

2020 CSAC Challenge Awards

Operation Sugarloaf: Navigating a Pandemic

Overview: Operation Sugarloaf was a pilot project consisting of collaborative, intensive intervention with an encampment of homeless individuals at high risk of COVID-19 and wildfire starts.

Challenge: Early in the COVID-19 Pandemic the Governor announced a statewide effort to shelter people living in homeless encampments who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to underlying health conditions, and unsanitary living conditions. Much like urban areas, homelessness in Nevada County is a significant and growing problem, but unlike in urban areas, our homeless population is geographically diffuse, with homeless individuals frequently living in the woods individually or in very small groups. The one exception was Sugarloaf Mountain. Sugarloaf has been an attractive location for camping for many years. It is close to downtown Nevada City, yet provides a sense of protection and seclusion due to the dense forest. In recent years the homeless population there has increased significantly. With that increase has come an increase in fire danger, environmental damage, impacts to the community, and increased risk of communicable diseases such as COVID-19.

Solution: In recent years the County's Homeless Outreach and Medical Engagement (HOME) Team has made great inroads with our homeless community. Responding to the increased homeless activity on Sugarloaf Mountain, and the associated community concerns, the HOME team had been making frequent visits to the mountain. What the HOME Team had been hearing from the homeless individuals on the mountain was that they were willing to relocate if there was a better option. With access to Project Roomkey funding, the county realized there was an opportunity to do something new and innovative, but that many different parties had to be at the table in crafting the program. Local Law Enforcement, County departments, and local homeless service providers convened and committed to a limited duration pilot project, which would start with engaging homeless individuals on Sugarloaf to design the project and have a hand in their own destiny. The HOME Team made contact with every individual on the mountain, convened a meeting and worked with the homeless individuals to commit to a one-month navigation

program where campers could achieve stability, capitalize on existing relationships and leadership structures, come to common understanding of rules and expectations, and work with service providers on housing placements, treatment and other services. “Operation Sugarloaf” was born.

Innovation: Operation Sugarloaf was innovative in several respects. The innovative components included working with a geographically distinct population, collaborating with all players from the beginning, being very intentional about keeping everything within the same jurisdiction, having a time delimitation to instill a sense of urgency, achieving personal stability through a motel placement vs. engagement in the field, and laying the groundwork by building trusting relationships through the HOME Team and service providers. Finally, and most importantly, we took to heart the mantra “Nothing about us without us.” The homeless community was part of the process of developing the project, from initial conversations in the encampments, to a group meeting prior to commencement, to establishing ground rules and expectations once the project started, and frequent group check-ins throughout the project. The combination of trusted service providers, and empowering the community to take the lead in determining their own destiny was key.

Results: All 17 of the sugarloaf homeless community members participated in the project, with none left camping on the mountain when the project was complete. Of the 17 participants, 13 achieved a housing placement at the end of the project, a hugely successful result compared to how many would have been placed through street engagement. The placements were through a variety of programs, including substance use treatment, permanent housing and other options. Tracking of longer-term outcomes is ongoing, but the benefits to both the individuals involved, and the community are tangible and lasting.

Replicability: We consider Operation Sugarloaf to be a pilot program, and we are making adjustments based on lessons learned with the intent of leveraging CARES funding to use a similar model for winter shelter. Other rural counties face similar challenges, and with the unique opportunity to use CARES Funding and Project Homekey awards, a model like this could prove critical to get our extremely vulnerable homeless communities through the COVID winter.

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Local media articles:

- <https://www.theunion.com/news/collaborative-effort-continues-to-house-formerly-homeless-people-from-sugarloaf-mountain/>
- <https://www.theunion.com/news/crews-clean-up-abandoned-homeless-camps-on-sugarloaf-mountain-outside-nevada-city/>
- <https://www.theunion.com/news/positive-outcomes-seen-after-30-day-pilot-project-that-moved-homeless-off-nevada-citys-sugarloaf-mountain/>

Additional Information on Operation Sugarloaf:

- <https://www.mynevadacounty.com/DocumentCenter/View/35870/Operation-Sugarloaf>