (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021; Petrovich & Cronley, 2015). By confining themselves to dark, unseen locations beyond the scope of potential institutional response or police deterrence, individuals living outside are usually quite vulnerable to exploitation, theft and, especially among women, sexual assault (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021; Meanwell, 2012; Tyler & Johnson, 2004).

The complicated relationship PEH have with law enforcement exacerbates their already precarious lack of security. PEH living outdoors often exist entirely without institutional protections against assaults on their bodies, their space, or their possessions (Cloke et al., 2008; Meanwell, 2012). Ellsworth (2019) summarizes thusly: "for the homeless, the lack of safe shelter, coupled with the physically deleterious effects of the homeless lifestyle, increases exposure to predatory crime and violence" (pg. 98). The frequency and traumatic nature of criminal victimization experienced by PEH, unsurprisingly, has extraordinarily harmful consequences for their mental health and sense of well-being (Lam & Rosenheck, 1998; Perron et al., 2008). Additionally, community actors and law enforcement can become a vector of

violence or dislocation when encampments or unsheltered communities are rousted or demolished (Snow & Mulcahy, 2001).

The vulnerabilities of PEH often lead them to develop a complex web of personal regulations, social norms, and standards of association for the people with whom they interact regularly. Outdoor spaces, encampments, and outdoor communities "are subject to their own informal rules and regulations, and such rules move around a very different ethos and are enforced in very different ways than are the rules governing life in night shelters and hostels" (Cloke et al., 2008, pg. 250). These communities serve as a mechanism for protection but also serve as a place for sharing coping strategies, knowledge, and needed resources (Stablein, 2011). Entry into informal communities or encampments is regulated to ensure these arrangements' continued viability and benefit. These regulations are ad hoc, certainly, but often institutionalized in understood ways based on interpersonal connections (Wasserman & Clair, 2011). Inviting undesirable/unknown individuals and groups that might upset the social balance of the community or bring unwanted substances, behaviors, or attention is regarded as reckless or deeply antisocial (e.g. Wasserman & Clair, 2011; Williams, 1996). These relationship-based communities can sometimes extend beyond specific interpersonal relationships and generalize to shared group identities. Unsheltered individuals can develop both formal and informal relationships with people or groups of people they do not directly know, sometimes based on racial identity, ethnic identity, or geographic proximity (DeVerteuil et al., 2009).

Despite the social and personal utility of these informal community arrangements, they are, for many people living unsheltered, not the norm. A common sentiment expressed by unsheltered individuals is a sense of impermanence—not just in regards to the stability of their living situation, but also with regard to the very possibility of maintaining meaningful interpersonal relationships of any kind. In Bower et al.'s (2018) retelling of the sentiments expressed by an unsheltered woman, Athena, "likened her friendships to 'social friends or something, or like friends from a friend.' Communicating with them was unlike with 'normal friends' and 'uncomfortable,' querying whether such friendships were worth it, whether she would 'rather be [by myself],' as either way she would feel 'even more lonelier'" (pg. 245). The ephemeral nature of most PEH's living situation lends itself to a social network of weak bonds, with relationships subject to end at any time one's living situation changes (Culhane & Kuhn, 1998). Over time, interpersonal relationships including romantic partnerships, mentorships, and friendships can come to be seen as unnecessary or outright counterproductive (Barker, 2014). As such, experiences of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection are common among PEH (Rokach, 2005; Sanders & Brown, 2015).

BARRIERS TO SHELTER

Past research shows that the inability to curate one's own social network in a manner similar to what is possible while living outside is one of the main drawbacks of consuming programmatic offerings and shelters. Staying in a shelter or using programmatic services means, in almost all instances, losing the agency PEH have to choose with whom they associate or their social network (Bower et al., 2018). Perhaps counter-intuitively, staying in a shelter often strips

unsheltered individuals of "the feelings of safety, comfort, and control more usually associated with a sense of 'home,'" as residents are forced to navigate a complex, and sometimes dangerous, web of social expectations among staff and other residents (Cloke et al., 2008, pg. 248). "Opting out" of social services and shelters offers a sense of control, even if that control comes with the heavy price associated with living outside. "[T]he discourse of opting out affords them an important sense of agency that allows them to disappear from one grid of visibility and reappear on their own terms" (Hoffman & Coffey, 2008, pg. 216). Opting into the various shelters in the system means to cede that sense of agency.

The literature suggests that, for similar reasons, and despite the myriad dangers PEH face when living outside, safety concerns are another major barrier to staying in emergency shelters. Interviews with people living unsheltered suggest the confined quarters and the bringing together of people with little to no previous social connection invites violence and theft that could be more easily avoided outside (Petrovich & Cronley, 2015). Further, formal public safety responses may not act as a meaningful backstop. According to Petrovich and Cronley (2015), law enforcement do not respond much more quickly or forcefully to victims within the shelter system than they do to those in public spaces (Petrovich & Cronley, 2015). "[P]articipants likened sleeping in a shelter to being in prison. One participant noted that 'They lock you in and you do have to more or less fend for yourself in there. So I'd rather be out up underneath the stars, you know, lookin' up'" (Petrovich & Cronley, 2015, pg. 319). Individuals residing in temporary shelters, transitional housing, and hostels report that utilizing these facilities means expending an extraordinary amount of emotional energy and bandwidth regulating their own behavior and attitudes—as well as foregoing enjoyed activities—to avoid antagonistic or violent encounters with other residents (Cloke et al., 2008; DeWard & Moe, 2010; Dordick, 1996).

The difficulty and disorder of navigating relationships with other residents can also be amplified by the physical environment within the shelters themselves. Research on shelters, transitional housing, and social services in general describe an environment that can be at times dirty, dark, and cramped, in facilities that, even when well cared-for, might go long periods of time without renovation (Cloke et al., 2008; Miller & Keys, 2001; Williams, 1996). The physical environment of a shelter is also usually designed with efficiency in mind—efficient use of space, of facilities, and staff resources. These spatial designs often come at the expense of the privacy of individual residents (Miller & Keys, 2001; Pable, 2012; Sparks, 2010). Private emotional, mental, or even physiological behaviors such as going to the bathroom are almost always less private than would be the case in a conventional home. Sparks (2010) constructs this living arrangement as a state of "heightened surveillance and nearly constant hypervisibility" (pg. 856), which breeds a sense of distrust, resentment, and paranoia among residents (Wasserman & Clair, 2011).

Unsheltered individuals must cede at least some autonomy when entering a shelter or receiving other services. The norms and rules of life in a shelter, both formal and informal, can present complexities and frustrations that serve as a major barrier to entering shelter. Shelters can have a lengthy set of dictates that determine who is eligible for services based on gender, criminal history, personal history, mental health status, substance use status, etc. (Broadhead-Fearn &

White, 2006; Ra et al., 2021). Life within a shelter environment is heavily regulated: aspects of life like interpersonal interactions, drug usage, and the allowability of sexual relationships fall under scrutiny. Furthermore, shelters sometimes impose quality of life restrictions like strict curfews, prohibited personal possessions, limits on pets, and aspects of romantic partnerships, like rules that prevent sharing a bed with a partner or spouse (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021; Cloke et al., 2008; Irwin et al., 2008; Wusinich et al., 2019).

Research suggests that even residents who otherwise understand, respect, and/or even agree with shelter rules complain that their enforcement can be excessive or arbitrary (Miller & Keys, 2001). Hoffman & Coffey (2008) assert that rules and regulation of daily life in the shelter system often cause individuals to opt out altogether "not just because of petty rules and regulations, but because to consume the services and to interact with providers led to a deterioration of their self-esteem and dignity" (pg. 216). It is not just the rules themselves, but the manner in which they are enforced by staff, that can serve as a major barrier to consumption of available services (Biederman & Nichols, 2014; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008; Miller & Keys, 2001; Stevenson, 2014). Miller & Keys (2001) identify a number of specific behaviors that people in shelters find alienating or that undermine their dignity: (1) being treated like a faceless member of a group rather than an individual, (2) being treated like a child or an animal, (3) being stereotyped or insulted, and (4) being ignored or avoided. PEH in shelters express that rules are often enforced unfairly or that staff will "play favorites," yelling at or even evicting one resident for a violation that they overlook for another (Goodkind et al., 2011; Williams, 1996).

Of course, barriers associated with the shelter environment itself are only relevant if PEH get access to the services in the first place. Logistical challenges and administrative burdens associated with getting access to needed services can ensure that merely accessing shelters, transitional housing, or social services can be quite difficult (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021; DeVerteuil et al., 2009; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008). Moreover, those challenges make establishing a daily routine, an ability to plan long-term, or even gaining employment far more difficult, exacerbating or extending the need for those same services (Schultz-Krohn, 2004; Vrabic, 2018). Hoffman & Coffey (2008) recount an individual who summarizes these frustrations: "'[I]t seems to me all the agencies...make everything so hard and so aggravating for you that you'll give up...It's almost like it's designed to see how aggravated they can get you...The majority of people walk out the door, they're frustrated. It's just not worth it'" (pg. 215). Intake interviews for services are often detailed, lengthy, and go deeply into a potential consumer's personal background, with little regard for their sense of privacy or propriety (Dickinson et al., 2017; Sparks, 2010; Williams, 1996). Furthermore, in order to access shelter or needed services, PEH often have to report to an appointed place at a specific time, irrespective of whether that place or time is convenient or accessible. Since very few unsheltered individuals have access to a reliable form of personal transportation, they are often at the mercy of unreliable or non-existent transit options, depending on the jurisdiction (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021; Cloke et al., 2008; Greenwell, 2020; Huslage et al., 2022; Williams, 1996).

PEH sometimes experience specific gender-based barriers to access as well. For women, problems of economic uncertainty, addiction, and mental illness are not necessarily different to those of their male counterparts, but they are often more acute (Auffrey et al., 2017; DeWard & Moe, 2010; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). Homeless women, in general, are disproportionately likely to experience physical or emotional victimization by acquaintances, family members and intimate partners, while experiencing homelessness (D. G. Anderson et al., 2014; Auffrey et al., 2017; DeWard & Moe, 2010; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995; Williams, 1996). Women have to manage external perceptions of self as a mechanism to maintain safety and security (Cloke et al., 2008; Meanwell, 2012). Additionally, many of the issues consumers experience when entering the shelter system (e.g. sacrifice of autonomy, infantilizing rules and norms) can cause complex family dynamics. Parents have reported that shelter stays were associated with a strained family dynamic as well as a loss of respect from their children (Stark, 1994). This issue becomes particularly acute for women since childcare and child rearing disproportionately falls to them (Averitt, 2003; de Vet et al., 2019; DeWard & Moe, 2010).

In many cases, gender-specific barriers could be as simple as a given facility for only one gender. This problem can vary from location to location: some areas have more women's shelters than shelters that serve men, or vice versa. Barriers to transgender individuals experiencing homelessness, though, are nearly universal (Meanwell, 2012). "[T]ransgender clients are routinely obliged to stay in quarters and use bathrooms or showers based on birth sex among people of a gender with which they do not identify" (Keuroghlian et al., 2014, pg. 68). Moreover, these problems arise only when transgender PEH are able to gain admittance to a given shelter in the first place, since that population is routinely discriminated against (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). Transgender unsheltered individuals often have to manage external perceptions to avoid harassment and victimization; these issues can be particularly acute in shelters where physical confines are close and one does not have the autonomy to choose one's company (Begun & Kattari, 2016).

THE TRADE-OFFS OF SHELTER: NEED VS. DIGNITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

To a first approximation, the purpose of services for people living unsheltered is to ensure their basic needs are met. The literature suggests that, in general, shelters usually ensure that unsheltered individuals avoid the most catastrophic effects of being outside like over-exposure. They tend to provide basic needs like food, water, and clothing (Donley & Wright, 2012; Griffith, 2017; Meanwell, 2012). However, if PEH continue to live without shelter over an extended period, they may build their own ersatz communities, gain information, and learn strategies to deal with their circumstances in such a way that immediate physiological needs can become less pressing (Barker, 2014; Bower et al., 2018; Sanders & Brown, 2015; Williams, 1996). As such, the extent to which the benefits of using services generally—or shelter specifically—outweigh the often substantial costs of using those same services can be subject to an ongoing re-appraisal by individual PEH (Miller & Keys, 2001).

According to Petrovich & Cronley (2015), utilization of services can impede on a sense of self and capability:

> While [PEH] uniformly avoided traditional service providers, they frequently identified their own internal resources as sources of support and survival. Some explained that they had developed a strong sense of self-reliance, pride, and independence because of living on the street. Participants even described homelessness as revelatory in regards to their character and their understanding of their own capacities and limits. As one man said, 'I'm tougher than I thought I was.' (pg. 319).

Thus, the literature suggests that the main framework for understanding when and under what circumstances an unsheltered individual would choose not to consume services comes down to (1) the extent of their physiological needs, (2) the extent to which those services impinge on the dignity and self-determination of that individual, and (3) individual tolerance for trading off the latter for the former. A desire to maintain their sense of "dignity" may drive an individual to "opt out" of services like shelter. Services often threaten dignity when they force individuals to forego aspects of private life that sheltered individuals take for granted (DeWard & Moe, 2010; Sanders & Brown, 2015). In many cases, especially when a person living unsheltered has secured what they feel are their baseline physical necessities, this trade-off of their sense of self is simply not worth it, even if it means exposing themselves to some physical risk (Hoffman & Coffey, 2008).

The Unsheltered Des Moines Study Methods and Data

Methods

In-depth interviews with PEH in past research have been drawn from convenience, snowball, and quota samples (Anderson et al., 2021; Petrovich & Cronley, 2015; Stablein, 2011). Though the data gathered is rich and informative, it runs the risk of being highly biased in some way: perhaps the people who are having the hardest time living outdoors are the ones who frequent the particular location where the research is being conducted, or perhaps the network of people produced by a snowball sample (having one person introduce you to others in their network) has more social supports than the general unsheltered population. Thus, our research team decided to choose a random a sample of people living unsheltered or who have lived unsheltered in Polk County. We needed to capture the range of experiences of homelessness and shelter, not just the most convenient stories. The heterogeneity of the group led us to hypothesize that there is no one distinct reason why this population will not go to shelter, but that instead that there will be several reasons that have to do with past experiences and future expectations.

PHASE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC AND QUALITATIVE SURVEY

No ready sampling frame (a ready list of all eligible people from which to choose a sample) exists for the unsheltered population of Polk County because of their changeable and precarious living circumstances. Thus, we created a plan to survey 150 people living outside currently or who had lived outside in the past several months. We chose the number 150 because this was the higher tally of the 2021 Point-in-Time count of PEH in Polk County. We decided to survey both people living outside currently and people who had lived outside recently because of the churning nature of unsheltered homelessness. Many PEH spend several days at a time outside, and then return to a friend's couch or an emergency shelter for a few days; sometimes people find permanent housing. Others have been outside for over a decade, though occasionally also finding somewhere indoors to sleep.

A steering committee created the survey to gather basic demographic information, using questions from the Point-in-Time survey as a guide. We also asked for recontact information so that we could find the interviewees again for the in-depth interview round of research. We wanted to extend the survey interaction, however, to capture at least some information on lived experience of everyone we surveyed. We thus asked open-ended questions about how the person came to be living outside; about agencies they had worked with and shelters they had stayed with over the past year; about why they might not go to emergency shelter; things they liked about living outside (if any), and specific challenges they faced in both winter and summer; ideas for what would help them live better in both summer and winter; what kind of housing they would like to have someday; and what they would tell someone in charge if they could. The survey is Appendix A of this report.

Advanced undergraduate interviewers from Drake University, paid hourly for their time, and outreach workers from two local service providers completed a formal training on the research and the survey tool. They learned the purpose behind the questions, good probing and follow-up techniques, and basic rapport-building. Outreach workers also spent considerable time one-on-one with the student interviewers to assure the students had a thorough overview of homeless outreach work in Polk County.

Recruitment for the survey was done by the research team (including Dr. Talbert, Dr. Record, and student researchers) and with the immediate support of outreach workers and institutional partners in various locations throughout Des Moines. Surveyors told potential respondents that we were a group from Drake University studying homelessness; that we wanted to ask them a few survey questions that would take approximately 10-15 minutes; and that we would offer them a $10 gift card for their time. Figure 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 152 individuals surveyed. Figure 2 shows the locations from which we recruited them. To identify respondents who were eligible for the survey, we asked interested individuals, "Have you slept outside in the past month?" Though most people who answered yes had, in fact, slept outside in the past month, we learned during the survey administration that some had not lived unsheltered in the past month, but had in the past year. However, all survey respondents but one had experience living unsheltered within the last year and a half, and the one outlier had recently spent time at the local shelter.

Gender Of Respondents

■Female ■Male ■Transgender ■Non-binary

1%   1%
66%   32%

Race Of Respondents

■Black ■White ■Native American ■Other

5%   11%
6%
78%

Age Of Respondents

■18-24 ■25-62 ■63+

9%   8%
83%

Ethnicity Of Respondents

■Hispanic/Latinx ■Non-Hispanic/Latinx

6%
94%
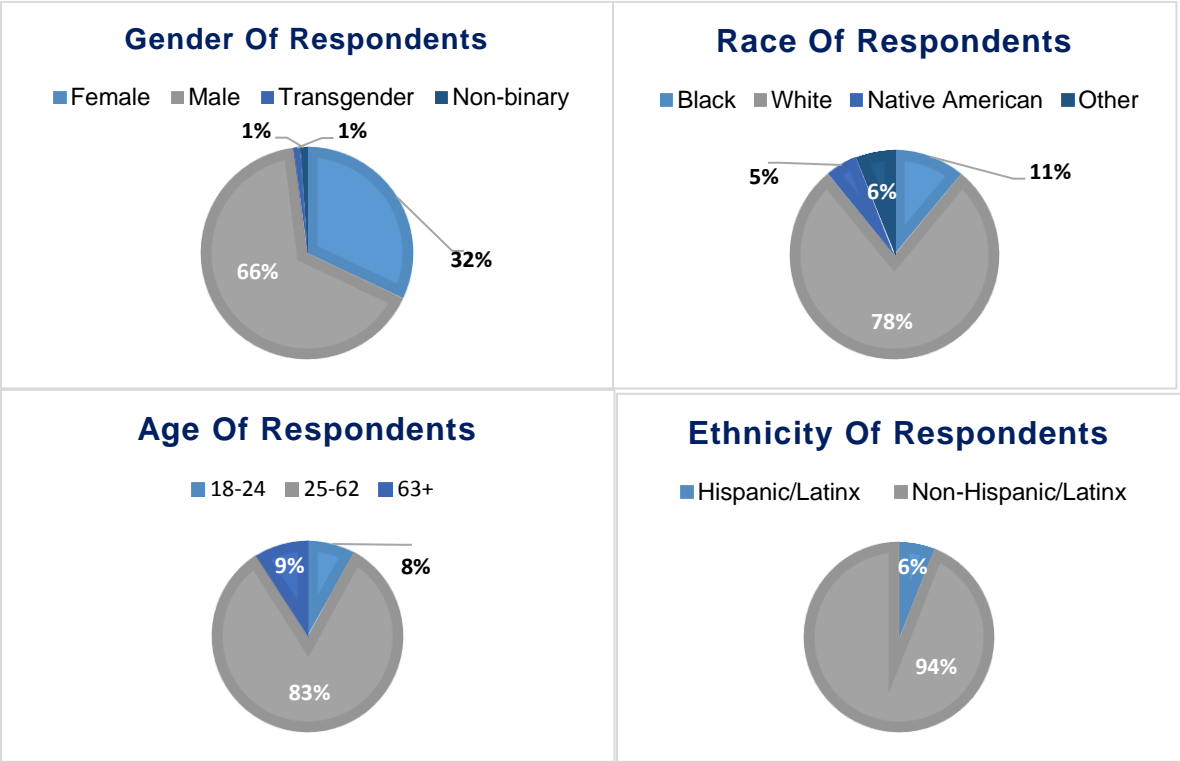
Figure 1: Demographic characteristics of the survey sample

Locations of Survey Administration

Outside CISS
3%
Outside IHYC
5%
Other
2%
Red Door
6%
Downtown/library
30%
Joppa
10%
Bethel Mission
13%
Encampment
16%
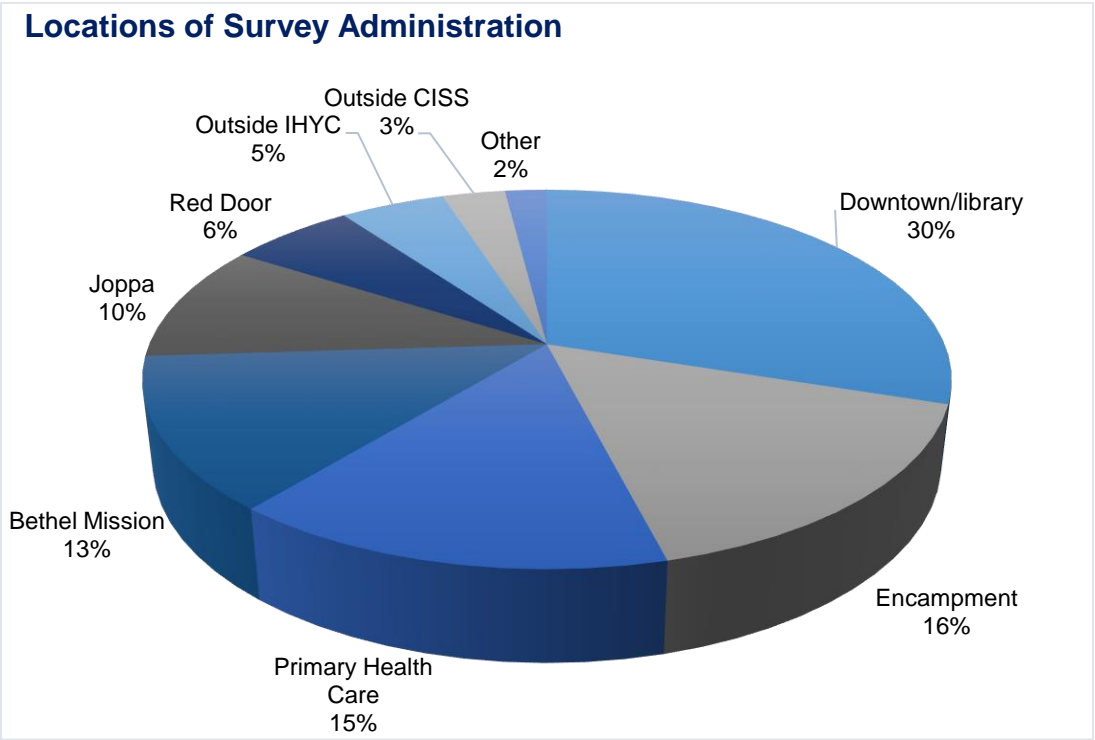Primary Health
Care
15%

Figure 2: Locations of survey administration

Surveys lasted approximately 15 minutes, but some respondents spoke to interviewers for an hour or more. Interviewers handwrote responses, verbatim when possible, and probed if the response was unclear or did not thoroughly answer the question. Interviewers then entered data from their surveys into a secure database as soon as possible after speaking to respondents. This data entry included demographic and recontact information for the respondent, a note about whether or not they had agreed to be recontacted for an in-depth interview, and responses to the open-ended survey questions. Recontact and demographic information were kept in a different secured database from survey responses to preserve confidentiality. Each respondent was given an identification number for confidential data matching purposes.

Survey data was inductively coded by the research team; we looked for strong themes that cut across multiple surveys. Data was then entered into the program STATA and analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. In reporting the data, we often went back to verbatim quotations from survey respondents to better understand the patterns we were seeing. The survey responses also informed the creation of our in-depth interview guide.

PHASE 2: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

At the conclusion of the survey phase of the project, we sorted the respondents into groups by age, gender, and race. Using these groups, we pulled a stratified random sample[ii] of 49 survey respondents to recontact for a follow-up in-depth interview. We used the recontact information the respondents had provided and relied on outreach workers from partner organizations who knew when and where we could find certain participants. Specifically, our strategy included posting an interviewer at the downtown public library every day from 9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. to be available for to interview whenever an outreach worker was able to locate one of the original respondents.

Our recontact efforts were thorough and productive, but we came up against certain roadblocks: some survey respondents selected for an interview no longer wanted to participate, some had moved, several were incarcerated by the time we tried to recontact them, many cellphones had been disconnected, and one survey respondent had passed away. To make sure we gathered as many stories as possible, we pulled the names of an additional 22 survey respondents to add to the original sample of 49. We had similar recontact issues with these survey respondents: at least one was incarcerated, several had moved away, many phones had been disconnected, and another survey respondent had passed away. In all, we conducted 32 interviews from the original sample of 71 respondents who had completed the survey, for a 45% response rate. To supplement these interviews with more stories of lived experience, we conducted an additional five interviews with people living unsheltered identified to us by outreach workers. In total, we

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[ii] Stratified random sampling is a technique used to assure coverage of minority groups that are particularly important to the research question. To do this, we divided the original sample by age, race, and gender to make sure the random sample included several respondents from each group. Thus, whereas the random sample included only a fraction of the white men, ages 23-62 (the largest subgroup,) it included all of the older survey respondents from the black, white, and other racial groups, as well as all the people who identified as Latinx.

conducted 37 in-depth interviews with people who have experience living unsheltered in Polk County.

We created our in-depth interview guide (Appendix B of this report) using a life history format. We drew on the expertise of the steering committee group as well as the information from the survey in creating the interview guide. The first question, "Tell me the story of your life," has been used by other researchers (see Edin and Shaefer, 2015) in similar interviews with marginalized populations. This question allows the interviewer to build rapport with the respondent and encourages a conversational experience. Additionally, looking at the reality of a respondent's current situation within the life course context allows us to better understand their lived experiences. The interview guide asked specifically about their current living situation, strategies they used to survive, and any experiences working with local agencies and/or staying in local shelters. Importantly, interviewers asked respondents the questions, in order, "I'd like to know more about your experiences in shelters around here. Tell me about the last time you stayed at a shelter in the area" and "Some people say they would go to emergency shelter under certain situations, others tell us that there is nothing that would make them go to emergency shelter. How about for you?"

The guide also prompted interviewers to ask about the person's family and friends to understand their network, and about daily routines to understand how the person spent their time and strategies they used to survive if they were living outside. The guide asked about physical and mental health and how they thought their living situation affected it, it asked about worry and well-being to better understand the emotional and mental reality of living unsheltered, and finally asked the respondents to describe their hopes for the future. The last question was the same as on the survey, and asked the individual to tell us what they would say to "someone in charge" if they were given the chance.

Interviews were sent for transcription to an academic transcription company, and then coded inductively and deductively for qualitative themes using the coding software NVivo. The research team, led by Dr. Talbert and Dr. Record, did the coding.

Findings

Findings from the Survey

Not all questions were answered by all participants. This is usual in survey research, and the Institutional Review Board requires that participants be free to not to answer certain questions and opt out of the research at any time. Additionally, because survey respondents often spoke to us for period more than the suggested fifteen minutes, they also often gave more than one response to the open-ended questions we asked. We thus applied up to three codes per answer. For example, if a respondent answered the question about what kind of housing they liked to have by saying, "An apartment in a safe neighborhood, that's at least affordable," we

would code "apartment/house," "safety," and "affordability." Note that in this report we only explain responses given by 10% or more of the respondents.

Amount of Time Living Unsheltered

Percentage of respondents outside for…(N=146)

■ <1 month	■ <6 months	■ <1 year	■ >1 year	■ >5 years
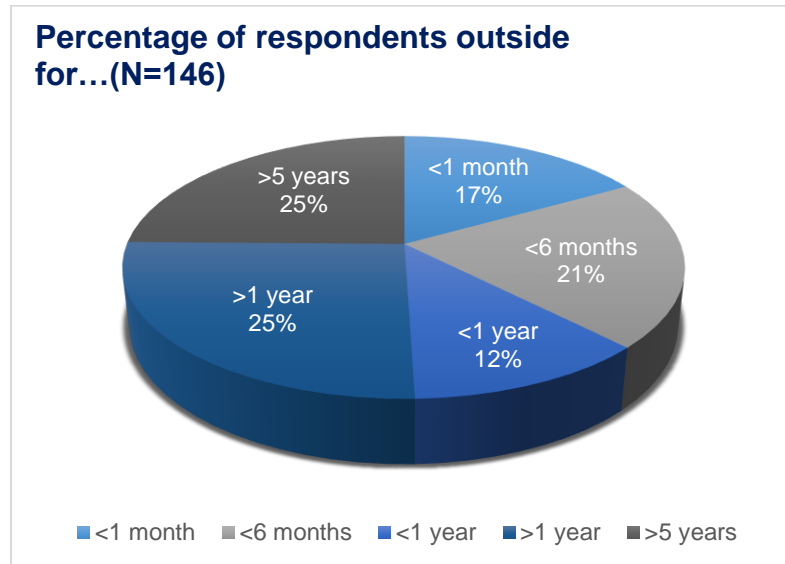
Of the 146 respondents who mentioned how long they had been living outside in the initial survey, a full quarter, 25%, had been living unsheltered for five years or more. Another quarter reported living unsheltered for between one and five years, 12% had been living outside for between six months and one year, 21% between one month and six months, and 17% of the respondents reported being outside for less than a month.

Consistency of Living Unsheltered

Percentage of respondents who were outside… (N=139)

■ Off and on	■ Consistently	■ Not Outside
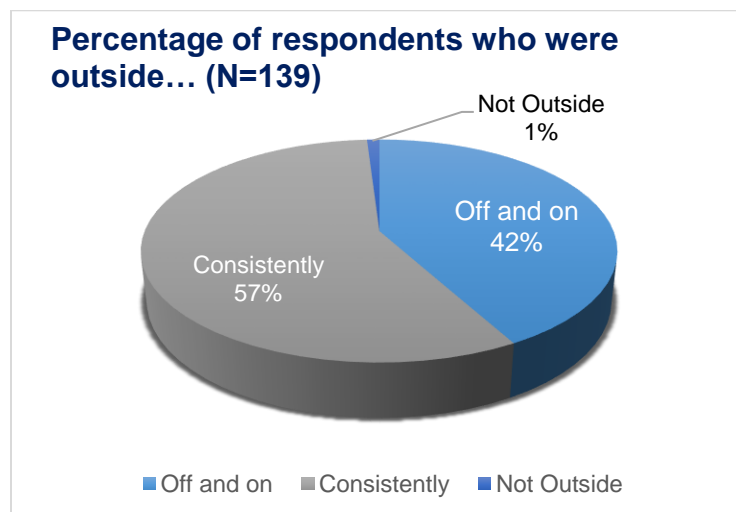
The important nuance of consistency came up in many of the survey respondents' discussion of how they came to be living outside, and what that looked like for them. Whereas some respondents described long spells of unsheltered homelessness tempered by a few nights here and there on a friend's couch, or a week or month back at a home with a parent or significant other, other respondents described uninterrupted experiences of living unsheltered. 57% of our respondents reported being consistently outside, except for a day here or there in emergency shelter; 42% of respondents reported living unsheltered off-and-on. One interviewer noted that the respondent had been "in and out of housing since October, when he lost his apartment because he signed a non-renewal lease. [He was] inside a bit in winter time, crashed on someone's floor." Another interviewer noted a consistent experience of homelessness: "He has been homeless for one year and has been living outside that entire time. He got out of prison and came out with nothing."

Shelters Utilized

Percentage of respondents who stayed at...(N=125)
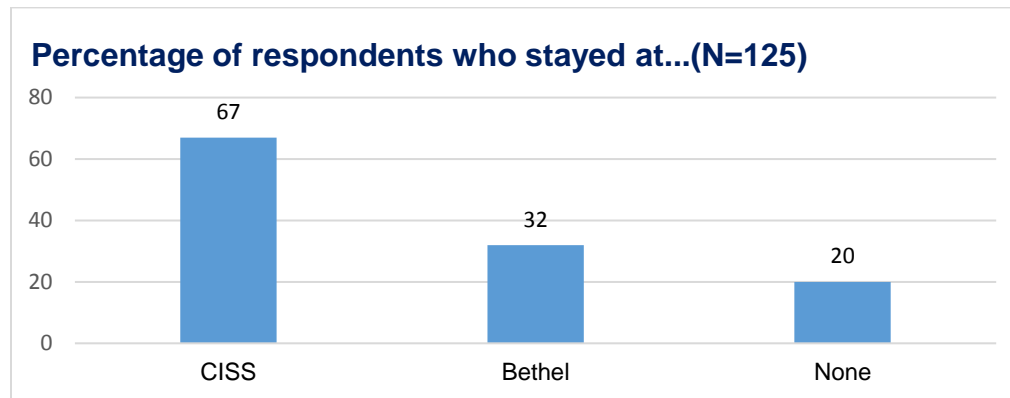
The survey asked respondents to name any shelters they had stayed in at least one night over the past year. A full two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents had stayed at least one night at Central Iowa Shelter & Services (CISS); 32% had sheltered at Bethel Mission; and 20%, or 1 in 5 of our respondents, had not used any kind of shelter over the past year. Note that the chart above only shows those shelters which were mentioned by ten percent or more of the respondents. Shelters like Hawthorn Hill, St. Joseph's, the Salvation Army, and the Iowa Homeless Youth Centers (IHYC) shelter for young adults were also mentioned, but by fewer than 10% of the respondents.

Reasons to Refuse Emergency Shelter

Percentage of respondents who mentioned...(N=144)

Category	Percentage
Problems with other people	29
Safety/theft concerns	25
Issues with staff	18
Unfavorable rules	15
Prefers outdoors to shelter	15
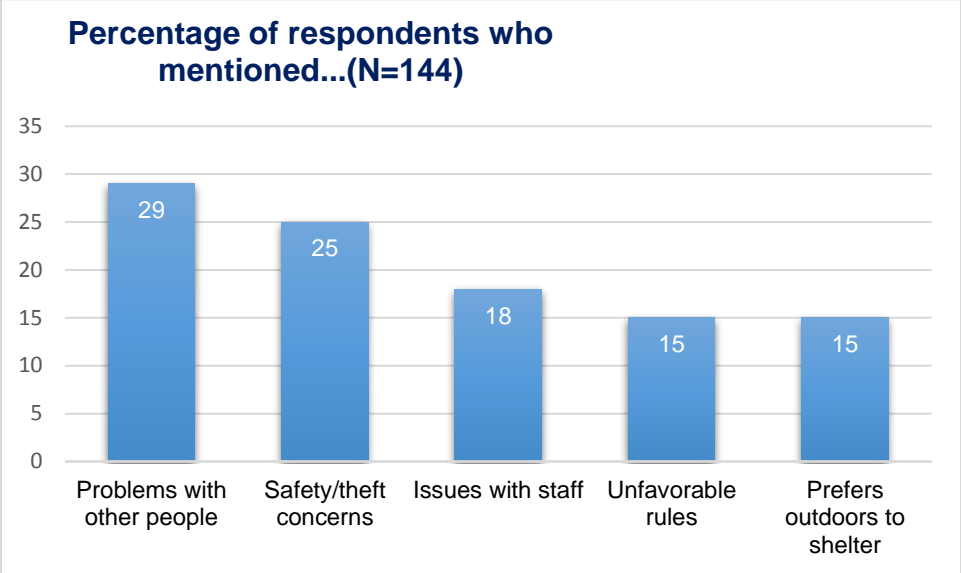
The survey asked respondents reasons that they would choose not to seek emergency shelter during extreme weather. Twenty-nine percent of respondents described negative experiences with other clients at the shelter, worries about their safety or personal property (25%), issues with shelter staff (18%), and unfavorable rules (15%) that they said kept them from seeking shelter. One respondent stated he wouldn't go to shelter because of "the way people are treated and the way they treat each other." Another elaborated that he did not "want to be told what to do," and referenced the curfew. Fifteen percent of respondents also told us that they preferred being outdoors to being in emergency shelter. As one respondent stated, "Try having 100 roommates who have low self-respect." He continued and explained that he was a "nature freak" and "fighting off mosquitoes is a lot better than 100 roommates."

What do you like about living outside?

Percentage of respondents mentioning...(N=139)

Category	Percentage
Being close to nature	32
Freedom/no rules	26
Nothing	24
Calm & quiet	12
Being alone/fewer people	12
Community	11
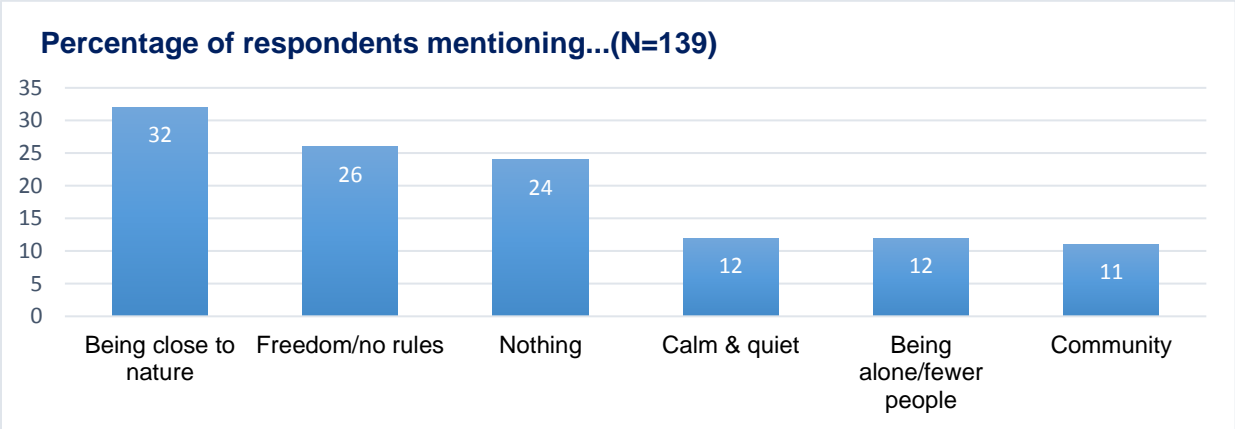
Respondents described certain aspects of living outside that they enjoyed. Thirty-two percent described the advantages of being close to nature. Having more freedom and especially a freedom from others' rules was important to 26% of the respondents. One respondent explained "[I] can control my own world." However, 24% of the respondents—almost a quarter—said they liked nothing about the experience of living unsheltered. One respondent said, "This is one of the hardest things I've ever gone through." Another respondent described living in her car as having "the smallest studio apartment anyone can have." Twelve percent of the respondents mentioned the calm, peacefulness, and quiet of living outside, and another 12% mentioned that being alone or with fewer people around was what they liked most. As one respondent told us of the forest noises, motioning to the surrounding trees, "See, you can hear it." Finally, 11% of the respondents described the importance of other people living unsheltered around them—this community of "camping folks" was something they liked.

What are the challenges to living outside during winter?

Percentage of respondents mentioning...(N=135)
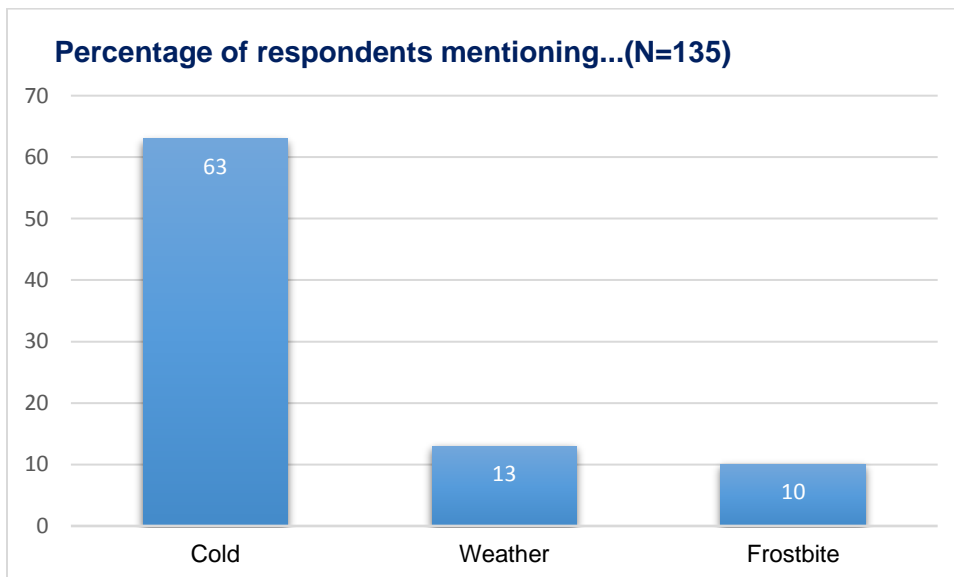
Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of respondents (63%) described the cold as the biggest challenge to living outside in winter. One put it in stark terms: "The cold at night can kill you." Another 13% of respondents said the weather generally was an issue, and 10% mentioned frostbite specifically.

What would help [in the winter]?

Percentage of respondents mentioning...(N=99)

Category	Percentage
Heating methods	29
Access to shelter	26
Access to resources	26
Clothing and blankets	22
More shelters	14
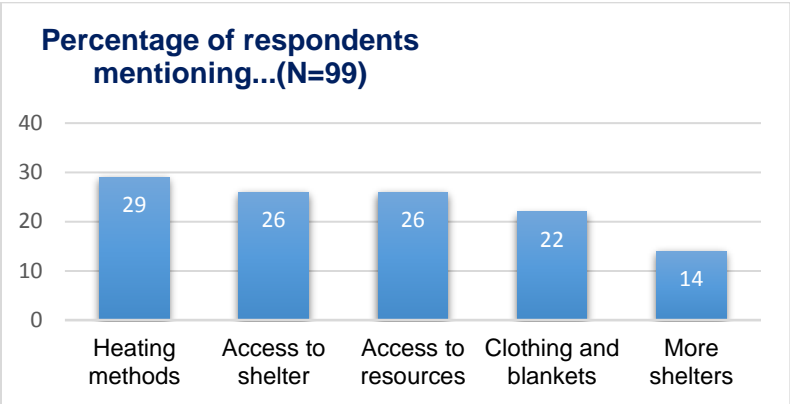
Protection from the elements was the major theme in response to what would help during the winter. Twenty-nine percent of respondents said that heating methods for their places of unsheltered living would help, and 26% mentioned access to more resources generally. Resources respondents mentioned included the materials of survival: food, water, and tents, as well as other helpful resources like electricity, laundry facilities, bathing facilities, more access to toilets, cots and bedding, and garbage cans. Twenty-six percent of respondents also described how more access to shelter would be helpful, especially on the very coldest days. Access to shelter meant everything from permanent housing ("Having my own house, with a backyard.") to more open hours at shelters and better physical access for individuals with disabilities. Several mentioned more emergency shelters specifically, which could be open only at nighttime during the worst weather. Twenty-two percent of respondents described the importance of good gear, clothing, and blankets to surviving the cold during the winter, and 14% said that having more shelters would be helpful.

What are the challenges to living outside during the summer?

Percentage of respondents mentioning...(N=134)

Category	Percentage
Overheating	53
Hydration	20
Security/theft	17
Hygiene	13
Insects	10
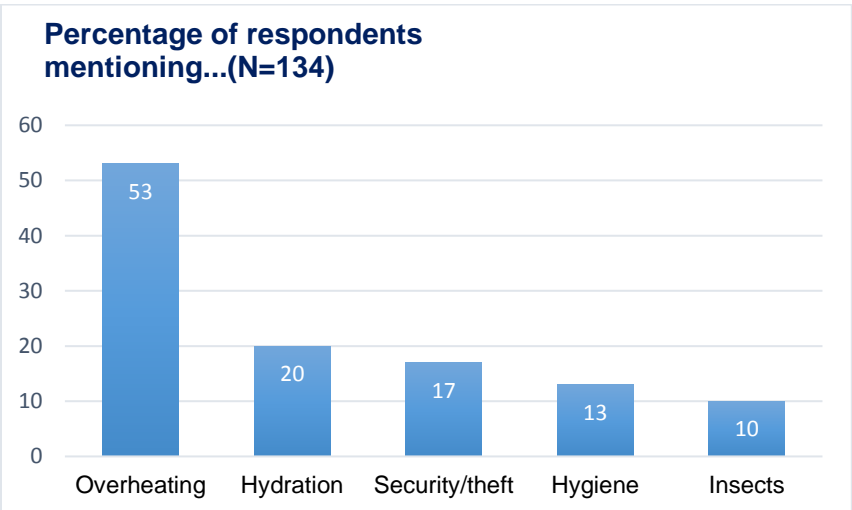
Like responses about winter's challenges, responses about the challenges of living outside during the summer focused on physical stress from extreme weather. Fifty-three percent of respondents mentioned overheating as one of the biggest challenges, while 20% mentioned that access to appropriate hydration was a major challenge. Notably, 17% of respondents described issues with security and theft of their personal belongings during the summer. One respondent simply said, "People stealing shit." Thirteen percent of respondents described the challenge of keeping themselves and their clothes clean during the summer, and 10% mentioned being challenged by insects, specifically mosquitoes.

What would help [in the summer]?

Percentage of respondents mentioning...(N=90)

Increased water access	Cooling stations	Cleaning resources	Access to shelter	Portable cooling options
24	23	18	17	12
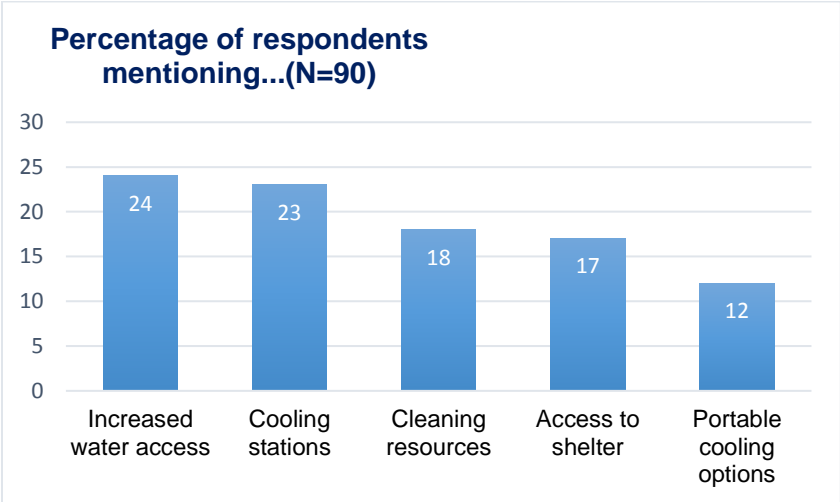
Respondents' ideas of what would be helpful to living unsheltered in the summer mapped onto basic physical needs. Twenty-four percent mentioned increased access to water, and 23% said cooling stations would be helpful, often describing the importance of the cooling stations open during the day in downtown Des Moines to their summer survival strategies. Multiple respondents mentioned needing some kind of spot for summer respite, where they would be able to cool off, do laundry, take a shower, use the internet, and eat. Eighteen percent of respondents said that more resources for cleanliness and hygiene—like showers, laundry facilities, and items like soap and deodorant—would be helpful. Finally, 17% wanted more access to shelter in the summer and 12% mentioned wanting portable cooling devices that they could use while living outside, specifically overnight. Respondents explained access to shelter in different ways, from having a place to live to having an option that did not include an established shelter. Still other respondents said that reducing the temperature necessary to claim shelter through heat amnesty could improve her access. One respondent said that he wanted "a place where I could live where I can just get off my feet, but not a shelter."

What kind of housing would you like to have?

Percentage of respondents mentioning...(N=143)
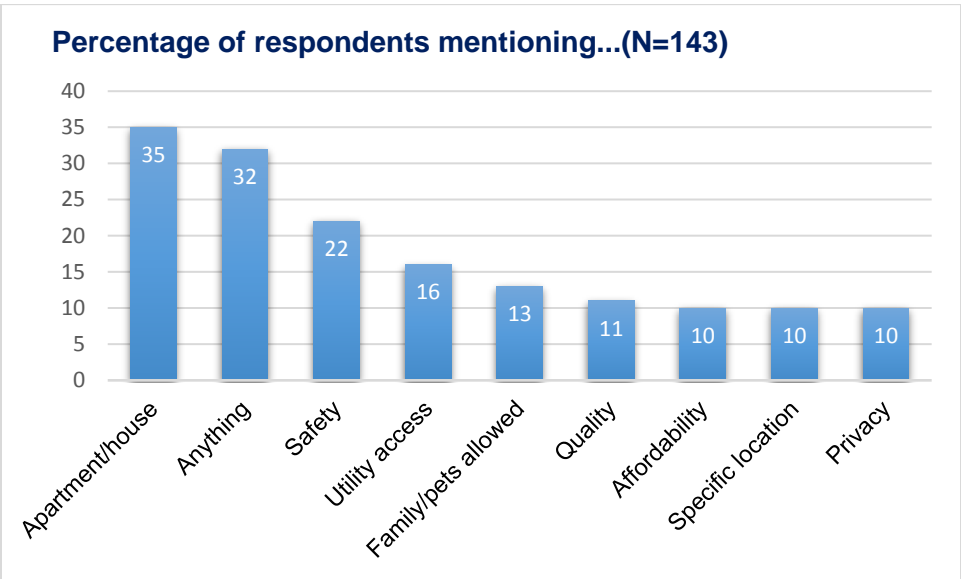
Respondents answered this question with descriptions of home: places that were theirs, places that were comfortable, places that were not unsheltered. Thirty-five percent specifically mentioned an apartment or a house: one respondent stated that it just had to be clean, but "it doesn't have to be spacious." Another 32% of respondents simply said "anything," or it didn't matter as long as it was inside. One respondent said, "Anything. I haven't slept in a bed in a few years." Their descriptions also detailed certain important characteristics of housing : 22% of respondents mentioned safety as a priority for housing, and 16% mentioned consistent and affordable access to utilities like electricity and water. Thirteen percent of respondents mentioned being able to have family and/or pets living with them in housing ("Nowhere is going to be home without my kids.") and 11% mentioned that they wanted the housing to meet certain quality standards. Ten percent of respondents mentioned affordability of the housing, 10% described a specific location where they would like to be, often eliminating certain neighborhoods in Polk County as "too dangerous" or otherwise unfit. Finally, 10% of respondents mentioned the importance of privacy in their ideal housing. Answers to this question suggested that, more than anything, respondents wanted a "home": "It don't matter where, as long as it is safe, and comfortable, and feels good."

Another important finding from this survey question was that only two people out of the 152 we surveyed, and out of the 143 people who answered this specific question, said they preferred a "tent" or "living outside." Though many people who are unsheltered choose to live outdoors instead of seeking emergency shelter, only two in our sample said that this was their preferred permanent housing.

If you could tell someone in charge how to help people who are living outside, what would you say?

Percentage of respondents who would tell someone in charge...(N=127)
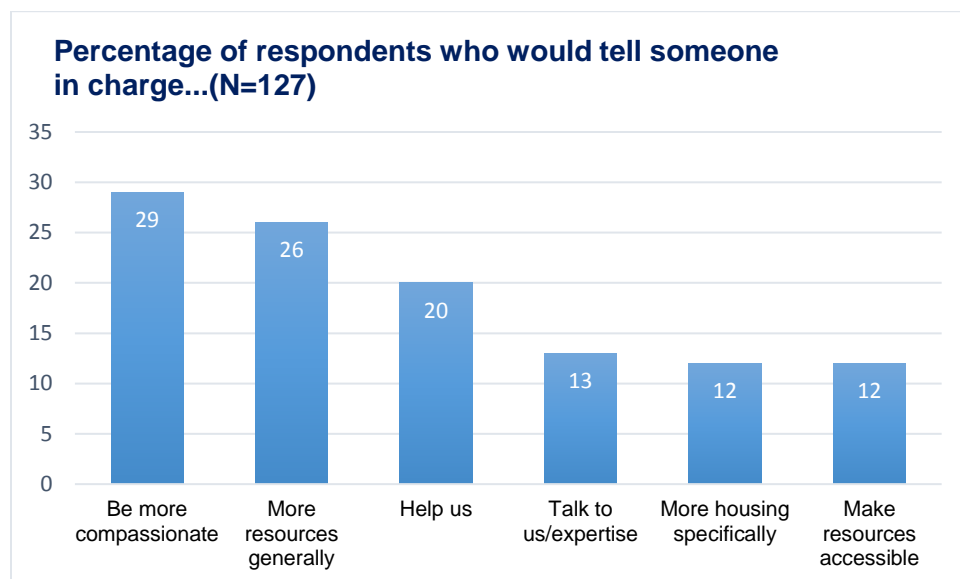
The last question of the survey elicited a variety of responses, many of them quite emotional and thoughtful. The plurality of respondents (29%) said something on the theme of needing more compassion and kindness from people in charge. One respondent said, "Put yourself in our shoes and go what we're going through before telling us what to do and doing anything about it. I guarantee they wouldn't be able to live how we do." Another 26% of respondents mentioned that they needed more resources generally. This included more food, more survival materials, and more facilities where they could take care of their bodies and their clothes. 20%—one out of five respondents who answered the question—said a simple "help us," or a variation on this sentiment. One respondent said, "Help us…I hate it." Respondents also encouraged using their lived experience as a source of information for decision-makers: 13% wanted a person in charge to talk to them, follow them for a day, or use their expertise in policymaking. 12% of respondents mentioned the need for more affordable housing, specifically, and 12% mentioned the need to make resources more accessible to more people. In this context, resources mentioned were monetary benefits like social security or disability payments, better resources for mental health like counseling and medication, as well as survival-specific resources. One respondent said simply, "Get me what I need and I'll take care of the rest."

Findings from the In-Depth Interviews

PROFILE: RIGG[iii], WHITE MAN, 50s

Rigg was born in Des Moines but was raised by his grandparents in Eastern Iowa because of a tumultuous early family life with his mother. "*[I had a] a couple stepdads*," he tells us. "*Neither of*

[iii] All interview respondents chose a pseudonym at the beginning of their interview. We use those pseudonyms, not their real names, in this report to protect confidentiality.

'em were worth a shit. Um." At age sixteen, Rigg and his high school girlfriend became pregnant. They were planning to marry, but his girlfriend went into labor six months into the pregnancy. She died during the preterm delivery, and their son died in the NICU two days later. After this trauma, Rigg says, he kind of "*stopped dealing with people."*

Though his grandparents worked hard to give Rigg a good start in life, they were very poor and the family often faced material hardship. At 17, Rigg went to jail:

> *I was breaking into—God forbid—churches. But not to steal money. I was going into their kitchens and stealing food to take home and stock our own fridge and shelves and make sure my family had something to eat. I did that and eventually, it caught up to me. And, um, they gave me, uh, five years for third degree attempted burglary. And ended up doing three on that.*

Upon release from jail, Rigg joined the army. "*So, I went and had talked to a recruiter and basically told him, you know, what I had been in prison for. And he goes, he goes, 'I don't see a problem with that. I think we can get around that.' So, six months later…Fort Benning, Georgia here I come.*"

For sixteen years, Rigg traveled all over the world with the army. In 2006, he was discharged, and bought and fixed up an old van to live in. He traveled around the country, living in various places and sleeping in his van. A few months in, the van's transmission blew, and while he was waiting on his Army pension check to pay for the repairs, the van was impounded. When his check finally arrived, the impound fees for storage were so high it would have cost more to pay them than to fix the transmission. Rigg snuck into the impound yard, got any important possessions he could carry out of his van, and left on foot. He says:

> *Pretty much been homeless ever since. Um, bounced around from place to place. It's a, it's a difficult life but it's not ideal. Some people have it better than others, but I'm used to being outside, spent a lot of time out there. The elements don't really bother me too much unless it gets incredibly cold and I suffer, but…that's about it, for the moment.*

Despite the cold, and despite having lived all over the country and the world, "*some places are better than others…but for some reason—I don't know why—I keep coming back to Iowa.*"

Rigg says that the last time he sought emergency shelter was six or seven years ago, Rigg is presently sleeping outside. He says, "*I'm not going to divulge my current location where I sleep at night.*" He says he can deal with the heat, but as he's gotten older (he's 55) the cold has gotten "*really rough on me."* Though he gets regular medical check-ups every six months, Rigg suffers from a variety of mental and physical ailments, with the physical being mostly brought on by living unsheltered. "*I've been, uh, diagnosed with obviously PTSD. Uh, paranoid schizophrenic, um, borderline personality disorder."* When we ask him how living outside affects his health he says:

It doesn't help at all. I mean, because you're so, so susceptible to all kinds of weather conditions—the cold, the heat—because you know, of the contacts—the contact you might come across because there's so many kinds of people out here, you never know what kind of disease or contagion they might have. You never know.

Though he has used drugs and alcohol in the past, and it still "*occasionally…happens,*" he says, "*I'm not going to spend my last penny on it.*"

When we ask Rigg what he thinks of the shelters in town, and how he would decide to use them in an emergency, he makes a face. He hasn't been there in six or seven years, he said, and gives several reasons. He doesn't like one shelter because of its "*religious obligations…They say, 'Well, you got to be this or that,' so I took 'that' and out the door I go.*" Rigg calls another shelter "*a nightmare*":

Um, hell the showers [had] shit growing in it that I can't even identify. I, uh, actually refused to use their showers. I would rather walk forty-five minutes on foot to [another service provider] and get a ten-minute shower there than, you know a half hour shower at [this shelter] just because of, you know, whatever growth they got going on in the showers."

Right now, for things like bathing and showering, he either goes to another service provider, has a friend with housing offer him temporary use of their bathroom, or uses "*baby wipes, it's not the ideal.*"

Rigg describes a hard life outside, one in which he must maintain constant vigilance towards both other unsheltered individuals and the systems nominally put into place to serve him. He has one person in his life who he trusts—Jane—and otherwise doesn't want to share his space with anyone. He describes a routine that requires him to work hard to find ways to survive daily:

I, uh, head down to the local, uh, store and pick something up to eat. Lately, it's been focusing on, like, frozen microwaveable burritos and a two-liter of Mountain Dew. I probably go through more Mountain Dew than I drink water…Which is unfortunate because it's not really good for me.

He spends the rest of his day walking between the library, other places where he can access the internet, and Bethel or the Red Door "*unless, you know, I have a prior engagement.*" Sometimes Rigg takes an odd job for cash; he likes to buy small things for Jane. He gets up around seven in the morning, and then goes back "*to my spot by 10:00…10:30 at the most. Maybe—maybe sometimes 11:00 and I'm usually there until morning. Um, there are, I do have another spot—I don't really like it. But if it does rain—and it does—I go there.*"

This day-to-day existence takes a toll on Rigg's outlook on life and his ability—or maybe, more accurately, his desire—to think toward the future. When we ask him how his routine would change if he had housing, he says, "*I don't know. I haven't had housing in quite a while. … I*

have been outside so long I don't really know what to expect for something like that." He tells us that "*dying alone*" is his biggest worry, and when we ask about what brings him joy, he answers:

> *Well, I don't know, um, the fact that I wake up every morning, you know. Someone is giving me another chance to live another day. [pause] I don't know, I don't really call it a life, per se. I don't call it an existence. Because, you know, it's nothing. I don't really have nothing. I mean, I don't. have anything. I mean, other than Jane, I don't have much of a life. And to be honest with you, I really don't need anything.*

He goes on to say, "*I don't plan anything more than a couple weeks out.*" At the end of the interview, we ask him what he would tell someone in charge if he could. He thinks and then says:

> *To be, um, more compassionate about the homeless situation. 'Cause, you know, especially in the wintertime, people set up camps in places they're really on the edge of society, you know. The town, the city people, they know they know. Right? … I just want them to have a little bit more compassion with the homeless community because a lot of us just don't have choices that people take for granted.*

Barriers to Emergency Shelter

"*Yeah, I go to the shelters wherever I'm at. The Des Moines shelter is rough compared to some of them.*" –Freddy, white man, 40s

Through in-depth interviews, we spoke to 37 Polk County residents who detailed their experiences living outside and their decision-making process about seeking emergency shelter. Almost all of the respondents had some experience living in shelter, whether for an extended period of time or in an emergency. We asked specific questions about reasons they would not go to emergency shelter and asked other questions about survival strategies, their community, their routines, and other personal aspects of their lives. We heard consistent themes about barriers to emergency shelter across interviews. These included the physical conditions of the shelter; the regulations and the norms of the shelter; perceptions of staff at the shelter; problems with other shelter clients; gender-specific experiences and barriers; complacency and the balance for daily survival; and insufficient benefits to compensate for the cost (forgoing personal determination) of the shelter. We give more detail and description about each below.

PHYSICAL CONDITIONS OF SHELTER

As does Rigg, above, other respondents discussed cleanliness and sanitation as one of the reasons they would not go or would hesitate to go to shelter. Barry, a white man in his 20s, described that the showers sometimes had "*cold water, the shower. Everything's dirty. Like you had to make them clean, you know. …There's too many people, you know.*" Lara, a white woman in her 30s, also mentioned the showers, saying, "*The bathrooms are disgusting. The showers hardly work. Like they're jail showers.*" Other respondents noted that during the height

of COVID-19 they were particularly concerned about sanitation; some respondents said they had heard rumors about a shelter having bed bugs, but no respondent we talked to described personal experience with this.

Respondents also mentioned the crowding within shelters and the large number of bunks in each dorm as a reason they would avoid emergency shelter. Kevin, a white man in his 60s, said he would go to shelter for one night if it's "*very, very cold*" but hesitated because "*it's so crowded.*" And Derrick, a white man in his 20s, explained it this way:

> It seems like a lot of people nowadays are trying to make homelessness into rocket science. They're just sitting there behind a white board, alright, what can we do to make the smallest area, and put the most people in it.

Finally, the physical conditions of the shelter reminded several respondents of being in prison, and this was a deterrent to emergency shelter. Bill, a white man in his 20s, said "*The dorms are…it's like, if you've been to jail…Yeah, it's the same beds and everything. And then there's fifty guys in a room. … It reminded me more of being in jail than any, anywhere else I've been in.*" Mercedes, a white woman in her 40s, told us something similar: "*It reminds me of jail. [laughs] I think they actually use the same paint they paint the jail as in the shelter, I swear.*"

Additionally, respondents told us that weather-related emergency shelter—what they called "weather amnesty," or overflow rooms at shelters during extreme heat or cold—had even more unfavorable physical conditions. When we asked Samantha, a white woman in her 50s who was at the shelter because of weather amnesty, about her housing situation now, she laughed: "*I'm sleepin' on a floor, how d'you think? Except [a shelter staff member] is saving me a big blanket every day. Everybody else is sleeping on these little white, like, hospital blankets, and I got this big, fluffy blanket.*" Other respondents discussed how sleeping upright in chairs was often the norm in these overflow rooms reserved for weather amnesty.

RULES, ROUTINES, AND NORMS OF SHELTER

Respondents mentioned rules and routines as one of the major reasons they avoided shelter. Rules that limited movement or access to personal devices, they told us, were often problematic in terms of scheduling or searching for work. Additionally, many respondents thought that the rules of shelters were often unclear and that they seemed changeable and arbitrary. Respondents told us that they had been kicked out because they had broken the rules or had simply "timed out" of shelter because of a time limit policy. Shelter routines that some respondents said encouraged them to avoid shelter had to do with the schedule. As do most institutions, shelters run on a particular schedule, and this schedule includes a "lights on" time, meal times, times clients are allowed to be in the dorms and when they are not allowed, time for re-entry or initial signing into the shelter, and a "lights out" time. Finally, norms of the shelters were sometimes barriers for respondents, especially any norms having to do with religious obligations. We also found that some respondents relied on hearsay, or others' perceptions

from shelter instead of their own experiences with the rules, regulations, and norms, when making decisions about whether or not to seek emergency shelter.

Rules often came up as one of the first things in the description of respondents' experiences in shelter. Doug, a man who identifies as multi-racial and is in his 20s, told us about how the rules seemed unclear, and because of this he was locked out of the shelter for the night:

> *I don't like. Just the rules. I mean it, it's, it's you can be out to ten, ten o'clock. You got to check-in at ten o'clock. If you out late, [that] means the time is eleven but check-in, you be, you got to be in the building at ten. And, last time I didn't know and I went outside to smoke a cigarette and at past ten and it was eleven o'clock, so almost can't come in because when I went inside to go in check, I didn't [sign] again.*

Doug, like several other respondents, was also displeased that he could not charge his phone at a shelter. Curfews or required check-in times to reclaim a bed were other rules respondents often cited as a reason they avoided shelter. Mr. Green, a white man in his 60s, did not like the curfew required by the shelter: "*I don't agree with their rules and stuff, curfew, I'm 62 years old, I don't need a curfew.*"

Some respondents noted that rules seemed inconsistent, changeable, or simply unclear. Peggy, a white woman in her 40s, described her experience:

> *They don't really give you a rule packet, you know what I'm saying, they don't give you a packet to read the rules on your own time. I mean you're just supposed to go in there and supposed to know what you're doing. Not everybody knows what the hell they're doing when they get into a shelter.*

Peggy also told us that she got kicked out of the shelter because she "*destructed their property…I can't go back there for life.*" Samantha, a white woman in her 50's, who was sleeping in a shelter when we talked to her, said, "*The rules are changing tomorrow.*" Other respondents mentioned getting "*kicked out*" for various—usually somewhat severe—infractions to the rules. Alternately, interview respondents who did not suggest they had many barriers to emergency shelter, and who said they would go back to shelter, had simply "timed out" after a specified number of days which itself was a regulation they had to navigate.

Like the curfews mentioned above, certain routines were another aspect of shelter life that deterred people from seeking shelter. Johnny, a black man in his 30s, called the experience of shelter "*terrible…That was the worst feeling I ever did in my life.*" He went on to explain:

> *I never been locked up where somebody tells you what to do, wake you up out of your sleep. You gotta take a shower before 7:00. Wake you up at 5:00 in the morning. Eat breakfast between 6:00 and 7:00. If you don't eat breakfast, you missed out. Uh, fix your bed. If you don't fix your bed, your bed is—they write you up or kick you out of the room, and you get a written notice.*

Some respondents, like Johnny, were displeased about the early time in the morning that the lights came on; others, like Julie, a white woman in her 20s, did not like that shelter clients were "*kicked out of our dorms from 7:30 to 3:00*" each day. Multiple respondents used the term "*kicked out*" to refer to the mandatory clearing of the dorm rooms at shelter. One respondent, Samantha, who was staying in the overflow "*weather amnesty*" room when we spoke with her, said that the lights there go off at 10:30, though she tries to go to sleep by 9:30.

Finally, some respondents avoided shelters because of rules and regulations that they had experienced in shelter, but also because of rules and regulations that they had *heard* about. For example, several respondents told us that shelters in town required people staying at them to attend a particular religious service to be able to receive a bed and other benefits at the shelter. This incorrect perception of necessary religious participation echoes the confusion about concrete rules that respondents found themselves having to follow when they went to shelter. The unclear expectations and regulations led to some people avoiding entering emergency shelter altogether.

PERCEPTIONS OF SHELTER STAFF

The interview guide did not ask about individual staff, specifically. Despite this, respondents told us about staff at shelters and other outreach services. We heard both praise and criticism. Respondents praised staff for being helpful, kind, knowledgeable, and for going out of their way to help. For example, Bill, a white man in his 20s, described the staff at one shelter as

> [R]eally friendly. Most of them at least. They didn't have any shoes in my size, so one of the guys that worked there bought, brought one of his pairs, a pair of shoes for me. So like, the staff there is definitely really cool.

Respondents, especially those who lived in camps, were also grateful for outreach services provided by community outreach workers. Bella, a white woman in her 30s, said, "*I mean, at least [outreach workers] are making the effort to find out what [they] can do, or to just understand what's going on with us. Or not just to push us under the table like we don't belong.*" Finally, some respondents described other one-on-one interactions with staff that were pleasant and meaningful.

Respondents also cited issues with staff at shelter as a reason they would not seek emergency shelter. They had two main problems with shelter staff: either they perceived the staff as not caring, aloof, or unhelpful, or they discussed how staff enforced rules, sometimes unkindly. Barry, a white man in his 30s, told us, "*They just, they don't care. … I don't know what's going on with the staff.*" He goes on: "*Do you really like this job? Come on.*" Danielle, a black woman in her 20s, said, "*They might have some [power trip] because they know that they have that control. They know that you need them more than they need you, but I've never had a problem with them.*"

Another complaint was that staff unfairly enforced rules, choosing favorites and selectively handing out reprimands. Freddy, a white man in his 60s, suggested the favoritism had to do with how long someone had been receiving homelessness services, with those newer to the system being preferred by staff: "*They've known the hardcore campers and they would not really like to tend to them as much as the people that are recently going to the streets because they've been in the lifestyle too long.*" Julie, white woman in her 20s, explained how staff enforced masking rules during the pandemic: "*They walk around and yell at you to wear your mask, to cover your nose. … They yell about our masks when theirs isn't even barely on. It's a little confusing.*" These types of experiences were the most common negative interactions our respondents had with shelter staff—instead of outright kindness or unkindness, they perceived a lack of respect shown toward some shelter clients.

A minority of respondents had the perception that shelter staff were purposefully unkind. For example, several respondents told us about how their belongings sometimes went missing after a few days, against what they understood to be shelter protocol of keeping them in storage. Anthony, a white man in his 50s, described how he had to give up a few of his belongings when he entered the shelter: "*I had knives and tools and they wouldn't let me bring them in. They said they put it in the storage unit, and when I left, they said they weren't there.*" Other perceptions of staff as being unkind or cruel often stemmed from issues with missing possessions clients originally brought into shelter.

PROBLEMS WITH OTHER SHELTER CLIENTS

The survey portion of the study suggested that problems with other shelter clients were a main reason respondents would not seek emergency shelter. The in-depth interviews gave more detailed explanations. Respondents explained how their own mental health issues made it difficult for them to be around other people, or how others' mental health issues made them feel uncomfortable and even in danger while in shelter. Fighting and violence between clients were other reasons respondents avoided shelter. Multiple respondents described issues with drug activity within shelters leading to negative interactions between people. For those who were active substance users or in recovery from substance use, substance activity in the shelters made getting clean or maintaining sobriety much more difficult.

Bella, a white woman in her 40s, told us about trauma that had led her to have panic attacks when she is around many other people. "*Just walking past the people,*" she said, "*all the people out here, my heart flutters and races and I get really sweaty.*" She went on to explain that this social anxiety is why she doesn't go to shelter: "*With, with my social anxiety, I can't do it. I can't.*" Some respondents cited their issues with PTSD, depression, or schizophrenia as barriers to sheltering in a congregate setting. Likewise, our respondents did not like living amongst the mental health conditions of others, especially people they did not know well and conditions with which they had no experience. Johnny, a black man in his 30s, said: "*You can't put like a regular person with a mental person with someone that came out of prison with someone else that is a drug addict. You can't put those four together. So you're gonna have chaos in there every, every time.*" When this "chaos" takes the form of fighting, respondents feel unsafe, and

hope to avoid the violence at shelter. Danielle, a black woman in her 20s, said, "*I just wish [the shelters] had more programs for like the, the mentally, the mental health people, ya know?*"

Doug, a man in his 20s who identifies as multi-racial, said that his friends have told him about fights they have been in at the shelter, and Doug himself has heard fighting, but has never seen it: "*And I do hear a lot of screaming and a lot of [fighting] sometimes. A lot of drinking. Yes, it is violent sometimes, so I do hear a lot and sometimes I do hear a lot of complaints of, of it but I never see it.*" Bill, a white man in his 20s, told us about the result of a fight he observed that made him rethink being in shelter: "*Oh, it, guy was bleeding, like his face was beaten up and busted open.*" When we asked Bill when he might seek emergency shelter he said, "*I have no idea. Like if it was winter and there was a blizzard, probably, but that would have to be it. Like it would have to be like life or death.*"

Many respondents told us that substances like drugs and alcohol were often present in shelters. Michael, a white man in his 30s who has recently received transitional housing and had stopped using substances with the help of methadone, said, "*Everybody I knowed does it or and I know everybody I know either are on it, or they're asking about it, or, you know? And when you're homeless it's hard to get away from those kind of people. It really is.*" All shelters in Polk County have a no substance use policy on the premises. However, our respondents told us that this policy is easily evadable, and substances are a part of shelter. Joe, a transgender person in their 30s, said, "*What's bad about [the shelter], uh, it's really easy to smuggle in anything you want, and they can't do anything [about] it.*" Bill told anyone he knows to avoid the shelter if possible because "*There's people smoking meth in the bathrooms, getting in fights. Smoking weed in the bathrooms, in the dorms.*" According to our respondents, substance use in the shelter often leads to some of the problematic interactions with others, detailed above, and makes a sober lifestyle much more difficult for clients who are in recovery.

GENDER-SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES AND BARRIERS

Respondents of all genders noted that certain gender-specific barriers to and problems with emergency shelter existed, and that most of these issues were experienced by women. We heard about unwanted sexual attention and a culture of sexualization of women that existed in shelter. Respondents also told us about assaults that happened in or around shelter that dissuaded them from seeking emergency shelter. Finally, some respondents noted it is difficult to exist outside the gender binary—that is, existing as a gender other than a man or women, like a transgender person—when the physical reality is that shelters are often divided along the male/female binary. Many respondents who spoke of these gendered barriers almost always suggested that a shelter for women—single and with families—would be incredibly appealing.

Unwanted sexual attention from others was an experience that respondents of all genders mention. Joe, a white transgender person in their 30s, explains: *"[It] happens to women, in particularly like just people from…anybody who's beautiful who walks into that shelter is immediately at risk. Like, they need a women's shelter.*" Mercedes, a white woman in her 40s, says, "*Um, I got hit on a lot. Like down here, it's more … um, I call it the biggest brothel in town.*"

Though many of the women respondents did not report experiences of unwanted attention and sexual violence, some did, and this was one of the main reasons they would not seek emergency shelter.

Sexual violence and violation were common in the lives of many women and transgender respondents before they became homeless. Some of these respondents described similarly traumatic experiences in or around the shelter itself. Echo, a multi-racial woman in her 20s, describes how she left the shelter after curfew when she had an interaction with a former boyfriend who had abused her. When she tried to reenter later that evening, Echo was told she had broken the rules and was not going to be allowed back into shelter for some time. Echo's situation shows how the interaction of past sexual violence with some of the rules of the shelter (the curfew) left her living outside.

Finally, Joe brought up an important consideration for the transgender unsheltered population, which is a particularly vulnerable group within the unsheltered population. "*Like, I met other Trans people, and a lot of us are [really] havin' a hard time—on the street. If you have your own house, it's a lot easier, probably.*" One shelter in town serves only men; the co-ed shelter is divided into male and female dorms. Joe and the other transgender people they have met who are unsheltered have a more difficult—and often less safe—experience: "*[The shelter is] a little bit safer [than being outside], but it's still not as safe as having your own place where you can lock the door.*" Many respondents suggested that a shelter arranged in a non-congregate way— with private doors that could lock—would solve some of the problems rooted in gender and interactions with other people.

APATHY AND THE PRECARIOUS BALANCE OF DAILY SURVIVAL

Depression was a common condition amongst our respondents when they talked about health and mental health. People told of past and current trauma that contributed to the experience of depression. However, our respondents overwhelmingly told us that one of things that made them feel good about their lives was that they were still alive, still moving, still here. This day-to-day existence, and the sense of resignation that often came with it, is another reason that many respondents did not go to shelter or seek other homelessness services. As they fought to balance the many precarious parts of daily survival, respondents also sometimes felt a great deal of apathy or complacency towards their housing situation. As Bella, a white woman in her 40s, said:

> *I mean it's like these cards become stacked against you and. When you're just beat down so much, it's hard to pull yourself up sometimes. … You give up, but you don't give up. I don't know if that makes any sense. Like I've given up on the hopes of finding housing, but I'm not gonna give up on my life.*

Bella's experience of complacency toward her housing situation was somewhat common amongst respondents.

Respondents who live outside spend most of their waking hours conducting the small tasks of daily living. These tasks—from hauling water, to walking everywhere, to finding appropriate food to eat, to simply facing the boredom and depression of their situation—can take an extraordinary amount of time and energy. Echo said, "*You'd be surprised how difficult it is to get fresh water for free. Um…or…next to free.*" Kevin, a white man in his 60s, discussed the cycle that results: "*That's the way every day is: wake up, think about food, a place to stay, to sleep, and you don't, you just gotta keep on, keep goin'.*" The effort it takes to enter shelter, or seek services, is effort that could be spent on physical survival routines, or just on surviving mentally. Cora, a white woman in her 60s, described her typical summer day by saying "*I sleep a lot. I'll be honest it's hot out so I don't do much activity. … I wake up, play on my phone a bit, get up and go and rest. It's too hot to do anything much.*"

A day-to-day existence often took its toll on the ability of our respondents to think about the future. When survival depended on the immediacy of actions and present-moment decision-making—as did the survival of many of respondents, especially those living outside and camping—the idea of interrupting this routine with any kind of adjustment to life in shelter seemed almost impossible. Kevin described the impermanency of his situation, and how finding a place to sleep even outside is almost a day-long activity:

> *Then I look around and I find my, some of my friends, they go, well, ask me, well, you find a place to sleep, or I ask them the same thing, they say, yeah. So instead of me lookin', I go with them for one night, then start all over again.*

Rain, a transgender person in their 20s, described how the impermanency and changeability of being unsheltered affected their mental health. This, they said, takes a toll on their ability to even think about how to get out of the situation they are in: "*Um sometimes unstable or changing environment constantly, it's hard to hold my brain together for one thing. …Um, I don't have anywhere to live or stay so there's really nowhere to anchor my thoughts.*"

Lara, a white woman in her 30s, who has used methadone to recover from a substance addiction, explained that she got used to living unsheltered because she was somewhat mentally removed when she was using. Explaining this apathy, she said, "*It was just, it became normal. I kind of noticed that I had just had adapted to all this crazy fucked up shit.*" Bella, similarly, said, "*I've noticed myself becoming complacent where I'm at, and I okay, I don't wanna be there. I don't. I mean, not where I'm at, but in my head I don't wanna be complacent. I don't want be comfortable there to live like that.*" Perhaps this complacency is adaptation to a way of life that is too demanding physically to find one's way out of and is one of the barriers to entering shelter for some people experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

PROFILE: LARA, WHITE WOMAN, 30s

The first thing Lara tells us is about a childhood defined by scarcity and trauma:

I mean, I didn't have an easy childhood. My mom was a single mom raising three kids and she, you know, she did it by herself. … She struggled and then she also struggled with, um, alcoholism, so that was a really big thing. [After my brother and sister left] I'm here by myself, and my mom's always working or she's passed out on the living room floor. And you know, so I kind of just was by myself a lot.

Lara's father exited her life early on. She recalls waiting for him to pick her up one weekend, and receiving a call. *"[He said] 'I think it's best we not see each other anymore,' and hung up on me. Yes.'"* She bounced around between different parental figures after her "*mom went psycho crazy and put herself in a mental institution,*" and ended up between Delaware and Maryland during her teenage years. Lara lived with her sister's father, who "*always treated me like, like his daughter,*" and helping to raise her sister's daughter, who was four-months-old when her sister left. "*So I was fourteen, raising a four-month-old child, going to school and getting straight A's, and holding a full-time [babysitting job.]*"

At some point, Lara fell into substance use: she says she was "*addicted to heroin. I also, I was an active meth user as well, but I wasn't addicted to it.*" She went through several rehab programs, like House of Mercy, and eventually was able to stop using with the help of methadone. But her living situation has deteriorated in the past year, even though she works two jobs. When she exited rehab, Lara and her boyfriend stayed "*in the shelter and then I timed out at the shelter, so we had to find a place for us to go.*" Because they were both working full-time hours at a local restaurant, they found a temporary efficiency that would take them without credit histories. They stayed there for two weeks and four days. The problem was:

it was nine hundred dollars for two weeks. And yes, it's really expensive, but the place we were working, we could have been able to afford it every two weeks, because we got paid every two weeks. … And then they started cutting everybody's hours because the labor's too high.

The couple no longer had enough earnings between them to pay rent on their apartment. Now, "*I sleep where I fall,*" she tells us, with a resigned laugh.

Lara continues to work at the restaurant that cut her hours, and she and her boyfriend just took a job at a packaging center through a temp agency. "*We, I work 8:00 to 4:00 at [the facility].*" She can then take evening shifts at the restaurant. She hates the job at the packaging facility but it pays well, and her boyfriend can work there too. "*So we have, we both have two jobs, they're the same jobs, but we, we both have two jobs, so you know what I mean, so we're trying. It's just hard. And like last night, we slept behind the um, … shelter.*"

Lara and her boyfriend choose to sleep across the street from the shelter because the proximity to services it provides, and the presence of the overnight security guards for the shelter gives them some peace of mind. She says she will not seek shelter again when her ninety days out of the shelter are up. She thinks for a moment, and then tells us that

> *Polk County was definitely the worst jail I've ever been to in my life, and it's just horrible. I can't do that. Um, and then honestly, I would rather be in prison than at [the shelter]. [Well], I would not rather be at Polk County than the shelter because Polk County is horrible. But prison, prison wasn't that bad.*

Lara discusses issues of cleanliness and other people in the shelter. She also tells us that the rules are confusing, and she lost a lot of important personal belongings that she thought the shelter would store for her when she went to be with her mother as she passed away. "*I found out my mom was dying…so I left for three days with [my boyfriend] and just stayed gone for a little bit because I needed peace. You can't get peace there.*" Lara's understanding was that the shelter would hold onto her belongings for 30 days. Instead, when she returned three days later, she found they had "*thrown away all my stuff."*

> *I had my teddy bear that my mom had bought me, and I don't have that no more and that was the last thing my mom ever bought me no because no she's passed away. Um, my birth certificate was in there. My social security card was in there, you know, everything, basically almost everything I owned.*

The loss of this small duffel bag soured Lara on ever going back to the shelter, but it wasn't just that. She realized that the benefits she was getting were not worth the cost—of peace, of her stuff, of the dignity you can have in your own space. For example, she tells us that the shelter says they provides services, but "*I was there for three months, and you never gave me a service worker.*"

Instead, Lara and her boyfriend live outside, usually close to the shelter because of the added security and the small community of other unsheltered people. They make use of the various services and benefits offered by organizations around town. They get lunch at a shelter or community organization and charge their phones at another service provider where they can also take a shower. One organization has given them two tents, although both of these have been stolen at some point, and they've also received blankets and sleeping bags. The couple work their two jobs and sometimes stop into hotels downtown to use the restrooms.

Lara has been sober for three years, and even though "*it's hard, it really is, especially you know, being homeless…[but] I have built so much…and I don't want to go back down that …very, very dark and lonely rabbit hole.*" She describes ways that shelters could offer services that provide needed resources and arrangements, supporting personal dignity and various family forms. "*Make a couples shelter like, so that like, you know, because some…some people don't go to shelters, like if they're, if they're with someone because of separation anxiety. … It's scary for them to be apart from their spouse.*" For Lara, the costs of being in shelter—nightly separation from a loved one, loss of stuff, and lack of peace—are not worth the meager benefits. Lara has worked out a moment-to-moment life that, even without shelter, gives her what she needs while she waits for her two jobs to make ends meet:

Everybody thinks we're homeless because we chose that. Sometimes that's not, not the issue. … It just so happened that our money just wasn't there because of our job being so stupid, and now we're back on the streets. That's, we didn't choose that. … We don't choose to have two jobs and still have no money.

Discussion

Insufficient Benefits at the Cost of Dignity and Self-Determination

Respondents above detailed various aspects of shelter that deterred them from seeking it, and many of these things had to do with giving up some amount of dignity and self-determination upon entering. There are curfews, sometimes rigid schedules, and rules that are possibly necessary but often poorly enforced, unclear, changeable. Respondents also detailed the issues they had with other clients at the shelter, people they did not know or like, but with whom they had to live in close physical proximity. These are some of the costs of shelter. Some respondents made the rational choice to pay these costs because their basic physical needs were more pressing at the time: those who did not know how to camp, those who were more afraid for their physical safety outside than in group living, and those who found themselves unprepared for the extreme weather in Iowa. However, as Lara and others detailed, sometimes the benefits of being in shelter are too low to make up for these perceived costs.

Rational choice—the theory that all people use their self-interests and preferences to make choices that will provide them with the best benefits—played a key role in many other respondents' decisions to seek or to avoid emergency shelter. Some people said they would go to emergency shelter if they needed a good night's sleep—problems with getting enough sleep were huge—but others did not even get the benefit of sleep from the shelter. Michael, a white man in his 30s, said, "*When I was in the shelter, the whole day was me tryin' to find a place to take a nap cause I just feel like I never slept enough.*" Now, Michael has his own efficiency apartment through a housing-first program; he told us he has been sleeping from 8:00 p.m. until 8:00 a.m. each day. Barry, a white man in his 30s, said that the only benefit of the shelter is that it is a "*safe place,*" but he had figured out how to patch together safety with a small community outside. The other benefits, he told us, aren't worth it: "*I don't know what's going on with the staff [at the shelter.] They used to help and stuff with like housing and stuff. They don't do it no more.*"

We also heard of respondents going to shelter after assessing the costs and benefits. Though Rain, a white individual who identifies as transgender and is in their 20s, told us they wouldn't go to another shelter because of "*everything about the place, the routine, the scheduling and the food,*" they said that they plan to use a smaller youth shelter in town because it has much better, more comfortable, benefits:

Even if there's no bed, you know, 12:00-6:00, get some food, get some blankets and clothes and talk to some people and see what else you might be able to do. I guess it's nice to have resources, computers, guitar. You can hang out, do our whatever so…

Danielle, a black woman in her 30s, described the costs to her dignity of seeking services, especially shelter, in terms of problematic interactions with gatekeepers:

They're wanting to lecture me more than like be there for me. Cause like you know, even…humans, we're all humans, we go through natural stuff that, it's not just about being homeless. … You know people don't wanna talk about [why your boyfriend broke up with you], they wanna talk about you being homeless and why you're homeless and what you need to do to do it, why you're doing it…Just, it's a lot of lecturing.

Unsheltered individuals reassess the cost of shelter to the benefits often, as immediate physical needs change with the days, weeks, and seasons, and there is an underlying impermanency in almost all arrangements for survival outside. Respondents also work hard to get needed benefits out of the services and shelter, sometimes to no avail. Travis said, "*You jump through hoops and sometimes stuff happens.*" He's chosen not to be in shelter at the moment: "*I was camping for the majority of the past year off and on because shelters were stressful. … I'll probably end up back at [the shelter] eventually.*" However, going through these motions of simply asking for help and still seeing no benefit is costly to dignity and emotional well-being. As Nora, a woman who identifies as multi-racial and is in her 20s, said, *"[I'm] depressed and just fed up. Especially when I've asked for help from not just family but friends or like…emergency shelters or…just in general and being told no we can't help you. There's a list, or no, you don't qualify. Or…"*

Finally, some respondents' responses to interview questions suggested that going into shelter would cost them their understanding of themselves as independent, capable, or motivated. The benefits shelter provided were not worth this loss of self-image. Greg, a white man in his 70s, and his dog were evicted from their subpar house about a month before we talked to him. Although he had a roof over his head, his landlord cut off the heat before the 2021-22 winter to force Greg to move out. (Notably, the water for the house had not been connected in the several years Greg had been living there.) Instead, Greg stayed and learned how to keep himself warm during the winter. He told us he's "*motivated by the big things not the little things in life.*" Indeed, this perception he has of himself as capable and motivated is the reason he gives us for not having sought emergency shelter upon eviction:

No, I'm not uh, no I'm not gonna go to a shelter. I try not to but that way I'm not looking down on people that do, it's just uh, I'm just super motivated to uh, it's like necessity is the mother of invention and I'm gonna prove it. And it has been and uh, I, I come up with good ideas daily

As Bella, a white woman in her 40s, told us, "*I've always been an independ, independent woman. I've always done things myself…For me, that's, it's hard to move past my pride.*" When

entering it costs people their pride and their self-view that they are motivated, capable people, the basic physical needs that shelter meets are rarely worth the cost.

Conclusion

Our surveys of 152 individuals living unsheltered in Polk County, and 37 in-depth interviews of the same, suggest that people experiencing homelessness have certain strong assumptions regarding, and experiences with, emergency shelter. These data also suggest that people become accustomed to certain patterns of life to provide for their own daily physical needs and that often, entering shelter is not worth the cost of interrupting these routines or letting go of some level of self-determination. Results from the survey show that people living unsheltered in Polk County value certain aspects of living outside, like being in a natural environment, not being subject to institutional rules, the peace they are able to find, and—similarly—the smaller number of people with whom they choose to surround themselves. These results map onto what survey respondents say are reasons they would avoid emergency shelter: negative interactions with other people and safety concerns dissuaded people from going to shelter, as did unfavorable and confusing rules, and issues with shelter staff. Some survey respondents said they would seek emergency shelter, and others said they would in a "life-or-death" situation, but preferred being outdoors.

That said, the survey also showed that almost all respondents a permanent home, like a quality apartment or a house, "anything," that was safe, affordable, and allowed them to bring family and pets with them. Only two people out of those surveyed said they wanted to live in a tent. Finally, the survey shows the importance people living unsheltered in Polk County put on the ability of leaders to listen to them and who display compassion and kindness. Given the dire situation many unsheltered individuals find themselves in, respondents said they needed more, and more accessible, resources (like food and water, as well as more regular access to things like showers and toilets) generally, more affordable and available housing specifically. Respondents used the term "help us" often when explaining what they would tell someone in charge.

Our in-depth interviews with 37 people who had recently lived or were currently living unsheltered in Polk County revealed important information about barriers to seeking emergency shelter. Some of these were shelter-specific barriers to emergency shelter as 1.) the physical conditions of shelter; 2.) the rules, regulations, and routines required of shelter; 3.) negative perceptions of shelter staff; 4.) negative perceptions of other shelter clients. Additionally, we identify issues specific to the lived experiences of individuals, usually women and transgender people, who face particular 5.) gender-specific barriers. Another stemmed from the way life is structured and experienced while a person is living outside: 6.) apathy and precarious balance of daily survival. These barriers are not exhaustive but are those that cut across the most interviews. Finally, unsheltered individuals make choices about their lives that are informed by

continuous cost-benefit analyses; what they often see as insufficient benefits from the shelter come at the high cost of self-determination.

It is important to note that the barriers we have identified by talking to people living unsheltered in Polk County are not unique to Central Iowa. Though Iowa has more extreme weather than some places—and has extreme weather in both the summer and the winter—the experiences of people living unsheltered in Polk County and the barriers to emergency shelter that they face have been documented in other studies (see Background Literature, above). However, our systematic study of the lived experiences of the unsheltered population of Polk County provides a strong foundation on which to refine policy and programs for unsheltered individuals. Below, we outline several policy recommendations based on the literature and our findings.

Policy Implications

This section discusses the specific barriers people living unsheltered in Polk County relayed in their interviews and ties these barriers to specific policy recommendations that may be beneficial in the short and medium term. This section then concludes with some structural recommendations that the existing research and best practices suggest would be beneficial. These structural recommendations encompass many of the issues that our respondents discussed, and address the problem of unsheltered homelessness more holistically and sustainably than the shorter-term approaches.

Short-term: Actionable Next Steps, Winter 2022-2023

Many solutions to the issue of unsheltered homelessness in Polk County will require an investment of time money that it will likely not be possible to marshal this winter. We thus propose two specific next steps for those interested in ensuring the well-being of the unsheltered population in Polk County during the 2022-2023 winter. These proposals account for the very different concerns people living unsheltered have about emergency shelter and the different patchwork solutions many have arranged to avoid it. For example, we know that some respondents simply want better and easier or to access shelter. Others said that they would not seek shelter because they were prepared to live outside, even at the height of winter. The homeless outreach community in Polk County knows the people living unsheltered well; they will need to cooperate with information and relationships to identify who needs help, where they are, and which of the temporary solutions will work best to keep each individual as safe as possible.

ADDRESS AND CHANGE SEVERAL COMFORT AND ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES AT EMERGENCY SHELTER

As a first step, emergency shelters in the Des Moines area should assess how their practices and policies might influence individuals' ability and desire to enter shelter during extreme

weather and implement any low-cost, low-barrier changes that may increase shelter uptake. Shelters should specifically consider making overflow rooms as comfortable as possible—with beds or cots, adequate blankets, and enough quiet, lights-off time to allow for adequate nightly sleep. Additionally, emergency Des Moines shelters should consider how consistent and efficient their systems for handling personal items and pets are, and whether these systems may be deterring vulnerable PEH. Finally, any changes made to increase the comfort, accessibility, and hospitality of current operations in emergency shelters should be communicated to the unsheltered population of Polk County through continued outreach and relationship-building.

SURVIVAL ACTION PLANS AND FOLLOW-UP WITH PEOPLE LIVING OUTSIDE

Of the 152 people surveyed, 22 said they preferred living outside to seeking emergency shelter. This does not mean these respondents do not ultimately want housing: only two respondents from our survey sample said they preferred living outside to having permanent, stable, and indoor housing. However, some of the people living unsheltered in Polk County have been camping off the grid for so long that they will likely not want to leave their belongings and way of survival for an unknown or temporary shelter arrangement. Polk County's homeless service providers should coordinate to identify these specific individuals and come up with action plans for each PEH, essentially providing a dedicated caseworker for each unsheltered individual. Instead of PEH coming to a central point of shelter and aid, specific resources like food, clothing, blankets, tents, and safe methods of heat would be provided to known camp locations at regular intervals. Information about the individual could be gathered at each encounter, and outreach could continue to encourage the use of temporary warming stations or shelter during the coldest days.

Medium-Term: Barrier-Specific Goals

WARMING STATIONS AS ALTERNATE OVERFLOW EMERGENCY SHELTER

For the unsheltered individuals in Polk County who choose to go to emergency shelter during the winter, a place that is less-crowded and less-scheduled than the traditional shelter would provide important physical respite from the cold. Warming stations that, with the addition of cots and more staff, could also serve as alternate emergency shelter would be a temporary solution for these unsheltered individuals. Advertising the low-barrier and less-crowded aspects of these warming stations amongst people living unsheltered in Polk County will be an important part of any rollout strategy. Stations should provide a comfortable and quiet physical location during the day and have several outreach and social service workers on hand to assess the individual needs of people living unsheltered. Stations should also have adequate security and a short and accessible list of sensible expectations that ensure the security of guests and staff.[iv] To become an emergency nighttime shelter, stations would designate hours when people could enter and leave. They would also provide adequate sleeping arrangements, like rollaway beds or cots. To

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[iv] See the National Alliance to End Homelessness's Emergency Shelter Webinar Series: https://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/GuidanceEmergencyShelterExpectations_4_2022.pdf

make these locations more accessible to more unsheltered people, transportation should be advertised and arranged for those seeking the services. Several of our respondents mentioned having been to temporary nighttime shelters in other cities during their time living unsheltered. Iowa City has one such example that could be assessed for effectiveness in Des Moines.[v]

BEGIN TRANSITIONING TO A NORM OF LOW-BARRIER, NON-CONGREGATE EMERGENCY SHELTER

A transition to more private, non-congregate emergency shelter settings is one of the most needed and hoped for reforms among this study's participants. A shift to lower-barrier and non-congregate shelter would address many individual barriers to shelter described in interviews, including negative interactions with other clients, physical crowding in larger spaces, and several gender-based restrictions. Other studies have found that people living unsheltered experienced these non-congregate arrangements during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and prefer non-congregate settings to living in more-crowded, less-private shelters; indeed, many even prefer living outside to congregate shelter (Boshart 2022). Because many CoC's and their providers shifted to non-congregate arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic, blueprints exist that could support efficiently transitioning to a norm of non-congregate shelter in Polk County.

IMPROVE THE PHYSICAL CONDITIONS OF SHELTER

A number of respondents referred to over-crowding and lack of cleanliness as a major barrier to their consuming services in the Des Moines area, particularly among the shelters. Greater resources should be devoted to cleaning, maintaining and transforming physical spaces that host services. This kind of diligence conveys respect and protects dignity; clients will appreciate both. Some of our respondents indicated that sanitary conditions, in particular, can represent such a long-term barrier that unsheltered individuals may opt out of shelters permanently if their perception of physical conditions is sufficiently low. As such, any improvements in facilities or conditions may need to be combined with outreach to homeless communities that communicates changes have been made, and explaining how those changes will be sustained and institutionalized.

In the near term, greater attention must be paid to creating environments that allow individuals more autonomy to determine how and under what circumstance they come into contact with other individuals (Baral et al., 2021). Many of our respondents mentioned the desire for privacy, and the safety that locking a door provides, even if it is just a door to a small room. Our local shelters and service providers should consider how to rearrange existing physical space to create more non-congregate-like settings; the community should also continue to pursue opportunities like purchasing vacant motels or repurposing some other larger space with private areas for individuals, couples, and families.

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[v] See Johnson County Homeless Coordinating Board: http://www.jchomeless.org/winter-emergency-shelter.html

CREATE RESOURCES AND SPACES THAT ADDRESS GENDER AND COMPANION-SPECIFIC ISSUES AND INCREASE CAPACITY FOR FAMILIES IN LOCAL SHELTERS

For cis-gendered and transgender women without families or partners, Polk County should institute a shelter for women, specifically.[vi] Unsheltered women in Polk County see their choices of shelter as limited and often unappealing, and this can lead to the choice to live outside. Men, women, and people who identified as transgender echoed each other during our interviews and surveys in calling out the need for a dedicated women's shelter; the research supports such an addition to the network of services. Additionally, service-providers should begin to specifically investigate how policies and physical spaces can be adjusted to accommodate all transgender individuals (McDonald, 2022).

As resources and time allow, steps should be taken in the medium and long-term to create physical spaces that facilitate privacy for families, romantic partners, or individuals seeking to preserve their privacy, their sobriety, and/or their personal safety away from fellow consumers that may present barriers to the same—barriers that might be particularly acute for women (Baral et al., 2021).[vii] According to Walsh et al. (2010), "[a]lthough gender separation was important to a number of participants, women also identified a loss of support when male partners could not live in the same space, and women-only areas can make it difficult to house women with their older male children. Some women proposed that these conflicts between safety and support could be mitigated by providing private rooms" (pg. 40).

Emotional, mental, and physical safety of all clients should continue to be prioritized. Issues of past and contemporary sexual violence came up as reasons for not going to shelter from multiple women we interviewed. Organizations providing shelter in Polk County should make or increase services for victims of past trauma and provide clear instructions for accessing such services. Additionally, all organizations providing emergency shelter should also create clear, non-punitive procedures for reporting any kind of violent incident, and effectively communicate those procedures to clients when they enter the facility. Moreover, lack of companionship and connection can be a source of substantial emotional hardship. Several respondents asserted that pet bans are a problem with seeking emergency shelter. Shelters should take steps to craft a physical environment where being accompanied to shelter by a pet is more viable, as they represent a source of companionship, well-being, and stability for people living unsheltered (Rew, 2000).

REASSESS RULES, NORMS AND ROUTINES

Respondents indicated that they often perceive shelter rules as onerous, unnecessarily fluid, and occasionally arbitrary. As clients begin to perceive rules-in-use as unfair or likely to result in their expulsion from the shelter, they become more likely to opt out, choosing the stability of life

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[vi] E.g. Cheung & Hwang, (2004); de Vet et al., (2019)
[vii] See also Nagendra & Blasco (2017) for a brief exploration of what the NAEH refers to as the Housing-focused Shelter Model.

outdoors over the uncertainty they perceive within the confines of delivered services (M. C. Anderson et al., 2021; Cloke et al., 2008; Irwin et al., 2008; Wusinich et al., 2019). In particular, Polk County respondents pointed to rules that bar cellphones (and/or their recharging) and enforce curfews as two reasons they would not go back to emergency shelter. Respondents also commented on the speed at which shelter rules seem to change or be enforced. Finally, respondents were often unclear about the rules in the first place and did not know where to get all of the information they needed to comply with them.[viii]

Respondents also expressed frustration with early wake-up rules, breakfasts and dinners that were served at times they were not used to, and mandatory participation in religious services. We recognize that routines are part of institutional living, and unavoidable to some extent; we also recognize that the perception of mandatory participation in religious services is likely not policy at emergency shelters in Polk County. Some of these rules for possessions and behavior (like, for instance, allowing cell phones) are also more necessary for congregate, institutional living; if physical spaces are transformed to allow more privacy and personal storage, these types of rules will likely become less necessary. Even if non-congregate shelter becomes the norm, however, organizations should make efforts to promote consistency of rules, get buy-in from clients for those rules, and investigate the necessity of them. The National Alliance to End Homelessness suggests that shelter rules be rebranded as "expectations." They should include a short list of user-friendly expectations that promote safety and housing in their language. Our interviews also indicate that the expectations need to be better-communicated and easily accessible for reference. Service providers should also assess their current rules to determine their necessity. The goal should be to communicate strategies for maintaining an orderly and respectful environment without excessively dictating consumer behavior.

DISRUPT CONFLICTS BETWEEN CLIENTS AND LIMIT ON-SITE DRUG USAGE

Respondents reported that being near other individuals experiencing similar difficulties could act as a trigger to their own struggles with mental health or substance abuse. Other individuals simply described the experience of being around other people a struggle. The literature suggests that unsheltered individuals will often eschew the shelter system to avoid unpleasant, hostile, or difficult encounters with other unsheltered people; they prefer determining for themselves under what circumstances they have social encounters with others (Cloke et al., 2008; DeWard & Moe, 2010; Dordick, 1996; Petrovich & Cronley, 2015). Non-congregate shelter would address many of these issues—if people prefer to be alone, or need to be alone for reasons of sobriety, they can achieve that. Alternately, creating separate areas of congregate shelters for people who need specific, non-triggering environments is a temporary solution. Shelters should also consider how to assure substances are not brought into or used in their facilities, while recognizing that their acceptance of unsheltered people who may be using substances is a critical service. A partnership between substance harm reduction[ix] organizations and homeless services is recommended.

[viii] See also Miller & Keys (2001).
[ix] https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/harm-reduction

According to Caton et al., (2005): "participants who were younger and who had better psychosocial adjustment, recent or current employment, earned income, adequate family support, no current drug treatment, and no arrest history experienced a shorter duration of homelessness" (pg. 1757). This finding suggests that people who have fewer of these protective factors, like employment and social support, will have longer spells of homelessness. Shelters must remain open to people with fewer protective factors, because they are the population in greatest need of supportive services, including shelter. Shelters can also facilitate the connection between those in the shelter to efficacious drug treatment, mental health facilities, and eventual employment (Caton et al., 2005; Liberty et al., 1998; A. Nyamathi et al., 2007). The shelter system is not specifically designed to offer wraparound services; it is a place for physical shelter from the elements. Supportive housing programs, on the other hand, are designed to offer these services. Transitioning long-term unsheltered individuals into supportive housing will not only assure that most in need be most likely to get services; it may thus allow those people most likely to transition out of shelter quickly better access to services (City of San Antonio, 2020; Schulenberg, 2019).

STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ORGANIZATION, STAFF, AND CLIENTS

In general, respondent discussions of staff at the shelters and homeless services in Des Moines were mixed: along with general and specific complaints about interactions with staff, there were a substantial number of positive reports. However, some respondents expressed that they were avoiding shelter because of past experiences with, and perceptions of, staff. The most common complaint among respondents was staff disposing of their possessions or not clearly communicating why and under what circumstances their personal effects would be seized or removed from storage. Generally, negative stories about interactions with staff included words like "rude," and suggested staff members were not as compassionate as respondents wanted them to be. Additionally, respondents perceived some staff to have negative attitudes about their jobs, unsheltered people, or the environment of their work generally.

The literature suggests that the attitude with which rules are enforced, the consistency with which rules are enforced, and pre-existing social goodwill deeply affect how those rules are perceived by program consumers (Biederman & Nichols, 2014; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008; Miller & Keys, 2001; Stevenson, 2014). In other words, PEH are more likely to respect and abide by rules-in-use if they generally perceive that the staff enforcing them are being fair, equitable, and kind. As stated earlier, simply reducing the load of rules to only what is necessary may attenuate the occurrence of negative interactions between consumers and staff. Moreover, regular sensitivity training or listening sessions where staff are encouraged to give voice to the needs and desires of program consumers could help to create stronger bonds between both groups.

For their part, staff should feel supported and backstopped by sufficient resources to do their jobs well. Research suggests that the people who work in fields such as this feel a strong intrinsic motivation to do their work (Gates et al., 2021; Packard, 2001). However, that may provide an incentive structure for organizations to continue to ask staff to do "more with less,"

creating a stressful and difficult work environment and exacerbating the potential for poor connection with the population of unsheltered individuals (Lim et al., 2022; Mann, 2006; Taylor & Westover, 2011). In the short-term, organizations should analyze their training procedures and employee handbooks for policies or guidelines that are not sufficiently client-oriented. Moreover, organizations should look for ways to incentivize the good and productive work that staff do and offer special recognition to staff members who go "above and beyond" in implementing the mission of the organization. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, organizations should do what they can to make staff feel appreciated through increased salaries, which have been demonstrated to motivate better outcomes from public servants across the board (Taylor & Taylor, 2011).

Long-Term: Structural Reforms

In addition to the proposed changes to address individual barriers, above, research suggests that several system-wide reforms would improve uptake of services and, ultimately, housing outcomes.

STRENGTHEN AND LEVERAGE REGULAR DATA COLLECTION PRACTICES

The Point-in-Time count in Polk County is an example of a discrete opportunity for system-wide data collection. However, the daily routine of homeless services in Polk County includes gathering, communicating, and recording qualitative information about the unsheltered community. Data-driven practices are often considered most desirable, and strong qualitative data can be invaluable to understanding patterns, problems, and opportunities as they arise for the unsheltered population. Polk County's homeless services should strengthen the uniformity with which these data are collected across service providers and institutionalize regular, scheduled opportunities for analysis of aggregate data. The detailed information collected would provide valuable insights on service delivery and effectiveness, and the expectation of uniformity in daily data collection would allow the system to be understood more holistically during analysis. On the whole, and within individual confidential cases, qualitative information like how long an individual has been unsheltered, what services they have consumed, or how their specific needs may have changed can show important patterns for intervention and services planning.

The literature supports the idea of using in-depth data as a system-wide tool. The needs of so-called "frequent users" of social services, emergency services, and shelter services almost always differ from those of the general population (Aidala et al., 2014; Ku et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017). Experts suggest conducting a "Frequent User System Engagement" (FUSE) analysis to identify particularly high utilizers of public resources among persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Such an analysis could be the first step in connecting people who are living unsheltered to appropriate housing resources and other social services (City of San Antonio, 2020; See also: Aidala et al., 2014; Smith & Moyer, 2021). This analysis could also rapidly identify important places where necessary support is falling short of client needs. Population outreach is best when it is systematized and coordinated across providers, ideally by

professionalizing processes for connecting unsheltered individuals with available services (City of San Antonio, 2020; Schulenberg, 2019)

INVEST IN AFFORDABLE PERMANENT HOUSING AND PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

All of the above recommendations will require a greater commitment of fiscal resources (Schulenberg, 2019). In all likelihood, this suggests a need to transition from a model that forefronts temporary, emergency-style shelter, to one that focuses more specifically on permanent or semi-permanent supportive housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018; Pottie et al., 2020; Schulenberg, 2019). Interviews with unsheltered people in Des Moines suggest the eligibility cycle for shelter in the Polk County system is counterproductive and is perceived as excessively paternalistic by the target population. Mandating a return to unsheltered status after a specific period is likely intended as a disincentive to prevent over-consumption of services and over-crowding. However, existing best practices strongly suggests this should be accomplished by prioritizing successful transitions between emergency shelter and supportive housing systems and by reducing barriers to consumption of system services whenever possible (City of San Antonio, 2020; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018; Wusinich et al., 2019). The churn of individuals or families through shelter availability on a systematic basis suggests supportive housing options are too limited or that the coordination between supportive, medium, or long-term housing options and the shelter system is insufficient (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018; Schulenberg, 2019).

The academic and programmatic literature is near unanimous in its assessment that permanent supportive housing improves outcomes overall for PEH across a number of relevant dimensions, such as mental health, personal well-being, improved interpersonal relationships, and long-term improvements to public costs associated with homelessness (Aubry et al., 2020; Bestor, 2021; Blosnich et al., 2020; Byrne et al., 2014; Jacob et al., 2021; Ly & Latimer, 2015; Padgett et al., 2016; Tiderington et al., 2022). For that reason, many strategic plans forefront the need to build a permanent supportive housing infrastructure in the medium-to-long term paired with a reconfigured governance structure that prioritizes connecting that infrastructure to PEH (e.g. National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018; Pottie et al., 2020; Schulenberg, 2019).

SOLICIT FREQUENT INPUT FROM UNSHELTERED INDIVIDUALS AND FRONTLINE PROVIDERS

Understanding the lived experience of individuals who are living unsheltered has become a best practice in homeless services. Following this, to the extent that they are able, people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, or those who have recently experienced it in a certain environment, should be part of any decision-making team at the levels of organizations and local government. Indeed, one of the most important things we heard from people during the survey was that they would like to tell "someone in charge" to talk to them and use their expertise. This expertise may help solve seemingly intractable problems. Additionally, providers who work directly with unsheltered individuals—whether as caseworkers, outreach providers, or shelter staffers—have a great amount of expertise to share with policy makers and the people

who develop programs. Thus, shelters should create a policy that includes people with lived experience and frontline staff on high-level decision-making teams. Additionally, community and government decision-makers should solicit input from these groups and institutionalize a way for people with lived experience living unsheltered and people providing unsheltered services to have a voice in the decision-making process.

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Appendix A: Survey Tool

Survey of People Living Outside in Polk County

1. Name: _____

2. Other names you go by: _____

3. Best way to contact: _____

4. Date of survey: _____

5. Location of Survey: _____

6. Tell me about how long you have been living outside.

_____

_____

_____

7. What Polk County groups, agencies, or organizations have you worked with for help with housing?

_____

_____

_____

8. Which Des Moines shelters have you stayed at in the past year? Which months? Seasons?

_____

_____

_____

9. What are some reasons you wouldn't go to emergency shelter?

_____

_____

_____

_____

10. What are some things you like about living outside?

_____

_____

_____

11. What are the biggest challenges living outside during the winter? What would help?

_____

_____

_____

12. What are the biggest challenges of living outside during the summer? What would help?

_____

_____

_____

13. What kind of housing would you like to have?

_____

_____

_____

14. If you could tell someone in charge how to help people who are living outside, what would you say?

_____

_____

_____

15. Would you be willing to be selected for a longer interview, and receive a $30 gift card?

Yes	No

16. What is your age? _____

17. What is your gender

	Female		Transgender		Other_____
	Male		Non-binary		

18. How would you describe your race?

	White		Native American		Other_____
	Black		Pacific Islander		
	Asian		Multiple Races		

19. Do you identify as Hispanic/Latin(a)(o)(x)?

Yes	No

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

I. Warm-up, Life history, Family

1. We'd like to begin with a big question: tell me the story of your life. You know, where you grew up and how you got to where you are today.

> TOPICS TO COVER:
> Parents/guardians
> Life at home
> Cultural background and religion
> Relationships with family members.
> School—level
> Neighborhood you grew up in
> Moving out
> Relationships with significant others and important friends
> Jobs (including current job)
> Parenthood
> History of health problems, addiction, substance abuse
> History of arrests, incarceration, probation, and/or warrants

II. Living Situation

1. How would you describe your living situation right now?

2. How did you come to have this living situation?

3. Tell me about any people who live with you right now. [Probe for each person's relationship to respondent.]

4. Now let's talk about the current area where you're living. Tell me all about what it's like for you to live in this area.

5. Some people tell us that winter is the hardest time to live outside; others tell us summer; and some people tell us that the seasons don't matter. How about for you?
> PROBE
> Survival strategies in different seasons

6. Tell me about any other places you've lived, stayed, or slept at for more than 30 days over the past two years.

PROBE
If you don't remember all of them, tell me about the two most important.

7. I'd like to know more about your experiences in shelters around here. Tell me about the last time you stayed at a shelter in the area.
PROBE
Is this typical of your other experiences?
What is the best thing? The worst thing?

8. Some people say they would go to emergency shelter under certain situations, others tell us that there is nothing that would make them go to emergency shelter. How about for you?
PROBE:
What keeps you from going to emergency shelter?
What would you need to change to be able to go?

9. What is the most important thing I should know about your experiences living outside or being without shelter?

III. Family and Friends

1. We've talked about the people you're living with, but I'd like to get to know a little more about other people who are important to you. Tell me about other family members or other friends. [Include extended family, but also neighbors, etc. Probe for relationship to respondent.]
POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:
a) How did you meet them?
b) How do you spend time with them?
c) How do they support you/you support them?

2. [IF A PARENT] I'd love to learn a little more about your children. Tell me about [child's name]. [REPEAT FOR ALL CHILDREN]
POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:
a) How old are they?
b) Tell me about their personalities or what they are like.
c) Who else plays a significant role in their lives?

3. [IF NOT ALREADY ANSWERED ABOVE] Is there someone else in your life we haven't discussed, like a romantic partner?

IV. Daily Routines

1. Now I want to get to know more about your life day to day. Tell me about a typical day last week. How about [WEEK DAY]?

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS/PROBE:
a) When do you usually get up in the morning?
b) When do you go to bed at night?
c) Where do you go during the day?
d) How do you get around during the day [mode of transportation]?
e) How does this change day by day or week by week?
f) [IF APPLICABLE] How about the other adults you live with?
g) How do/would these routines change if you were in shelter? Had housing?

2. Tell me about how you make ends meet right now.

3. Tell me about any programs or people who are really important to helping you get by right now.

4. How did things change for you during the pandemic?
POSSIBLE FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS
a) When do you expect them to return to normal?
b) How did the pandemic affect your:
   a. Housing
   b. Financial Situation
   c. Well-being
   d. Strategies for living outside

V. Physical Health

1. Tell me about your general health right now. How is it?
PROBES
a. Chronic conditions
b. Acute issues

2. Where do you access things like healthcare, medicine, or any kind of counseling?

3. How does your living situation impact your health right now?

VI. Worry and Well-Being

1. Now we're going to talk a bit more about what life was like for you over the past year. How have you been feeling over the past year?

2. In general, what issues do you worry about?

3. What worries you the most?

4. What brings you joy?

5. Whom do you turn to for advice?

VI. Conclusion

1. We have talked a lot about challenges in this interview. What makes you feel good about your life?

2. I know it may be difficult, but imagine yourself five years from now. Where would you like to be then? This could be financially, personally, geographically -- anything that matters to you.

3. If you could speak to someone in charge, someone who could really change things, what would you tell them?

VIII. Closing Remarks

Thank you very much for participating in this interview and for giving us your precious time. Your contribution to this study is very important to us and to our community partners. I don't have any more questions to ask you. Is there anything we have not talked about that you would like to share with me?