

Homeless System Response: Housing Surges—Special Considerations for Targeting People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness

Purpose

As part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and in response to COVID-19, many communities have received significant new allocations of CARES Act Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG-CV) funds that can be used to quickly rehouse the most vulnerable individuals and families experiencing homelessness and disproportionately at risk of COVID-19. Among the most vulnerable to severe illness and death from COVID-19 are people experiencing unsheltered homelessness—those living on the streets or in other places not meant for human habitation—who struggle with challenges associated with lack of protection from the elements, inadequate access to hygiene and sanitation facilities, and disconnection from health care and services.

ESG recipients and Continuums of Care (CoCs) can maximize the impact of ESG-CV funds by targeting people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. A key strategy for quickly deploying ESG-CV resources is to use a housing surge, as detailed in [in Homeless System Response: Planning a Housing Surge to Accelerate Rehousing Efforts in Response to COVID-19](#). Below are special considerations for CoCs looking to target their housing surge activities toward people who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

Special Considerations

The following section details special considerations for your CoC when targeting a housing surge toward people experiencing unsheltered homelessness:

Focus on Equity in Planning and Implementation

When planning and implementing a housing surge for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, consider how to increase and improve engagement with people from historically marginalized groups—such as Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC)—who may not be connected with or known to outreach teams. Partnering with culturally specific organizations and community groups to help identify people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and connect them to permanent housing can also help CoCs increase the success of a targeted housing surge.

Shifting Outreach to Focus on Permanent Housing May Require a Culture Shift

In many communities, the historic role of outreach teams has been to encourage people experiencing unsheltered homelessness to enter an emergency shelter or treatment facility. From there, the shelter staff can take over conversations related to housing. However, successfully implementing a housing surge focused on people experiencing unsheltered homelessness makes it important to ensure that people can bypass crisis options and move directly into permanent housing. For many people, this may involve a connection to assistance such as rapid rehousing (RRH), permanent supportive housing (PSH), or a Housing Choice Voucher (HCV). Other people may be successfully connected to permanent housing with [housing problem-solving strategies](#), through which outreach workers focus on the household's strengths and existing support networks and provide light-touch assistance to help them access safe housing outside of homeless system resources (such as with family or in private housing).¹

Creating a coordinated approach to housing people directly from the streets can present a significant cultural and operational shift for some communities. Start by directly engaging people with lived expertise, as well as outreach staff, providers, and community groups that work with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness (including

¹ For more information and examples, see: [Problem-Solving: An Innovative Approach to Addressing Homelessness](#) and [Housing Problem-Solving in Practice](#)

culturally specific organizations that target BIPOC and other historically marginalized groups) to get a better understanding of needs. Bring outreach teams, housing providers, coordinated entry system (CES) staff and/or assessors, people with lived expertise, and other relevant groups together to discuss how to streamline connections to permanent housing. Allow space for staff and other participants to voice their concerns and brainstorm any potential challenges upfront.

You may want to have your housing staff accompany your outreach staff on some of their work. You can also discuss how outreach workers can begin compiling the information and documentation needed for quick housing placement directly from their street outreach visits, and/or partner with housing navigation teams (from CES or housing provider agencies, depending on how your local system works) to do so.

Equip Outreach Workers with the Tools and Processes to Make Housing Happen Quickly

People experiencing unsheltered homelessness often move between locations frequently, so speed is critical to ensuring successful connections to permanent housing. The ability to help someone rapidly move into a new home also helps establish and maintain trust between your organization and the individual or household, which avoids the issue of a broken promise when housing is offered but cannot be delivered.

Train outreach workers and other service providers that work with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in housing problem-solving techniques (such as conflict mediation with families) and [housing-focused outreach practices](#) to identify opportunities to resolve homelessness without homeless system resources.

Ensure that outreach workers have a clear sense of what documentation is needed from a household that will be assisted with RRH, PSH, or other resources to secure housing, and that staff members have all the needed forms with them during their visits. Tablets and other mobile technology can be helpful in enabling outreach workers to collect and upload information in real-time for housing applications.

Outreach workers should also reduce barriers for obtaining any identification, such as state-issued ID cards or social security cards, that an unsheltered household may need to complete a housing application.

Have a Diverse Range of Physical Housing Units Available

Another key strategy for expediting housing placements in a surge is to have ample physical units available so you can move someone into housing the same day, if possible. In some communities, private funding has been used for holding fees to ensure the availability of units. For tips and strategies on securing housing, see [Landlord Engagement resources](#).

People experiencing unsheltered homelessness may face physical or mental health challenges that require special housing accommodations. When developing your housing stock, anticipate these needs by securing units that are wheelchair accessible, friendly to service and assistance animals, and near particular amenities such as public transportation or medical facilities.

In addition, when working to identify housing stock for surges, keep in mind that while pre-identifying units is critical to speed, housing choice can be critical to increasing placement rates and reducing the rate of returns to homelessness. Location is a particularly important factor for anyone looking for housing, and communities may have many different neighborhoods or districts in urban settings, or towns, counties, etc. in rural and suburban areas. Being in a preferred location can ensure that tenants have access to support systems, their home community, employment, transportation, resources, etc. Location can also be of the utmost importance for tenants that are fleeing trauma, are working on sobriety and trying to avoid certain people and situations that may trigger a relapse, or would like to move to a new area for other reasons. To ensure that you are identifying appropriate housing options, engage directly with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness to understand what is important to them in terms of location and housing options and work to identify units that meet a range of needs and preferences.

Have Services and Other Key Resources Ready

Just as move-in-ready units are critical to being able to help people experiencing homelessness connect quickly to permanent housing, services are necessary in order to ensure that placements are successful and that new tenants are able to maintain their housing. RRH and PSH providers, or others providing housing case management or housing stabilization services for tenants served through the surge, should be ready to walk tenants through the move and assess and address any immediate needs (e.g., food, medical care, furniture and household

supplies, etc.). Providers should be prepared to provide intensive supports as the tenant adjusts to their new home, and should keep in mind that for tenants who have experienced unsheltered homelessness, particularly for long periods of time, the transition to being indoors in a home of their own may be difficult. Ensure that providers are trained in [evidence-based service delivery](#) approaches and that housing case managers are connected with service providers and community resources that can help tenants meet their needs.

Leverage Community Champions

Community buy-in across businesses, service organizations, local government, and community groups is crucial to the success of a housing surge that targets people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Having a mayor or other elected government official as a local champion for the effort can help recruit landlords to join the cause. A respected local minister or community organizer can also elevate the support of businesses and philanthropic groups looking to make the initiative a success.

Community in Focus: Houston/Harris County, Texas

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual estimated taxpayer cost for someone experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Houston/Harris County, Texas was \$41,000, a cost expected to now rise since people living unsheltered are uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19 and may need to access emergency services.² Placing people into housing results in better health outcomes, both individually and community-wide, and lowers annual taxpayer costs to approximately \$17,000 per year.

While Houston/Harris County had planned a coordinated effort around housing people experiencing unsheltered homelessness before COVID-19, the community is now framing this housing surge as a way to get ahead of the pandemic-related housing crisis and to better respond to future demands on the housing system. This community highlight summarizes key lessons learned so far from Houston/Harris County's planning, implementation, and results from this unsheltered housing surge.

Goals and Progress

The surge launched on October 1, 2020 with a goal to house over 1,000 persons within the first six months and 5,000 persons over two years. The program had 100 units available for immediate move-in at the time of launch, allowing it to house five people on the first day of being officially open. Within the first two weeks, over 60 people were housed.

The hope is that offering a variety of options to meet differing needs will accelerate housing placements. The plan created for the surge includes options with housing stability services:

- The RRH program will provide housing navigation, case management, and rental subsidy for up to 12 months for approximately 1,700 persons experiencing homelessness due to COVID-19.
- The RRH to PSH "bridge" option will provide housing navigation, case management, and rental subsidy for up to 24 months for approximately 1,000 persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness, at which point they will transition into PSH for longer-term supports.

Planning

Houston/Harris County used data-based decision-making to document the nature of homelessness throughout the community and focus on areas where they could have the greatest impact. Through this deliberate, clear understanding of unsheltered homelessness within the region, the community was able to get buy-in from elected officials, philanthropic organizations, neighborhood groups, and local government to align housing surge efforts for this population. Data also showed how they could expand outreach efforts to people living unsheltered outside of Houston's urban core and the ways in which those populations may look different (e.g., suburban unsheltered homelessness often involves families living in vehicles or abandoned buildings, whereas in the urban core it is more frequently individuals living within encampments or other public spaces).

The community recognized that having an array of housing options is the best way to enable outreach workers to engage with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness with programming that looks beyond a one-size-fits-all model. This led to the planning for the RRH and the RRH "bridge" to PSH options, as well as options

² [Harris County, Houston commit \\$58 million to program that could "functionally end chronic homelessness" in the county.](#)

including diversion to keep people from entering the homeless system as well as prevention to stabilize people at risk of homelessness.

When communities are planning for how to use CARES Act funding for homelessness initiatives, they should start with community needs rather than eligible activities to separate local politics. Focus these planning conversations around the most vulnerable and highest priority people in your community and then move into how the funding can play a role in helping those groups.

Implementation

Drawing upon experience rehousing people after Hurricane Harvey, Houston/Harris County created a “housing central command” structure for this housing surge. Outreach teams go out into the community and establish personal relationships with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness that are maintained throughout the full housing process. Housing applications are built into the local HMIS, including all information a landlord would need such as background checks, available utility assistance, and any back rent owed. Outreach workers collect this information onsite and upload it to the system so housing project managers can quickly track it and move housing applications forward.

Through extensive landlord recruitment prior to the launch of the housing surge, the community secured a backlog of available units to ensure quick housing placements. The mayor and a local minister with strong connections to the faith community and downtown business groups played critical roles in speaking with landlords and building the case for this effort. Through landlord incentives of three months of rent, the community is able to reserve move-in-ready empty units (which a household can move into the day their application is approved) for up to thirty days. The incentive fee covers one month of rent to keep the unit available, the security deposit, and the first month’s rent. The housing stock includes a variety of neighborhoods, numbers of bedrooms, and other considerations such as elevator access.

The housing surge effort also offers an array of program options, including short-, medium-, and long-term rental assistance, as well as a “bridge” option to PSH (for tenants who need ongoing rental assistance and wraparound services in order to maintain housing stability) as those units become available.