



THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS, INC.

WHAT IS HOUSING FIRST?

Posted February 17, 2006

Housing First is an approach that centers on providing homeless people with housing quickly and then providing services as needed. What differentiates a Housing First approach from other strategies is that there is an immediate and primary focus on helping individuals and families quickly access and sustain permanent housing. This approach has the benefit of being consistent with what most people experiencing homelessness want and seek help to achieve. Housing First programs share critical elements:

- There is a focus on helping individuals and families access and sustain rental housing *as quickly as possible* and the *housing is not time-limited*;
- A variety of services are delivered primarily *following* a housing placement to promote housing stability and individual well-being;
- Such services are time-limited or long-term depending upon individual need; and
- Housing is not contingent on compliance with services – instead, participants must comply with a standard lease agreement and are provided with the services and supports that are necessary to help them do so successfully.

A Housing First approach rests on the belief that helping people access and sustain permanent, affordable housing should be the central goal of work with people experiencing homelessness. By providing housing assistance, case management and supportive services responsive to individual or family needs (time-limited or long-term) after an individual or family is housed, communities can significantly reduce the time people experience homelessness and prevent further episodes of homelessness. A central tenet of the Housing First approach is that social services to enhance individual and family well-being can be more effective when people are in their own home.

While there are a wide variety of program models, Housing First programs all typically include:

- Assessment-based targeting of Housing First services
- Assistance locating rental housing, relationship development with private market landlords, and lease negotiation
- Housing assistance – ranging from security deposit and one month's rent to provision of a long-term housing subsidy
- A housing placement that is not time-limited

- Case management to coordinate services (time-limited or long-term) that follow a housing placement

Housing First is an approach used for both homeless families and individuals and for people who are chronically homeless. Program models vary depending on the client population, availability of affordable rental housing and/or housing subsidies and services that can be provided. Housing First programs often reflect the needs and preferences of each community, further contributing to the diversity of models.

What are some examples of Housing First programs?

- Beyond Shelter, Los Angeles, CA
- Community Care Grant Program, Washington, DC
- Direct Access to Housing, San Francisco, CA
- Family Housing Collaborative, Columbus, OH
- HomeStart, Boston, MA
- Pathways to Housing, New York City, NY and Washington, DC
- Project Coming Home, Contra Costa County, CA
- Rapid Exit Program, Hennepin County, MN
- Shelter to Independent Living, Lancaster, PA

What does a Housing First approach entail?

Assessment and Targeting

Individuals and families receive an in-depth, upfront assessment before being referred to or receiving services from a Housing First provider. This allows providers to ascertain whether the community’s Housing First approach is feasible given the providers’ capacity to provide housing assistance and services tailored to their clients’ needs. The level of assistance programs are able to provide most often shapes who is targeted for Housing First services.

Families	Chronically Homeless Individuals
<p>Some Housing First programs serving homeless families can only offer short-term rent assistance. As a result, these programs target families who can be expected to assume the rental payments in the short-term. However, some families with very minimal incomes can also be served because the delivered intensive case management services help families maximize their income through employment services and access to public benefits.</p>	<p>Some Housing First programs serving chronically homeless individuals are able to provide very rich, intensive wraparound services and supports to promote a successful housing outcome. Because of the level of services they are able to deliver, these providers typically prioritize those individuals who have failed to use or succeed in other program models – some intentionally identifying their community’s “high system users” - those who have heavily relied on shelters, jails, and emergency rooms.</p>

Evidence indicates Housing First is appropriate for most, if not all, homeless persons. The combination of housing linked to services can help a wide variety of people exit homelessness more rapidly. This is supported by research that demonstrates that most formerly homeless families, including those with significant challenges, will retain housing with the provision of a long term housing subsidy. It is also supported by evaluations of Housing First interventions with chronically homeless individuals that have found that many who have remained outside of housing for years can retain housing with a subsidy and provision of wraparound supports. In short, while most communities are targeting Housing First services to a subset of their homeless population, the approach can be tailored to end homelessness for many more.

Permanent Housing

There is substantial variation in how Housing First providers help meet the housing needs of the individuals and families they serve.

- Some Housing First programs provide only minimal financial assistance, for example assistance with security deposits and application fees. Other programs are able to rely on federal housing subsidies or move individuals/families into public or subsidized housing.
- Some Housing First programs rely solely on apartments in the private rental market. Others master-lease or develop multi-family units and then sublease those units to program participants. And still others seek out many different permanent housing options, in order to maximize the availability of permanent, affordable housing for the people they serve.
- Some Housing First programs hold the individual or family's lease while they are involved with the program; individuals and families then often take on the lease when the "program" services end (time-limited case management). In other program models, the family or individual holds a lease with a public or private landlord from the onset.

All Housing First providers focus on helping individuals and families move into permanent housing *as quickly as possible*, based on the premise that social service needs can best be addressed after they move in to their new home.

Assistance Locating & Sustaining Housing

Housing First programs all typically invest time and resources in helping homeless individuals and families overcome barriers to accessing permanent housing. This includes reaching out to landlord organizations, housing management companies, public housing authorities, civic organizations and congregations. Developing strong relationships helps improve Housing First providers' capacity to relocate individuals and families into permanent housing arrangements.

All Housing First programs are responsive to the concerns of landlords, housing operators and developers. Many Housing First programs develop strategies to overcome concerns expressed by landlords. This is viewed as a critical investment to help facilitate access to housing and promote successful housing outcomes. As a result, these programs are able to find housing for individuals and families who have extensive housing barriers. Successful housing placements often result in landlords and management companies increasing the number of units they are willing to lease to individuals and families served by Housing First programs.

Chronically Homeless Individuals	Families
<p>One Housing First operator provides additional deposits/reserve funds to developers of a multi-family building. He reports that the developers and owners he contracts with to house chronically homeless individuals have all insisted on the additional deposits and reserve funds as they anticipate the population will put significant wear and tear on the building. The Housing First program operator reports in every instance he has been able to recapture those funds during contract renewal as owners have been satisfied with the light wear on the building.</p>	<p>A Housing First program that serves high-risk families offers landlords an “eviction guarantee.” If a family fails to comply with the terms of the lease, the program will assist the landlord and reimburse any costs he incurs. The program markets the services it provides to the families and its willingness to intervene with any problem behavior that arises. The Housing First program, landlords, and families are jointly committed to promoting a successful housing outcome. The program has greatly expanded the roster of landlords that it successfully works with. And, even if families lose their housing, the Housing First program continues to work with them to find and sustain suitable housing so they do not re-experience homelessness.</p>

Low, Moderate or High Intensity Supportive Services

Housing First programs offer services with varying levels of intensity following a housing placement to ensure successful tenancy and promote the economic and social well-being of individuals and families. These services are typically offered for only as long as they are needed. In many instances, those services are transitional to help stabilize the individual or family in housing. A focus of the transitional supports is to help the individual or family develop a support network that includes other local or community mainstream resources and/or social service agencies that can be responsive and attentive to the individual’s or family’s long term goals and any subsequent crisis. In other cases, on-going, intensive supports will be needed to ensure that the individual or family will be able to remain stably housed. The capacity of programs to provide supportive services following a housing placement is largely determined by, and determines, who is targeted for Housing First services.

Families	Chronically Homeless Individuals
<p>Housing First programs serving homeless families typically provide transitional, case management services lasting 6-12 months, often intensive at the beginning. Most programs prioritize helping the families link up with community-based, mainstream social service providers that are able to meet their long-term social support and service needs. Case management services for families tend to phase out as families stabilize in their housing and new networks of supportive services are in place.</p>	<p>Housing First programs serving chronically homeless individuals typically provide intensive case management services coupled with providers in the community who are able to address individuals' substance abuse and mental health treatment needs over the long term. Programs serving chronically homeless individuals can typically provide very intensive services because case managers have small client-to-worker ratios.</p>

Outcome Measures

Determining the effectiveness of Housing First programs relies on capturing outcome data. Among the primary outcomes that should be assessed in a Housing First program are the individual's or family's housing outcomes. How rapidly are families being re-housed? Are individuals and families remaining housed? Do families or individuals re-enter shelter?

Programs may want to capture outcomes on family or individual well-being. Programs serving families may include employment and earning outcomes and school performance of children. Programs serving chronically homeless individuals might examine increases or decreases in hospital stays.

In communities where there is widespread implementation of a Housing First approach, one outcome measurement that should be captured is the average length of stay in homelessness of the target population. This outcome measurement allows communities to assess whether they are reducing the length of homeless episodes overall through their Housing First initiatives.

Where can I learn more about Housing First?

Resources have been developed on Housing First for homeless families and resources on Housing First for chronically homeless individuals. As the Housing First approach continues to take hold, there may soon be resources for other populations – including homeless youth and single, non-disabled adults.

To learn more about Housing First for Homeless Families, visit:
<http://www.endhomelessness.org/networks/housingfirst/#families>

Resources on Housing First for Chronically Homeless Individuals will be coming soon to
<http://www.endhomelessness.org/networks/housingfirst/>