



ENGAGING VULNERABLE PEOPLE





“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting their own battle.”

Plato

“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

Leo Buscaglia

“More than 250 Recruit Constables have benefited from experiential learning at a homeless shelter. Our officers walk away with a first-hand perspective of how some of our partner agencies, like The Drop-In Centre, Alpha House, The Seed, and The Salvation Army, are dealing with the issues of homelessness, mental illness and addictions. Feedback from their experience has helped the Calgary Police Service strengthen our positive relationships with vulnerable people and the agencies that support them.”

Inspector Scott Boyd

Calgary Police Service, Chief Crowfoot Learning Centre



A STRATEGY FOR ENGAGING VULNERABLE PEOPLE

In your workplace or residence, you may have experiences with a vulnerable person displaying behaviours that cause you or the people around you to feel unsafe. This may include aggressive panhandling, being intoxicated, sleeping in a private space or just being loud and unruly. Or you may come across a person who appears to be in crisis. If you feel comfortable engaging, keep these three steps in mind: stay safe, have a plan and then reach out. (Below is a summary of these three steps. More details are provided in the workshop.)

1. Stay Safe – First ask yourself if it is safe to approach. Read the person's body language. Body language or non-verbal communication communicates much more than verbal communication. Sometimes up to 90 percent of what is communicated comes from body language rather than words. A person's body language is a key indicator of their openness to having a conversation, or if they are in a stage of escalation which can be unpredictable and dangerous. Maintain a safe distance, while respecting personal space. Communicate non-threatening body language.

2. Have a Plan – Have a plan in place, including an exit strategy, prior to engaging a vulnerable person. Identify the need or escalation behaviour at hand, and use the skills outlined in this manual to communicate effectively. Your assessment should include the following:

- What are you hoping to accomplish? What are your expectations for acceptable behaviour?
- Are you ready to provide alternative steps to

the person to meet your expectations?

- Is the person angry? If so, determining the person's stage of escalation will determine your action. (See Verbal Resolution Model, **Page 13**). Understanding the psychology of an escalating person will allow you to plan your intervention for that specific behaviour.
- You need to know your exit strategy before you reach out.

If you are uncomfortable or uncertain ask for further support from a staff member or neighbour. Do not hesitate to contact the police if you feel threatened or unsafe.

"I'm worried about calling the police because I don't want the person to go to jail."

Homelessness and poverty in itself are not criminal justice issues; they are societal issues that require a community response as a whole. City of Calgary enforcement agencies know that ticketing and charging individuals who are homeless for behaviours that do not endanger the public or property does not result in positive outcomes. Putting people who are experiencing homelessness into the justice system is costly and ineffective. Calgary Police Service, Transit Security and Community Standards (bylaw officers) all work closely with Calgary social service agencies. Every effort is made to connect the person with services that will meet their immediate needs. (See **Appendix A** for more information about City of Calgary enforcement agencies' partnerships with social service organizations.)

IN THE END, IT IS ALWAYS SAFETY FIRST!



The safety of yourself and others is most important. If you witness or sense behaviours that are unsafe, please **call 911** right away. Do not put yourself or others in an unsafe position. Do not try to be a hero, or try to "rescue" others. Utilize the highly skilled and **professional emergency responders** in Calgary at any time you deem it appropriate.

Here's a Useful Tool: www.calgarydowntown.com/about/resources/safety.html

3. Reach Out – Use the basic communication skills outlined in the following section. If you are comfortable, offer assistance or intervention. Knowledge of community resources will increase your level of comfort in offering assistance (see **Appendix A**).

Communications Basics

The most important tool we provide in the Engaging Vulnerable People Workshop is the Verbal Resolution Model. The success of the model depends on good, basic communication skills. People want to be listened to and authentically heard. We were born to connect in community. But having said that, 70 percent of all communication is:

- ✘ Misunderstood,
- ✘ Misinterpreted,
- ✘ Rejected,
- ✘ Distorted,
- ✘ Simply not heard.

So, we must work hard at communication, even more so with people in crisis. An empathetic approach removes any personal judgement or bias from the conversation. This means both addressing negative behaviour while acknowledging the person behind the behaviour.

Your body language is just as important as your words. Remember these two key principles:

- Most people need 18 to 36 inches of personal space in order to feel comfortable. Maintaining a minimum three-foot distance away from an escalating person communicates respect and minimizes risk. Should that person make sudden movements, you have a better chance of taking evasive action.
- Stand at a 45-degree angle to the person you are engaging with. This position communicates an open, respectful and non-threatening position, and also allows you to retreat if a person strikes at you.

Your behaviour will influence the outcome of the conversation. We may not have complete control over how another person reacts; however, we can control ourselves. We should always be aware of our own body language, facial expressions and nonverbal communication, as they can influence the situation to our advantage or not.

Engagement Examples

Mike is visibly homeless. He has been found sleeping in the lobby of a workplace. This is the third time this week he has been found sleeping there. Each time Mike is asked to leave he becomes verbally abusive and angry, but does not act out physically. An employee has been instructed to talk to Mike and get him to leave.

Dos and Don'ts

What **Escalates** a Conflict?

- Overreacting.
- Lack of Patience.
- Poor Listening/Making Assumptions.
- Not Mindful of Personal Space.
- Defensiveness.

Escalation example: The employee is standing a foot away from Mike, with his arms crossed and his voice raised. He is annoyed about having to get Mike to leave.

Employee: "Hey, buddy, you can't sleep here."

Mike: "Why not? I'm tired. Just leave me alone!"

Employee: "You can't sleep here, you need to leave now! I don't care if you're tired, you have to go now!"

Mike: "Where am I supposed to go?"

Employee: "I don't care where you go, just leave!"

Mike: "Leave me alone"

Employee: "Fine I'll leave you alone, but the police won't. I'm calling them now"

Mike: "Go ahead, call the police I don't care"

Employee: "Don't say I didn't warn you!"

What De-escalates a Conflict?

- Remaining Calm.
- Introducing yourself/ask for their name and use it.
- Active silence for reflection and/or open questions.
- Being mindful of your body language.

De-escalation example: The employee is standing three feet away and communicates open, respectful body language, using a low tone of voice.

Employee: "Hi my name is [Employee's Name], what's your name?"

Mike: "My name is Mike, what do you want?"

Employee: "Nice to meet you Mike, I came to speak with you because I am concerned about you sleeping in the lobby."

Mike: "What about it?"

Employee: "I am curious, why you are sleeping here?"

Mike: "I'm not bothering anyone, I just need somewhere to sleep!"

Employee: "I can appreciate that you need your rest. Unfortunately you cannot sleep here. Do you have anywhere else to sleep?"

Mike: "No, I've been sleeping here because I don't know where to go. No one noticed until this week."

Employee: "Mike, I'd like to call someone who can help set you up with someplace to stay. They are called the **DOAP team** and they'll talk with you and give you a ride to someplace where you can get some help finding a safe place to sleep. I don't want to see you sleeping in this lobby when there are better options for you."

Mike: "Do I have to go with them?"

Employee: "No, but are you willing to have a conversation with them to see what they have to offer?"

Mike: "I guess."

In the **escalation** example, you can see how both parties were frustrated and it escalated quickly to involving police. In the **de-escalation** example you can see how a short conversation can solve an issue long term. Sometimes it simply comes down to people not knowing what resources are available to meet their needs. Taking the time to explain what behaviour is not acceptable and providing an alternative will go a long way to ensuring mutual respect and understanding of one another.

The 4 Types of Communication

1. Listening - 60 percent of our overall communication time is spent listening, although we only recognize 25 percent of what is being said. So, we often miss the underlying message of what a person is trying to say. Non-judgemental listening means adopting a set of attitudes and listening skills, both verbal and nonverbal, that allow the listener to hear and understand what is being said. This allows the listener to hear the feelings behind what a person is saying, not just the facts. It also allows the person who is speaking to do so openly and comfortably without fear of being judged.

There are 5 levels of listening. Take time to self-assess and discover what you do most:

- Not Listening - Outright ignoring, not really listening at all.
- Pretend Listening - Listening on autopilot.
- Selective Listening – Drifting in and out of the conversation, paying attention to only parts.
- Active Listening – Fully engaging in a conversation by listening to the person speaking, showing through body language that they have your full attention, interrupting only to ask clarifying questions and recapping what they've said at the end to make sure you're understood.

- Empathetic Listening – Listening with intent to understand, to get inside the person’s frame of reference, seeking to understand them emotionally and intellectually.

Empathetic listening requires us to really care; to look people in the eye, drop what we’re doing, and put ourselves in their shoes. We also need to listen “between the lines”; to hear beyond their words. This involves listening to what is being said, and listening to what is not being said. It’s important not to be quick to give advice or to speak. The less we speak and interject and offer comment, the more we will hear, understand, and appreciate.

2. Verbal Communication - Words have power. Choose words that express acceptance, warmth, kindness, understanding, positivity, and hopefulness. Slow down before speaking, use clear, concise language, and avoid words that reflect judgment, negativity, or frustration.

3. Nonverbal Communication – Powerful messages are conveyed through nonverbal cues. Body language is critical in the actual listening process, and in helping people to feel genuinely heard. 90 percent of all communication is non-verbal. This means that if we are to help people feel heard, we must communicate it non-verbally:

- With the Eyes – With vulnerable people, make eye contact. Acknowledge their presence.
- With Facial Expressions – Smile.
- With Posture and Overall Body Language – Remember to stand at a 45-degree angle to the person you are engaging with. This position communicates an open, respectful and non-threatening position.

4. Para-verbal Communication – It’s not just what you say but how you say it. Tone is important when engaging with another person. We can use the correct wording to portray a message but if we use the wrong tone our message will be lost entirely. Our tone, volume and rhythm always needs to be adjusted for the conversation at hand.

Keeping these fundamentals of good communication in mind, we can use the Verbal Resolution Model to reach out safely and effectively.



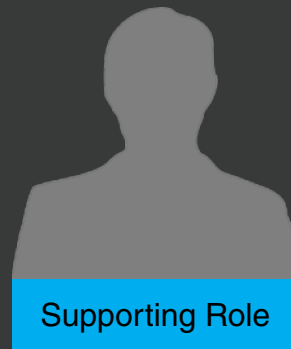
VERBAL RESOLUTION MODEL

HIGH STRESS AND TRAUMATIC



Initiating Role

- Uneasiness
- Slight Loss of Rationality/Disproportionate Response
- ⚠ Physical/Non Physical Intimidation
- Emotional and Logical Rebalancing



Supporting Role

- Supportive Engagement
- Concise Verbal Expectations
- Exterior Support/Exterior Agency (CPS)
- Helpful Rapport Approach

Diagram 1: Verbal Resolution Model - Summary

In the **Verbal Resolution Model**, the “initiating” role refers to the vulnerable person you are engaging. You are in the “responding” role (see Diagram 1). Each stage shows a step of escalation and the parallel strategy from the responding person. If the initiating person escalates, the responder should act based on the strategy that parallels the initiator below. It is important to understand that this is not a linear process. A person may stay in one stage or move back and forth between stages.

Be aware of and sensitive to precipitating factors if they are evident. Precipitating factors are internal and external issues that cause a person to reach an escalating behaviour. Remember that everyone has a peak or breaking point, where the risk to personal safety is higher. The good news is that what goes up must come down. It’s when a person is at Stage 4, “Emotional and Logical Rebalancing,” that rapport building and boundary enforcing conversations can occur.

Initiator	Responder
<p>Appears To Be Uneasy</p> <p>Uneasiness or feelings of anxiety that make the person tense and irritable. This can be the most common way a person may act out or display an escalating behaviour. Precipitating factors include internal or external issues that cause a person to lash out including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustration, • Sleep deprivation, • Need to be heard (yelling), • Peer pressure (impressing friends or saving face), • Urgent need, • Hunger, • Displaced anger/fear, • Drugs/alcohol. <p>In this stage it is important to focus on recognizing physical signs of uneasiness in the other person.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slumped shoulders, clenched fists, pacing or nail biting, • Crying, yelling, swearing, • Isolation - Sometimes they simply isolate themselves. This is often missed because this behaviour does not demand attention. 	<p>Supportive Engagement</p> <p>Engage with an empathic and supportive approach.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use empathy • Remove personal bias or judgement • Respect personal space • Communicate kindly <p>Keys to supportive engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay calm, • Don't take it personally, • Use open-ended questions, • Allow silence for reflection.
<p>Slight Loss of Rationality</p> <p>Loss of reasonable thinking, talking or acting logically. This is a clear sign the initiating person is escalating indicated by difficulty staying on topic and fully comprehending all the facts and information they are receiving. Often they will have a disproportionate response to suggestions or conversations.</p> <p>Signs of a slight loss of rationality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempting to draw you into a power struggle, • Unable to stay on topic, • Defensive commentary, • Attacking language, • Ultimatums are used. 	<p>Concise Verbal Expectations</p> <p>Communicate short, clear expectations.</p> <p>At this stage, brevity is important. Communicate directives or expectations clearly but kindly. Further conversation can be had at a later time.</p> <p>Keys to setting verbal expectations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have purpose to your directive – ask yourself is it obtainable or doable for both parties? • Keep it simple. • Be concise. Over-explanation often results in confusion. • Use plain language. Avoid slang or abbreviations

STAGE 3

<p>Physical/Non Physical Intimidation</p> <p>Intentional behaviour or action to cause fear, terror, harm or physical injury.</p> <p>This behaviour should always be taken seriously. Often nonphysical intimidation is over looked or ignored; even though it is a criminal offence.</p> <p>Examples of physical and nonphysical intimidation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal threats of harm to you or a loved one (“I’m going to kill you”), • Damaging property, • Spitting on you, • Pretending to strike at you, • Striking or punching you. 	<p>Look for Exterior Support</p> <p>Depending on where the incident is occurring, gauge the support you will need. If you are a security staff member, call for support and take a step back from the situation. Sometimes providing a new face provides a new chance. This is enough for the initiating person to calm down and start over. If the behaviour continues or threats are being made, seek assistance from the police.</p> <p>Seek further support when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The initiating person is focused in on you (tunnel-vision), • You can no longer maintain rational detachment, • Threats of harm have been made, • An assault has occurred. • Contact CPS: Call 911 if there is an immediate threat, or 403-266-1234 if you are concerned but it’s not an emergency.
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STAGE 4

<p>Emotional and Logical Rebalancing</p> <p>The stage after a person has lost control and lashed out physically or non-physically in an extreme manner. The person who initiated the escalated behaviour begins to calm down and regains control over their emotions, and is able to think in a logical manner again. This is a stage where boundaries and expectations can be further reinforced.</p> <p>A person experiencing Emotional and Logical Rebalancing may exhibit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A decrease in emotional intensity, • A decrease in physical intimidation, • Remorse or apology, • Regret or shame. 	<p>Helpful Rapport Approach</p> <p>Used to understand each other and improve communication. This is where boundaries and expectations from the responding person can be reinforced. Teaching the initiating person alternative behaviours and explaining what they did wrong can have extensive impact on improving their behaviour while establishing trust with the responder.</p> <p>Keys to Helpful Rapport Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build trust. • Validate feelings. • Speak about alternatives. • Reinforce boundaries and expectations.
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If the person is still in an escalated state, and you choose to engage, always remember the following process for de-escalation:

1. **Be Calm** – Shift from reaction and judgment to curiosity.
2. **Make It Safe** – Make it clear you are authentically listening. Have an exit plan in mind.
3. **Discover Common Goals** – Express your desire to meet their goals and yours in a calm and safe conversation.
4. **Ask for Change** – Note current behaviours and invite them to respond differently.

If you choose to reach out, it is helpful to know the resources available to vulnerable people in Calgary. Please see the list of resources in **Appendix A**.

CONCLUSION

The richest experiences we have are those where we connect with one another. We hope this resource increases your understanding and interest in building safe, respectful and mutually beneficial relationships with struggling Calgarians.

We are committed to supporting you after your training. If you have questions about the training, please call or email the program trainer, **Samantha: 403-699-8207** or **SamanthaU@TheDI.ca**.

If you would like to learn more about vulnerable people, please volunteer at the Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre Society, the Mustard Seed, Alpha House, the Salvation Army or Inn from the Cold:

<http://www.TheDI.ca/Volunteer>

<http://theseed.ca/take-action/>

<http://AlphaHouseCalgary.com/Volunteer.html>

<http://www.salvationarmy.ca/alberta/>

<http://innfromthecold.org/>

The success of these agencies is directly linked to people like you.



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