

ISP Releases Illinois Law Enforcement Response For Homelessness Guidebook

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SPRINGFIELD – The Illinois State Police (ISP) is releasing the first Illinois Law Enforcement Response to Homelessness Guidebook (Guidebook). The Guidebook is designed to provide law enforcement agencies and officers across Illinois with practical community resources, planning tools, training resources, and policy examples to help create a safer and more inclusive environment for all residents, including people experiencing homelessness (PEH).

“Law enforcement officers respond to all types of emergencies and social-service related calls among all populations, including people experiencing homelessness,” said ISP Director Brendan F. Kelly. “Because of these interactions, officers are in a position to provide information about resources and programs available in communities, and help connect individuals to longer-term solutions to prevent and end homelessness.”

When responding to calls, police officers face contributing factors to homelessness such as mental illness, substance use, and criminal activity, and must develop skills in de-escalation and crisis intervention. Officers and departments can use their personnel and other resources more strategically but investing in developing community collaborations and having the most up-to-date information about referrals and other assistance.

“Project NOW is proud to partner with our state partners in government, law enforcement, and human services to produce the comprehensive Illinois Law Enforcement Response to Homelessness Guidebook. It is comprehensive in nature, contextual to the lived experience and expertise of those experiencing homelessness and a call to collective action for all of us,” said Project NOW Community Action Agency Executive Director Dwight L. Ford. “We recognize the value of our law enforcement community as a vital part of our society. The guidebook is a living testament of our collective will and a declarative departure from old ways of thinking which diminish relationships and degrades human life. Our sincere hope the guidebook becomes our North Star, giving us direction in our service to people experiencing homelessness.”

This Guidebook provides an in-depth analysis of various strategies and programs that have been successful in addressing homelessness in other jurisdictions. It examines the role of specialized units, such as Homeless Outreach Teams (HOTs) that address mental health, in effectively managing homeless encampments, property seizures, and homeless court systems. Furthermore, this Guidebook explores the importance of police training on homelessness, innovative uses of technology and data-sharing, funding mechanisms for homeless assistance programs, and regional partnerships to share resources.

“Bolstering the crisis safety net is a pillar of our state plan to prevent and end homelessness,” said State Homelessness Chief Christine Haley. “Through this guidebook, the Illinois State Police provide concrete examples of compassionate and effective strategies on how police officers can serve residents living outside, strengthening the safety net for all.”

“Homelessness equates to humanity. For a community to say they care about their citizens they must include all citizens,” said Fairview Heights Police Department Chief Stave Johnson. “The problem is what do we do with people who have mental health needs, drug behaviors and simply don’t want to change or get help? This guide will not

solve all problems, but is a best practice stepping stone guide for local governments to start the process of helping all of their citizens.”

A promising approach adopted by numerous police departments across the country, and highlighted by the Police Executive Research Forum, is the establishment of HOTs. These specialized units often work in collaboration with mental health service providers to connect homeless individuals with necessary services and resources. The co-responder model, wherein patrol officers are paired with or co-located with mental health service providers, has proven to be effective in facilitating access to services for homeless individuals. Implementing similar practices in Illinois could significantly improve interaction and communication with the homeless. By adopting best practices and fostering collaboration with other stakeholders, the Illinois law enforcement community can make a significant impact on addressing homelessness in the state.

"The Madison County Sheriff's Office is honored to be a part of this collaboration which not only will assist law enforcement in dealing with the physical and economic difficulties of homelessness, but also helps educate officers to understand the mental and emotional barriers associated with this crisis as well," said Madison County Sheriff Jeff Connor.

"The DeKalb Police Department feels privileged and honored to serve, protect, and assist all members of the community from all walks of life. We hope to provide resources to persons experiencing homelessness in any way we can," said Patrol Officer Sadie Pristave. "We will use this guide to identify the best practices in assisting those who need our help finding shelter and will work with the other agencies in our community to partner together to assist populations in need."

This Guidebook was made possible by the Illinois Department of Human Services Office to Prevent and End Homelessness, the Illinois State Police, DeKalb Police Department, Springfield Police Department, Fairview Heights Police Department, Madison County Sheriff's Office, Illinois Associations of Chiefs of Police, and Project NOW Community Action Agency.

The Guidebook can be found on the ISP website by visiting <https://isp.illinois.gov/Director/ResponseToHomelessnessGuidebook>.