



HOUSING FIRST

WHAT IS “HOUSING FIRST”?

Housing First is an approach to serving people experiencing homelessness that recognizes a homeless person must first be able to access a decent, safe place to live, that does not limit length of stay (permanent housing), before stabilizing, improving health, reducing harmful behaviors, or increasing income. Under the Housing First approach, anyone experiencing homelessness should be connected to a permanent apartment as quickly as possible, and programs should remove barriers to accessing the housing, like requirements for sobriety or absence of criminal history. It is based on the “hierarchy of need:” people must access basic necessities—like a safe place to live and food to eat—before being able to achieve quality of life or pursue personal goals. Finally, Housing First values choice not only in where to live, but whether to participate in services. For this reason, tenants are not required to participate in services to access or retain housing.

WHAT TYPE OF HOUSING IS CONSIDERED “HOUSING FIRST”?

Programs using Housing First generally fall into two categories:

- Supportive housing, which is an apartment made affordable through long-term rental assistance, paired with intensive services promoting housing stability.
- Rapid re-housing, which connects a family or individual to an apartment affordable through short-to medium-term rental assistance, along with moderate services designed to allow that household to increase their income sufficiently to be able to afford the apartment over the long-term.

While Housing First recognizes housing is a necessary precursor to treatment, Housing First does not mean “housing only.” On the contrary, Housing First acknowledges social services and care coordination are necessary elements of housing stability and quality of life.

CORE COMPONENTS OF HOUSING FIRST UNDER CALIFORNIA LAW

In 2016, the California Legislature passed Senate Bill 1380 (Mitchell). It required all housing programs to adopt the Housing First model.¹ The Legislation defined Housing First with these “core components”:

- Tenant screening and selection practices promote accepting applicants regardless of their sobriety or use of substances, completion of treatment, or participation in services.
- Applicants are not rejected on the basis of poor credit or financial history, poor or lack of rental history, criminal convictions unrelated to tenancy, or behaviors that indicate a lack of “housing readiness.”

¹ Codified as California Welfare & Institutions Code § 8255.

- Housing providers accept referrals directly from shelters, street outreach, drop-in centers, and other parts of crisis response systems frequented by vulnerable people experiencing homelessness.
- Supportive services emphasize engagement and problem solving over therapeutic goals and service plans that are highly tenant-driven without predetermined goals.
- Participation in services or program compliance is not a condition of housing tenancy.
- Tenants have a lease and all the rights and responsibilities of tenancy.
- The use of alcohol or drugs in and of itself, without other lease violations, is not a reason for eviction.
- Funding promotes tenant selection plans for supportive housing that prioritize eligible tenants based on criteria other than "first-come-first-serve," including, but not limited to, the duration or chronicity of homelessness, vulnerability to early mortality, or high utilization of crisis services.
- Case managers and service coordinators are trained in and actively employ evidence-based practices for engagement, including motivational interviewing and client-centered counseling.
- Services are informed by a harm-reduction philosophy that recognizes drug and alcohol use and addiction as a part of tenants' lives, where tenants are engaged in nonjudgmental communication regarding drug and alcohol use, and where tenants are offered education regarding how to avoid risky behaviors and engage in safer practices, as well as connected to evidence-based treatment if the tenant so chooses.
- The project and specific apartment may include special physical features that accommodate disabilities, reduce harm, and promote health and community and independence among tenants.

EVIDENCE BASIS

The federal and State government recognize Housing First as an evidence-based practice. In fact, a settled and growing body of evidence demonstrates—

- Tenants accessing Housing First programs are able to move into housing faster than programs offering a more traditional approach.²
- Tenants using Housing First programs stay housed longer and more stably than other programs.³
- Over 90% of tenants accessing Housing First programs are able to retain housing stability.⁴
- In general, tenants using Housing First programs access services more often, have a greater sense of choice and autonomy, and are far less costly to public systems than tenants of other programs.⁵

² Gulcur, L., Stefancic, A., Shinn, M., Tsemberis, S., & Fishcer, S. Housing, Hospitalization, and Cost Outcomes for Homeless Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities Participating in Continuum of Care and Housing First programs. 2003.

³ Tsemberis, S. & Eisenberg, R. Pathways to Housing: Supported Housing for Street-Dwelling Homeless Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities. 2000.

⁴ Montgomery, A.E., Hill, L., Kane, V., & Culhane, D. Housing Chronically Homeless Veterans: Evaluating the Efficacy of a Housing First Approach to HUD-VASH. 2013.

⁵ Tsemberis, S., Gulcur, L., & Nakae, M. Housing First, Consumer Choice, and Harm Reduction for Homeless Individuals with a Dual Diagnosis. 2004; Perlman, J. & Parvensky, J. Denver Housing First Collaborative: Cost Benefit Analysis and Program Outcomes Report. 2006.