

# Trauma-Informed Design for Homeless Populations

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## PURPOSE OF STUDY

Across North America hundreds of thousands of people are currently living without permanent housing. Yet, historically, little attention has been paid to how design can reduce trauma and instill resiliency in people experiencing homelessness. The purpose of this study is to provide homeless shelters and other social service agencies with design strategies for creating safe, healing, and welcoming environments for vulnerable populations and the people who serve them.

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

This report draws on existing research as well as insights from interior design professionals and social service agencies to provide design teams, contractors, and shelter providers with guidance on creating healthy and supportive spaces for people experiencing homelessness. Specifically, the report examines:

- **Client Needs and Design Considerations** – Offers an overview of the types of people experiencing homelessness and associated traumas, their unique needs and design solutions to address their needs.
- **Staff Needs and Design Considerations** – Provides a look at how design can nurture the happiness, health and performance of staff and volunteers working within different facility types.
- **Trauma-informed Design Strategies** – Offers design recommendations for specific challenges facing shelters, including:
  - **Layout and Planning:** How to create efficient and safe spaces.
  - **Comfort:** Tips for designing inviting and calming environments.
  - **Paint and Color:** How to select wall and accent colors to support resiliency and reduce stress.
  - **Furniture Types:** What to consider when adding new or additional furniture to a room.
  - **Flooring:** Choosing the best flooring type for the function.
  - **Cabinetry and Counters:** Material finishes for warmth and resiliency.
  - **Healing Power of Nature:** How elements of nature improve health and wellness.
  - **Lighting:** Creating warm and inviting environments.
  - **Visual Stimuli:** How art, color and graphics can lift mood and outcomes.
  - **LEED and Wellness:** Takeaways from environmental and human sustainability design principles.
- **Budgeting** – Funding for building improvements and construction can be especially challenging for shelters that rely on donations and governmental assistance. A pricing guide within the report allows shelters to get an advance estimate of project costs.
- **Trauma-informed Design in Practice** – Takes a look at how shelters and other social service providers are using trauma-informed design to create healthier, more supportive environments.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The research found qualitative evidence that an increasing number of shelter providers are recognizing the importance of design for improving the health and well-being of people experiencing homelessness (and its associated traumas) as well as for improving the satisfaction and safety of staff and employees. The study also found that no single design solution applies to all homeless shelters. Each has its own challenges (financial uncertainty, space limitations, code requirements, etc.) and specific needs based on geography, core clientele and staff that must be taken into consideration. The guidelines put forth in this report are intended to provide a better understanding of how trauma-informed design can benefit shelters and offer broad solutions. It is recommended, however, that shelters consult with professionals who understand local code requirements before beginning any major renovation or construction.

## TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN FOR HOMELESS POPULATIONS

### BACKGROUND

Homelessness was increasing across much of North America before the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>1</sup> It has only grown worse since then. Layoffs coupled with steep price increases (particularly within the housing sector) have created a double whammy for homelessness service providers.<sup>2</sup>

### METHODOLOGY

HOK, in partnership with United Way, YWCA, Salvation Army, Los Angeles Homeless Systems Authority (LASHA), and the National Alliance for Safe Housing, conducted focus group sessions throughout North America, targeting specifically Los Angeles, Seattle, Dallas, Nashville and Toronto.

Additional meetings were held with leaders from successful initiatives such as RoomKey to leverage and expand learning. The research team toured facilities and interviewed clients/patients.

## KEY FINDINGS

Faced with increased demand, homelessness agencies and other shelters must make efficient use of limited space. This can be particularly challenging when dealing with vastly different client needs. Although no two clients have the exact same challenges, it's important to understand how homeless population demographics can shape facility and design requirements.

## CLIENT PROFILE TYPES

- **Veterans**  
Former military often have lasting physical and mental health needs stemming from conflict and battle. Wheelchair accessibility and calming spaces (that counteract PTSD and other mental health issues) are just a couple of the design considerations for facilities that serve veterans.
- **Victims of Domestic Violence & Trafficking**  
It is estimated that 80 percent of mothers and children experiencing homelessness have experienced domestic violence.<sup>3</sup> People who've been trafficked and exploited for sex and labor also face increased housing insecurity. For these victims of homelessness, facility design should provide a sense of privacy and safety, particularly within co-ed facilities.
- **Addiction & Substance Abuse**  
While people experiencing homelessness are often unfairly classified as substance abusers, shelters must account for some clients having alcohol and drug addictions. Facility design that allows staff to safely and efficiently intake clients and their belongings and eliminate hiding spots for contraband can go a long way to ensuring a safe environment for all.

- **Individuals with Mental Illness**

As many as one-third of unhoused individuals suffer from mental illness.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, we know that homelessness itself is a cause of mental illness, trauma, and increased morbidity.<sup>5</sup> With mental illness playing such a large role in homelessness, spaces designed to serve this population should be as soothing as possible and speak to a diversity of needs.

- **Chronically Homeless Individuals**

According to HUD, 27 percent of individuals experiencing homelessness in the U.S. in 2020 had chronic patterns of homelessness, defined as being continuously homeless for 12 months or at least four times in the past three years for a period adding up to 12 months. These individuals can benefit from design that instills a sense of place, respect, and ownership with the goal of encouraging them to utilize the care and services a shelter provides to successfully move forward with their lives.

- **Families and Children**

While individual adult men account for the largest percentage of homeless populations in the U.S. and Canada, they do not suffer alone. Families and children require specialized spaces that accommodate needs that are often different from the main population.

- **Seniors**

Elderly populations also have different needs than the general population. Organizations that care for seniors must pay particular attention to design issues around accessibility, mobility, acoustics, and lighting, all of which can be impediments to service for older clients.

- **Financial Need**

Financial strain itself can often result in homelessness. This can affect people of all ages, race, and physical health. Research has shown that financial crisis can result in one of the strongest factors associated with lifetime experience of homelessness in young adults. It is important to address those in need early

to avoid damaging stigma, mental fatigue and prevent negative stimulus.

## NEEDS & DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

The best shelters align the needs of clients with the needs of staff. Often these needs can be harmonious. Regardless of who we are, we all want environments where we feel safe, secure and comfortable. Everyone also wants a place that is healthy and clean and allows us to be our best selves.

- **Safe & Secure Environments**

The very definition of shelter is “to provide protection,” so it’s inherent that our shelters emphasize safety and security. Simple design solutions to promote safety and security include good visibility (clutter-free spaces that allow people to see people and things around them), places for guests to securely store personal possessions and proper lighting to illuminate those same spaces at night. Visible security, either in the form of personnel or door systems and video cameras, can also help people feel safe within an environment.

- **Privacy**

Private spaces are important for providing clients with places to discuss their challenges one-on-one with case managers. These same rooms can provide areas for quiet moments to de-stress and plan. Though many shelters lack the space or resources for individual bedrooms and bathrooms, these room types can be particularly beneficial in serving families, women and victims of crime and violence, and people experiencing mental health crises.

- **Treatment and Learning**

Design can be used to aid treatment and educate and inspire clients. This can include providing the space and resources, such as computers and classrooms, to help prepare clients on their path to housing and independence. Or it could be simply celebrating the steps they make along the way.

- **Comfort + Emotional Support**

People won't take advantage of a shelter if they don't feel comfortable within the space. People who are comfortable and removed from the fight-or-flight survival mode of homelessness are also more receptive to treatment. Shelters can instill a sense of comfort in ways that stretch beyond soft furnishings and warm aesthetics. Providing people with a choice of space types—from group to individual and quiet to social—helps place people at ease. Wayfinding also supports comfort by providing people with intuitive layouts and signs that make a space more inviting and relatable. Clean, neat spaces and pleasant scents also can make a space more welcoming with little expenditure.

- **Health & Well-Being**

Everyone needs access to clean air, light, exercise, and nutrition to support both their physical and mental health. Shelters should consider how, if possible, they can provide operable windows, places for movement, connections to nature and healthy food choices to clients. Where actual access to nature is not possible, “virtual” access can be provided through art and imagery, pattern, and color.

- **Daylight**

Daylight promotes health in numerous ways that can benefit both clients and staff. Daylight helps regulate our circadian rhythms — the physical, mental, and behavioral cues that help regulate our 24-hour biological clocks. Our circadian rhythms influence our sleep and wakefulness cycles and other important health factors such as hormone release, hunger and digestion and body temperature. In addition to aiding our circadian rhythms, natural light and views of nature are also known to alleviate stress and help the body recover.

## TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN STRATEGIES

- **Planning**

Planning, including programming and layout, takes a holistic look at the entirety of a building. Does the building have the capacity and infrastructure to function as intended? Is it laid out in an intuitive way? Are individual spaces properly furnished and equipped to meet specific goals?

- ✓ Include transparency when designing entryways
- ✓ Provide a welcoming reception with comfortable and safe seating
- ✓ Consider including a hydration area and/or kitchen within intake areas for those who arrive tired and hungry, quiet areas for those experiencing moments of extreme stress, and secondary building entrances

- **Comfort**

One of the most important considerations to designing a space is whether it will be comfortable for its occupants. While comfort is subjective (what's comfortable for one person may be uncomfortable for another), the following factors all impact people's sense of pleasure and enjoyment:

- ✓ Temperature
- ✓ Noise and acoustics
- ✓ Clean air
- ✓ Access to water, restrooms, and laundry
- ✓ Safe and secure storage

- **Paint and Color**

Paint and color can be one of the easiest and most cost-effective ways to freshen and update a space. Selecting the proper paint and color requires an understanding of how a space is to be used. Is it a low- or high-traffic area? What mood should the space evoke? Will it be used for social or group purposes or is it intended for quieter, more reflective uses?

- **Furniture**

Each piece of furniture within a space must address the needs of the individuals within the environment, whether that be a seat in a staff office setting or a place to set a coffee in a social setting. When selecting furniture, it's important to understand the function of the space, the activities that will happen in the room, and how an area will be used.

- **Flooring**

Flooring is often the first thing people notice about a space. Flooring impacts the aesthetics, comfort, feel and durability of an environment. Like other design elements discussed in this guide, flooring should support the needs and use of a space.

- **Cabinetry and Counters**

Like flooring, cabinetry and counters come in a variety of materials each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Price is often the No. 1 determinant in selecting cabinetry and counters. But choosing solely based on price can lead to costly repairs and replacements if a material is ill-suited for how it is being used.

- **Healing Power of Nature**

Biophilia is a term used to describe the deep psychological connection people have to nature. Biophilic design recognizes this connection—

forged over thousands of years—and uses it to create spaces that incorporate natural elements in soothing and therapeutic ways. Research has backed up the importance of biophilic design to reduce stress and aid healing. Today, when we practice biophilic design, we first look for found opportunities. Can curtains and blinds be opened to allow for outdoor views and for natural light to enter the interior? Can doors and windows be opened to let in fresh air?

- **Security and Privacy**

Safety and security are important throughout the facility. A front entrance must be able to close and lock when needed; and ideally, most interior doors should lock for client and staff safety and security. In addition, entrances and all building paths need to be well-lit with clear camera angles.

- **Lighting**

Lighting provides warmth, security, and comfort. It helps regulate our moods and impacts our health, particularly the circadian rhythm that influences our sleep and wakefulness. When considering lighting, it's important to evaluate its purpose and location (especially if you have large dorm rooms that house shift workers). Reception and intake, for example, will require different lighting than a more private or quiet space, such as a sleeping area or work area. Before choosing new or replacement lighting, designers often assess the following four criteria:

- ✓ Brightness and color temperature
- ✓ Energy efficiency
- ✓ Natural light
- ✓ Variety

- **Visual Stimuli**

Art, graphics, and other visual stimuli complement interior design and architecture. Visual stimuli can help us relax and inspire creativity and wonderment. On the other hand, visual stimuli that is overwhelming or provocative can evoke unwanted emotions like anger, anxiety, and agitation. For this reason, visual stimuli should be thoughtfully applied with an understanding of how it will support the broader goal of a space or building.

- **Sustainability and Wellness**

When possible, incorporate LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and WELL Building Standard requirements into your spaces. Both LEED and WELL are third-party rating systems for buildings. LEED measures the environmental footprint of a building, and WELL measures how a building can support the health and well-being of occupants.



A blend of cool and warm colors help balances the mood in this room. The multiple light sources make it interesting. The furniture is all BIFMA approved with healthcare seating heights. Child-size furniture invites younger guests to feel welcome. The large screen provides both entertainment and information. Photo courtesy of HOK, photographer Andrew Bruah.



## RESEARCH BIO

**Pam Light, FIIDA, LEED AP**, is an interior designer with more than 40 years of experience helping commercial and healthcare clients create spaces that promote collaboration, productivity, health, and well-being. She was the HOK Los Angeles Principal that led the HOK IMPACT report for the United Way on Trauma and Resiliency.

**Lori Selcer, CID, LEED AP ID+C, WELL AP**, who, prior to her retirement worked as a Project Manager and Sustainability Leader for the HOK Los Angeles Interiors. Her 40 years of experience includes corporate office, higher education and healthcare design and leadership, where she applied her passion for sustainable environments and principles of wellness for building occupants.

**Deborah Sperry, NCIDQ, LEED AP**, is an interior designer with more than 25 years of experience helping commercial and workplace clients throughout Canada. Sperry specializes in creating spaces that meet the needs of organizations and their people. A co-chair of HOK's philanthropic arm, HOK IMPACT, she has provided pro-bono design services to numerous Canadian social service agencies—including a women's shelter and home for people living with HIV/AIDS.

**Kay Sargent, FASID, FIIDA, CID, LEED® AP, MCR.w, WELL AP**, is global director of HOK's WorkPlace practice and a well-known speaker on the role design plays in supporting healthy and productive organizations. Sargent's recent research into neurodiversity and design is helping to make workplaces and other environments more inclusive and supportive for people with autism, ADHD, dyslexia and other neurodivergent individuals.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Sally Augustin, *Place Advantage, Applied Psychology for Interior Architects* (Wiley, 2009)
2. Jill Pable, Yelena McLaine, Lauren Trujillo, *Homelessness and the Built Environment. Designing for Unhoused Persons* (Routledge, 2021)
3. Podcast: Pam Light (HOK) & Dr. Scott Zeller, MD (Vituity): *How will mental health and remote work impact design?* <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/pam-light-hok-dr-scott-zeller-md-vituity-how-will-mental/id1506501256?i=1000492741674>
4. Michael T. Berens, *A Review of Research: Designing the Built Environment for Recovery from Homelessness* available via [http://designresourcesforhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/FINAL1\\_8\\_2017.pdf](http://designresourcesforhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/FINAL1_8_2017.pdf)
5. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development *The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress* via <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress"
- <sup>2</sup> The United Way of the National Capital Area, "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Homelessness in the United States"
- <sup>3</sup> Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, "The Intimate Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Homelessness"
- <sup>4</sup> Mental Illness Policy Organization <https://mentalillnesspolicy.org/about.html>
- <sup>5</sup> Psychiatric Times, "The Never-Ending Loop: Homelessness, Psychiatric Disorder, and Mortality"