



Resolving
Homelessness
Together

How to Talk About Homelessness

A guide to tough conversations with your friends and neighbors

Page 1 will walk you through some first steps to lay the foundation for a productive conversation. Page 2 will guide you through some questions to start with. Easy peasy!

FRAME THE CONVERSATION

Talking about homelessness can be uncomfortable. This issue holds a lot of emotion and discomfort that can make a productive conversation hard. So, here are some do's and don'ts to keep in mind.

Do

Ask: Use open-ended questions that encourage thought and reflection.

Listen: Hearing what others think gives them the opportunity to say it out loud while giving you the chance to learn from the people around you.

Stay solution-oriented: Keeping things solution-focused means everyone can leave feeling empowered. Don't bury negative feelings but also try not to dwell on them.

Be comfortable with silence: This topic is big

and requires a lot of thought. Silence reflects that thought process is taking place, so welcome it!

Don't

Interrupt: Get the conversation started and help navigate the discomfort that comes up. When someone speaks, do not interrupt them. Let them speak fully.

Dig your heels in: We all have varying opinions on the issues and people WILL disagree on topics as emotionally charged as this one. When disagreements arise, ask more questions and work to understand new points of view.

LEARN THE BASICS

Being informed means more productive conversations. You may be surprised by what you find!

Key Statistics

Every two years, the [Homeless Census and Survey](#) is conducted to collect information about homelessness in Santa Cruz County. It's not perfect, but it gives us an idea about the demographics and numbers in our county. Here are some findings from the 2019 report:

- 74% of local unhoused people were housed in Santa Cruz County before becoming homeless
- 23% have been in the foster care system
- 31% are employed, and 60% are either unable to work or are actively looking for work
- Only 13% become homeless due to a drug or alcohol addiction
- The total number of people experiencing homelessness in 2019 was roughly 2167

Shelter and Housing

Homelessness is a bit more nuanced than being without a home. It's really the experience of lacking stable and — here's the key — *adequate* housing.

Shelter is a temporary place to sleep. It is a step along the path to housing. Those in shelters are still unhoused.

Shelter does not equal housing. People staying in shelters are still without a home. Shelters are temporary. Housing is permanent.

Housing First

Housing First is a national best practice for ending homelessness, prioritizing housing over everything else. People with stable housing can better attend to things like job training, substance abuse, behavioral health, and more. By establishing the foundation of housing, all other matters can be addressed.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

You're feeling prepared, but now: Where to even start?! This is a big topic, and you probably have lots of feelings about it. Our advice? Get curious. Here's a list of questions you can ask yourself and others to promote a thoughtful, productive conversation.



I wonder what it's like to live without a home?

Are there places for people who live on the streets to keep their stuff, or are they just limited to what they can carry? What must that be like?



Do you truly believe that people are unhoused by choice? What might the benefits of that choice be? What obstacles might someone have encountered within "the system" to cause them to feel so discouraged that they would "choose" homelessness?

How could a temporary encampment be managed in a way that's good for its residents and the surrounding neighborhood?

Do I have a fear of seeing unhoused neighbors in my neighborhood? Why is that?

I wonder how easy or hard it is to get or keep a job without a regular place to sleep and shower? What would I most struggle with in that situation?

Is being without a home a constant state of crisis? What happens to our minds and bodies when we're in survival mode?

What do you think it takes for a person to get back into housing once they've lost it? What resources and support might they need?

How do you imagine being unhoused affects a person's health? What about their mental wellbeing?



Phew! Those are some big questions. Great job being curious and thinking through these things. That sort of engagement is what our community needs to keep moving ahead on compassionate solutions.

Want to dig deeper? Check out our Get Informed online library for more thought-provoking resources!