

LEIANA INTERVIEW

Thu, Feb 29, 2024 1:08PM • 44:42

Where you lived when unhoused

In discussion with co-worker

At bench with client

At the library

Booking out car

Driving

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

living, people, unsheltered, services, community, program, work, person, navigator, situations, housing, call, goals, substance use disorder, life, human services, social service providers, treated, recovery, talk

00:00

I remember to do, okay. It's like counterintuitive, and so used to people being able to communicate with me now all these different platforms. Okay.

00:10

Okay, just as an opening statement, can you just tell us your name, or your work for what you do?

00:18

Sure. So, my name is Leiana Parr, and I'm a community actions recovery Navigator Program Coordinator. I just recently moved into that role. Before that I was a case manager in the recovery navigator program for community. And primarily, what the recovery navigator program does is it aims to assist people with goals they've already set for themselves in the community. More specifically, we prioritize people from the unhoused community. And they're usually facing a lot of different complex behavioral health needs. So what our program does is they help people to be able to navigate systems, that they are having a lot of barriers in navigating on their own.

01:10

Could you just talk through a typical day?

01:13

Yeah, so I usually come into the office around eight o'clock in the morning, and I start my day off by going and **getting a vehicle from the company**. We drive fleet vehicles that belong to the company. And a lot of the time, I am going straight out into the field to meet with clients. And when I'm meeting with these clients, I'm meeting them where they're at. So that can be **anywhere in the community**. Sometimes people want to meet me **at like the library**, sometimes people want to meet me at their tent where they're saying, it just really depends. In that circumstance, one of the things that I really appreciate about our program is that we have teams go out. So it's not just me alone. Because sometimes, we're met with you know, situations where we have to have a lot of like safety and situational awareness. So usually, I'll have a partner come out with me if I'm going to meet someone for the first time. Just to kind of like help make sure that we're breaking the ice with people who are new. And sometimes, you know, when we're going to meet with clients with the recovery navigator program, we're coming across people who are in large groups and would benefit from other services that we also provide to our outreach participants. So

02:35

what I'm just doing the question, slight different order here, what what qualifies you to do this job.

02:43

So it's actually interesting. I am **not traditionally** in the human services field the way that a lot of people enter it. I did study human services at college, I do have an associate's degree with human services focus. That being said, what actually brought me into wanting to work in human services was and specifically in this demographic for community action. So specifically marginalized people who are living unsheltered is because I have lived experience of being unsheltered. my lived experience of being unsheltered really opened my eyes to the way that people are treated when they're living on the streets. I was often treated like a second class citizen. And when you've lived that experience, you also run into, of course, social service providers. And I worked with a lot of different social service providers over the three years that I was living on sheltered, and one particular social service provider did stand out to me, and it was community action. And the reason that community action stood out to me when I was living unsheltered was, I called, and I talked to a **person**. And the person who I spoke with, spoke to me, like I was a human, like my life mattered, and that I wasn't just a number to them. And that wasn't my experience and a lot of places that I had worked with, and having an opportunity to just call every month to at least maintain some sort of communication with Community Action. While I was still living unsheltered was really important to me, because again, I still was greeted with a person, a person talked to me and treated me like a human being and gave me suggestions about things that could be doing to end my homelessness. Event eventually, I did get into a shelter program here in Skagit County, and I attended the Anacortes Family Center emergency shelter. I graduated through their program pretty quickly. And I wasn't going to stay in Scotch it but I decided to because I wanted to be able to find a way to give back to an organization that had done so much for me. And my apologies, my nose isn't super ready. So I

noticed that there was an opening here at Community Action. This was a couple of years ago now, almost. And the heading spoke to me, it spoke to my soul and my personal, like lived experience. And it was that they were looking for people who, you know, have one lived experience with homelessness, or substance use disorder, mental health challenges. So like, experience with being part of the behavioral health system, but also experience with maybe living unsheltered. And I was like, that's, that speaks to me, like, these are a lot of my lived experiences.

I'm not someone who walked in their shoes, because no two people's paths are the same. But I feel that it's a lot easier to understand people, when you've had experiences that were very similar to theirs. And also, I can empathize with, most specifically, the struggle, because that part of living unsheltered is true until people get housed. And as much as I, like, would try to find ways to get rehoused during the period of time I was living on sheltered. It wasn't really until somebody reached out to me and greeted me with hope that things started to change my life.

07:22

I just want to that's great. I just want to get a couple of shorter.

07:29

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able to empathize with them on a true level. I'm not someone who walked in their shoes, because no two people's paths are the same. But I feel that it's a lot easier to understand people, when you've had experiences that were very similar to theirs. And also, I can empathize with, most specifically, the struggle because that part of living unsheltered is true until people get housed. And as much as as much as I like, would try to find ways to get rehoused during the period of time I was living on sheltered. It wasn't really until somebody reached out to me and greeted me with hope that things started to change my life.

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I just want to ask Craig, I just want to get a couple of shorter that we can use in this as well. I mean, it's always kind of like repeat Take a bit of what you just said. But one of them would be that excuse me services, or the services that you provide are essential. But that human contact is, in a way, what makes the difference, something like that, when you said that you actually felt listened to, and somebody connected with you this, that kind of alchemy, the importance of that. Yeah.

15:28

So the importance of building relationships, and having trusting relationships is huge. When you're working with, especially people who have felt very marginalized, and very alone, even just having a pro social or positive interaction with somebody that can really change the dynamics of not just how today's going to go, but how tomorrow might go. I think, you know, just sitting down with somebody and having a conversation and letting that person feel heard, understood. Making sure their feelings are validated. Because a lot of the time, people who are living unsheltered, the way they're treated is, as if it's their fault that they're in the situation they're in, and that they deserve whatever happens to them. And that couldn't be further from the truth.

So like, if when I was in that situation, anytime someone would come and have a positive interaction with me, or even just sit there, and listen to me, while I shared what was going on that day, it helped me to feel more human, and less, you know, Castaway, like, like, I'm living on the fringes of society and, and more included in society. And one of the things that I felt with working with community action, I felt that I felt that I was part of a community. And that everyone in the community was trying to keep me in the community, not, you know, let me let me, you know, just be another number. Because it because really, that that delineation is so important to me is that every time I interact with a person, I interact with them by trying to make sure that I get to know their name. And, you know, offer them some food and like some hot cocoa and just like sit down and have just a, you know, heart to heart with them. Because I know that I can't solve all of the problems that are going on in somebody's life. Nobody really can. But from those conversations, we can take goals that that person has, and try to start, you know, taking steps in a direction that is more positive. So another Oh, sorry, go ahead.

18:24

Question. Yeah, this is this is going really well. In our conversation, when we first started talking, you mentioned that getting help from somebody about how to start navigating

the housing thing made such a difference, because it was like, trying to read us science paper or something like that. And that person made all the difference to could you just talk about that? Yeah, contribute to.

18:57

So when I was going through the process of trying to get rehoused, it was really, maze of confusion. There's a lot of different programs for different situations. And I felt like I was just in a complete sea of confusion really, and truly, like, that's the best way to describe it. And I finally had an opportunity to talk to somebody who worked at the time for the local housing authority here in Skagit. And I couldn't have had a more important conversation at that moment, because it was when I finally had a direction I could be going in, that was focused to my needs as a person in our community. And with that, I feel bad because I will never remember her name right now. But what she explained to me was, you know, the differences between what section eight housing is and what it isn't, what 50% or more People who make sorry, she explained that people who make 50% or below the area median income, qualify for low income housing tax credit units. And then she further explained the differences between, you know, people who are living with disabilities and seniors and housing that's aimed for the particular demographic versus family housing. So that I could really understand what kinds of apartments I'm supposed to be applying to, and what apartments I shouldn't be worrying about trying to apply to. And when you're just like handed lists, which is what a lot of the time kind of happens is, you just, you know, you walk into somewhere, and they're like, here's a bunch of places you can go, you know, apply to, it's like this, hundreds of properties, lists. And like, you're already nervous, because you're like, I don't even know if I feel comfortable calling these places on my own. And I think ultimately, one of the things that it's really important when people are ready to apply to housing is that we sit down with them, help them to understand what their expectations should be, and also help them to understand what kind of housing they should be applying to, because without a like, really solid direction, that's one of the reasons I think that people kind of stay on house even longer is because they don't have someone walking beside them to really explain what's going to be worth their time for a second. So one of the things that people are looking for, when they come to the recovery navigator program or refer to the recovery navigator program, really what it is, is they already have goals, those goals can be anything from trying to navigate systems in housing, it can be trying to navigate systems in the, you know, justice system, the legal system, trying to get access to substance use disorder services, or mental health services. And sometimes even just physical medical needs that aren't being met. So what we are here to do is to walk alongside that person, they already have these goals in mind, and help to make sure that they're navigating those systems with someone by their side. That's, that's the whole purpose is someone who's knowledgeable enough to be able to help them to attend court on time, for instance, make sure that they're able to make it to these appointments that are so crucial to their future. That's hugely what this program is about.

22:58

That's right.

23:01

And I'm like grieving. Yeah, because it sucks. And it sucks when people who work in this field, they get their hands tied behind their back, and they're trying to do something to make change happen, that they're not able to be there for a person that they wish they could have been.

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There's not enough resources, sometimes there's not enough people to say,

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yeah, like one of the gaps in services that happens a lot is a lot of these like social service providers, where Monday through Friday, voc, and like those two days over the weekend, there's just not enough connection that can be made. That doesn't feel I guess, pretty much like if it's the weekend, your chances of getting help or someone are to call it doesn't need a crisis response. 911. And who wants cops to respond to them when they're having a crisis? Not very many people.

24:12

That's why there's so much news about or someone's reality about, you know, police violence and stuff, because they're not social workers. They're not trained to deal with behavioral health issues. And they, you know, they either shoot first and ask questions later, or any variation on that and it's not fair on either side. To put a guy Yeah,

24:34

yeah, exactly. Anyways, they're not trained to be in a lot of those situations.

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I just want to or questions at least on my side. And one is, do you think people out there as it were the general public understand the extent of the problem that I mean, most of us just go about our daily life doing this going down to the coop getting something or whatever. And, you know, it's just traffic it might be raining or whatever people walking around. But behind that, just the other world that you navigate. Do you think people really understand and appreciate what that situation is?

25:12

That more often than not, people see what they want to see when it comes to the unhoused community I often hear banter, especially on social media, where people have this just like heartless approach to a person living unsheltered. Because they've never experienced a hardship in their life, that would put them in that same position. But yet, the reality of our economy and the reality of everyone's situation is everyone's one paycheck away, one missed paycheck away from probably living outside. And for a long time, I would really, really take it to heart and I still do when I hear people speaking about people that they don't know, they've never had a conversation with, in fact, sometimes would be afraid to even have a conversation with just out of the stigma that comes along with living unsheltered. I urge people to really think, before they speak upon another person and how they're living. Because statistically, for example, a lot of people like to blame the unhoused community for crime. If they knew the

reality, that actually it's more common for unhoused people to be victims of crime than perpetrators of crime, maybe they would really, you know, think twice about how they continue to try to treat them. As the more you push people away, the more and more that marginalizes them from society. And the more that you push people away, and try to hide them from society, or ignore the problems that they're facing, the challenges that they're going through.

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It's so dehumanizing. And, you know, we have so much to be grateful for in our society. And what really disturbs me is that, like, you can live in a first world country, and yet people can be treated like they are third world citizens.

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I will constantly rally for change. And, you know, it kind of goes along with that same thought process of like, if you see something, if you hear somebody speaking ill of a person who is probably going through one of the worst days, their whole life, speak up, you know, to tell them, you know, it's really cruel to speak upon a person that way. I hate to throw around the word bigotry, but that's really how it feels. I remember a time when I was living in sheltered, I was physically assaulted, it took over an hour to convince someone to call the cops, when I was wandering down the street with a very, very bright black eye and blood coming out of my eyeball. It took an hour to convince someone to call the police. So it took an hour for anyone to actually call the police to try to do something about my situation. And when the police arrived, they didn't really offer any assistance to me. I even explained like that the person who, you know, had punched me in the face repeatedly, was still just wandering around and, and making threats at me that they might come back and hit me some more. And that's kind of the level to which people are treated when it's known that they're part of the unhoused community is truly like a second class citizen. Like, just because I mean, because, I mean, I can imagine, you know, if you're living in a house, and you open to the door to your house, and someone punched you in the face multiple times and you called the police, the police would probably you know, show up and like try to look for the perpetrator and like, you know, maybe do something about that. But the fact that I wasn't at a house, I was in my tent, and I will get from my tent And, and the person who was standing outside of my tent started to punch me in the face. I see that like, now that's marginalizing of a person and treating them as lesser just because they don't live under a roof.

30:22

Can I ask a follow up question on that? Yeah, sure. Can you talk a little bit about that partnership? Or do you have any, you may not have any experience with working with the Mount Vernon Police Department on there, because they have a, I think they have somebody who's kind of a social worker type officer that helps in the sheriff's department kinda seems to coordinate as well. Are those positive experiences for the most part? And can you talk about it a little bit? Yes.

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So one of the partnerships with the recovery navigator program is with what's called the Integrated outreach services, which is embedded within the Mount Vernon Police Department. And what that is, it's actually a team of social workers who go out in the community and provide support to people who are facing, you know, crisis type situations, a lot of the time. They aren't labeled as a crisis response team. But what they do is very similar to any other, you know, outreach provider, which is making connections with people helping them to understand that if they are, you know, victims of crime, that they're able to, you know, of course, report that to them, and they will do their best to try to help them with that. Reporting. It's important that we have people who are available to victims of, of any type of crime, to be able to report it without fear. I know, it's an issue that is always in the process of being developed into, you know, better response. But I do, I do have to say, iOS, having them available for situations like that, or situations where somebody, you know, might being accused of committing a crime, they're looking at the bigger picture of what's going on with this person. What's happening to this person, rather than looking at it from this perspective, that a lot of police officer police officers often do, which is, well, I was called here, because you're breaking the rules, let's, you know, prosecute you for breaking the rules.

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So this is a way of this is a way that we work with the justice system in order to more fairly serve, I guess, are serving the homeless community as well, right.

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It's to try to divert people from recidivism. So even in the circumstance that someone has committed, for instance, you know, a gross misdemeanor. We cover navigator programs, having embedded social workers in the police departments, the whole focus of that is to actually try to divert people away from the justice system, who really have no reason to be in the justice system, have no reason to be going back to jail, have no reason to be staying long periods in jail, because the true focus is people who have complex behavioral health challenges. And it's, it's rare that you meet a single person who's living unsheltered who doesn't have some sort of complex behavioral challenge. The trauma alone of living unsheltered can develop into long term post traumatic stress disorder. It's been seen many times. And it's really hard to navigate systems to be heard or feel like you're being heard or receive any help. When you're constantly being looked at as a criminal when you're constantly being looked at as you know, part of the problem when in reality, you're just trying to make it through the day you're just trying to survive. You know, every 24 hours that you're still alive in this like Hunger Games seeming scenario, is a good day. So I guess ultimately, the the importance of of communities coming together, including police departments, including, you know, people within the judicial system, all coming together to understand and focus more on what are the behavioral health challenges this person is facing and how Okay, we try to divert them away from the jails and prisons and in places where ultimately they really don't belong. And towards social services and receiving help for the reasons why they're living unsheltered why they continue to go back to jail.

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Oh, on the upside, what what does success mean to you? What was success for you in terms of the work that you do?

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Since success, it can mean a lot of things. Success in the work that I do is someone completely completing goals. So every time that a person comes to the recovery navigator program, and they're receiving intensive case management services, say, you know, perfect example, you know, I start, start getting to know a person building, you know, a trusting kind of rapport with them. Oftentimes, within, within, sometimes it'll be like a really brief period of time. And then sometimes it will be, you know, several months of interacting with a person, they finally decide that one of their goals is, you know, to get sober and, and, you know, their substance use, they've realized has created some, some challenges extra challenges in their life. My favorite day is the day when someone has decided that they want to take their life back, and that they're going to manifest goals to do that. And okay. No worries.

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Okay, I can edit into this. But yeah, we're talking about what success is to you. So

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success with the recovery navigator program, of course, is people who have goals that they've already set out for themselves, finally getting to be accomplished. And that looks different depending on the person. Specifically, you know, the reason it's called the recovery navigator program is recovery. So, recovery is different for each person. And it's a different path for each person. When someone has finally decided that they want to be on a path of recovery, I love being able to be there for them in choosing their path and supporting their chosen path. And that can be everything from you know, accessing medication assisted treatment services, that could be substance use disorder, counseling, intensive outpatient inpatient services, some people that I work with are ready to do a long term inpatient stay. And my favorite part of success is watching someone graduate treatment and come back from treatment with a new lease on life, and ready to start working on the other goals that they had before they went such as, you know, getting back into housing, reuniting with their family, all of those things, I've been able to be a part of watching someone really feel alive and want to be part of society again, wanting to work again, wanting to have jobs wanting to go into jobs in this field. That's, that's really what I see as success.

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What does that do for you? How does that make you feel?

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Every person who has decided to turn their life around and given us this opportunity to be of support to them. It's amazing to see with such you know, grueling numbers of overdose and loss that we have in our communities right now. And we're still you know, we're still in pandemic proportions where it comes to people who are losing their lives to especially fentanyl. Every person that I get to see the light come back into their eyes and their life be able to be functional

for them and actually have success at beating this thing, beating addiction it's why I do what I do. You know? Watching people be able to have a roof over their head that they don't have to worry whether or not they get to still be there tomorrow. That's what makes this all worthwhile. You know? Most importantly, the relationship building that I get to have with my community. Because when I see unhoused people, I, I think more so that it's not just a housing problem. People deserve to feel like they matter because they do. Every single person that I've met during the period, I was unhoused, every single person I meet here, doing the work I do with Community Action, their life matters. And so, I, even when it's just like small, incremental goals, because like, a lot of the time, people get really lost in this sea of you know, services. Even when a person's goals are broken down to something really small, where it's just like, today, I'm going to have 24 hours of better than yesterday, when I was first, when I was actually first getting sober. I remember a time where the way that I coped was, I would say, for the next five minutes, I'm going to live. And if I make it to five minutes, I'm going to try for another hour. And if I make it past an hour, I'm going to try for, you know, four hours, and then eight hours, and then eventually I'd get to a 24 hour period where I hadn't used. And what that did was, I was able to extend that period of time longer and longer. All right. So one of the areas that I serve on the recovery navigator program is East County, I go up there every Tuesday. And to basically give a better picture of services. Anywhere that you're going along the i Five corridor, if you're east of I five, the further east you go, the more rural our territories get, and the less and less services are available to folks. So being able to make those connections in the East County part of the county looks a little bit different. I'm going into you know, more rural areas, meeting people where they're at in rural areas, oftentimes making sure that I can't transport them, at least into town to access some of the services that are available there. So it really is a you know, bridging a pretty big gap. Things are starting to come along in that area a lot. There's been a lot of progress. For instance, medication assisted treatment services are being offered over there and have been for a while but more even more specifically, we just learned that and then next coming months, one of our main providers of methadone program is actually moving there to East County and and is going to start serving participants there, which I mean, that's just huge. Because one of the biggest reasons why people don't access substance use services is because they're so overly located. It's almost an impossible task to try to access their services. To kind of give a better idea of what I'm talking about. If this person lives in concrete, Washington, and they want to access methadone program, they have to go to Anacortes, Washington, it's over an hour drive, if you don't have a car. It's going to be an all day endeavor, just to get to methadone program. And even then, you might miss one of the buses that don't run very often, to make it back home. So eliminating some of those barriers, looks like you know, picking people up driving them to the local place that's providing medication assisted treatment now, because even within concrete, you know, people are pretty far away from actual downtown concrete. They are living very rural, you know, up in the woods several miles from a gas station. That's that's just kind of the terrain works over there. So it's nice to get access for people