SUPPORTIVE SERVICES FOR VETERAN FAMILIES (SSVF)
User Guide: Program Managers

Management staff and board members with responsibility for implementing and managing programs have many duties. It is difficult to constantly monitor consistency between the program's mission and philosophy and the multitude of program operational details and data elements. Mission drift is common, not because programs make a deliberate decision but because staff activities tend to migrate over time. This evolution is normal and may be positive. However, when the change occurs without using rational planning or program quality improvement processes--including consideration of data and participant input--the change may hinder effectiveness or efficiency. Using the Practice Areas and Standards can help programs make changes in a more thoughtful way, and improve focus and performance.

This User Guide will summarize program management activities that can be undertaken by one person or divided among several staff. The Guide is intended to be used with the description of each Practice Area and the associated Standards. The content is relevant for administrative personnel, board members and any other staff who are responsible for program management tasks.

Managing and Rapid Re-housing and Homeless Prevention Program

➢ **Meeting all the requirements of the funder(s).** This is a potentially enormous task, as each funder has very specific contractual requirements. In addition, all federal funders must impose the requirements enacted in statute, program regulations, and other notices, which may change on an irregular basis. The funder also develops policies to interpret and implement the regulatory language or fill gaps in the regulations. Because these requirements also change on both a scheduled and irregular basis, program managers must continually scan for updates in funder requirements and make revisions as needed. As an example, VA added a requirement to utilize a new eligibility screening and prioritization process for Homelessness Prevention. Implementation of this new process required grantees establish new policies, procedures, forms and staff training.

➢ **Clarifying, interpreting, implementing and communicating the program mission.** All aspects of the program should advance the mission. The more consistently and transparently the mission is communicated to internal staff and external community partners, the more focused the program will be. If there is conflict or inconsistency between the funder's mission and the program's philosophy, the program manager should attempt to resolve this; otherwise, the program will lose focus (or funding). A key example is the emphasis on Housing First as core concept in resolving homelessness. Practices consistent with Housing First must be apparent in the program's policies, screening and assessment processes, staff supervision and training. It must be consistently referenced and reinforced in coordination agreements with other rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention grantees, the local Continuum of Care, and relevant mainstream community service providers.

➢ **Developing policies and procedures-- and assuring they are effectively implemented.** Policies define the requirements of both funders and the agency's mission. Procedures translate those policies into job roles and tasks. Often, procedures evolve informally, yet it is precisely through the actions of staff that the program delivers services, so programs must assure that staff actions are

consistent with the program intent and design. In addition, any time the funder's policies change, the program must also re-visit its own policies and procedures. Ideally, the program also solicits feedback from community partners on key policies and procedures. For example, the program may ask landlords if they receive the timely, effective response they have been promised to address tenancy concerns. VA partner agencies may be asked if the program's screening and intake requirements have been clearly communicated. It is a significant challenge to regularly review and update policies and procedures, and then communicate relevant changes to those partners who accept or make referrals of program participants.

➢ **Setting, monitoring and balancing the budget.** Nothing demonstrates a program's priorities more than the budget. Yet even when the budget balances the competing costs of staff salaries, temporary financial assistance, and other administrative and operating costs, challenges are likely to arise: under-spending in one category, over-spending in another, cash flow problems. Spending to meet the needs of individual participants needs vs. the average spending per household (as projected in the budget) requires frequent monitoring. Managing the natural tension between spending limits and the need for programmatic flexibility can be extremely challenging. This is particularly critical in terms of the level and duration of temporary financial assistance to program participants. Early projections of average TFA per household may be challenged as rents increase, job vacancies fluctuate, or if the proportion of participants with zero income changes.

➢ **Managing personnel.** Establishing and managing a personnel system that will effectively deliver Housing First, crisis response, participant-driven services requires constant attention. What qualifications are the best match for the program philosophy-- and actual staff roles? What training and supervision will best prepare and support staff? How will staff be evaluated? Can the program minimize—but also manage—staff turnover while maintaining quality services?

➢ **Defining the data needed for dual purposes: meet funding requirements and continuously improve quality and performance.** Programs collect enormous amounts of information; the risk is using data *only to comply* with funding requirements rather than to also *assess and improve* program effectiveness, efficiency, accessibility and satisfaction. On the one hand, there is a natural desire to limit the time and expense of data collection to only the elements that are required. Yet, there is no end to the data that could potentially be useful, so there are temptations to collect too much. The challenge is balancing the need to know with efficiency. Programs should also make explicit decisions about the data that can and should be shared with the community: outcomes, client characteristics, satisfaction, etc.

➢ **Comparing the program against a yardstick of best practice.** Too often, programs are developed in isolation and may "reinvent the wheel." It is far more efficient to consider research and examples of effective practice when managing and seeking to improve a program. Assessing fidelity with the SSVF Practice Standards is one approach that can help.

Special challenges for new program management staff When a new director or program manager is hired, the board or outgoing director/manager often provides little orientation or training. New management staff is expected to "hit the ground running." Yet many funding requirements and decisions, policy and procedures, staff job descriptions and training plans have already been made and may have become relatively inflexible. Commonly, these decisions have evolved over time and may be inconsistent, even contradictory. New management staff may also be preoccupied with day-to-day operating tasks that allow little time for review. Reviewing a program, component by component, risks

loss of overall program integrity; reviewing the overall design without knowledge of implementation details risks irrelevancy.

It is often useful to start with some of the following actions:

- Review the program's enabling legislation and the funder's rules and contract to assure compliance. Be careful to include a review of updates in policy and relevant Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

- Survey staff, participants, and community partners, including other grantees within the same region, the local Continuum of Care, VA agencies, mainstream community programs, landlords, etc., about their perceptions of and satisfaction with program mission, operations, effectiveness, etc. to identify priorities for re-examination. Focus groups of community partners can allow more in-depth feedback and recommendations.

- Provide a series of presentations by program experts (and, if possible, a representative of the funder) to staff and board members regarding the requirements, philosophy, best practice, and research related to rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention. Follow up with a comparison to the current program.

- Arrange a series of presentations by landlords, VA and other public and private community partners to explain their resources (housing, healthcare, jobs and training, benefits) for homeless or imminently homeless program participants, requirements, application processes, and how program staff can coordinate and communicate most effectively.

- Invite people who formerly experienced homelessness to present their experiences, describe the assistance that helped (or was less helpful) and offer advice to staff and board members. In a Housing First program, it is essential that staff understand how their clients experience housing crises; how they sustain housing despite extremely low incomes and severe rent burden; and the kinds of housing or support services they want.

- Appoint or request volunteers from staff and board to form committees, each of which will have responsibility for comparing the current program's component (such as Outreach/Engagement/Screening/Admission or Assessment/Housing Plan, etc.) with best practice Standards. Solicit recommendations for any needed change.

- Arrange for visits of similar, established programs and look to model your services upon successful elements of that program.

Program Review and Improvement

The Practice Standards can be used to structure either a limited or a total review of an existing program. Within each Practice Area, Standards are grouped into three categories of program responsibilities;

1. Practice, Policy, and Procedures
2. Staff Training and Supervision
3. Performance and Quality Improvement

Too often, once critical decisions are made, the operating details are assumed to follow. Unfortunately, without clear policies, procedures, and guidance, staff may revert to roles and methods they have learned elsewhere—which may either be consistent with or undermine the program's mission and philosophy. Over time, individual staff may unconsciously develop their own informal decision-making customs. Eventually, the program may drift from the cohesive system of highly-focused services originally envisioned by planners to a loose association of independent practitioners. This is a particular risk when there is an underlying and unresolved conflict between the program's Housing First philosophy and staff belief that program participants should not be assisted to exit homelessness until they have resolved personal issues and are "housing ready."

To avoid this common hazard, programs should periodically re-examine their operations—either one area at a time or altogether – to identify and correct "mission drift" and tighten the emphasis on program purpose. Regardless of the way the review process proceeds, the program's operations should be periodically reviewed for the extent to which they support the three core concepts, fidelity to the Practice Standards, and compliance with funder requirements and other agency requirements and practices. The program should also assure that the program complements other homelessness resources in the community and actively participates in local Continuum of Care planning processes.

Use of Data to Review Existing Programs. In addition to a review of program operations, each program review should include an analysis of program inputs, outputs, the sequence and timing of key activities, outcomes, complaints and satisfaction. Programs that have been operating for more than a year should also consider **trends** in costs, participant characteristics, outcomes, satisfaction, etc. Whenever possible, national data or data from other rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention programs (costs, outcomes) should also be used. Data can help answer many critical questions:

- Is the program assisting the **intended population**? Are changes in targeting being considered? What changes are being planned and what data supports the change? How would changes in the target population affect the overall homeless system and Continuum of Care goals?

- Is the program as **effective** as it could be? Are outcome trends showing improvements in effectiveness? How do outcomes compare with other similar programs, including other grantees within the same region for similar target populations?

- As a crisis response service, are the program's **processes** for eligibility determination, intake and intervention as rapid as they should be? How quickly can these activities be completed?

- Is the program as **cost efficient** as it could be? Is the cost per household "just enough, just in time" to resolve the housing crisis? If cost per household is increasing, why? If there are no compelling reasons for the increase, can costs be brought down so that more households can be served within the same budget? Or do data on the cost per successful outcome suggest that reductions in cost/household are not warranted?

- Is the program as **accessible** as it should be? Are some subpopulations under- or over-represented among program caseloads? Consider disabilities, languages, literacy, participant modes of transportation, etc. This type of review should also include input from community partners regarding subpopulations who are eligible for rapid re-housing or homelessness prevention, but face unnecessary (or even insurmountable) barriers to receiving assistance.

- Are the stakeholders **satisfied** with the program? Stakeholders include program participants, staff, partner landlords, and public/private agencies (VA, Continuum of Care, state or local public assistance offices, other service partners, etc.) that send or receive referrals to the program. If not, are there patterns in the areas where they are most or least satisfied?

Reminder: Funder approval. Any significant program re-design, such as changes in the target population, increased cost/household, or a major change in program scope or budget requires advance approval from the program's primary (and possibly secondary) funders. Federally-funded programs must continue to meet all requirements established in statute, program rules, and the applicable notices of funding availability (NOFAs).

There are also strict requirements for funding competitions. If a program is selected on the basis of their program description and later makes significant changes, it may then be considered a "new program," which has implications for renewal funding. Keep in mind, however, that many elements of a program can be changed without risking disapproval from funders, particularly improvements to policies and procedures, staff training and supervision, and performance/quality improvement. The SSVF Practice Standards provide a list of the types of program policies and procedures; staff training and supervision processes; and performance and quality improvement activities that a high quality program should have in place. However, the Standards are not a substitute for the many design and operational decisions an individual program must make. And those decisions must also be internally consistent.

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