

How PHAs Can Assist People Experiencing Homelessness

September 2021

Using Coordinated Entry to Identify People Experiencing Homelessness for Housing Assistance



INTRODUCTION

A coordinated entry (CE) system is a centralized approach to assessing the needs, vulnerability level, and program eligibility of people experiencing homelessness and linking them to available housing programs in the community using standardized assessment, prioritization, and referral processes.¹ Continuums of Care (CoCs), the local planning bodies that organize and deliver housing and related services to people experiencing homelessness, are required by HUD to operate a CE system. Each CE system is unique. CoCs have flexibility to design CE processes and priorities that fit their local needs to respond to homelessness. CE processes help communities prioritize assistance based on households' vulnerability and the severity of service needs to ensure that people who need assistance the most can receive it in a timely manner. [HUD's recent guidance](#) instructs CoCs to prioritize their resources to people with higher levels of need and vulnerability over those with lower levels of need or vulnerability. Past efforts focused on serving people on a first-come, first-served basis or serving those more likely to succeed may not have been as equitable. Using CE to obtain referrals is a requirement for the Emergency Housing Vouchers funded through the American Recovery Plan (ARP).²

CE is intended to align homeless service providers across the CoC to work as a system to meet the needs of the entire community, rather than having each agency select its own clients. By design, CE aims to ensure fair and equitable access to all housing resources within a community, regardless of where and how a household shows up to ask for help or is persuaded by outreach workers to seek help. [New HUD resources](#) provide strategies for how CoCs can actively advance equity by using CE to remove barriers and maximize opportunities to access housing for [people of color](#), [people with disabilities](#), and [LGBTQ+ individuals](#).³

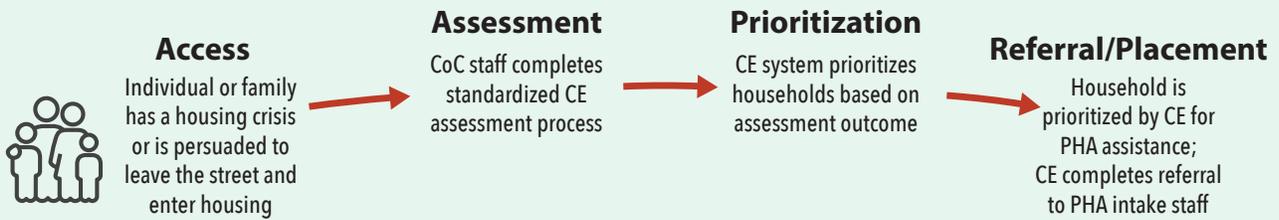
By participating in CE, the PHA extends the spectrum of housing supports that are available to people experiencing homelessness in its geographic region. This subject guide provides information on how PHAs can participate in and use the local CE system to identify people experiencing homelessness and refer them to their HCV and public housing programs. First, it explores how PHAs using the CE process for referrals can strengthen the relationship between the PHA and the CoC. Second, it discusses how using CE can simplify the PHA referral process and reduce the burden on PHA staff. Lastly, it highlights how CE can expedite the PHA application process for households experiencing homelessness.

The graphic on the next page illustrates how a household experiencing homelessness can be referred via CE to the HCV and public housing programs. PHAs should connect with their local CoCs to understand their local CE design and operation (processes, tools, policies, and procedures), as every CE system is different. The process would likely include the following steps:

¹ For more information about coordinated entry implementation, please see the *Coordinated Entry Core Elements* guidance document on the HUD Exchange: <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Coordinated-Entry-Core-Elements.pdf>. For more information about HUD's coordinated entry requirements, please see HUD's Notice CPD-17-01: [Notice Establishing Additional Requirements for a Continuum of Care Centralized or Coordinated Assessment System](#).

² U.S. Department of Urban Development. *Notice PIH 2021-15 (HA): Emergency Housing Voucher Operating Requirements*. [PIH2021-15 \(hud.gov\)](https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/pih/PIH2021-15)

³ COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Advancing Racial Equity through Assessments and Prioritization. [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Advancing Racial Equity through Assessments and Prioritization \(hudexchange.info\)](https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/COVID-19-Homeless-System-Response-Advancing-Racial-Equity-through-Assessments-and-Prioritization.pdf)



Continuum of Care (CoC) providers



Public Housing Agency (PHA)

- A household experiencing homelessness requests help at a designated access point for homeless assistance in the geographic region, such as emergency shelter, a call line, or an intake center. This may be a “self-referral,” or a person staying in an unsheltered location may have been persuaded to seek assistance by an outreach worker.
- A homeless services staff complete a standardized assessment (selected by the CoC) to determine eligibility and identify which homeless services and PHA programs are the best fit for the household.
- If the household meets eligibility criteria and is a good candidate to receive long-term housing assistance, staff will prioritize the household to that type of assistance and make a referral to the PHA. Often, the housing services case manager will help the household complete the PHA application and gather the necessary personal documentation needed to support the application (see [Helping People Experiencing Homelessness Navigate the PHA Application Process](#) for more information on the PHA application process).

Leveraging Coordinated Entry Reduces Burden for PHA

Using the CE system to identify and refer people experiencing homelessness can reduce administrative burden on PHAs. The CE system can allow PHAs with limited preferences for people experiencing homelessness to receive referrals without having to update or open their existing waiting lists for the HCV and public housing programs. Once a household experiencing homelessness is referred to the PHA, PHA staff often work with the household's case manager from the local homeless service provider during the application process. The referrals from CE occur quickly, so contact information for households experiencing homelessness is typically more accurate than for households who may have been on a PHA waiting list for many months or years.

A key component of the CE process is using a standard assessment tool and process to determine a household's need for housing assistance. HUD does not prescribe any specific tools or processes that CoCs should use. CoCs can choose to use different assessment tools for five distinct subpopulations, as long as they use the same assessment tool and process within each group:

- Adult-only households (i.e., adults without children) experiencing homelessness
- Family households (i.e., adults accompanied by children) experiencing homelessness
- Unaccompanied youth (i.e., households with no one age 25 or older) experiencing homelessness
- Households fleeing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions
- [Households at risk of homelessness⁴](#)

CoCs also can use widely published or locally developed assessment tools, as long as they meet [HUD's requirements](#). CE systems use assessment tools to learn about a household's needs and barriers to identifying and maintaining housing.

By using CE for PHA referrals, people experiencing homelessness do not have to navigate the PHA eligibility and application process separately without the support of their case managers. Advantages for the PHA of using CE for referrals include:

- **The ability to fill unit vacancies quickly.** By accepting referrals from CE, PHAs can more quickly identify households that are eligible and interested in receiving a Housing Choice voucher or a unit in public housing. PHA staff regularly reports to the CE staff how many units or vouchers are currently available. Once PHA staff identifies availability of housing, CE staff can identify households that match the eligibility criteria will be referred to the PHA for a voucher or a unit.
- **Eliminating need for documentation of homeless status.** Using CE may eliminate the need to collect documentation of homeless status from applicants. Some CoCs combine their assessment process with their eligibility process through CE. In these instances, the CoC may already have documentation of the household's homeless status that can be shared with the PHA.

EXAMPLE: *Partners for HOME*, the nonprofit that manages the CoC in Atlanta, provides a certification letter for households they refer to Atlanta Housing for housing assistance. The letter confirms that the household is currently experiencing homelessness and meets the eligibility requirements, as outlined by the CoC's MOU agreement with Atlanta Housing. This letter enables PHA intake staff to begin quickly working with the household to finalize the application for housing assistance.

⁴ HUD defines a household at imminent risk of homelessness if the individual or family will lose their primary nighttime residence within 14 days of the date of application for homeless assistance; no subsequent residence has been identified; and the household lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing.

How Can a PHA Participate in CE?

A PHA can participate in their local CoC's CE system as a referral-receiving agency for any permanent housing they want to offer specifically to households experiencing homelessness—for example, HCVs, public housing, Non-Elderly Disabled (NED) Vouchers, Family Unification Program (FUP) Vouchers, Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHVs), or permanent supportive housing (PSH)-funded through the CoC and supported by HCV. The PHA accepts CE system referrals of people experiencing homelessness who are eligible for and in need of the housing programs they offer. PHAs also can use the CoC's CE system to identify households for any limited preferences they have for people experiencing homelessness.

BEST PRACTICE



To ensure that people experiencing homelessness can access PHA programs, CoCs should specify that when PHAs administer subsidies funded by HUD through the CoC Program that these units need to be filled using the CE process. PHAs also can document the requirement to use CE for the HCV or public housing programs in their PHA administrative plans. The new EHV program requires a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the PHA and the CoC explaining how the referral process will work.

Using Coordinated Entry Builds a Relationship Between the Coc and PHA

Participating in the local CE system can help to build or strengthen an existing relationship between a PHA and the CoC. Many PHAs already participate in CE if they administer grants through the CoC program, such as grants formerly under the Shelter Plus Care program. PHAs do not need to use their waiting list to identify people for CoC-funded program enrollments. PHAs that already participate in CE for some grants could build on that that experience for referrals to the HCV and public housing programs and the new Emergency Housing Vouchers.

EXAMPLE: The *Fargo-Moorhead Coalition to End Homelessness* operates the CE system for the region across two separate CoCs. This joint CE system across the two jurisdictions helps to ensure that resources are used equitably across the local geography that includes communities in both North Dakota and Minnesota. Households enter the system at the designated access point and are assessed using the Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT). The CE team meets every other week to identify upcoming openings in housing programs and case conference household assignments to the available housing assistance. If the PHA has units to occupy immediately under their limited homeless preference, PHA staff can request a recent CE report and identify a household to fill the opening.

In addition to using the CE process to report on their program openings and receive referrals, PHA staff may also build relationships with staff at local homeless service providers who participate in the CE process.

BEST PRACTICE



Many CoCs keep a “by-name list” or “active list” of all clients assessed through the CE system and awaiting prioritization and referral to housing assistance that could meet their needs. If the PHA has a limited preference for people experiencing homelessness, they can document in their administrative plan that this prioritization will occur through CE. PHA and CoC staff may meet weekly to monthly for case conferences during which they discuss how to connect individuals and families on the list to upcoming vacancies or slots in housing programs and to other services they may need. PHA staff can ask to participate in the “by-name list” meetings or case conferencing that the CoC uses to discuss the needs of applicant households. By learning what CE staff and homeless service providers know about households, PHA intake workers have a better understanding of barriers that households may face in applying for PHA programs and can help them overcome these potential barriers.

EXAMPLE: At *Stark Metropolitan Housing Authority* in Canton, Ohio, one staff person is responsible for overseeing the PHA programs that are designated to serve households experiencing homelessness, including units supported by project-based Housing Choice Vouchers. The staff person attends the CoC’s weekly “by-name” meetings to relay how many vacancies are available for people experiencing homelessness in the PHA’s PSH programs and discuss which households may be a good fit for those vacancies. Households who are not on the PHA waiting list can be referred to the PHA via CE. Once a household is referred to the PHA, the staff person meets with the applicant to complete the PHA application process.

BEST PRACTICE

The PHA should assign specific staff to work with the CoC/CE staff. This designated staffing can help build relationships between the two organizations and facilitate more information sharing.



A structured relationship can improve communication between the CoC and PHA, establishing standardized channels of communication between dedicated staff that work together to assist households experiencing homelessness.

PHA staff also can participate in the governance of the CoC to strengthen their involvement in CE. Many PHAs have their staff or leadership serve as a member of their local CoC’s Coordinated Entry Committee or other body responsible for creating CE policies and procedures and providing CE oversight. Through the CE committee, CoC and PHA staff can build relationships and think collectively about how to best serve people experiencing homelessness. These enhanced relationships can serve as a springboard for further collaboration between the two entities.

EXAMPLE: *Atlanta Housing* has a designated program manager for their HAVEN supportive housing programs, which are targeted to households experiencing homelessness. The program manager engages actively with the CoC and is involved in the CE process. The program manager serves on multiple CoC committees and regularly meets with staff from the CoC and its service provider partners. The person who currently occupies this role previously worked for Partners for HOME, the nonprofit that manages the Atlanta CoC, as a Coordinated Entry Project Specialist. Her extensive experience with CE processes and procedures helped Atlanta Housing leverage CE as the referral mechanism for the HAVEN programs.

BEST PRACTICE

In some CoCs, the CE process can collect personal documentation from people experiencing homelessness, including birth certificates, Social Security cards, and driver’s licenses. If the household does not have these documents, CE can communicate that to both homeless service provider case managers and PHA staff. PHAs should work with their local CoCs to understand what documentation the CE process does and does not collect and to continue to refine and streamline these processes.



Using Coordinated Entry Can Expedite the Application Process

CE referrals can expedite the PHA application process for households experiencing homelessness. Participating in CE can facilitate the sharing of information from an individual or family’s intake assessment as well as from any time the household has spent in homeless services programs. This may include information about a household’s barriers to housing as well as personal documents that a homeless services case manager has helped the household obtain. (For more information about the PHA application process, please see [Helping People Experiencing Homelessness Navigate the PHA Application Process](#)).

BEST PRACTICE

The CoC can offer the PHA application assistance for households experiencing homelessness. CoC CE staff also may help simplify the application process by completing applications for people experiencing homelessness and transmitting them to the PHA intake staff.



EXAMPLE: In Atlanta, when the PHA receives a referral from the CoC's CE system, the CoC's CE staff completes the application packet for the household that is being referred and submits it on behalf of the household to *Atlanta Housing's* intake staff. Personal documentation is sent to AH staff securely through the CoC's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). After reviewing the application, AH intake staff then conduct the eligibility determination and intake briefing within one day. This integration of CE and PHA functions ensures that homeless households receive the necessary support throughout the application process.

BEST PRACTICE

PHAs can implement their limited homeless preferences by identifying eligible applicants via CE instead of opening their HCV or public housing waiting lists.



EXAMPLE: In Texas, the *Housing Authority of the City of Austin* uses their CoC's CE system to identify households experiencing homelessness to fill their set-aside for households experiencing homelessness. The limited preference is for 25 percent of HCVs issued or 100 vouchers, whichever is achieved first. The most vulnerable households are referred to the PHA by CE for the available vouchers in the HCV set-aside. The CE staff completes the household's assessment and prioritization before referring a household to the PHA. The CE staff then work with the household's existing homeless service provider to obtain a certification of homelessness.

EXAMPLE: The *Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA)* has a waiting list limited preference for its Housing Choice voucher program for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. HACLA documented this limited preference in its administrative plan. To operationalize the limited preference, HACLA has agreements under which the LA County's Department of Mental Health (DMH) and Department of Health Services (DHS) consult the local Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), operated by the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority (LAHSA), and identify the next households they prioritized for PHA assistance.