

Characteristics of an Exemplary Diversion Specialist

Posted by Iain De Jong **10sc** on September 06, 2016

http://www.orgcode.com/characteristics_of_an_exemplary_diversion_specialist

In training communities on effective diversion, a common question is, “What are the sort of characteristics you’d look for when hiring someone for that position?” It is a great question because it appreciates that the role is somewhat different from other roles that serve people experiencing homelessness or at imminent risk of losing housing. Here are some thoughts.

They should be an extraordinary problem solver who is remarkably resourceful rather than whining about a lack of resources.

Being solution-focused means the individual will work the problem to find a solution rather than waiting for someone else to find a resource or fix a system that is broken. I like to think of good Diversion Specialists as the Macgyver’s of the homeless and housing service delivery system – they find a way to make it work with what they have, even when it is not ideal.

They need to think before reacting to what is presented.

A good Diversion Specialist puts themselves on a short delay. The client says something. They take a pause, sometimes counting in their head, before responding. This avoids unnecessary conflict, feelings of interrogation, and the rapid exchange that can interfere with remaining objective.

They must remain objective and fair.

A good Diversion Specialist sees forests and trees. They see the needs of the household in front of them while also thinking of all households in similar circumstance. They see the household’s needs for resources in the context of all resources available. They are not going to circumvent the process, nor are they going to make exceptions. They build trustworthiness through the transparency of what they do.

They must focus on the problem/issues, not the emotions.

Jokingly I have remarked that the best Diversion Specialists are the ones that have no heart. Yes, a Diversion Specialist should have compassion. But then need to separate the sometimes overwhelming emotional context that the household finds themselves in from the problems that led the household to seek service in the first place. Otherwise the Specialist can cater the response to the emotional outburst instead of dealing with the real issue(s).

They must exercise direct communication and active listening.

No sugar coating or misleading referrals are found emanating from the lips of a good Diversion Specialist. They focus on facts rather than opinion or advice. They call it as it is after making sure they have understood the situation as presented.

They must focus on the future, not the past.

Nobody has a time machine – Diversion Specialists included. A good Specialist knows they cannot rewind life to prevent a particular situation or mishap from occurring. As such, they need to see exactly where things are at in the present to work with the household to prepare a course of action for the future. And when the household seems fixated on past events, they work hard to get them to focus not on “what happened” but instead on “what’s next?”.

They must have unwavering integrity of process and remain impartial to all parties that may be trying to influence the situation.

A good Diversion Specialist is supported by the system and established processes as a whole. There are no special favours for politicians or friends in other organizations or their pastor, etc. While others may try to advocate for particular favour for their household, the best Diversion Specialists ensure there are no side doors or special treatment.

They must have impeccable personal boundaries.

Whatever is happening in the life of the client, a good Diversion Specialist will know how to separate that professionally from their own life and experience so that emotions and resources on a personal level do not interfere in the process. More than once I have encountered Diversion Staff that feel sympathy instead of empathy in particular situations, only to then watch personal boundaries crumble.

They must embrace and empower self-determination.

A good Diversion Specialist works *with* the household seeking assistance. They do not do things *to* the household nor do they do things *for* the household. A good Diversion Specialist knows how to transparently present options for consideration by the household and empowers that household to resolve their own situation to the best of their ability, progressively engaging only when the household has demonstrated an inability to effectively engage with the resources and options provided.

They must steadfastly distinguish between want and need.

A good Diversion Specialist uses the lightest touch possible after understanding the true needs of the household. This is critical given the household can, quite honestly, approach services feeling a sense of entitlement, or wanting what their friends have received, or even getting what they were given in a previous encounter with the system. A good Diversion Specialist focuses on needs, not wants.