Researchers help create 'guiding principles' to address homelessness at airports

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In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the United States. People who are in this situation have nowhere to go at night or during bad weather,

except places not designed for humans to sleep: like a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or rest area. Because airports tend to have amenities like public bathrooms and sheltered rest areas, many airports are struggling to respond to the rise in homelessness.

A new report from the Airport Cooperative Research Program (ACRP), titled "Strategies to Address Homelessness at Airports," explains what airports, specifically, can do to mitigate the impacts of this crisis. Researchers at Portland State University's Transportation Research and Education Center (TREC) worked with PSU's Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative (HRAC) on the project, led by the Cadmus Group.

Research at the intersection of transportation and homelessness

Meeting the needs of unhoused individuals is not core to the mission of airports, and [airport](#) operators often do not have specialized expertise to address these needs. Yet, airport staff have in fact needed to address homelessness at their airports despite a lack of expertise and adequate resources. This project arose out of a need for practical guidance to help airport personnel deal with the current situation occurring around the country.

PSU researchers Marisa Zapata, John MacArthur, Anna Rockhill and Jacen Greene were part of a multidisciplinary team led by the Cadmus Group to develop guidance for airports to support people experiencing homelessness, while also ensuring the safety and security of airport operations. Zapata and Greene are co-founders of PSU's Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative (HRAC), and Rockhill is a Senior Research Associate at PSU's Regional Research Institute (part of the

School of Social Work). MacArthur is the Sustainable Transportation Program Manager for PSU's Transportation Research and Education Center (HRAC). MacArthur and Zapata have partnered on other projects at the nexus of transportation and homelessness, including research centered around public transit.

In general, people experiencing homelessness seek shelter in airports because the facilities are relatively safe due to the presence of other people and security personnel, the buildings are climate controlled, there is often easy access to public transit, and a variety of facilities such as public restrooms, internet, electricity, and water are available. Airports report that they observe an increase in individuals seeking indoor shelter in extreme weather conditions.

Without broader societal solutions to address homelessness, it remains likely that people experiencing homelessness will continue to seek shelter in airports.

How should airports respond?

Measures such as closing the airport during late hours of the night, preventing access to certain areas, and closing amenities can be effective at reducing the number of people experiencing homelessness at airports—in some situations and locations—but they also adversely affect the traveling public's customer experience. Moreover, these actions can harm people experiencing homelessness by forcing them to shelter in a less safe place.

Punitive measures (such as arrests, citations, and banning individuals from facilities) have been demonstrated to be futile in addressing homelessness. More recently, airports have recognized that to implement effective change, multiple constructive solutions—such as hiring dedicated personnel and engaging in long-term partnerships with service

providers—must be considered.

After investigating the demographics of people experiencing homelessness at airports, how airport facilities were being used, and contextual factors like airport size, transit access, local climate, and existing outreach programs, the project team established a set of guiding principles for responding to this complex issue. Having these principles clearly defined is helpful in situations where staff are using their judgment or making subjective determinations in gray areas between defined airport policies and protocols.

Guiding principles

- Safety For All: Safety must be prioritized across all groups: travelers, employees, operators, tenants, and the public, including people who experience homelessness.
- Do No Harm: Airports should invest in crisis management and harm reduction training for public safety officers, first responders, operations staff, and other outreach and engagement employees. Training must be human-centered and should address how bias can affect people's treatment of individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Balanced and Appropriate Response: Airports should focus on effective, sustainable strategies that produce co-benefits (for example, improved customer experience, tenant and staff morale, and airport safety) and use resources efficiently, such as procedures for engagement, nonpunitive measures, and connection to services.
- Partnerships Are Key: Airports cannot solve homelessness, nor are they social service providers, but they can be active participants in connecting individuals in need to aid and resources, and they can act as regional advocates for truly sustainable solutions, such as access to affordable housing and

provision of services.

With these guiding principles as the basis, researchers developed a strategic action plan that airports can use to initiate or enhance a program to address homelessness.

Strategic Action Plan: Eight Strategies

1. Learning the Fundamentals
2. Assessing Current Conditions
3. Identifying and Working with Partners
4. Planning a Response
5. Outlining Staff and Stakeholder Responsibilities
6. Developing and Implementing a Training Program
7. Developing an Engagement Protocol
8. Tracking Progress

For each of the eight strategies, the final report includes detailed context, relevant tools and resources, an introduction to the stakeholders involved, and specific actions to consider.

The application of this strategic action plan is intended to be flexible and based on what is most useful to the airport. No matter how airports choose to use the strategic action plan, it is important to remember that homelessness is an evolving and complex issue. Best practices and available resources in response to homelessness can change over time. Therefore, airports should build flexibility into their programs so they do not remain static and can adapt to regional and local context-specific conditions.

The full research team consisted of Damon Fordham of High Street Consulting; Juliana Urrego, Mia Stephens, Carrie Miller and Bridget Smith of the Cadmus Group LLC; Marisa Zapata, John MacArthur,