Models for Providing Housing Search Services

There are three common models for organizing and delivering housing search assistance within a community:

- ## Model 1: Centralized, Single Function

Under a "centralized, single function" model, a continuum designates one agency to provide housing search and placement services. The agency has several staff, often referred to as "housing advocates," whose sole responsibility is helping housing-ready clients find and keep housing. Services may include housing-related case management services (e.g., helping clients establish a budget, repair credit history, remove evictions from their record), tenant education, housing search assistance, and follow-up services. The program may take walk-ins, but the majority of clients would be referred from other homeless services agencies within the continuum.

Key Advantages

- *Staff specialization ensures a focus on housing search.* The specialization inherent in this model allows staff to focus on doing a specific job and doing it well. Case managers and other frontline staff are typically pulled in a number of different directions, with the majority of their time being devoted to clients with the most severe barriers. Unfortunately, providing housing search assistance and follow-up services are tasks that typically fall to the bottom of the priority list. However, establishing a program devoted to providing housing search and stabilization services eliminates the competing demands that so many providers face. Housing advocates have the time to focus on familiarizing themselves with the local housing market, cultivating partnerships with the local housing authority and other housing providers, and building relationships with area landlords - all of which are essential to successful housing placement.

  Why is staff specialization important?

  Providing housing search assistance is a full-time job! Among other responsibilities, a housing advocate must:

  - Know the community and understand the housing options available;
  - Understand mainstream housing subsidy programs;
  - Build/maintain relationships with landlords;
  - Be able to help clients quickly respond to vacant units;
  - Be able to respond immediately if/when problems arise; and
  - Be able to provide follow-up support and assistance to keep individuals housed.

- *Greater collaboration and coordination.* A second benefit to this model is that it encourages greater collaboration among agencies within a continuum. If each agency/program within the continuum is assigned to serve a particular population and/or provide a particular service, it can decrease competition and turf issues and encourage agencies to think about success in a broader, more systemic sense. For example, having a centralized housing search agency would require agencies to come together to develop clear and consistent referral guidelines (including who should be referred, when, and what client information should be shared). A centralized model also promotes greater coordination among staff providing housing search services, since they work for the same agency and operate under the same policies and guidelines. It allows for more consistent training and also enhances information sharing. For example, simply by virtue of sharing office space, advocates can easily share leads with one another regarding new landlords or available units.

- *Provides landlords with central point of contact.* A final advantage related to a centralized model is that it enables landlords to have one point of contact for the program. Housing advocates can coordinate their efforts to ensure that only one person contacts a landlord to discuss/market the program or inquire about a vacant unit. For example, one housing search program in the Midwest divides the city geographically, so that each housing advocate is assigned to a particular geographic territory. While there is some overlap where landlords own buildings in different parts of the city, it allows the advocates to really get to know their particular neighborhoods and the landlords in those neighborhoods. It also encourages greater cooperation among the advocates, since they have to rely upon one another for information regarding available units throughout the city. Additionally, the landlords interviewed for this project appreciated knowing exactly who to call with questions or concerns about the program.

Key Disadvantages

- *Funding a centralized program may be a challenge.* For most continuums, having a centralized housing search program would require the creation of an entirely new program. And, if they planned on using McKinney-Vento dollars to provide housing search services, it might require reducing or eliminating funding for one or more other programs, which can be a difficult decision for continuums to make. As a result, continuums may struggle with a way to fund a centralized housing search program.

- *Provides less continuity for clients.* Because centralized housing search services are dependent on an organized referral process (i.e., other homeless providers in the system must assess clients and identify those who are "housing-ready"), it can encourage better collaboration among agencies. At the same time, however,

it creates an environment where clients can slip through the cracks as they are referred from one agency to another. Furthermore, if the system is not organized and agencies are not working together well, it can actually create a burden on clients (e.g., they may have to fill out forms or paperwork that they already completed for another agency). Additionally, there can be tension around sharing confidential client information, particularly if the housing search agency is not part of the continuum's Homeless Management Information System.

- ## Model 2: Decentralized, Single Function

Under a "decentralized, single function" model, several different agencies would provide clients with housing search assistance, but they would each have one or more staff whose sole function is to provide housing search and stabilization assistance. For example, three agencies that each provide transitional housing might each hire different people to provide housing search assistance for clients "graduating" from their individual programs.

Key Advantages

- *Staff specialization without the cost of establishing a new program*. This model offers the same benefits related to staff specialization, but without the cost and administrative burden of creating a new program. Individual agencies would have to identify resources to fund the new position (or train an existing staff member to be a housing advocate), but it may be significantly easier and more politically palatable for agencies to make this shift than for the continuum to reallocate resources from one or more grantees to another.
- *Good model for continuums with some level of housing search services.* For continuums already providing some level of housing search assistance (i.e., some agencies provide assistance, others do not), it may be easier to fully implement this model than to restructure programs to create a centralized model. Such continuums may want to establish a working group to increase coordination among agencies. For example, the working group could establish common policies and procedures that all housing advocates would follow, regardless of their parent organization. They could establish common tools and resources, such as referral guidelines (i.e., criteria to help case managers determine when a client is "housing-ready"), a housing assessment form, and landlord marketing materials.
- *Provides more consistency for clients*. Even though a client may have to work with different staff members (e.g., a case manager and housing advocate), the "hand-off" may be smoother since both staff work for the same agency. Having staff that are co-located allows for better coordination of services for the client, since it allows staff to remain in constant contact to ensure that the client gets the services he or she needs. Also, sharing client information is often not as problematic or controversial since staff work for the same agency. Finally, it can sometimes be difficult to build trust and establish open lines of communication with persons experiencing homelessness. As a result, the more stability and

consistency that can be provided, the better. Clients may feel more comfortable continuing to work with the same organization and may appreciate seeing familiar faces as they work through the challenges in their lives.

Key Disadvantages

- *Decreased coordination on landlord side.* While the decentralized approach provides more coordination and consistency for clients, it provides less coordination and consistency on the landlord side. As discussed above, a continuum could establish a working group to ensure that agencies were using consistent policies and procedures. And, once implemented, housing advocates could meet on a weekly basis to discuss leads and tips, troubleshoot individuals or families stuck in the system, and discuss strategies for reaching out to landlords. However, even with the best of intentions, coordinating across different agencies is not as easy as coordinating within an agency. There is also less incentive for housing advocates to collaborate and share information (e.g., regarding landlords or vacant units), particularly if agencies have specific performance goals related to the number of individuals placed in permanent housing.
- *Gaps in the system.* If left to each individual agency, there will inevitably be some agencies/programs that simply do not have the resources or capacity to provide housing search assistance and follow-up services. The clients of these smaller agencies will then be at a disadvantage when it comes to locating and securing permanent housing.

• Model 3: Decentralized, Multiple Function

A "decentralized, multiple function" model is the one that most continuums use, both because of resource constraints as well as a lack of attention concerning how to best organize and deliver services within their community. Under this model, there is no staff devoted solely to providing housing search assistance. Instead, clients work with the same case manager from the time they enter the system until system exit. This requires case managers to be a "jack of all trades."

Key Advantages

- *Provides clients with consistency and stability.* The biggest advantage of this model is that clients have a single point of contact. As mentioned earlier, it can be difficult to build trust with clients and establish open lines of communication, and having just one case manager may help clients feel more comfortable. In addition, case managers have the opportunity to get to know their clients very well. Over time, they will come to know the client's history, needs, strengths, and weaknesses. A case manager that has been working with a client for a period of time may be able to perceive things about the client that a newly assigned housing advocate would not. As a result, they may actually be able to do a more effective job placing and stabilizing clients - as long as they actually have the

time and expertise to do so. This requires keeping caseloads at a manageable level and offering plenty of training opportunities to ensure staff understand housing issues and programs.

Key Disadvantages

- *Lack of staff specialization.* The key disadvantage to this model is that homeless service organizations, due to resource limitations, are often understaffed. This means that case managers typically have very large caseloads and, inevitably, are forced to devote a majority of their time to clients with the greatest needs and most severe barriers. At the end of the day, clients deemed housing-ready - clients who, by definition, have fewer barriers and a greater chance at success - may not receive the services they need to transition out of homelessness. The lack of specialization can also mean a lack of expertise. Many case managers in homeless service organizations have a social work orientation as opposed to a housing background. With heavy caseloads, however, it can be difficult to devote the time necessary to learn about housing issues and housing programs. As a result, it would be particularly important for the continuum to organize and/or provide training opportunities on issues related to housing programs, fair housing, tenant rights and responsibilities, and housing search strategies.
- *Lack of coordination.* With this type of model, coordination is a huge challenge. It is difficult to ensure that all case managers use consistent procedures and provide the same level of services, which can be a serious drawback for landlords. If a landlord has one or two bad experiences, it can discourage him or her from ever working with the program again.

Select each model above to view a description along with its key advantages and disadvantages.