



Houselessness and Natural Areas: Trauma-Informed Resources

By Hannah Buehler

As summer approaches, staff are increasingly in the field collecting seed, monitoring plants and working to reduce fire risk, while simultaneous seasonal pulses in the movement of unhoused people mean that land and water stewards may encounter people surviving outside in our region's parks and natural areas more frequently than in the colder months.

As the impacts of environmental, housing and public health crises continue to play out throughout the Pacific Northwest, many communities are struggling to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in their communities. In cities across the West coast, law enforcement often directs houseless people to seek shelter in parks, natural and riparian areas. Due to lack of public hygiene facilities and trash pick-up services that housed residents enjoy, fecal matter run-off into bodies of water and general litter from camps often accumulates. Although this impact is likely no greater than [the environmental footprint of housed residents](#), this pollution tends to be more visible, exacerbating neighborhood tensions, raising concern over the environmental impact of urban camping and further stigmatizing houseless community members.

Want to learn more about what water quality data can tell us about houselessness & the environment? [Click here to learn more!](#)

“I was a park ranger for a number of years with a high volume of engagement with unhoused folks. I was out there using tactical communication from state parks and law enforcement and often unconsciously triggering people. Certainly wearing my uniform didn’t help. I made some good contacts too but the results weren’t there. So on my own I started to do a wellness check with folks, asking things like “do you need water,” asking “was it cold last night?” before trying to communicate information around park rules or requesting that people move. Making sure that contacts were healthy and building a level of care for individuals through a trauma informed lens. It works, and I saw it work immediately.”

—Monty Woods, Metro Parks Operations Manager

These issues began to intersect with the work of Bonneville Environmental Foundation (BEF) in 2016 as land and water stewardship partners were reporting negative outcomes in engaging with people living in the natural areas they steward. Increasingly land and water stewards have found themselves, largely without preparation, on the frontlines of a social crisis. Environmental workers are in need of tools to foster positive relationships and interactions that help strengthen social networks with those living outside, [a foundational component in getting unhoused individuals connected to resources and services](#).

BEF has partnered with [Trauma Informed Oregon](#), [Right 2 Survive](#) and [Kush Kuntux Tumtum Consulting](#) to create online Trauma Informed Care modules to provide an understanding of the impact of trauma in engagement with unhoused individuals. Trauma-informed care provides a framework for land trust staff and natural area managers to help them navigate

challenges in engagement with unhoused individuals and address potential impacts to protected lands with compassion and an eye towards long term solutions. You can learn more and take the online training [here](#).

Trauma-informed approaches center meaningful relationship building with those living outside, as well as building connections with houseless advocates in order to better connect people to resources and services. Early outreach to community-based organizations that serve and represent houseless people can offer critical insight, support, and access to resources and increase capacity for outreach and engagement, and assist people in getting [access to the services](#) they need. Connections with houseless advocacy and service organizations can provide land stewards with people to call that can assist in providing services, understanding local systems and learning key background information to inform engagement. Building relationships with houseless community members and community-



Our friends at the [Resting Safe](#) project have created flyers on environmental hazards ranging from fire safety to mold and mildew prevention developed by and for houseless people, which you can find [here](#).

based organizations that have strong relationships with the unhoused community takes time, intentionality and resources, but can be critical in yielding better long term outcomes and help with more effective and humane problem solving.

Steps to consider when seeking partnerships with advocacy organizations:

- Read about an organizations' work
- Reach out and see if there is a field staff member you can connect with
- Ask to tag along on an outreach visit
- If you connect with an advocate, ask if they can be a future resource
- Add key telephone numbers to field staff cell phones
- Lean on them with questions about effective communication, problem solving, and de-escalation, and be open to/invite them to set boundaries with their limited time
- Continue relationship building and note if you see any improvements

These efforts are merely small gestures, attempting to address critical challenge points of insufficient resources, neighborhood hostilities and environmental pollution and provide essential resources where there are enormous gaps. We encourage land and water managers to get creative, build partnerships with unhoused community members and engage them as co-conspirators in the stewardship of the natural areas we all love. If you'd like to sign up for updates and information on the online training modules, peer support discussion groups and more, please sign up for our mailing list [here](#).

Join us from **1:30-3:00pm PST on July 21st** for a peer support discussion with Trauma Informed Care facilitators around engaging with unhoused populations in parks and natural areas.

Please reach out to hbuehler@b-e-f.org for more information!



*A man and his dog embrace at a Portland handwashing station.
Photo Credit: Daniel Rushton*

During the pandemic, BEF worked to establish hand washing stations at encampments in urban greenspaces. If hygiene or water quality impacts are of concern for your organization, think creatively about what facility access you may be able to provide. Want to read the full report on BEF's hygiene work? [Click here](#).