What is Housing Problem-Solving?

Housing problem-solving (HPS) seeks to empower households by having unwavering respect for their dreams, strengths, goals, and preferences. HPS explores person-centered, housing-focused approaches that are creative, flexible, safe, and cost-effective solutions to quickly resolve the housing crisis—even if just temporarily—with limited or no financial support. HPS identifies community partnerships and skills-building and training opportunities supporting client empowerment and long-term HPS solutions while helping households regain a sense of control by focusing on their strengths and resiliency. The HPS approach does not depend upon dedicated permanent housing resources or subsidies. Every community must have in place a systemic response that ensures that homelessness is a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience. If every interaction is approached with a belief that each individual has a potential pathway to stable housing or access to resources without the limitation of normal restrictions and lengthy policies, efforts to prevent and end homelessness using HPS strategies can be accelerated for many.

Why Housing Problem-Solving?

HPS can be an effective approach for people in existing institutions, allowing for coordination with discharge planners and focusing on mediation, conflict resolution, and strengths-based cases. An experience of homelessness—no matter how brief—is both traumatic and disruptive. More housing resources are needed; however, homeless services cannot afford to wait for the availability of sufficient housing resources to find solutions for people that are experiencing homelessness. A person-centered approach can be integrated into virtually any program type and involves exploratory and creative strengths-based conversations that seek to identify flexible and cost-effective alternative housing solutions that can be implemented quickly.

It is critical to identify and dismantle discriminatory policies and programs that create unnecessary barriers for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). Disparities in homelessness are rooted in centuries of government-led systemic racism that has been woven into institutions, policies, programs, and practices. The current homelessness system in every community has been dependent upon standardized assessments, screening, eligibility, and resource scarcity requiring prioritizations that are biased and prone to discrimination and perpetuating disparate outcomes.

Homelessness prevention strategies represent a wide array of efforts to prevent housing crises from occurring and to prevent people who face such crises from experiencing homelessness. The goal of HPS is to explore safe housing options outside the homelessness services system (even if temporary when a part of a diversion or rapid-exit intervention) and connect the household to community supports and services. Providers aim to divert individuals or households at any entry point of the homeless response system and help them move more effectively and rapidly through the coordinated entry system (CES). HPS strategies need to be executed as a continuous process in order to yield the most effective results.

Where Does Implementation Take Place?

- Street outreach.
- Emergency shelter intake.
- Strengths-based case management.
- Conflict and crisis resolution.
- Housing search and navigation.
- Landlord-tenant mediation.
- Family mediation.
- Tenant legal services.
- Financial assistance.
- Certifications/license for employment.
- Coordinated entry (CE) access points.
    - **Outcome 1**
        - Housing option is identified and secured.
            - Limited case management.
            - Connection to mainstream connections.
    - **Outcome 2**
        - Option 1 plus a conversation that serves as the assessment and can be followed by a direct referral to homelessness prevention or rapid rehousing funds designated for HPS.
    - **Outcome 3**
        - HPS conversation does not result in a housing option identified.
        - Proceed with CE but also continue the HPS approach wherever the household is still engaged.

Targeted Population

- Re-Entry-
    - Returning citizens, people who are exiting jail/prison and returning home, need providers in place to help support and navigate their return to society due to systemic barriers positioned against them.
        - When these resources and supports are not in place, individuals' outcomes can result in returning to survival activities that might lead to recidivism.
- BIPOC are disproportionately represented and experience greater disparities in access to housing and in their encounters with homelessness response systems. Identifying racial disparities in the homelessness response systems and services informs HPS efforts to maintain housing by preventing homelessness and supporting viable outcomes for individuals and families. Understanding the historical and current marginalization of BIPOC based in housing discrimination, high unemployment, low wages, and overall poverty and its impact on housing in the United States assists in the prioritization of these groups.

Best Practices/Strategies/Key Steps

- Restorative justice methods.
- Peer support implementation.
- Community partnerships/skill-building and training programs.
    - Neighborhood revitalization involves connecting diverse sectors of the community in creating a sense of belonging for its renters, homeowners, organizations, and businesses.
        - Groups such as Habitat for Humanity nationally, state-level organizations like Preservation Maryland, and city programs such as Historic Wilmington in North Carolina are potential partnerships for HPS and homeless prevention strategies.
- Motivational interviewing techniques.
    - Conducted by skilled, trained, and flexible staff who engage in open-ended, exploratory conversations to understand a household's strengths and existing support networks.
    - Staff members use empathy, active listening, conflict resolution, and mediation skills and draw on their understanding of and access to community-based resources.
    - Open-ended questions.
    - Deep, active, and nonjudgmental listening.
    - A conversation, not a checklist.
    - Be clear and transparent in conversation.
    - Normalize their experience.

- o Display open, responsive body language.
- o Agreeing on a common language, practicing cultural humility.
- Landlord Incentives.
  - o Prevention programs can make the landlord an offer that turns "high-risk" tenants into low-risk business opportunities.
    - ▪ Reduced advertising costs and less time searching for tenants.
    - ▪ Less work for the landlord because every tenant will have program support.
    - ▪ The program staff acts as an intermediary to resolve issues that might arise, such as:
      - Non-payment.
      - Complaints by and about the tenant.
      - Lease violations.
      - Property damage.
    - ▪ Avoids the time, expense, and conflict associated with initiating court-ordered evictions. If problems cannot be adequately resolved and the landlord wants to file an eviction, the program will help the household move out voluntarily.
    - ▪ Avoids the expense of property damage. If the tenant causes damage that costs more than the security deposit, the program will repair or pay for the excess damage.
      - It is expected, however, that severe damage, such as a fire, would be covered by the landlord's insurance, or the tenant may have rental insurance that may cover it as well.
    - ▪ Avoids risk of non-payment of rent: the prevention agency may subsidize the client's rent for a period of time.
    - ▪ Avoids any legal risk: the prevention agency co-signs the lease or directly leases the unit and sublets to the household.

Benefits/Effectiveness

- Utilizes potentially untapped resources and may significantly improve communities' system performance measures.
- Can help reduce the lengths of time a person experiences homelessness, the number of households experiencing first-time homelessness, and the share of households returning to homelessness.
- Can help prevent homelessness and help people exit their experience of homelessness more quickly.
- HPS can:
  - o Increase equity.
  - o Reduce trauma experiences.
  - o Support community efforts to end homelessness while ensuring housing assistance is prioritized for the most vulnerable and the spread of COVID-19 can be mitigated by reducing entry into the homelessness system.

Community Examples

- Seattle/King County Washington
  - o Activities funded:
    - ▪ Mediation, family reunification, housing location, crisis resolution, flexible financial assistance, diversion staffing.
  - o Conversation approaches:
    - ▪ Occurs at any entry point of the crisis response system.
  - o Participating:
    - ▪ Staff are trained to have diversion conversations by diversion coaches who include individuals with lived experience of homelessness.
  - o Key takeaways:

- The Central Diversion Fund helped to scale up diversion and promote equity in access to resources.
- The expertise of diversion coaches (including people with lived experience) needs to be adequately compensated.
- Montgomery County, PA
  - Activities funded:
    - Call center staff, shelter case management, outreach, direct client assistance, rapid rehousing lite.
  - Conversation approaches:
    - Homeless hotline, street outreach, shelter.
  - Participating:
    - Five trained call center staff, five outreach workers, case managers at the emergency shelter.
  - Key takeaways:
    - Leadership identified staffing as a primary operational expense.
    - It is critical to fund the time and intensity of services, not just financial assistance.
- Washington, DC
  - Activities funded:
    - Case management, mediation, family reunification, housing location, direct client assistance, central intake/assessment staff, prevention program staff.
  - Conversation approaches:
    - Initial conversations take place at the central point of intake for families to determine initial eligibility for homeless services.
  - Participating:
    - Families engage with community HPS partners to receive a range of services.
  - Key takeaways:
    - The HPS was introduced to provide alternatives to shelter placement to ultimately slow the rate of shelter placement through a redesign of the intake process. Measuring the success of the HPS process has been focused on reduced rates of shelter entry and returns to the system.
    - DC has intentionally not set targets for diversion at intake to ensure families are not disincentivized to ask for, and ultimately get connected to, services they need.

Resources

- [Adopting Housing Problem-Solving Approaches with Prevention, Diversion, and Rapid Exit Strategies](#)
- [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Housing Problem-Solving](#)
- [Homeless System Response: Housing Problem-Solving](#)
- [Problem-Solving: A Humanistic Approach To Ending Homelessness](#)
- [Innovative Practices in Housing Problem-Solving](#)
- [NAEH: Homelessness Prevention: Creating Programs That Work](#)
- [Problem-Solving: An Innovative Approach To Addressing Homelessness](#)