

Rich/Collins Community Impact and
Leadership Fellowship Final Report -
Buddies for Emotional Support and
Transitional Assistance (BESTA)

Brandeis University

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Background

Homelessness has been a pressing problem in Greater Boston for many decades, and statistics show that there were more than 6200 individuals experiencing homelessness on a given night in 2019. Although a lack of affordable housing is greatly accountable for this phenomenon, homelessness and housing insecurity is the product of a multiplex of environmental and psychological obstacles that hinder the individual's ability to acquire stable income and maintain social connections. Our community partner, the Community Day Center of Waltham (CDCW), is the only drop-in day shelter in the Metro West. According to staff members, the majority of their guests/clients suffer from mental disorders, alcohol dependence, or substance abuse. Many of these people also lack support from family and friends due to adverse childhood experiences, loss of close ones, family disputes, etc. The absence of this source of emotional and financial support exacerbates feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and insecurity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, facilities were locking down or reducing capacity, and volunteers were physically withdrawing from shelters like the CDCW. This further deprived homeless individuals of survival resources and human connections. The highly infectious nature of the virus also led to continuous marginalization and stigmatization of the homeless population. Quoting from *It Can Happen to You* by Renée Nakkab, "(w)ith a faulty support system, it is hard for individuals to get back on their feet when they have been constantly knocked down." For these reasons, new community resources should be built so that the emotional needs of homeless individuals are acknowledged and addressed.

Project Goals

Buddies for Emotional Support and Transitional Assistance (BESTA) aims to foster connections between homeless individuals and Brandeis volunteers. Volunteers for synchronous positions will match with a guest/client from the CDCW and reach out to them on a weekly basis to either provide case management assistance or engage in friendly conversations. Volunteers for asynchronous positions will work on case management tasks assigned by the case manager.

Coordination & Communications

In order to accommodate to procedural conventions at the CDCW and conform to Brandeis COVID-19 protocols, the buddy matching process applied the following workflow:

- a) Clients are introduced to BESTA by their case manager during appointments.
- b) Interested clients will be asked to fill out their preferences on a paper survey.
- c) Photos of the responses will be sent to me and recorded in a Google form linked to Google Sheets: <https://forms.gle/9kxirecDeXiF1TAGA>
- d) Clients will be asked to sign an agreement form and provide contact information during a follow-up appointment. Contact information will go to the same sheet as above.

- e) I will pair up volunteers and clients who have signed agreement forms (attached in supplementary documents) based on their availability and preferences.
- f) I will email each volunteer with their buddy's name, contact information, and specific preferences. The email also includes reminders about self-introduction, remote operations, and pseudo-number servers.
- g) After the volunteer's first meeting/phone call, they will email me the weekly meeting time they agreed upon.
- h) Volunteers will be required to fill out a weekly report after their calls/meetings using this form: <https://forms.gle/ckpp7MaVoudvVzKx5>

Timeline

Date	CDCW (in-person)	Brandeis (virtual)
Dec 15 – Jan 31	Online discussions with director and case manager regarding project goals, program format, implementation, and budget adjustments	
Feb 1 – 15	Interest survey for clients	Volunteer recruitment
Feb 16 – 28	Buddy information collection	
Mar 01 – 14	Online discussions with case manager regarding sensitivity training, case management training, and risk management for volunteers	
Mar 14	/	Volunteer training module I
Mar 14 – 27	CDCW Buddies are asked to sign agreement form during appointment with case manager	Agreement form for CDCW buddies and Brandeis volunteers drafted
Mar 15 – Apr 30	Synchronous volunteers and CDCW buddies connect	
Mar 27	Volunteer training module II	
Mar 29	Zoom station setup	/
April 10	no-contact delivery of supplies from Share the Care	Share the Care (in-person)
April 1-20	Preparations for the Night of Light	
April 19-30	Feedback surveys	Feedback surveys and interviews
April 21	Hair salon vouchers obtained	
April 22	Night of Light	Coordinator on call during event
April 30	Last day of mandatory commitment for volunteers	
May 6	R/C CLIF Symposium	

*Note: events marked bold are milestones

Milestones

Volunteer Training Module I: Get to Know Your Buddy

Volunteers will be given a brief introduction to homelessness in Waltham, including demographics, socioeconomical factors leading to homelessness, and the role of our community partner. This aims to help volunteers unlearn misconceptions about housing insecurity, acknowledge the uniqueness of personal experiences, and acquire compassion and sensitivity. They will also learn about their role as a buddy or case management assistant.

Volunteer Training Module II: Maintaining Healthy Boundaries

A case manager was invited as a guest speaker to help volunteers acquire interpersonal skills necessary for maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship. She spoke about the importance of healthy boundaries, means to identify signs of an unhealthy relationship, and appropriate responses to inappropriate requests/treatment.

Zoom Station

In order to accommodate clients that do not have access to a phone or laptop, a Zoom account was set up on one of the public computers at the Community Day Center. Additionally, a list of items that guests can borrow, including equipment for Zoom, will be displayed in the area: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ClAe9E4cupYHjphAK3sxqJUCpPQ7MhJw/view?usp=sharing>

Share the Care @ SCC Great Lawn

Volunteers gathered to assemble care packages for CDCW buddies. They also wrote Dear Stranger notes on origami for guests of the Night of Light. Remote volunteers wrote their notes on a Google form, which were copied onto origami crafted by volunteers. These gifts and supplies were sent to the Community Day Center by means of no-contact delivery.

Night of Light @ CDCW

This event marks the culmination of the BESTA program as well as the conclusion of the night shelter program at the Community Day Center. Although this event was originally planned to be hosted during nighttime, it was rescheduled as a lunchtime event due to a lack of on-the-scene volunteer support. This event was open to all guests at the Community Day Center, but participants of the BESTA program received a special invitation along with their care package. During the event, around 30 guests enjoyed a barbeque lunch with 12 dishes, dessert, and drinks. Supplies and snacks were distributed, and the origami notes were used as gifts and decorations. Fairy lights were lit around the room as a symbol of positivity and appreciation.

Hair salon vouchers

We partnered with Studio 56 Hair Designs to secure 25 haircut vouchers for guests at the Community Day Center. Based on intake demographics, there were 20 vouchers exchangeable for a men's haircut and 5 vouchers exchangeable for a women's haircut. These haircut vouchers have no expiration date, and they can be used as a fixed-value coupon for any other service.

Assessments

All Brandeis volunteers and CDCW buddies were asked to fill out a feedback survey by the end of their mandatory commitment on April 30th (attached in supplementary documents). Additionally, 4 synchronous volunteers were interviewed one-on-one over Zoom.

According to feedback from 3 CDCW buddies who responded, the BESTA program has an average 9.5/10 satisfactory rate. Overall, 2 out of 10 CDCW buddies were able to persist in weekly meetings and truly benefit from this program. One requested for case management assistance, and the other one preferred having friendly conversations. Both expressed gratitude to their buddies and were interested in continuing their weekly meetings. The virtual format seemed to be suitable for conversations, but posed obstacles for case management assistance.

In general, volunteers acquired a deeper understanding of homelessness and their local community, developed compassion and sensitivity, and improved professional skills such as resource gathering. Volunteers felt more engaged in the community, and many of them thought that Share the Care was a great opportunity to regain this sense of involvement and transition into the post-pandemic world. The training sessions also received a lot of positive feedback, and many highlighted the introduction to homelessness and the case manager's speech on healthy boundaries. Furthermore, volunteers who established a buddy relationship reflected that they were able to form new perspectives about homelessness, and that these experiences honed professional techniques and conversational skills.

Unexpected Success & Challenges

The goal of this program is to strengthen connections between volunteers and homeless locals by providing remote support and assistance. During a short period of 45 days, asynchronous volunteers found 42 affordable housing options for a client request and reached out to 20 hair salons in search of a partner for vouchers. The efficiency of their work and the significance of their contributions were unexpected, so these positions should be retained even if we transition into in-person volunteering.

As for synchronous volunteers, however, the majority have reported that they were unable to reach their assigned buddies. They also encountered a lot of difficulty with scheduling, as the clients were often very busy. Establishing trust between volunteers and their buddies is a significant challenge for this program, because this is directly associated with the client's willingness to answer their phone and speak with someone regularly. This is one of the limitations of this virtual format, because insecurity and distrust is hard to overcome without the volunteer's physical presence. Despite these difficulties, one of the buddy pairs actually established sustainable companionship, in which both parties were interested in continuing. The CDCW buddy entrusted the volunteer with their private struggles and really considered the volunteer as a confidential resource, and the virtual format was beneficial in this case due to its scheduling flexibility.

Future Plans

We believe that the physical presence of volunteers is essential to the BESTA program as well as the Community Day Center. Once in-person volunteering is safe again, we envision volunteers visiting the Community Day Center and becoming lunch buddies with the guests. By this means, relationships can be established more organically and buddies can be matched on a basis of familiarity. Guests are also generally more available during lunch period, so time conflict will become less of a problem. We plan to offer this program in a hybrid format so that we can tailor services to meet individual needs and maximize the flexibility of volunteer resources. We are currently contacting coordinators of the Waltham Group Hunger and Homelessness to see if they would like to incorporate BESTA into their program.

Personal Reflection

I am genuinely grateful to be granted this extraordinary opportunity to serve and learn about my local community. This is my first time working closely with community service specialists, social workers, locals, and volunteers to create a community program like this. Despite limitations of the virtual format, I learned immensely about housing insecurity from conversations with my community partners and local individuals. As I set off to explore the complexities of homelessness and housing insecurity, numerous discussions and experiences introduced me to social issues and improper mindsets that I failed to take notice of, and they reshaped my understanding of my own privileges. I have come to realize that the most meaningful part of volunteerism is not the change that you bring, but the connections you build and the people you meet. This experience shaped me into a more resourceful, flexible, and compassionate individual. I developed a habit of self-reflection and introspection, and I acquired the ability to look at problems from multiple perspectives. I feel increasingly connected to the people around me, and this makes me more willing to communicate and more confident about leadership and community engagement.

Supplementary Documents

Supportive Brandeis Volunteer Commitment and Confidentiality Agreement:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JEs3hIpb3ZFo3fBPN9MV_N1fbKWMvw8t/view?usp=sharing

Brandeis/CDCW Buddies Program Participant Agreement:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1G2AjYRuKulFEOrOlktD_XQpGBqxtSH_W/view?usp=sharing

BESTA General Volunteer Feedback form: <https://forms.gle/vgG2vHhTvhp45Lg28>

BESTA Buddy Feedback Form: <https://forms.gle/WEKX49RyNXxMshmg7>

CDCW Participant Feedback Form: <https://forms.gle/gCqRmf1s6eQcg9ic6>