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## CoC Competition Focus: Housing First

Housing First is a proven approach in which all people experiencing homelessness are believed to be housing ready and are provided with permanent housing immediately and with few to no preconditions, behavioral contingencies, or barriers. Effectively implementing a Housing First approach involves prioritizing people with the highest needs and vulnerabilities, engaging more landlords and property owners, and making our projects client-centered spaces without barriers to entering and remaining in the project.

This *Competition Focus* message provides information and resources to help Continuums of Care (CoCs) and stakeholders understand the FY 2016 policy priority of *using a Housing First approach*.

### Adopt Client-Centered Service Methods

At its core, a Housing First approach should start where the program participant is and should ensure that individuals and families are provided with housing choices and with access to voluntary supportive services that are tailored to meet the unique needs of each individual or family presenting for services and that will assist program participants achieve their goals. The services offered should be determined through a collaborative process with the program participant and should focus on the program participant's preferences and goals. Because of this, the supportive services offered will likely change over time as the preferences and goals of the program participant change; however, program participants should not be required to participate in services and cannot be required to participate in disability-related services. See the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) [Person- and Family-centered Care and Peer Support webpage](#) for more information and resources about adopting client-centered service methods.

### Remove Barriers to Entry

Systems and projects following a Housing First model should have minimal barriers to entering those projects. CoCs should review project-level eligibility criteria for all projects within the CoC and work with the recipients to remove any barriers to accessing housing and services. For example, persons experiencing homelessness should not be screened out of or discouraged from participating in programs because they have poor credit history, or lack income or employment. Additionally, people with addictions to alcohol or substances should not be required to cease active use before accessing housing and services. See HUD's [Coordinated Entry Policy Brief](#) for more information on how coordinated entry processes can help remove barriers at a system level as well.

The Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs (SNAPs) released a [Policy Brief](#) in 2015 reporting on the Family Options Study—a long-term, multi-site, experimental study that demonstrated that requiring additional eligibility criteria beyond the statutory or regulatory requirements does not increase the success of programs. The study highlighted that permanent housing like Public Housing, vouchers, and Rapid Re-housing (RRH) have lower barriers to entry, whereas transitional housing programs often place additional barriers to receiving housing and services, and these additional eligibility criteria did not result in fewer returns to homelessness or better family well-being outcomes.

In a recent [In Focus message](#), we also discussed recovery housing programs and how some programs have successfully implemented Housing First principles. For instance, Ed Blackburn from Central City Concern discusses in a [guest blog](#) how recovery housing works within a Housing First model. The key elements include ensuring that



entry into the program is not predicated on a set amount of clean time, strict income requirements, background checks, or other barriers, and ensuring that drug or alcohol relapse does not necessarily mean eviction from the program. Relapse management takes into account the realities of addiction and ensures that clients are held accountable within a framework that allows for mistakes along the way.

### Engage Landlords and Property Owners

In order to ensure units are readily available for program participants, CoCs and providers should be identifying and recruiting landlords of units in the geographic area so that when an individual or family needs housing, potential units that those individuals or families may choose from have already been identified, speeding up the housing process. Landlord engagement can be undertaken by each homeless assistance provider or consolidated so that one or a few organizations engage landlords on behalf of many providers.

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) has posted a number of resources to help providers and CoCs effectively engage landlords. Check out their [listing of resources](#), as well as [First Lady Michelle Obama's video](#) encouraging landlords and property owners to get involved in ending Veteran homelessness.

### Use Data to Quickly and Stably House Homeless Persons

Programs that use a Housing First approach should be moving individuals and families quickly into permanent housing. CoCs can measure quality of housing first approaches by evaluating the length of time it takes for programs to move households into permanent housing.

CoCs can get an overall sense of how quickly the entire system moves households into permanent housing by analyzing [Measure 1](#) of HUD's [System Performance Measures](#). If the CoC is going to truly lower the average length of time homeless across the system, the CoC and individual providers will have to focus on those who have been homeless the longest periods of time. These individuals and families typically have high vulnerabilities and service needs, and also may have characteristics, such as substance use disorders, criminal records, or resistance to services, that result in their being screened out of other programs.

Strong evidence, such as the recently published [Housing First Fact Sheet](#) from the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), and the Corporation for Supportive Housing's (CSH) [NYC FUSE Evaluation: Decreasing Costs and Ending Homelessness](#), shows that people with long histories of homelessness and chronic disabilities who were served in permanent supportive housing using a Housing First approach has shown a number of positive outcomes, including significant declines in homelessness, arrests, hospitalization, and emergency room visits as well as declines in the public costs of shelter, corrections, and health care.

### What You Can Do to Evaluate Your Program(s)

Our partners at USICH created a useful [Housing First Checklist: A Practical Tool for Assessing Housing First in Practice](#). We encourage providers to use the checklist to evaluate whether you are using a Housing First approach. Take this opportunity to evaluate your project, and reflect on whether you have adopted client-centered service methods. Ask yourself:

- *Does my project rely on predetermined goals that all clients must meet?*



- *Does my project require participation in services?*
- *Does my project evict clients for use of alcohol or drugs without opportunity for managing a relapse?*
- *Does my project evict clients for non-payment of rent without an opportunity for repayment plans or interventions to assist clients to pay on time?*

If you answer “yes” to these questions, your project should take steps to improve your implementation of Housing First.

We encourage CoCs and providers to share these resources among community partners and utilize them to continue the work of implementing Housing First practices. With your commitment and support, we will end homelessness for those with the highest vulnerabilities and service needs.

Thank you,

Norm Suchar and Abby Miller  
Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs

#### **Additional Resources**

- [Housing First in Permanent Supportive Housing Brief](#)
- [Family Options Study](#)
- [How Data is Ending Chronic Homelessness in Maine](#)
- [VA-PSH Guidebook](#)
- [Community Policing Dispatch – Policing and Approaches to Street Homelessness](#)
- [Washington Post – “Housing First” Approach Works for Homeless, Study Says](#)