



**THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS, INC.**

## **Housing First: A New Approach to Ending Homelessness for Families**

Many communities are adopting a “Housing First” approach to ending homelessness for families. The approach is based on two very simple principles:

- 1. The best way to end homelessness is to help people move into permanent housing as quickly as possible.*
- 2. Once in housing, formerly homeless people may require some level of services to help them stabilize, link them to long-term supports, and prevent a recurrence.*

Of course, Housing First really isn’t that new. Some communities have been practicing it for years, with extraordinary results.

- The city of Philadelphia has used a Housing First approach to reduce the number of people in shelters.
- In 2002, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change recognized Beyond Shelter, a Housing First program in Los Angeles, as a “Solution for America.” They stated:

*“The ‘Housing First’ program breaks the cycle of homelessness by placing some of the most vulnerable and at-risk homeless families in the nation immediately into permanent housing and then providing them with intensive support services.”*

Following is a list of questions that are frequently asked about the Housing First approach.

### **What is a Housing First approach?**

A Housing First approach consists of three components:

- **Crisis intervention, emergency services, screening and needs assessment:** Individuals and families who have become homeless have immediate, crisis needs that need to be accommodated, including the provision of emergency shelter. There should be an early screening of the challenges and resources that will affect a re-housing plan.

- **Permanent housing services:** The provision of services to help families' access and sustain housing includes working with the client to identify affordable units, access housing subsidies, and negotiate leases. Clients may require assistance to overcome barriers, such as poor tenant history, credit history and discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, family make-up and income source. Providers may need to develop a roster of landlords willing to work with the program and engage in strategies to reduce disincentives to participate.
- **Case management services:** The provision of case management occurs (1) to ensure individuals and families have a source of income through employment and/or public benefits, and to identify service needs *before the move into permanent housing*; and (2) to work with families *after the move into permanent housing* to help solve problems that may arise that threaten the clients' tenancy including difficulties sustaining housing or interacting with the landlord and to connect families with community-based services to meet long term support/service needs.

### **Targeting: Is a Housing First approach appropriate for all people experiencing homelessness?**

A Housing First approach that emphasizes a rapid return to permanent, independent housing is not believed to be appropriate for all people experiencing homelessness. Some may require longer stays in transitional housing before re-entering housing to cope with other issues such as domestic violence or substance abuse addiction. There is a small population of chronically homeless people who will require permanent supportive housing to exit homelessness. Finally, many individuals and families have the capacity to exit homelessness rapidly without any additional forms of assistance.

Families with significant barriers to becoming re-housed have been the initial target population for Housing First services. Housing First programs have attempted to target those individuals and families who are most likely to remain in the homeless service system longer without such assistance. Such targeting efforts have resulted in greater emphasis on upfront housing assessments to determine the permanent housing strategy that best meets the individual or family's needs.

## **Assessment: How do you know a family/individual is "ready" for housing?**

All programs assess the individual or family's "readiness" for Housing First services. Obviously, having a source of income, which includes a welfare grant, or access to a housing subsidy is a primary and immediate concern. There must be some assurance the housing is financially affordable to the family or individual over the long term. This, of course, means that Housing First providers must be attentive to the availability and parameters (such as time limits) of publicly funded programs -- such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Section 8 housing vouchers.

It is important to stress that Housing First providers do not believe housing should come after successful interventions to help an individual or family achieve self-sufficiency. Indeed, some believe it is not until a family is stabilized in their own permanent housing that real progress in meeting other family goals can be made. A Housing First approach incorporates transitional case management services following a placement in permanent housing that helps families stabilize in their housing and links them with the appropriate services in the community to meet their long-term support needs and goals.

In some cases, a family assessment indicates to program providers that stays in transitional housing may be beneficial for the family. For example, some domestic violence providers believe transitional housing can provide vulnerable families the more intensive, on-site support required during the early days and months of separation from an abusive partner. Those with a recent history of drug/alcohol addiction may find stays in transitional housing programs enhance their recovery work. It is important to recognize, however, that for the majority of individuals and families experiencing homelessness, stays in transitional housing are not indicated. It is typically more costly to the community to prolong the period of time in which an individual or family remains homeless. Transitional housing should therefore be used purposively, when indicated by the needs of the family or individual.

Finally, an essential consideration for those adopting a Housing First model is responding to the concerns of landlords. In many communities, it is very difficult to locate housing affordable to very low-income individuals and families. Housing First providers rely on extraordinary efforts to attract and maintain a roster of landlords willing to accept their clients -- particularly those with more "challenging" rental histories. Because Housing First providers are so dependent upon their reputation among landlords to build a pool of housing opportunities for their clients, they must have some confidence in the clients' capacity to be good tenants.

Inevitably, Housing First providers will work with individuals or families whose rental histories may indicate a high level of "risk" both to the landlord and the reputation of the Housing First provider. Housing First innovators are responding to this challenge by working cooperatively with area landlords to explore how to reduce or share the risk burden.

## **Housing Assistance: What kind of housing assistance is recommended and how can you help families find housing when there is NO affordable housing?**

Housing assistance typically involves helping the individual/family identify appropriate housing options, negotiate with landlords, and intervening when problems develop following a housing placement that threatens the client's tenancy. Housing assistance may also include providing financial assistance for security deposits, rent guarantees and housing applications.

Developing housing resources has become a necessary component of implementing a Housing First approach -- this may involve marketing the program to landlords to develop a base willing to work with the Housing First program. Developing housing resources might also include working closely with the local public housing authority to maximize the community's housing resources for clients.

The increasing difficulty in locating affordable housing accessible to very low-income individuals and families does present a significant challenge for Housing First providers. It is even more challenging for the many individuals/families who exit homelessness without access to Housing First services. There is a need to continue to develop and refine strategies to locate and develop more housing opportunities in the community and through the use and expansion of publicly funded housing resources. Housing First innovators have found that landlords are often motivated to lease an apartment to a homeless individual or family when they know that there is a support system to provide assistance -- or to call if a problem arises.

## **Case Management: What is the focus of case management work and why should homeless assistance dollars pay for services to families and individuals who are no longer homeless?**

Housing First approaches shifts the paradigm of service provision to homeless people. In the prevailing model, individuals and families often remain eligible for case management services and supports only as long as they continue to be homeless. The goal of such case management services is to stabilize the individual or family so they can enter housing.

Housing First models attempt to significantly reduce the length of time people are homeless. Follow-up case management services are required to help the individual or family stabilize after they are housed. Reducing the length of time families are homeless presents great cost-savings to homeless programs, the cost of the follow-up case management a fraction of that required to meet the comprehensive needs of the family who remain homeless for a longer period of time.

Individuals and families will require some immediate short-term case management while still in emergency shelters to resolve immediate, pending crises. The initial case management services that begin in the emergency shelter often focuses on addressing the

barriers that prevent the individual/family from re-entering housing. Utilizing a Housing First approach, however, means not predicating provision of housing on completing case management services.

Follow-up case management services should be provided to the individual or family for at least six months to one year and may vary in intensity depending on the need of the family. Case management is expected to be transitional, therefore, linking individuals and families with on-going need for supports to community-based services is a focus of case management services.

### **Role of transitional housing: Doesn't the Housing First approach underplay the value of transitional housing to accommodate the shortage of affordable housing and help families achieve real self-sufficiency?**

The Alliance believes there is a role for transitional housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. The Alliance strongly believes transitional housing funded out of the homeless assistance funds should be used purposefully -- to achieve an end to homelessness. The Alliance is concerned, however, that transitional housing has become a "waiting area" for too many individuals/families whose only real re-housing need is an assurance of affordability. The consequence is that those individuals/families who might benefit from the supports a transitional housing program may provide -- for example, a family fleeing an abusive relationship or an individual working on his/her sobriety -- are diverted from the help they need because of the backlog of people seeking assistance. By providing the Housing First assistance to help those who can move rapidly out of homelessness, transitional housing can be utilized to serve those who would derive the greatest benefits from it.

### **Permanent supportive housing: Many homeless families appear to need on-going support, so shouldn't we just develop more permanent supportive housing programs for families?**

While housing with supports attached may benefit a broad spectrum of individuals and families, the Alliance recognizes that sufficient funding is unlikely within the existing federal housing budget and absolutely impossible out of the limited homeless assistance dollars. Instead, the Alliance supports targeting existing Supportive Housing, Shelter Plus Care and SRO permanent supportive housing dollars to those with disabilities and experiencing chronic homelessness, and who without such assistance, would never escape homelessness. This may include some families.

It is true that many of the individuals and families who have experienced homelessness might benefit from on-going supports -- and the goal of the transitional case management work following a housing placement is to put those supports in place. Studies and experience demonstrate that even those with multiple challenges can live independently

in the community when they have access to supportive services delivered by mainstream programs.

### **Questions: What do we need to consider when developing a Housing First program?**

Each community will need to assess its existing resources. A Housing First approach can be adopted by one agency or it can be accomplished through the collaboration of agencies each providing specialized services. The questions that need to be evaluated in each community are:

- Which individuals/families experiencing homelessness should be targeted for Housing First services?
- Who will be responsible for the referral and assessment of individuals/families?
- Who can provide individuals/families with housing assistance, including:
  - Help overcoming barriers to accessing affordable housing including addressing poor credit, eviction histories, lack of move-in funds
  - Locating subsidized or affordable units in the community,
  - Developing greater affordable housing resources by working with landlords, public housing authorities, etc.
  - Serving as a resource to landlords following a housing placement for problems/issues that may develop.
- Who will provide the case management services to the individual/family, including:
  - Time-limited case management immediately after the move,
  - Linking individual/family with needed supports in the community,
  - Helping to resolve crises that may evolve following a housing placement.
- What funding resources are available?
- What outcome data elements should be captured?

For more information, go to the Housing First Network at <http://www.naeh.org/networks/housingfirst/index.htm>