



Cambridge
Public Health
Department

**Preparing for Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)
Related Emergencies Among
People Experiencing Homelessness**

2023 Seminar Report

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Event Overview

Project Background

Cambridge Public Health Department (CPHD) was one of six jurisdictions in the nation awarded a grant from the National Association of County & City Health Officials (NACCHO) to participate in a project “Preparing for WASH-Related Emergencies Among People Experiencing Homelessness.”

CPHD developed a tiered approach to conduct the project engaging municipal departments as well as internal and external stakeholders in educational presentations and interactive discussions, culminating with the development of a plan for WASH-related emergency events. One of the established project deliverables was to conduct a discussion-based Seminar event to educate project participants on WASH-related emergencies and to explore the disproportionate impacts on people experiencing homelessness.

Seminar Overview

The Seminar was conducted over two sessions (1/26/23 and 2/9/23), utilizing the existing Cambridge “Shelter Provider Call.” Agencies represented included:

- BayCove/CASPAR
- Cambridge Health Alliance
- Cambridge Police Department
- Cambridge Public Health Department
- First Church
- Healthcare for the Homeless
- Hildebrand Family Self Help Center, Inc.
- Multi-Service Center
- On the Rise
- Salvation Army

The Seminar agenda included the following topics:

- Project Overview
- WASH-related Emergency Overview
- Open discussion on WASH-related roles and responsibilities, resources, and needs for unhoused community members and the organizations working with these individuals
- Next Steps

A summary of Seminar discussions and identified recommendations are captured in the following sections.



Summary of Discussions

The following is a summary of discussions that took place over the course of the two Seminar sessions.

I. Existing Coordination and Outreach Activities

Organizations supporting unhoused community members and/or providing services have multiple established coordination groups:

- Shelter Provider Call (every 2 weeks, Thursdays 11a-12p).
- Cambridge Nonprofit Coalition Unhoused Advocacy Subcommittee (meets every other Friday at 9AM, convened by Cambridge Non-Profit Coalition).
- “Outreach Call” – multi-disciplinary outreach focused on unhoused community members.

Education and outreach to unhoused community members can be challenging. During COVID-19 it was confusing for organizations and primarily done verbally. There is opportunity for CPHD to lead coordination, ensuring there is consistent messaging that can be shared with providers for dissemination, and support translation or alternate format development. Organizations currently supporting education and outreach include:

- CHA: Street Medicine Program and First Step. Currently assessing bringing on Community Health Workers to support efforts.
- Step Van
- First Step
- On the Rise
- Elliot Community Health Services
- Bay Cove
- MDOT
- Homes For Families. An advocacy organization for unhoused and underhoused individuals.

II. Needs for Unhoused Community Members related to WASH-related Emergencies

Discussions with participants revolved around infrastructure, resources, and policy needs. Participants also reinforced the need to solicit or include feedback from individuals with lived experience.

Infrastructure and Resources

- The current infrastructure is patched together and insufficient for individuals to maintain health and hygiene. Hygiene facilities are mostly construction type sites that are not well maintained. How do we get the system sufficient and working now, let alone during an emergency? There is a need to make services baseline accessible and



functional. If we improve and increase current infrastructure, this will prevent future outbreaks and spread.

- Discussion on how to request or deploy handwashing stations, portable toilets, and showers during a WASH-related emergency. Not clear how to request or whether such resources exist.
- Central Square was noted to be a high-traffic priority area. During an emergency event, there would be an immediate need to deploy resources or temporary facilities here.
- There were challenges to access water during COVID-19. Public water-bottle refill stations were turned off to prevent disease transmission but impacted access to water. To mitigate, in some instances, disposable plastic bottles of water were provided but that was not sustainable and created litter.
- Some resources for Go Kits were discussed (extra water, sterile saline, wound care supplies), but participants recommended engaging individuals with lived experience to provide most accurate feedback on WASH-related Go Kit supplies.
- Recommended infrastructure and resource needs:
 - Improved/clean and increased quantity of bathrooms and showers.
 - Changing rooms to change clothing and to use wipe/dry showers.
 - Public dry-heat/dry-cleaning facilities to drop/clean clothing.
 - Increased access to laundry facilities.
 - Lockers for storing belongings.
 - Providing paper-sheets and paper-pillowcases.

Policy

- Participants discussed the extensive needs of the unhoused community members, including mental health, substance misuse and dependency, and distrust of uniforms. During COVID-19, uniformed services (e.g., police) were often tasked with distributing resources, which was not the best strategy. There is a need for people with better understanding of the individuals. A structural part of emergency services is to build a public health outreach team. Consider how to expand and increase policies, language, and training for people conducting outreach work. Consider if there is opportunity for CPHD and/or CHA to increase public health education roles.
- Policy work needs to be culturally respectful and linguistically appropriate.
- Is there opportunity to outreach to restaurants, hotels, or other businesses to conduct a scan of hygiene facilities, establish relationships, and assess how these facilities might be used during emergency events? This would likely require agreements and financial incentives.
- Is there opportunity to establish relationships or agreements with laundromats to increase access to clean clothes and laundering?



- Consider establishing a WASH-related working group and/or “WASH Response Team.”

Individuals with Lived Experience

Participants reinforced the need to solicit or include feedback from individuals with lived experience. A 2021 Bathroom Survey conducted by the Cambridge Nonprofit Coalition Unhoused Advocacy Subcommittee was discussed. Participants agreed there has been enough recent change to repeat the survey and include additional questions around WASH-related emergency needs. Additional discussion included the following comments and recommendations:

- Survey and focus groups would be valuable.
- Recommendation to provide incentives (e.g., Dunkin Donuts or CVS gift cards).
- Conduct sessions in multiple languages.
- Best practice to give notice about focus groups but to be flexible enough to just set a time when individuals are likely to be present (e.g., around lunch time).
- Staff from On the Rise and FirstStep Street Outreach offered experience and support in conducting these efforts.
- Recommended using the Bathroom Survey and adding some questions to meet WASH-related emergency needs, such as:
 - Toilet, shower, handwashing, hygiene locations (use, location, barriers)
 - Drinking water (use, location, barriers)
 - If you could design an ideal “go kit” for WASH, what would it contain?
 - Other current needs or feedback

Additional Discussion

- Providers commented on the need to identify “who to call in the City” and requested an updated list of contacts and resources. During COVID-19, it was unclear who to call and how to get information or resources from at the City.
- Providers expressed the need for planning considerations for congregate settings (e.g., the YMCA, single room occupancy (SRO), and other group living settings).
- Providers expressed the need for planning considerations for individuals who only sleep outside. This number has increased recently; many have left shelters during COVID-19 pandemic due to safety concerns.
- The Warming Center runs December 1-April 1. In the “off-season” there is considerable loss of space and resources, but no change to the need for services.
- There is no organized referral line, or system for a warm hand off. There are some resource lists, but in general, providers fill this role.



Recommendations and Next Steps

Seminar Recommendations

The following recommendations were identified during the Seminar discussions.

- Include individuals with lived experience in this project and in future planning efforts. Review and discuss example from San Jose Lived Experience Advisory Board (LEAB): <https://leabsv.org>
- Consider establishing a WASH-emergency workgroup.
- Assess memorandums of agreement with laundromats and/or businesses with hygiene facilities that may be utilized during WASH-related emergencies.
- Work with partners to conduct a survey and/or focus group effort similar to the 2021 Bathroom Survey (with some additional questions around WASH-emergencies).
- Consider future opportunities for CPHD to lead development of multi-language, multi-format health education materials and share with providers to ensure clear, consistent guidance and messaging.
- Consider how to expand and increase policies, language, and training for people conducting outreach work. Provide subject matter expertise to ensure future policy work is culturally respectful and linguistically appropriate.
- Further discussions are needed on referral lines and how to coordinate warm hand offs for resources or services. Without a formal process or system, this is an added responsibility to whichever provider gets called or asked.
- Elevate the following topics to Workshop or Tabletop Exercise discussions:
 - Available resources and process to request or deploy handwashing stations, portable toilets, and showers during a WASH-related emergency.
 - Updated list of City contact information and resources for providers.

Cambridge Non-Profit Coalition Unhoused Advocacy Subcommittee

On 2/24/23, the Cambridge WASH Planning Team participated in the Cambridge Non-Profit Coalition Unhoused Advocacy Subcommittee. This Subcommittee conducted the 2021 Bathroom Survey and during the call provided background, results, and implementation lessons learned. The 2021 Bathroom Survey was precipitated by a Harvard University student-led initiative “Free to Flush” and Bathroom Bill of Rights. The City of Cambridge considered partnering with private businesses to incentivize allowing unhoused individuals to use their bathrooms. Results from the survey showed unhoused community members typically would not want to use these bathrooms, and gathered feedback on usage and needs. The survey was conducted verbally in English language and used Google Form with laminated copies of the surveys to show participants. The survey was administered at MAAP, Friday Café, the Women's Center, and at two encampments.



The group agreed with the recommendation to engage individuals with lived experience. There is no formal way to do this now and a Lived Experience Advisory Board was agreed upon as an outcome/longer term goal of this project. One of the Subcommittee members advocated to include an individual with lived experience in the upcoming Tabletop Exercise.

Project Next Steps

The next steps outlined in the project “Preparing for WASH-Related Emergencies Among People Experiencing Homelessness” include:

- Conduct a discussion-based workshop with project participants to develop plans for responding to WASH-emergencies, resulting in a summary report.
- Develop and conduct an awareness level training for emergency responders and volunteers on WASH-emergencies and their disproportionate impacts on people experiencing homelessness.
- Develop a CPHD WASH-Emergency plan, proposed to sit as an Annex to the Emergency Response Plan.
- Conduct a discussion-based tabletop exercise to evaluate the draft CPHD WASH-Emergency plan, resulting in an After-Action Report and Improvement Plan.
- Present the final project deliverables and lessons learned at the April 2023 NACCHO Preparedness Summit.

The Planning Team determined that the most effective way to include lived experience in this project will be to conduct a meeting after the conclusion of the discussion-based tabletop exercise with unhoused community members to share the results of the project and draft recommendations to ensure they are inclusive and appropriate.

Recommendations and longer term goals are proposed to occur as an outcome of this project, not a direct deliverable of the established project scope and lifecycle.