



# Strategies for Partnering with Faith-Based Organizations

By Joe Savage, Regional Coordinator

As the National Initiatives team visits communities across the nation, we are in constant awe of the diversity of partners engaged in preventing and ending homelessness. Although partnerships vary by community, we've noticed the consistent, valuable presence of one partner in particular – faith-based organizations.

For me, this is exciting because my doctoral studies focused on faith-based development of affordable housing. As I pursued my coursework, one of the initial questions I asked was: *what motivates faith-based organizations to do the work that they do?*

Through my work I found that despite the complexities of defining “faith” or “belief” across groups, there were some commonalities in motivation. While faith-based organizations come to the issue of homelessness in different ways, for many, motivation can be explained either as a sense of duty to their fellow person, a calling or conviction to improve the lives of the less fortunate, and/or a deep compassion that compels them to aid those in need. It's out of this motivation that many faith-based organizations take a seat at the table and play a vital role in a community's efforts towards ending homelessness.

## Creating Effective Partnerships

Understanding their motivation is paramount as communities seek to partner with faith-based organizations who don't receive federal, state, or public funding, or who have not yet become a full partner in the coordinated entry system, but are wholly concerned with the issue of homelessness and have expertise, resources, passion, and people to bring to the table.

When effective, these partnerships give faith-based organizations a means through which they can attain a sense of fulfillment of their calling while offering the more tangible benefits of access to supplemental services and housing resources for people they serve through charitable or programmatic efforts.

Here are some strategies to grow partnerships with faith-based organizations my fellow regional coordinators and I have observed working in communities:

**Share passions and find common ground.** Focus on what motivates the faith-based organizations to start the conversation. A great question to ask is: *Are you interested in joining a movement committed to helping reach as many people as possible to make sure that no person experiences homelessness?*

**Spend time building relationships.** Relationships are often the bedrock of both faith-based organizations and our work to end homelessness. Ask faith leaders about their congregation's interests. Join their potluck suppers. Host “get to know you” events. Ask faith leaders to help you organize events so they are accessible and deepen connections.

**Build on Strengths.** Faith organizations can rally volunteers and can be more flexible and speedy since they aren't beholden to public funds. Sometimes faith-based organizations even have property that can be converted to provide housing. Public organizations have convening power, connections to federal and state resources, and can

leverage public resources to meet the health and housing needs of people asking faith-based organizations for help.

**Figure out what you really need.** Faith-based organizations and public organizations working to end homelessness may have non-negotiables that can feel like stumbling blocks. But do they have to be? What if a faith-based shelter is willing to conduct assessments and make immediate referrals to permanent housing, but won't enter data into HMIS? What if a housing provider can quickly connect people in the faith-based shelter to housing, but needs to be able to outreach in the shelter to make it happen? Leverage your community's expert negotiators to find a path forward that will connect people to housing and build a platform for successful partnerships.

**Go for depth – create tiered opportunities.** Faith-based organizations are experts at creating a variety of experiences, from studies, to celebrations to volunteering. Find ways to link each of these activities to permanent housing. Help find curriculum about homelessness and housing for study nights, ask faith leaders to host National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, get the children's group to raise donations for move-in kits, and invite leaders to direct resources to move-in, arrears, or to volunteer with important roles like mentoring and landlord recruitment across their members and within the community.

**Build the Network: Cross-train and share board members.** A network of faith-based organizations in partnership with public agencies can fill gaps and quickly gear up to meet needs as they arise. Develop on-boarding for people new to the coordinated system and make sure that staff at community agencies have the opportunity to learn about faith-based organizations. Board members can help further cross-pollinate and provide context as faith-based and public organizations make decisions about how to engage in partnerships.

To learn more about faith-based partnerships, visit the [White House's Office on Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships](#).

*Regional Coordinator Amy Sawyer provided guidance and strategies for this article.*