

HOUSING FIRST

Key Concepts

I. INTRODUCTION

Housing First is an alternative to the current Continuum of Care system of emergency shelter-transitional housing-permanent supportive housing, which tends to prolong the length of time that people remain homeless. The “housing first” approach is premised on the belief that homeless and at-risk people are more responsive to interventions and social services support *after they are in their own housing*, rather than while living in temporary or transitional housing programs. With “housing first,” these people can begin to regain the self-confidence and control over their lives they lost when they became homeless.

For over ten years, the housing first methodology has proven to be a practical means to ending and preventing homelessness. The methodology is currently being adapted by organizations throughout the United States from the Los Angeles-based Beyond Shelter's **Institute for Research, Training and Technical Assistance** and the National Alliance to End Homelessness' **Housing First Network**.

Recognized as a dramatic new response to the problem of homelessness, the “housing first” approach stresses the immediate return to independent living. Created as a time-limited relationship designed to empower participants and foster self-reliance, not engender dependence, the housing first methodology:

- helps homeless people move directly into affordable rental housing in residential neighborhoods as quickly as possible;
- then provides six months to one year of individualized, home-based social services support "after the move" to help individuals transition to stability.

The housing first approach provides a link between the emergency shelter/transitional housing systems that serve homeless people and the mainstream resources and services that can help them rebuild their lives in permanent housing, as members of a neighborhood and a community. In addition to assisting homeless families in general back into housing, housing first can offer an individualized and structured plan of action for alienated, dysfunctional and troubled families, while providing a responsive and caring support system.

The combination of housing relocation services and home-based case management enables homeless individuals to break the cycle of homelessness. The methodology facilitates long-term stability and provides formerly homeless people who are considered *at risk of another episode of homelessness* with the support necessary to remain in permanent housing.

The Housing First Approach is Implemented Through Four Primary Stages:

- θ **Crisis Intervention & Short-Term Stabilization:** This phase includes helping homeless individuals access emergency shelter services and/or short-term transitional housing and address crisis needs.
- θ **Screening, Intake and Needs Assessment:** The "needs assessment" results in an action plan for clients, which includes short- and long-term goals and objectives with concrete action steps. This can occur immediately or after individuals are stabilized in emergency services.
- θ **Provision of Housing Resources:** After the completion of screening and assessment, the next phase involves assisting individuals in moving into permanent, affordable housing in a safe neighborhood. This is accomplished by helping them overcome various barriers to obtaining permanent housing.
- θ **Provision of Case Management:** Before the move into permanent housing, case management services help to identify clients' needs and to ensure individuals and families have sources of income through employment and/or public benefits. After the move, time-limited case management services focuses on helping individuals solve problems that may arise and to connect individuals and families with community services to meet longer-term needs.

II. IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS¹

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.

Housing first programs have attempted to target those individuals and families who, because of their barriers to accessing housing, are most likely to remain in the homeless service system longer without such assistance. Such targeting efforts have resulted in greater emphasis on up-front housing assessments to determine the permanent housing strategy that best meets the individual or family's needs.

¹ Excerpted from the NAEH, Housing First Network materials available online at www.naeh.org.

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 begins 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 National Alliance to End Homelessness and others believe 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 the limited permanent supportive housing dollars to those experiencing chronic homelessness, and who without such assistance, would never escape homelessness.

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. Utilizing limited permanent supportive housing dollars to provide supports for those who could live independently comes at too high a price -- leaving that some of our most vulnerable citizens on the streets.

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?

III. DETERMINING HOUSING NEEDS: A CONTINUUM-OF-CARE-WIDE PERSPECTIVE

A. Which individuals/families experiencing homelessness should be targeted for housing first services?

Who needs what kind of interim, transitional, permanent, permanent supportive housing? What are the implications of this answer vis-à-vis the community’s need for transitional housing and emergency shelter?

Characteristics (these are examples only; each community determines its own factors)	Short-term Crisis Intervention	Long-term housing needed
Level 1: Families/individuals with no barriers to rehousing <i>For example:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good rental history • No UDs • No criminal history • No active chemical dependency/abuse issue 	Very short-term interim housing (aka shelter) Rental assistance	Affordable housing (current market meets need; on-going assessment necessary)

Characteristics (these are examples only; each community determines its own factors)	Short-term Crisis Intervention	Long-term housing needed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employed or employable at low-rent housing wage 		
<p>Level 2: Families/individuals with some barriers to rehousing</p> <p><i>For example:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No rental history New to the area Large family One easily explained UD History of battery but abuser not in the area Non-English speaking No high-school diploma Physical disability that effect housing One parent/child household Needs financial help with moving, furniture, etc. Head of household under 18 	<p>Short-term interim housing (aka shelter)</p> <p>Case management before and after placement</p> <p>Rental assistance</p>	<p>Affordable housing (current market meets need; on-going assessment necessary)</p> <p>If not, plan to increase affordable housing stock; maintain balance of shelter/TH as permanent housing phased in</p>
<p>Level 3: Families/individuals who will benefit from transitional housing program</p> <p><i>For example:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Domestic violence victims Families with substance abuse Sex workers Unaccompanied youth 	<p>Transitional housing</p>	<p>Affordable housing</p>
<p>Level 4: Families/individuals who have multiple barriers to accessing and retaining permanent housing</p> <p><i>For example:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chronically homeless individuals Families who would meet HUD’s definition of “chronically homeless” 	<p>Very short term interim housing while processing permanent supportive unit</p>	<p>Permanent supportive housing</p>

Characteristics (these are examples only; each community determines its own factors)	Short-term Crisis Intervention	Long-term housing needed
except that the adult is accompanied by children		

B. Determining the Amount of Type of Housing/Assistance Needed

Characteristics/Number	Short-term Crisis Intervention	Long-term housing needed
Level 1: Families/individuals with no barriers to rehousing X Families (w/ A Adults, B Children) Y Individuals	Very short-term interim housing (aka shelter) Rental assistance Current capacity: Need:	Affordable housing (current market meets need; on-going assessment necessary) Current capacity: Need:
Level 2, etc.		

C. Program Design/Operation – Coordinate Across Your Continuum of Care

- 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?

IV. DECISION POINTS FOR CREATING A HOUSING FIRST PROGRAM

The Big Picture -- Components:

- Housing
- Services
- Outreach and engagement

Eligibility

Chronically homeless people

Participation in services (psychiatric or substance use treatment, case management)

History of violence, poor credit, poor tenancy history, felony convictions

Housing

- Number of units targeted (what you need, what you have, what's in the pipeline, what you will lose to market and other factors)
- Congregate living and/or scattered site
- Develop, lease, master-lease
 - How engage developers, landlord: what incentives can you offer? How will landlords be recruited on an on-going basis?
- What rental will you charge?
- Damage fund to restore property?
- Property management separated from supportive services?
- What events jeopardize loss of tenancy?
 - Clinical crises resulting in absence from unit?
- Pets?
- How build community for tenants?
- Transitional units?
- Tenant obligations
 - Money management
 - Case management
 - Walk-throughs
- Number of units, type, location, timeline, cost

Services

- Principles of service-delivery
- Type
- Provided where
- Provided by whom (targeted, mainstream; staff qualifications)
- Service units, timeline, cost

Where tenants will come from

Referral

Outreach

Street outreach

ACT model

Role of police officers

BEST PRACTICES AND COMMON SOLUTIONS

Program	Beyond Shelter (Los Angeles, CA)
Web Information	www.endhomelessness.org www.beyondshelter.org
Practice Used	<p><u>Description</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Housing First Program offers assistance in moving into permanent residential rental housing and the provision of home-based case management support for six months after the move to assist with the transition to stability. • Families in the program meet with intake workers for screening to develop an individualized Family Action Plan which identifies the family’s specific housing and social service needs as well as steps to transition the family to stability in permanent housing. • Beyond Shelter maintains working relationships with private building managers, non-profit affordable housing providers, and local, state, and federal housing assistance programs. These affiliations motivate private landlords to participate in the program. Beyond Shelter’s staff then assist the families with lease negotiation, access to move-in funds, and overcoming barriers such as poor credit history, prior evictions, and discrimination based on ethnicity, and income. • Families are assigned a case manager who links families to community resources and advocates on their behalf. Case management services are provided with the goal of reorienting the family to stable living patterns and include homemaking, nutrition, parenting education, money management, child care, job training, job placement, and job retention. The program is based on a theory that families will be more receptive to these services if they are provided while the family is in a secure housing environment. <p><u>Funding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond Shelter’s Housing First Program is funded primarily through HUD’s Supportive Housing Program. • Supplemental funds are provided by a variety of local, state, and federal contracts, as well as private foundations. <p><u>Population</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Housing First program serves homeless families with children • The majority of families face multiple challenges and have a history of homelessness. • If an adult family member has a history of substance abuse Beyond Shelter requires at least six months in a recovery program. If the family has experienced domestic violence then there is a requirement of at least 4 months of separation from the abusive partner.

Program	Pathways to Housing (New York, NY)
Web Information	www.pathwaystohousing.org
Practice Used	<p><u>Description</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pathways to Housing is designed to end homelessness for people living on the streets with concurrent mental illness and addiction. • In order to be eligible for the program, an individual must be homeless, must have a psychiatric disability that compromises their ability to function, and must be willing to meet with a service coordinator twice a month during the first year of tenancy. • The program provides an alternative to the more common "linear residential treatment programs," which move people through a continuum of services beginning with outreach, some intermediary housing which helps people become "housing ready", and ending with permanent housing. • Pathways provides clients with housing first, and then offers services and treatment to people in their homes. • Most clients are contacted through the outreach efforts of Pathways staff; other referrals come from city outreach teams, shelters and drop-in centers. • Pathways to Housing staff assist clients in locating and selecting private market rental housing. • The housing department keeps logs of new vacancies and the over 200 landlords they work with, and works to negotiate leases and complete Section 8 applications. • The agency also leases two transitional apartments for use by clients who have been accepted into the program, but have not yet found an apartment of their own. The average length of stay in these units is 15 days. • Pathways to Housing uses Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) interdisciplinary teams to deliver services to clients in their homes and are on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, the tenant determines the type, frequency, and sequence of services. • Service requirements are that the tenant meet with a service coordinator twice a month and participation in a money management program. • Refusal to participate in sobriety or other treatment programs does not disqualify an individual, nor does a history of violence or prison time. <p><u>Funding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for the Pathways program comes in two parts: housing subsidies and services. • Around 65 tenants have Section 8 vouchers, and the remainder are subsidized by grants from the HUD Shelter Plus Care program and the New York State Office of Mental Health. • Each unit costs approximately \$20,000 per year. <p><u>Population</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority is given to women and elderly people because they are at greater risk of victimization.

SELECTED RESOURCES

Online Resources

National Alliance to End Homelessness	www.endhomelessness.org
Beyond Shelter	www.beyondshelter.org
Pathways to Housing	http://www.pathwaystohousing.org/
Corporation for Supportive Housing	www.csh.org
San Francisco Department of Health (Direct Access to Housing)	http://www.dph.sf.ca.us/
HomeBase	www.homebaseccc.org

Publications

Lanzerotti, Laura (2004). *Housing First for Families: Research to Support the Development of a Housing First for Families Training Curriculum*, National Alliance to End Homelessness, available at www.endhomelessness.org.

Tsemberis, Samuel et al. (2004). *Housing First, Consumer Choice, and Harm Reduction for Homeless Individuals*, American Journal of Public Health, available at www.ajph.org.

Tsemberis, Samuel (1999). *From Streets to Homes: An Innovative Approach to Supported Housing for Homeless Adults with Psychiatric Disabilities*, Journal of Community Psychology, available at www.pathwaystohousing.org/publications.

Tsemberis, Samuel and Eisenberg, Ronda (2000). *Pathways to Housing: Supported Housing for Street-Dwelling Homeless Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities*, Psychiatric Services, available at www.pathwaystohousing.org/publications.

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