The Engagement Center (EC)
The Challenge

- Large on-street population in the Mass/Cass area struggling with substance use disorder, homelessness, and behavioral health conditions.
- Individuals use public spaces, sidewalks, parks, and public libraries, to spend time during the day.
- For some people, daytime social services have prohibitive barriers, like security checks and no tolerance for substance use.
- These individuals are often in need of a safe place to go during the day, medical care, or access to recovery services.
The Need

A safe, welcoming and low-barrier space for daytime use as a crucial need in the Melnea Cass / Mass Ave neighborhood.
Can we design a welcoming and safe place for people struggling with substance use disorder or homelessness to escape the elements and engage in services?
The Approach

The Engagement Center (EC) began with a collaborative, community-based approach to improve quality of life in the Mass Ave/Melnea Cass neighborhood and surrounding areas:

• Mayor’s Office of Recovery Services created a City of Boston internal working group

• Engaged individuals living on the street and in emergency shelters, local businesses & neighborhood associations in design process

• Pilot began August 2nd, and reached maximum capacity within 30 days of opening
The Approach

The City of Boston, under the leadership of Martin J. Walsh and the Mayor’s Office of Recovery Services, invested $1.87m.

Programmatic Leadership provided by Bureau of Recovery Services, BPHC.

The Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics (MONUM) was a key partner in the design of the EC.

Boston Healthcare for the Homeless Program provides medical care.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health contributed $250,000 to the Engagement Center for additional staff coverage.
The Engagement Center aims to:

- Create a comfortable space for individuals to **begin or continue engagement in services**
- Provide a **safe, low-threshold space** for neighborhood residents to spend time during the day
- **Address neighborhood concerns** regarding sidewalk congestion
- Offer BPD and street outreach workers a **place to guide individuals** in need of services and support
The Engagement Center: After
The Engagement Center: After
The EC provides basic amenities and access to a range of recovery services

- Water, snacks, coffee, and bathrooms
- Computers, phone chargers, and TV
- Medical care from Boston Healthcare for the Homeless
- Referral to medical care, behavioral health care, recovery services, and housing services
- Fitness groups by Phoenix Multi-sport
- Writing groups by Writers Without Margins
- Services requested by clients, including foot care, dental care, and workforce development
- Social space
Learning From Guests
Community partners have engaged to support the EC

Examples include:

• **Clothing and toiletries**  Newmarket Business Association
• **Food and meeting space**  Corcoran Jennison
• **Books and board games**  Andrew Square Business Association
• **Books for library**  Boston Public Library
• **Holiday breakfasts**  Boston University
• **Holiday client party**  Hope House
• **Research evaluation**  DoIT and MONUM
the
Writers’
Workshop
at the
Engagement
Center

Storytelling
Sharing & Support
Thursdays
3:00 – 4:00pm
Facilitated by
Faith Breisblatt
& Skoot Mosby

HANDS TO HEART
- CENTER -
YOGA FOR THE PEOPLE

Programming the EC
The EC has resulted in improved service engagement

Open 7 days/week 7am-7pm

Number of client contacts/week = 5,147
Unduplicated guests/day = 300
Number of Program Referrals/week = 27
Number of BHCHP visits/week = 35
Qualitative Evaluation

- What draws guests to the Engagement Center, what makes them stay, and where are they coming from / going to?
- What unexpectedly positive or negative uses have emerged since the Engagement Center opened?
- How can we support the needs of guests with further pilot programming and amenities?
- What areas can the Engagement Center most improve upon?
Understanding “who” is using the EC

NOTE: This is not a quantitative study, and this “map” should not be taken as quantitative data.
*Names are pseudonyms
Homelessness and stigmatization strips people down. The Engagement Center builds people back up.

A PIT STOP

“...I come here for coffee”

MY COMMUNITY

“I asked for fruit cups – and the staff ordered it for me”

MY HOME

“When I don’t need to be anywhere else, I’m here”
Homelessness and stigmatization strips people down. The Engagement Center builds people back up.

Welcoming
- Location matters
- Security is performed discreetly
- There are no conditions for access
- But openness operates in tension with a need for security

Connecting
- Guests have their “go-to” staff member
- Social groups form
- Shared rituals and shared values create a sense of community
- Shared use of the space encourages thoughts of recovery
- But for those in early recovery, it's hard to be around active users

Identity Building
- The EC helps people (re)acquire social capital
- People begin to contribute to their community
- The work of identity building gets people to a place where they are ready to look for help
Location matters

“Most of the barriers for me have been transportation... it’s been a challenge to get around.”

-Guest
There are no conditions for access

“They don’t tolerate the drug stuff at the shelter. If they catch you doing drugs, they will kick you out of there for 30 days.”

-Guest
Shared use of the space encourages thoughts of recovery

“You telling your story might help...People that have never been in this position fascinate me because I’m always like, “How?” It fascinates me to see people that are citizens.” - Guest
But for those in early recovery, it’s hard to be around active users

“When I see someone who’s high it triggers me, makes me want to get high....The EC has helped me stay clean. I’m not as depressed here.”

-Guest
People begin to contribute to their community

“I have my own footsteps in life, but if I could teach a few tricks of the trade... I'd want to help. I want to be a drug counselor, a youth counselor. I've been through a lot of shit.”

-Guest
Shared rituals and shared values create a sense of community

“We at the EC love you.”

-Guest
The EC helps people (re)acquire social capital

“There are times when I’ve gone over to people and said, ‘Don’t do it in here. Please.’ And they’ve told me: ‘I have respect for you. I won’t.’”

-Staff
Next Steps

How can we better serve our clients?
How can we better serve our staff?
Where should the EC live long-term?
What other services should we provide?
How can we improve our data collection practices?
Thank You!

Devin Larkin
Director, Bureau of Recovery Services

DLarkin@bphc.org

boston.gov/recovery
bphc.org