



United States Interagency Council on Homelessness

Preventing and Ending Homelessness in the United States

The Housing First Checklist: A Practical Tool for Assessing Housing First in Practice

Introduction

Housing First is a proven method of ending all types of homelessness and is the most effective approach to ending chronic homelessness. Housing First offers individuals and families experiencing homelessness immediate access to permanent affordable or supportive housing. Without clinical prerequisites like completion of a course of treatment or evidence of sobriety and with a low-threshold for entry, Housing First yields higher housing retention rates, lower returns to homelessness, and significant reductions in the use of crisis service and institutions.¹ Due its high degree of success, Housing First is identified as a core strategy for ending homelessness in *Opening Doors: the Federal Strategic Plan to End Homelessness* and has become widely adopted by national and community-based organizations as a best practice for solving homelessness.

Housing First permanent supportive housing models are typically designed for individuals or families who have complex service needs, who are often turned away from other affordable housing settings, and/or who are least likely to be able to proactively seek and obtain housing on their own. Housing First approaches also include rapid re-housing which provides quick access to permanent housing through interim rental assistance and supportive services on a time-limited basis. The approach has also evolved to encompass a community-level orientation to ending homelessness in which barriers to housing entry are removed and efforts are in place to prioritize the most vulnerable and high-need people for housing assistance.

As Housing First approaches become adopted more widely, the need for clarity increases around what the Housing First approach entails and how to know whether a particular housing program or community approach is truly using a Housing First approach. Robust tools and instruments are available which can quantitatively assess and measure a housing program's fidelity to Housing First, and recent research has attempted to rigorously evaluate Housing First implementation.² For quick screening, policymakers and practitioners will benefit from this practical, easy to use guide to identify and assess the implementation of the core components of the Housing First approach.

¹ 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.

² Tsemberis, S. (2010). *Housing First: The Pathways model to end homelessness for people with mental illness and addiction*. Center City, MN: Hazelden. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. (2012). *Unlocking the door: An implementation evaluation of supportive housing for active users in New York City*. New York.

<http://www.casacolumbia.org/upload/2012/20121907casahope2full.pdf>

How to Use this Tool

This user-friendly tool is intended for use by policymakers, government officials, and practitioners alike to help make a basic assessment of whether and to what degree a particular housing program is employing a Housing First approach. The tool can be used as a checklist that can be reviewed during a site visit, program audit, or program interview, or as a guide and checklist when reviewing funding applications or reviewing a program's policies and procedures.

The tool is organized in two sections. The first section is a checklist of the core and additional elements of Housing First at the housing program or project level. The second section is a checklist of elements of Housing First at the community-level. Users of this tool should be aware that this tool assesses Housing First adoption along a spectrum, rather than as a simple *yes/no* or *pass/fail*. This tool is also not intended to serve as or supplant a more comprehensive housing and program quality assessment tool, but may supplement or be used in conjunction with such tools.

Housing First at the Program/Project Level

Core Elements:

- Admission/tenant screening and selection practices promote the acceptance of applicants regardless of their sobriety or use of substances, completion of treatment, and participation in services.
- Applicants are seldom rejected on the basis of poor credit or financial history, poor or lack of rental history, minor criminal convictions, or behaviors that indicate a lack of "housing readiness."
- Housing accepts referrals directly from shelters, street outreach, drop-in centers, and other parts of crisis response system frequented by vulnerable people experiencing homelessness.
- Supportive services emphasize engagement and problem-solving over therapeutic goals. Services plans are highly tenant-driven without predetermined goals. Participation in services or program compliance is not a condition of permanent supportive housing tenancy. Rapid re-housing programs may require case management as condition of receiving rental assistance.
- Use of alcohol or drugs in and of itself (without other lease violations) is not considered a reason for eviction.

Additional Elements Found in Advanced Models:

- Tenant selection plan for permanent supportive housing includes a prioritization of eligible tenants based on criteria other than "first come/first serve" such as duration/chronicity of homelessness, vulnerability, or high utilization of crisis services.
- Tenants in permanent supportive housing given reasonable flexibility in paying their tenant share of rent (after subsidy) on time and offered special payment arrangements (e.g. a payment plan) for rent arrears and/or assistance with financial management (including representative payee arrangements).

Quick Screen: Is permanent supportive housing Housing First?

1. Are applicants required to have income prior to admission?
2. Are applicants required to be "clean and sober" or "treatment compliant" prior to admission?
3. Are tenants able to be evicted for not following through on their services and/or treatment plan?

If the answer is "Yes" to any of these questions, the program is not Housing First.

- Case managers/service coordinators are trained in and actively employ evidence-based practices for client/tenant engagement such as motivational interviewing and client-centered counseling.
- Services are informed by a harm reduction philosophy that recognizes that drug and alcohol use and addiction are a part of tenants' lives, where tenants are engaged in non-judgmental communication regarding drug and alcohol use, and where tenants are offered education regarding how to avoid risky behaviors and engage in safer practices.
- Building and apartment unit may include special physical features that accommodate disabilities, reduce harm, and promote health among tenants. These may include elevators, stove-tops with automatic shut-offs, wall-mounted emergency pull-cords, ADA wheelchair compliant showers, etc.

Housing First at the Community Level

- Emergency shelter, street outreach providers, and other parts of crisis response system are aligned with Housing First and recognize their roles to encompass housing advocacy and rapid connection to permanent housing. Staff in crisis response system services believes that all people experiencing homelessness are housing ready.
- Strong and direct referral linkages and relationships exist between crisis response system (emergency shelters, street outreach, etc.) and rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing. Crisis response providers are aware and trained in how to assist people experiencing homelessness to apply for and obtain permanent housing.
- Community has a unified, streamlined, and user-friendly community-wide process for applying for rapid re-housing, permanent supportive housing and/or other housing interventions.
- Community has a coordinated assessment system for matching people experiencing homelessness to the most appropriate housing and services, and where individuals experiencing chronic homelessness and extremely high need families are matched to permanent supportive housing/Housing First.
- Community has a data-driven approach to prioritizing highest need cases for housing assistance whether through analysis of lengths of stay in Homeless Management Information Systems, vulnerability indices, or data on utilization of crisis services.
- Policymakers, funders, and providers collaboratively conduct planning and raise and align resources to increase the availability of affordable and supportive housing and to ensure that a range of affordable and supportive housing options and models are available to maximize housing choice among people experiencing homelessness.
- Policies and regulations related to permanent supportive housing, social and health services, benefit and entitlement programs, and other essential services support and do not inhibit the implementation of the Housing First approach. For instance, eligibility and screening policies for benefit and entitlement programs or housing do not require the completion of treatment or achievement of sobriety as a prerequisite.
- Every effort is made to offer a transfer to a tenant from one housing situation to another, if a tenancy is in jeopardy. Whenever possible, eviction back into homelessness is avoided.