THE CRIMINALIZATION OF ROUGH SLEEPING AND SUBSTANCE USE IN KENSINGTON, PHILADELPHIA, AND THE US: A NOVEL MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO BRINGING PEOPLE IN WITH HARM REDUCTION AND "SLOW MEDICINE"

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Background:
The Kensington section of Philadelphia, PA (USA) includes an estimated 875 rough sleepers, most of whom inject drugs. In 2024, the new city administration planned an encampment clearing of 125 individuals to be followed by a mass criminalization and forced relocation of 750 more and defunding of harm reduction organizations. This presented an opportunity to forge policy with respect to the treatment of rough sleepers in Philadelphia.

Approach:
Beginning in April, 2024 Prevention Point Philadelphia (PPP) , the City of Philadelphia, and a housing partner implemented a novel program, re-locating an initial 47 individuals to a "One Stop Shop" residence including withdrawal management, medication for opioid use disorder care (MOUD), wound care, and support to resolve many social determinants of health.

Analysis:
Since April, more than 300 individuals received focused outreach with 97 voluntarily re-locating to a residence where PPP operates the One Stop Shop and has provided several hundred medical visits. Most residents (90%) are non-White, half identify as female, 50% received wound care, withdrawal/symptom management, and transition to MOUD via onsite induction and handoff to a nearby methadone partner. Nearly 20 receive long acting injectable MOUD. All received care coordination services and are in consideration for longer term housing. Thirty people left the residence (97% female identified)

Conclusion:
Encampments of rough sleepers who inject drugs stand in the way of development and gentrification, as do the harm reduction organizations serving them, resulting in systematic encampment closures, criminalization of rough sleepers, and de-funding harm reduction. The project serves as a model and alternative, resolving medical, behavioral health, and social needs systematically, addressing the root causes of homelessness. A planned expansion in August 2024 presents opportunity for additional innovation.

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