

What is Housing First?

Housing First is an approach that prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, thus ending their homelessness and serving as a platform from which they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life. This approach is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before attending to anything less critical, such as getting a job, budgeting properly, or attending to substance use issues. Additionally, Housing First is based on the theory that client choice is valuable in housing selection and supportive service participation; exercising that choice is likely to make a client more successful in remaining housed and improving their life. Housing First programs remove barriers faced by households trying to attain permanent housing, and do not require prerequisites to access housing support beyond what is required in a tenant's lease.

How is Housing First different from other approaches?

Housing First does not require people experiencing homelessness to address their problems before they can access housing, including behavioral health problems, or graduating through a series of services programs. Housing First does not mandate participation in services either before obtaining housing or in order to retain housing. Supportive services are offered to assist with housing stability and individual well-being, but participation is not required. Services have been found to be more effective when a person chooses to engage. Other approaches do make such requirements in order for a person to obtain and retain housing. Many Housing First models also use a harm reduction approach to help reduce barriers to obtaining or maintaining permanent housing.

Who can be helped by Housing First?

A Housing First approach can benefit both homeless families and individuals with any degree of service needs. The flexible and responsive nature of a Housing First approach allows it to be tailored to help anyone. As such, a Housing First approach can be applied to help end homelessness for a household who became homeless due to a temporary personal or financial crisis and has limited service needs, only needing help accessing and securing permanent housing. At the same time, Housing First has been found to be particularly effective approach to end homelessness for highly vulnerable populations, such as chronically homeless individuals. Housing First also promotes racial equity, in that it removes judgement from the providers as to who is “deserving” of permanent housing - which can be riddled with bias against people of color.

Does Housing First work?

There is a [large evidence base](#) demonstrating that Housing First is an effective solution to homelessness. Consumers in a Housing First model access housing faster and are more likely to remain stably housed, and systems see many benefits when using the Housing First model. Providing access to housing generally results in cost savings for communities because housed people are less likely to use emergency services, including hospitals, jails, and emergency shelter, than those who are homeless. One study found an average cost savings on emergency services of \$31,545 per person housed in the course of two years. Another study showed that a Housing First approach can cost up to \$23,000 less per consumer per year than a shelter program. Housing First is not only cost efficient, but it also reduces the trauma households face due to homelessness.



Housing First Checklist: Assessing Projects and Systems for a Housing First Orientation

Housing First is a proven approach, applicable across all elements of systems for ending homelessness, in which people experiencing homelessness are connected to permanent housing swiftly and with few to no treatment preconditions, behavioral contingencies, or other barriers. It is based on overwhelming evidence that people experiencing homelessness can achieve stability in permanent housing if provided with the appropriate level of services. Study after study has shown that Housing First yields higher housing retention rates, drives significant reductions in the use of costly crisis services and institutions, and helps people achieve better health and social outcomes.¹

This checklist was designed to help you make a quick assessment of whether and to what degree housing programs — and entire systems — are employing a Housing First approach. Robust tools and instruments are available elsewhere to quantitatively measure program quality and fidelity to Housing First. This tool is not meant to take the place of those more rigorous assessments, but is intended to help Continuums of Care, individual housing and services providers, funders, and other stakeholders to communicate about, and quickly assess, alignment with key Housing First approaches.

Core Elements of Housing First at the Program/Project Level

For your homelessness service system to work the most efficiently and effectively, individual programs must embrace a Housing First approach. This portion of the checklist can help you assess the extent to which your local programs are implementing Housing First. You can use this tool for trainings or planning sessions, during a site visit or program audit, as a guide when reviewing funding applications, or for many other uses.

- Access to programs is not contingent on sobriety, minimum income requirements, lack of a criminal record, completion of treatment, participation in services, or other unnecessary conditions.
- Programs or projects do everything possible not to reject an individual or family on the basis of poor credit or financial history, poor or lack of rental history, minor criminal convictions, or behaviors that are interpreted as indicating a lack of “housing readiness.”
- People with disabilities are offered clear opportunities to request reasonable accommodations within applications and screening processes and during tenancy, and building and apartment units include special physical features that accommodate disabilities.

Quick Screen: Does Your Project Use Housing First Principles?

- 1) Are applicants allowed to enter the program without income?
- 2) Are applicants allowed to enter the program even if they aren’t “clean and sober” or “treatment compliant”?
- 3) Are applicants allowed to enter the program even if they have criminal justice system involvement?
- 4) Are service and treatment plans voluntary, such that tenants cannot be evicted for not following through?

- Programs or projects that cannot serve someone work through the coordinated entry process to ensure that those individuals or families have access to housing and services elsewhere.
- Housing and service goals and plans are highly tenant-driven.
- Supportive services emphasize engagement and problem-solving over therapeutic goals.
- Participation in services or compliance with service plans are not conditions of tenancy, but are reviewed with tenants and regularly offered as a resource to tenants.
- Services are informed by a harm-reduction philosophy that recognizes that drug and alcohol use and addiction are a part of some tenants' lives. Tenants are engaged in non-judgmental communication regarding drug and alcohol use and are offered education regarding how to avoid risky behaviors and engage in safer practices.
- Substance use in and of itself, without other lease violations, is not considered a reason for eviction.
- Tenants in supportive housing are given reasonable flexibility in paying their share of rent on time and offered special payment arrangements for rent arrears and/or assistance with financial management, including representative payee arrangements.
- Every effort is made to provide a tenant the opportunity to transfer from one housing situation, program, or project to another if a tenancy is in jeopardy. Whenever possible, eviction back into homelessness is avoided.

Core Elements of Housing First at the Community Level

Housing First should be adopted across your community's entire homelessness response system, including outreach and emergency shelter, short-term interventions like [rapid re-housing](#), and longer-term interventions like [supportive housing](#). You can use this part of the checklist to assess the extent to which your community has adopted a system-wide Housing First orientation, as well as guide further dialogue and progress.

- Your community has a coordinated system that offers a unified, streamlined, and user-friendly community-wide coordinated entry process to quickly assess and match people experiencing homelessness to the most appropriate housing and services, including rapid re-housing, supportive housing, and/or other housing interventions.
- Emergency shelter, street outreach, and other parts of your crisis response system implement and promote low barriers to entry or service and quickly identify people experiencing homelessness, provide access to safety, make service connections, and partner directly with housing providers to rapidly connect individuals and families to permanent housing.
- Outreach and other crisis response teams are coordinated, trained, and have the ability to engage and quickly connect people experiencing homelessness to the local coordinated entry process in order to apply for and obtain permanent housing.
- Your community has a data-driven approach to [prioritizing housing assistance](#), whether through analysis of the shared community assessment and vulnerability indices, [system performance measures](#) from the Homeless Management Information System, data on utilization of crisis services, and/or data from other

systems that work with people experiencing homelessness or housing instability, such as hospitals and the criminal justice system.

- ❑ Housing providers and owners accept referrals directly from the coordinated entry processes and work to house people as quickly as possible, using standardized application and screening processes and removing restrictive criteria as much as possible.
- ❑ Policymakers, funders, and providers conduct joint planning to develop and align resources to increase the availability of affordable and supportive housing and to ensure that a range of options and mainstream services are available to maximize housing choice among people experiencing homelessness.
- ❑ Mainstream systems, including social, health, and behavioral health services, benefit and entitlement programs, and other essential services have policies in place that do not inhibit implementation of a Housing First approach. For instance, eligibility and screening policies for benefit and entitlement programs or housing do not require treatment completion or sobriety.
- ❑ Staff in positions across the entire housing and services system are trained in and actively employ evidence-based practices for client/tenant engagement, such as motivational interviewing, client-centered counseling, critical time interventions, and trauma-informed care.

Additional Resources

- [Implementing Housing First in Supportive Housing](#) (USICH, 2014) – discusses supportive housing and Housing First as tools for ending chronic homelessness and helping people with disabilities live independently in the community.
- [Webinar: Core Principles of Housing First and Rapid Re-Housing](#) (USICH, 2014) – describes the core components of the Housing First approach and the rapid re-housing model and how both work together to help end homelessness.
- [Four Clarifications about Housing First](#) (USICH, 2014) – clarifies some common misperceptions about Housing First.
- [It's Time We Talked the Walk on Housing First](#) (USICH, 2015) – advances our thinking on Housing First.
- [Housing First in Permanent Supportive Housing](#) (HUD, 2014) – provides an overview of the principles and core components of the Housing First model.
- [Permanent Supportive Housing Evidence-Based Practices KIT](#) (SAMHSA, 2010) – outlines the essential components of supportive housing, along with fidelity scales and scoresheets.

ⁱ Lipton, F.R. et. al. (2000). "Tenure in supportive housing for homeless persons with severe mental illness," *Psychiatric Services* 51(4): 479-486. M. Larimer, D. Malone, M. Garner, et al. "Health Care and Public Service Use and Costs Before and After Provision of Housing for Chronically Homeless Persons with Severe Alcohol Problems." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, April 1, 2009, pp. 1349-1357. Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance. (2007). "Home and Healthy for Good: A Statewide Pilot Housing First Program." Boston.