

HOUSING FIRST: A CRITICAL STRATEGY TO END HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness and housing poverty is a crisis in many communities – one that demands urgent action. To end homelessness once and for all, federal, state, and local governments must invest in proven solutions at the scale necessary. A critical strategy for ending homelessness is the **Housing First Model**.

BACKGROUND ON HOUSING FIRST

The research is irrefutable: Housing First is the most effective approach to ending homelessness for most individuals and families. Housing First is a bipartisan, [evidence-based practice](#) backed by multiple, national studies.

The Housing First approach has garnered strong bipartisan support for decades. It has been embraced by the George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden administrations, including the U.S. Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Veterans Affairs (VA), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), and many state and local elected officials who have seen Housing First work in their communities.

Under the Housing First model stable, affordable, and accessible housing is provided to people experiencing homelessness quickly and without prerequisites, and voluntary supportive services are offered to help improve housing stability and well-being. It is a flexible model that can be adapted to address the unique needs in local communities and tailored to the challenges facing individuals.

Housing First is not “housing only.” It includes an array of support services – such as substance use and mental health counseling, and employment training, among others – needed to live stably in the community. Housing First recognizes that stable housing is required for effective psychiatric and substance use treatment and for improved quality of life. Once stably housed, individuals are better able to take advantage of wrap-around services to help support housing stability, employment, and overall health. Without stable housing, attaining these goals becomes much more difficult.

The Housing First Model was initially developed in the early 1990s as a response to the “stairstep” or “linear” model of the time. This earlier model set housing as the end goal – requiring participants to first participate in various service programs, abstain from drugs and alcohol, and adhere to a set of behavioral requirements before accessing housing. Costs were very high, and results were very limited.

The Housing First model can be adjusted for individuals with short- or long-term needs. Rapid Rehousing Programs, for example, offer shorter-term rental assistance to individuals who can quickly become housing stable, while Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) programs offer long-term housing assistance and services.

HOUSING FIRST WORKS

In addition to being a proven strategy to end homelessness, Housing First is a responsible, accountable way to spend taxpayer dollars on homelessness issues because it:

- [Rapidly ends homelessness for most individuals and families.](#)
- [Can improve quality of life and other outcomes.](#)
- [Can lead to better treatment outcomes.](#)
- [Reduces taxpayer spending on public services](#), including emergency health and criminal legal systems.

Learn more about the evidence supporting Housing First [here](#).

Housing First in Local Communities

In communities nationwide, a Continuum of Care (CoC) oversees and coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals. CoCs often include representatives from nonprofit homeless providers, victim service providers, faith-based organizations, governments, businesses, advocates, public housing agencies, school districts, social service providers, mental health agencies, hospitals, universities, affordable housing developers, law enforcement, organizations that serve homeless and formerly homeless veterans, and homeless and formerly homeless persons.

CoCs have the flexibility to decide how to best address homelessness in their community. CoCs are responsible for developing local plans to:

- Conduct outreach, intakes, and assessments in order to identify the service and housing needs in their community;
- Provide emergency shelter as an immediate and safe alternative to sleeping on the streets; and
- End homelessness by providing permanent and permanent supportive housing to individuals and families, with services if needed.

Under federal homelessness programs, CoCs decide which programs to fund in their communities. CoCs tend to focus scarce federal resources on high-performing shelter and service providers that are most effective in addressing homelessness. Because programs based on the Housing First model are proven to be effective for most individuals and families, CoCs often prioritize these programs.

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