

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

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Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Extension facilitates talks to address unhoused issues in Pekin

Homelessness is an increasing societal issue in every community in America today. Pekin is no exception to it either. The [Pekin Downtown Main Street Merchants Association](#) reached out to University of Illinois Extension for help in addressing issues being caused by the unhoused in the downtown business district.

Terri Gambetti, president of the Merchants Association, worked with [Richard Proffer](#), Illinois Extension community and economic development educator serving Fulton, Mason, Peoria and Tazewell counties, to plan a series of “facilitated conversations” between the merchants, [City of Pekin](#) officials, concerned social organizations, and [Pekin Outreach Initiative](#).

“Since the issue was contentious and people felt upset and unheard,” explained Proffer, “I decided it was important to review the rules of civility at the initial meeting, so everyone knew how to behave. I wanted to avoid a session where nothing was accomplished due to everyone trying to talk over each other. Plus having a set agenda for each meeting helped keep everyone on track.”

Over the following months, the group was able to agree on issues and create an environment where all points of view were respected and heard. For some attendees, this format would be the first time they had heard opposing views and had someone to help encourage discussion civility in the process. Detailed notes were recorded and shared each month. These precise notes kept everyone aware of what was said and how to proceed.

Many facilitative techniques were used by Proffer to help keep the conversation focused and moving towards a potential solution. In addition to the behavior ground rules and meeting agenda, Proffer also used active listening where close attention was being paid to what was being said, expressions of non-verbal communication, and observation of the room’s reaction to the statements. Using flip charts to record the flow aided in the group understanding of each others’ comments and making connections. In an effort for all to be heard, Proffer often called on people who had not been active in the discussions to ensure all were heard and represented in the work of the group.

Proffer’s role as the facilitator was very involved, and many people said they felt progress. One person said, “I never expected us to be so civil in the meeting after all the talk that had gone on before it.” He kept the meetings to one hour.

“I remained neutral and tried to ensure all sides were discussed fairly,” Proffer stated. “When needed, I would interrupt people trying to talk over others and then allow the current speaker to finish.” His ability to read the room, recognize people who wanted to say something, letting them know he knew that, and then calling on them helped the group realize they were going to be heard.

The group was instrumental in creating results in the community. The [Pekin Police Department](#) hired a social worker to work with the unhoused and started a dedicated downtown patrol. The fire department started more frequent outreach efforts. The Pekin Outreach Initiative found a new space outside of downtown. The merchants realized it was appropriate to call the police when confronted by an unhoused individual.



Pekin Outreach Initiative was one of many organizations involved in a series of meetings held to address concerns involving unhoused citizens in Pekin. Richard Proffer, Extension CED educator, facilitated the discussions which helped the organizations, merchants, and city officials have a better understanding and work together to address the needs and problems.

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