



# Using a Housing First Philosophy When Serving Youth

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## What is Housing First?

The Housing First approach focuses on quickly connecting people experiencing a housing crisis to permanent housing without preconditions and barriers to entry (e.g., sobriety, treatment, or service participation requirements) while also providing necessary supports to help maintain housing and prevent a return to homelessness. Supportive services are offered based on assessed need but are not required.

Adopting a Housing First approach can be challenging for any provider organization, including those that serve youth. It is important for providers to understand the core principles of Housing First as they relate to youth, and ways in which the provider may need to change or reorient their existing approach to successfully implement Housing First.

## Core Principles of Housing First for Youth

- **Immediate access to permanent housing with no preconditions:** Youth should be provided with access to safe and secure permanent housing that meets their needs as quickly as possible.
- **Youth choice and self-determination:** Housing First is a person-centered approach that promotes choice regarding housing and service options, while maintaining high expectations for youth.
- **Individualized and youth-driven supports:** All youth are different. Once housed, the level of service offered will depend on the unique needs and choices of the youth. Non-time limited supports provide a practical, person-centered approach that assist in helping youth maintain their housing independently.
- **Persistent Engagement:** Staff should utilize an assertive style of case management, and continuously attempt to engage youth, even if youth are resistant to services.

When making the transition to a Housing First orientation, it is important to involve all levels of your organization, including youth. When Safe Space NYC, an organization serving youth with HIV/AIDS, decided to embrace Housing First, they held a training session with their board and all staff. Next, they reviewed all of their policies to remove any aspect that was consequence-driven. Finally, they engaged with their youth participants to discuss other structural changes to the program and garner buy-in.

## Techniques for Engagement

When organizations adopt a Housing First approach, they may need to adopt new techniques to better serve the youth, such as:

- **Positive youth development:** Focuses on the strengths that youth already have and builds protective factors and resiliency. Positive youth development strategies include giving youth access to experiences that build leadership and boost self-awareness.
- **Trauma Informed Care:** Most homeless youth have experienced trauma in their lives that is affecting the ways in which they currently behave. This technique recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system, and then responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.
- **Harm Reduction:** For youth and young adults who are actively engaged in substance use, a harm reduction approach is important for youth to be able to honestly address substance use issues and make responsible decisions regarding their substance use. Abstinence-focused models may be available for youth and young adults; however, the choice should lie with the project participant, and communities should ensure that housing options are available for youth at all stages of recovery, including youth who continue to use drugs or alcohol. Sexual health is an important part of physical well-being,

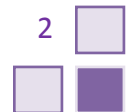
and should be incorporated in harm reduction conversations with youth.

- **Motivational Interviewing:** Motivational interviewing is an approach that works to engage and facilitate a youth's intrinsic motivation to change their behavior. This approach is traditionally used to engage youth in changing health behaviors, but is also successful with changing behavior around attending school or work. Motivational interviewing is collaborative and person-centered, and honors a youth's autonomy and decision making. With this model, youth are engaged to think differently about their behavior and ultimately to consider what might be gained through change.

Some youth may not be ready for the independence of permanent housing. A key innovation of Housing First for youth is the inclusion of transitional housing as an option. Transitional housing, with the availability of more extensive supports and possibly congregate living, may be appropriate for some youth, and may be what youth prefer. A caveat of including transitional housing in a Housing First framework is that youth must be eventually supported to move to permanent housing (with supports, if needed).

## Organizational Changes

- **Staff Buy-in:** From the organization's Board of Directors to residential staff to case managers, all members of the organization will need to be trained (and re-trained) on Housing First. During the initial stages of implementation, the organization should provide a safe atmosphere for



staff to discuss barriers to and difficulties with adhering to Housing First. The organization may experience turnover from staff who are unwilling to commit to the new direction. Turnover is a part of the process, and when hiring new staff, the interview process should include screening for understanding of and belief in the principles of Housing First.

- **Staff Roles:** Various roles within the organization may need to change. For instance, to provide the intensive supports that Housing First requires, an organization may need to hire additional staff with the intention of reducing case manager caseloads, allow staff to accompany each other on supportive services appointments, or hire staff who have clinical expertise. An organization may need to re-define job positions so that project management staff are separate and distinct from staff providing supportive services.
- **Transparency:** Utilizing a Housing First approach requires a greater level of transparency at all levels of the organization. Rather than engaging youth in a consequences-driven environment, providers should explain expectations of the project. Additionally, organizations should be clear with youth about other aspects of the organization, such as the length of the application and intake process, the conditions of being terminated from the project.
- **Relevant Services:** Organizations should be structuring their service packages to be responsive to needs identified by the youth in their projects and appealing in a way that

so that youth want to engage. While services are not required, staff should continue to attempt to engage youth in services, even if offers for services are continually or periodically rejected.

- **Termination Policy:** As with other populations, projects should provide youth with leases or occupancy agreements similar to those used in market rate apartments. This means that participating in supportive services should not be reason a project can evict a youth from the housing. It should also not be a reason for terminating a youth from the project as this should happen in only the most severe circumstances with staff doing their best to keep the youth housed. Projects should keep in mind that eviction and termination from the project are two different things and it is possible for a youth to be evicted from one unit while still participating in the project, meaning the provider can re-house the youth in a new unit.

*Disclaimer: This tool provides examples from communities without any edits from HUD. They are included only as useful examples. HUD has not reviewed them to determine if they meet all funding requirements, including whether all costs depicted are eligible. By including them, HUD is not endorsing the examples as strategies that all communities should adopt.*