

BUILDING SUCCESSFUL HOUSING FIRST TEAMS USING A CHANGE MANAGEMENT APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

The Housing First approach is a critical keystone to ending homelessness. A proven best practice, Housing First strengthens client outcomes, improves stability, and enhances permanent housing exits and retention, ensuring the system of care is able to serve the most vulnerable persons with the highest needs. For many programs, Housing First represents a significant shift in culture and practice, requiring a **deliberate implementation process and continuous course correction for successful, sustainable change**.

The suggestions below identify opportunities to strengthen your agency's Housing First implementation, grounded in an organizational change management model and the experiences of agencies that have successfully adopted Housing First.

PHASE 1: DEFINING HOUSING FIRST¹

Housing First is a collection of principles and practices and may be defined in multiple ways. Each community and organization must ensure that they create a clear, shared definition and vision, and articulate that vision so it may be implemented through practical application.

By definition, Housing First removes barriers to housing and retention and prioritizes the most vulnerable and high-need persons for housing assistance, embodying **four overarching principles**:

1. Homelessness is a housing problem and should be treated as such.
2. Persons experiencing homelessness should be stabilized in permanent housing as soon as possible – and then connected to resources to sustain that housing.
3. Underlying issues that contributed to a person's homelessness are best addressed after that person is in a stable housing environment.
4. **All** persons experiencing homelessness are "housing ready."

SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- How does your agency define Housing First? Would everyone at the agency define Housing First the same way?
- Do your agency's board, management, and line staff **agree with the basic principles** of Housing First? What has been the **impact of Housing First** on your programs and agency culture?
- What are your next steps in strengthening:
 - The **collective buy-in** around Housing First in your agency?
 - The **effectiveness of Housing First** in your program implementation?

¹ While framing the process in terms of phases suggests a linear progression, these steps may overlap.

PHASE 2: IMPLEMENTATION

Once you have agreed to shared definitions and assessed next steps, ongoing implementation requires a **clearly articulated vision, engaged leadership, and incorporation** of Housing First practices into policies and procedures.

- Do the vision and mission statements **reflect your Housing First definitions**?
- Are the vision and mission statements **clear and articulated** in a distilled message?
- Are the statements **supported by data, best practices, and feedback** from engaged stakeholders?
- Does **leadership understand and agree** to the approach taken at your agency?
- How have your programs integrated Housing First principles:
 - In **eligibility determinations and the client admission process** (e.g., communicating that there are no participation obligations)?
 - In **approaches to client retention** and avoiding termination (e.g., minimizing reasons a client would be terminated from the project)?
 - In **program practices and design** (e.g., harm reduction approaches to service provision)?
 - In **written policies and procedures** that explicitly state what is – and is not – grounds for termination?
 - In your agency’s **mission, vision and/or values**?

PHASE 3: COMMUNICATION

Once implementation has been established, the change must be communicated to staff, clients, and community stakeholders. Successful communication requires an **effective communication culture, consistent messaging, and ongoing feedback loops**.

COMMUNICATION WITH STAFF

- What is your agency’s **communication culture**?
 - What approaches are typically used for communication at your agency (e.g., regular meetings, email, Google groups, Slack, one-on-ones, etc.)?
 - How have these approaches been used to communicate the agency’s Housing First principles?
- How is the agency’s Housing First vision **communicated to your staff**?
 - What are the agency’s messages to staff around Housing First?
 - What communication avenues are used and how often is Housing First discussed?
 - How do staff provide feedback?

Potential Actions

- ✓ Schedule **regular “all hands” meetings** to share the agency’s vision, give progress reports, and provide a forum to voice questions or concerns, bridging a potential gap between management and team members.
- ✓ In an all-staff meeting, **identify common goals** that each team has (i.e., to support participants to maintain stable housing), acknowledge and embrace differing goals, and determine how these differing goals fit into the larger common vision.
- ✓ **Evaluate your communication culture** and create links between staff at each level of the organization to ensure needs are being communicated and met.
- ✓ **Send out a regular newsletter** or “advocacy update” which gives staff an opportunity to comment or submit questions to upper management. Include data that shows how Housing First is working for your community.

COMMUNICATION WITH PARTICIPANTS

- Have you established **consistent communications** with program participants?
- In **what format** do those communications take place?
- Have you **communicated your Housing First vision** to participants?
- Do all participants have a **forum to voice their questions or concerns**?

Potential Actions

- ✓ Schedule **regular meetings with participants** to share your vision and longer-term goals for the program as a whole, as well as a discussion about how participants' goals fit into the larger vision.
- ✓ Identify **opportunities for participants to contribute** to enhancing the effectiveness of Housing First implementation, for example by identifying challenges and opportunities in reducing barriers to program access and participation.
- ✓ Use **client advisory groups** and/or peer “ombudspersons” to enhance communication between participants, staff and decision-makers.
- ✓ **Conduct focus groups** with participants during the decision-making processes and implementation to solicit feedback.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE COMMUNITY

- How have you communicated your Housing First vision **to the broader community**?
- Have you **effectively communicated your Housing First vision** to landlords?
- Have you given landlords a **forum to voice their questions or concerns**?

Potential Actions

- ✓ Identify talking points that will **leverage your Housing First mission** with stakeholders, including potential funders.
- ✓ Establish a multi-faceted **landlord engagement campaign** to build successful long-term partnerships with landlords.
- ✓ Developing a **user-friendly brochure** that describes Housing First and your program for landlords, addressing common landlord concerns and describing your risk mitigation approaches.
- ✓ Discuss the changes your agency is making and your Housing First successes into your **public stakeholder communications** (e.g., monthly newsletters, annual report, etc.).

PHASE 4: CLARIFY & SUPPORT ROLES

Successful Housing First implementation requires buy-in and participation by all staff, from intake to senior leadership. Beyond the cultural shift, Housing First often presents significant changes in program design and may require **assessment of staffing structures, orientation and training, and intensive staff supports**.

ASSESS STAFFING STRUCTURES AND LINES OF LEADERSHIP

- What is the role of each level of your agency's org chart in implementing Housing First?
- Do all management and staff:
 - **Understand** Housing First principles and practice?
 - **Agree** with the approach taken to implement Housing First in the agency?
 - Have the **capacity** they need to succeed in their role?
 - Have the opportunity to participate in **troubleshooting** (e.g., identifying challenges, contributing to solutions)?
 - Participate in **celebrating successes**?

Potential Actions

- ✓ Evaluate your Housing First leadership and management plan to ensure it **clearly delineates roles and responsibilities** in line with your Housing First vision.
- ✓ Create regular opportunities to strengthen buy-in and capacity as needed – e.g., through trainings, staff meetings and messaging.
- ✓ Consider adding Housing First as a **standing agenda item** in meetings.

ENSURE STAFF ARE ORIENTED AND TRAINED

- How do you ensure you **hire the right people**?
 - Have you revised job descriptions and position qualifications aligned with your new program models?
- Have training needs been assessed and has a **regular schedule for training** been developed?
 - Has a plan for orienting all new staff to Housing First been created?
 - Are housing staff receiving sufficient training regarding the housing search, landlord cultivation, housing placement or other relevant skills?
 - Are case managers receiving sufficient training regarding client-centered, trauma-informed, motivational interviewing and other relevant skills?
- Has your agency implemented strategies to engage **people with lived experiences** into your staff and trainings?

Potential Actions

- ✓ From the beginning, it's crucial to hire the right people who embrace teamwork, are flexible, solve problems creatively, embrace challenges, and utilize client-centered interventions. **Re-work your job descriptions** and hiring policies to ensure you are getting the right staff.
- ✓ **Set a routine** for in-service trainings, trainings by external technical assistance providers, attendance at off-site workshops, or regular site visits to Housing First programs.
- ✓ **Set up a regular schedule for focus groups** or project briefings to engage staff in planning and decision-making.
- ✓ Create opportunities for staff to **consult with experts or clinicians** for tenants with complex needs.
- ✓ Create **employee program implementation evaluations** for staff to reassess team members who have not adapted to the Housing First model.
- ✓ Where current staff continue to lack buy-in, **consider position reassignments** or whether or not they are the right fit for Housing First programs.

ENSURE STAFF ARE WELL-SUPPORTED

- Have **sufficient lines of communication** been established to keep team members supported and engaged?
 - Are staff appropriately and regularly supervised?
 - Are staff being supported by each other?
 - Are there strategies to involve front-line staff as members of the transformation, advisory, or management teams?
- Do staff have **sufficient time and resources** to accomplish their work?
 - Are staff taking on additional burdens as a result of the Housing First transition?
 - Has work been allocated in a way that maximizes efficiency and minimizes unnecessary burdens?
 - Are there protocols to address particularly difficult situations that are accessible to staff and other stakeholders?
 - Can staff speak up about resources they need (e.g., access to staff with certain skills or specialties, specific training)?
 - Does your agency encourage self-care for staff who may be overburdened?
- Are there other community providers that could be **potential partners** helpful to your agency's staff?
 - Are there additional ways to build those relationships?
- Does your agency take a **trauma-informed approach** with staff?

Potential Actions

- ✓ **Set up a regular time** where supportive services and housing provider staff meet with senior staff to troubleshoot difficult cases, brainstorm methods to help program participants achieve their goals, and to address personal challenges.
- ✓ **Hold weekly (or daily) team meetings** where staff members can learn, talk openly, and express frustrations and feelings.
- ✓ To ensure housing and clinical teams remain in **regular contact and communication** with each other, have teams housed within close vicinity to one another, hold weekly cross-disciplinary meetings, or include a housing team member in the regular case management team.
- ✓ Ensure **staff roles are balanced and difficulties are minimized** where possible.
 - For case managers, limit their geographic areas, hire a live-in house manager in shared housing situations, consider using video visits, or leverage partnerships with service providers who can help address crises.
 - For housing services staff, create policies that maximize institutional trust with landlords and tools/resources to assist staff in their communications.
- ✓ Encourage self-care of staff by creating **staff "self-care days,"** where staff can leave work early or take time off work. Encourage staff to ask for help if they need it and emphasize that asking for help does not indicate failure.
- ✓ Create formal and informal strategies to help staff deal with **secondary or vicarious trauma**, including an open-door policy when staff need help.
- ✓ When teams are being formed, **secure a "critical mass" of case managers** with experience and ensure there is a strategy in place in case of employee turnover.
- ✓ **Identify the full spectrum of community collaborative relationships** or referral sources and cultivate new relationships with a memorandum of understanding, linkage agreement, or sub-contract.

ASSESS STAFF OWNERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

- Do you know of **team members who are not supportive** of Housing First?
 - If yes, what are their concerns?
 - How have you managed the situation?
- Are all levels of staff **integrated in planning and decision-making** processes?
 - Have you given staff **plenty of opportunities** to give input and feedback regarding all facets of the program?
- Have you been clear about **identifying behaviors** that best support the new way of doing business, and **how they are measured**?
 - Have you created **incentives and rewards** for good performance and outcomes?

Potential Actions

- ✓ Establish a **stakeholder advisory group** involving leaders at all levels of staff to assist management in decision-making.
- ✓ Create an **incentives and rewards program** for high-performing staff, such as an awards ceremony.

PHASE 5: ONGOING FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION

- How do you **monitor and evaluate progress**?
 - Have you incorporated Housing First measures into your **data collection** systems?
 - What **other methods** do you use to evaluate your success with Housing First?
- **Who is responsible** for your monitoring and evaluation?
 - How often do you evaluate and who **reviews and implements** the information?
 - Have you integrated all team members, participants, and partners into your evaluation process?
- Are there processes in place to ensure that your **data guides your decisions**?
 - Is your program flexible to respond to these continual assessments of change?

Potential Actions

- ✓ Re-evaluate **performance measures** to ensure they are in line with your Housing First vision.
- ✓ Establish or re-evaluate **process measures** to monitor your Housing First program implementation. Some sample process measures are below.
 - Are tasks being accomplished within the timeframes you set?
 - Are key stakeholders increasingly on-board with and capable of implementing Housing First?
 - Are transition efforts translating into behavior changes in staff?
- ✓ Re-evaluate your **outcome measures** and whether the Housing First philosophy and service delivery model improve targeted outcomes.
 - Outcomes contingent on grants are important, but check to see if you are also monitoring qualitative outcomes emblematic of the spirit of Housing First.
- ✓ Expand use of **quantitative data** to measure demographics and primary outcomes relevant to Housing First, such as time to placement in PSH or rates of housing retention.

... How will you manage change moving forward?

Effective implementation of Housing First is a long-term process, requiring regular self-evaluation and identification of opportunities for course correction and improvement.

- How will you **continue to identify opportunities** for strengthening your agency's implementation of Housing First and how will you **prioritize**?
- How will you **take the next steps** forward to address the challenges identified?
- **What information do you need** and how will you get it?
- **How will you know** if/when you are going off course and need additional support?