

# **Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF)**

## **Homelessness Prevention Screening Tool**

### ***Frequently Asked Questions***

#### **Developing the Grantee HP Eligibility & Targeting Threshold Score Form**

Q. Can a grantee propose additional screening criteria to target specific households?

A. Grantees cannot change any of the criteria associated with the threshold scores in Stage 2 of the screener. These criteria are fixed and have been included as part of the HMIS Data Standards effective October 1, 2016. Grantees have the option to add additional program eligibility conditions only under Stage 1 in order to serve one or more specific subpopulations of Veteran households included in their approved SSVF grant agreement. If grantees are approved to use additional eligibility conditions, they must apply these conditions in conjunction with the other required eligibility conditions listed in Stage 1 related to Veteran status, household income, and imminent risk of homelessness. Specifically, *Condition 4: Other Program Eligibility Conditions* is an option for grantees to adapt the SSVF HP Screening Form to meet the terms of their VA grant agreement. This means that applicants for HP services must meet Condition 4, in addition to the others listed in Stage 1. For example, an SSVF grantee may have entered into an agreement with VA to serve SSVF eligible households through Homelessness Prevention that include “young Veterans under age 25 with dependent children.” The grantee may then include this condition as an eligibility condition to Stage 1, Condition 4. The grantee must have included this eligibility condition in their grant application and in the *Grantee HP Eligibility & Targeting Threshold Score Form* submitted to and approved by the VA. VA does not allow customization of targeting criteria and point values in Stage 2 as these have now been standardized for consistency and to support further evaluation of the characteristics of households receiving SSVF homelessness prevention assistance.

Q: Can transgender be included in the new targeting?

A. At this time, the HP Screening Tool has been finalized for the program. VA will consider suggestions for revisions to future versions.

Q. Do all grantees within a single CoC need to have the same HP targeting threshold score?

A. It is not required. If a single CoC has multiple grantees providing services, it is not required that all grantees have the same threshold score. There may be justification for different threshold scores between grantees if one grantee serves a particular target population or offers a unique type of homelessness prevention assistance (e.g., legal services). However, it is important that grantees within a single CoC are aware of the differing scores among programs and, if there is a great variance among the scores, we expect grantees to work together to determine a shared understanding of how to effectively coordinate homelessness prevention referrals within the CoC. Variances may create challenges for community partners when determining which provider to refer a Veteran for assistance. Therefore, variances in scores should be supported by the community planning efforts, including discussions with the CoC, local VA, and other partners. Otherwise, the scores should be reassessed to close the disparity.

Q: Do grantees have to use the same score across all CoCs they serve?

A. No. If a single grantee is serving more than one CoC, the grantee may establish a different targeting threshold score for each CoC, so long as that score is determined in consultation with the CoC, local VA and other partners.

Q: Are grantees permitted to have different threshold scores within different regions and communities within the BoS CoC geographic area?

Yes. Grantees serving a BoS CoC may establish more than one targeting threshold score if the BoS CoC has distinct planning and service regions where a different score is justified and has been determined in consultation with the CoC, local VA and other partners. This is also allowed in CoCs that cover a large geographic area and have subdivided the CoC geography into distinct planning and service regions. For example, it may be beneficial to have a different score for a more rural region within the BoS CoC as compared to another, more suburban region that adjoins an urban community. It is critical to establish a clear rationale and assignment of scores per CoC and/or per community type within the BoS CoC.

Q. Do all grantees have to submit a change to their targeted threshold score through GIFTS? How do grantees change their score later in the grant term?

A. For new grant terms, SSVF Program Office is requiring grantees to submit the new version of the *HP Eligibility and Targeting Threshold Score Form* to VA as part of the grant resolution process in the GIFTS system. This confirms that all grantees have reassessed their threshold score based on the new, standardized screener and will be utilizing the new version for all households screened for HP services during FY 17. Grantees are not required to notify or receive VA approval if they are increasing their targeting threshold score; however such changes should be discussed with community stakeholders as part of ongoing community planning. An updated *HP Eligibility and Targeting Threshold Score Form* is only required if a grantee proposes to decrease their targeting threshold score (i.e., potentially shifting resources from rapid re-housing to homelessness prevention). Grantees may contact their Regional Coordinator to facilitate this.

Q. How will we be notified that the new Grantee Eligibility and Targeting Threshold Score is approved?

A. The HP Screening Toolkit describes the review and approval process. Grantees can assume the targeting threshold score has been approved for FY 17 once submitted and should begin implementing the new form and score immediately. VA will notify grantees if there are any concerns.

Q: What is the average targeting threshold score that needs to be met among all SSVF Grantees?

A. VA does not apply an average Targeting Threshold Score to SSVF grantees. This score should be a reflection of the local demands of the community for homeless assistance (i.e., rapid re-housing) and the remaining resources available for homelessness prevention.

### **Stage 1: Eligibility for Homelessness Prevention**

Q: How do grantees determine imminent risk of homelessness for households that are staying in a motel?

A. Households staying in a hotel or motel paid for by the individual or family (i.e., not being paid with an emergency shelter voucher) would be screened for imminent risk of homelessness in the same manner as other households. Grantees should answer all of the sections in Stage 1 Eligibility Condition 3.A. in order to determine imminent loss of this housing due to the household's inability to further pay for the motel or circumstances outside of the household's control that require they leave the motel.

Q: Why would "Exiting an institution or system of care (e.g., hospital, jail, treatment facility, etc.)" be an option for identifying why the applicant must leave the primary place they are staying, if domestic violence and Veterans exiting an institution are to be screened as RRH? (*Refer to Stage 1. Eligibility Condition 3.A*)

A. Applicant households who are "exiting an institution or system of care" are considered literally homeless if their stay in the institution or system of care was 90 days or less AND if they previously stayed in an emergency shelter, homeless specific transitional housing (such as VA's Grant and Per Diem), Safe Haven, or on the street prior to entering the institution or system of care. Such Veterans should be screened for SSVF RRH assistance. If the Veteran must leave an institution or system of care and has been there for longer than 90 days or if they otherwise were not staying in an emergency shelter, Safe Haven, or the street prior to entry, then they do not meet the definition of literal homeless and are to be screened for HP services. Note: Veterans in an institution that is listed in the Homeless Inventory Count (HIC) as a homeless specific program are not subject to this 90-day limitation and are considered homeless.

Q. If a Veteran has to leave transitional housing and has been there for longer than 90 days, and they are referred to SSVF by Coordinated Entry or Homeless Assistance Provider (Refer to Stage 2 Targeting Criteria), and they have not identified stable housing, will the Veteran be eligible for the 5 points on the screening tool?

A. Transitional housing participants maintain their literal homeless status while residing in transitional housing, regardless of length of stay in the program, and therefore should be screened for RRH services instead of HP services.

Q. Can grantees use SSVF homelessness prevention to assist with utility arrearages, when utilities are the only issue causing imminent risk?

A. Utility-only cases generally do not meet SSVF eligibility conditions related to imminent risk of housing loss. However, an applicant who is behind on their utilities (excluding cable and telephone) *may be eligible* if they're required to pay for utilities as stated in their lease, if their utility(ies) are shut-off or they have received a shut-off notice, and if they receive an eviction notice as a result of not meeting that lease requirement. An example is if a household in public housing is behind on utilities, has their gas shut-off and, as a result, receives a 30 day Notice to Quit from the local housing authority. Additionally, an applicant may be considered at imminent risk of homelessness if the utility shut-off has caused (or will cause) the unit to be unsafe and/or

uninhabitable (e.g., due to local weather conditions) and the applicant can no longer remain in the unit. Grantees must clearly document in the *HP Screening Form* the circumstances of an applicant who is being assisted solely due to a pending or actual utility shut-off. Grantees are reminded that even if a household is imminently at-risk of housing loss due to a utility shut-off, the applicant household must still be assessed for other eligibility conditions, including conditions related to other housing options and financial resources.

Please note: Grantees should be familiar with local utility shut-off protections, which vary by state and locality. For example, many states have shut off protections that are temperature or seasonally based, as well as protections for people who are disabled or elderly. Grantees should also be familiar with other sources of utility assistance, such as the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP), assistance available through local Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), and other local resources. There are also utility discounts that low-income households may be eligible for through utility companies. An overview of state protections can be found here: <https://liheapch.acf.hhs.gov/Disconnect/disconnect.htm>. Grantees should conduct additional research regarding other state and local protections and utility assistance programs to ensure staff are able to provide accurate advice and make timely and accurate referrals for households needing utility assistance.

Q: Would a HUD-VASH participant already housed who is behind with a utility bill and yet to receive an eviction notice, have to be screened? What stage does this scenario place this Veteran in to be eligible for TFA in the HP category?

A. A HUD-VASH HP referral should be considered as any other referral and screened accordingly.

Q. Are Veterans who are doubled up temporarily considered literally homeless and should they be screened for rapid re-housing assistance? Or, are they considered still housed and they should be screened for homelessness prevention assistance?

A. A Veteran who is doubled up is still considered to be housed (i.e., not literally homeless) and therefore should be screened for SSVF homelessness prevention assistance. In such cases, attempts should be made to obtain a letter from host family or friend documenting the need to leave this housing in the next 30 days or less.

## **Stage 2: Targeting Criteria and Scoring**

Q. For the targeting criteria for "Major change in household composition in the past 12 months" does this include a family member death that was NOT part of the household but affected the Veteran financially (for funeral expenses)?

A. No, a major change of household composition involves only a change in the number of household members. Such changes might occur due to the death of a family member, separation or divorce, birth of a new child, etc. Note that an applicant that experienced financial hardship due to unanticipated funeral expenses may receive points under the criterion "Sudden

and significant decrease in cash income (employment and/or cash benefits) AND/OR unavoidable increase in non-discretionary expenses (e.g., rent or medical expenses) in the past 6 months.”

Q. How do grantees determine if a disability directly affects housing (criterion: “Head of household with disabling condition (physical health, mental health, substance use) that directly affects ability to secure/maintain housing”)?

A. The targeting criterion asks if the household has a disabling condition that directly affects their ability to secure or maintain housing. Grantees should interview the applicant to determine if they have a disabling condition (e.g., PTSD, substance use disorder, etc.) and whether the Veteran feels the disability is a barrier to securing or maintaining housing. The determination should be based on the household member’s feedback and self-report.

Q: For targeting criteria regarding income, would a household that has zero income receive both criteria points for “Current household income is \$0” and “Annual Household Gross Income Amount of 0-14% AMI” if they currently have no income and they were determined to have 0 annual income (per the Stage 1 eligibility determination for income)?

A. Yes, a household would receive both point values for the criteria under Current Household Income and Annual Gross Household Income.

Q. When determining whether to apply points for a sudden and significant decrease in cash income (employment and/or cash benefits) AND/OR unavoidable increase in non-discretionary expenses (e.g., rent or medical expenses) in the past 6 months, would a household receive points if they have new child support obligations ordered by a court and now garnished monthly? Is there a difference between this and child support that has been in place for a long time if, in both scenarios, that fixed cost is directly contributing to the inability to pay rent?

A. If in the past 6 months a household experienced a sudden and significant decrease in cash income, such as due to a court child support order, then the household would receive points for this criterion. However, for child support payments that have been in place for more than 6 months, the household would not receive the points for this criterion.

Q. Regarding household composition criteria, such as “At least one dependent child under age 6,” do grantees give points to the household if they have partial custody of a child?

A. Targeting criteria related to household composition should be answered based on the household members identified by the Veteran when determining the household size and annual income level as part of the Stage 1 eligibility screening. For SSVF reporting purposes only, dependents are defined as children under the age of 18 at program entry. Per the SSVF Program Guide, a household is defined as “All persons who together present for services and identify themselves as being part of the same household.” This reflects an alignment with HUD’s definition of “households with children and adults” and the definition of household included in the HMIS Data Standards Manual, which states that “a household is a single individual or a group of persons who apply together to a continuum project for assistance and who live together in one dwelling unit (or, for persons who are not housed, who would live together in one dwelling unit if they were housed).” A Veteran may also have other adults with them who identify as part of their “household.” These adult household members may be served as part of the Veteran family, but for SSVF purposes are not considered a “dependent.”

Q. Under “Urgency of Housing Situation,” if a Veteran is referred by coordinated entry or homeless assistance provider to prevent the household from entering emergency shelter and the Veteran has current housing loss expected within 0-6 days, can this Veteran potentially receive a total of 10 points or is 5 points the maximum?

A: Yes, a household could potentially score a maximum of 10 combined points under “urgency of housing situation.”

Q. Under “Urgency of Housing Situation”, the criterion states, “Referred by Coordinated Entry or a homeless assistance provider to prevent....” What type of homeless assistance provider is this referring to? Would another SSVF grantee or the local VAMC Homeless Team count here?

A. The purpose of this criterion is to give greater priority (points) for Veterans who believe they need emergency shelter and have contacted a coordinated entry provider or, if coordinated entry is not yet implemented or fully implemented in your CoC, another homeless assistance provider with the intent of accessing emergency shelter. Veterans (and non-Veterans) who seek shelter can often be diverted from entering shelter when careful screening, problem solving and other diversion assistance is offered. Veterans who seek out, but are diverted from emergency shelter are generally considered to be in more tenuous housing situations than those who are not yet seeking emergency shelter and, therefore, are deemed to have a more urgent need for homelessness prevention assistance. With this in mind, grantees should only assign these points to Veterans who requested shelter from an entity with the authority to make decisions about shelter eligibility and admission, such as a coordinated entry provider or, if coordinated entry is not yet fully implemented, then an emergency shelter, transitional housing, Safe Haven, or other provider that offers temporary shelter assistance.

Q. How do grantees calculate 1-14% and 15-30% AMI given the 50% AMI figures are not direct calculation of 100% AMI in communities? The numbers are not simple straight math and there is no federal publication of the AMI ranges that exist on the form.

A. HUD does not publish income ranges that align with these ranges used in the targeting criteria. For SSVF purposes, the SSVF Program Office intends to develop a reference guide for grantees with these ranges. In the meantime, grantees must calculate these ranges by dividing the current 30% of AMI amount in half to estimate the 15% of AMI amount for each household size for their community. For example:

30% of AMI for a 1 person household = \$14,050

\$14,050 / 2 = \$7,025

\$7,025 = estimated 15% of AMI for 1 person household

**1-14% of AMI range for 1 person household = \$1 - \$7,024**

**15-30% AMI range for 1 person household = \$7,025 - \$14,050**

Grantees can find current fiscal year area median income limits published by HUD at:

<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il.html>.

A HUD spreadsheet with 30% AMI income limits for every community may be found at:

<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il16/IncomeLimits-30-FY16.pdf>.

Q. Can you repeat the Stage 2 screening if the client's situation changes after enrollment?

A. Yes, grantees may repeat the HP Stage 2 screening after enrollment, should new information change the targeting score. If the Household does not meet the targeting threshold score, they may be offered "Light Touch" or non-TFA homelessness prevention services.

### **HMIS and Form Questions**

Q. Do grantees need to complete a *HP Screening Form* for all clients presenting for SSVF assistance, including those who are literally homeless and in need of rapid re-housing (RRH)?

A. Only applicants presenting for HP services who are not literally homeless should be screened for HP assistance using the *HP Screening Form*. Applicants who are literally homeless should be screened for RRH assistance per each grantee's program screening form, which must assess RRH eligibility related to Veteran status, household income, literal homeless status, and need for assistance in order to secure housing and exit homelessness.

Q. Are grantees required to use this specific PDF version of the *HP Screening Form*? If we use a database to enter data and generate forms, can we make a version of this form that can be generated by our database?

A. The *HP Screening Form* may be handwritten or completed using the VA-provided PDF-fillable form. Grantees may re-create this form in a database or other program and use a generated version of the form for case file documentation. However, the re-created form must include all questions in Stages 1 and 2 (as worded) and the point values in Stage 2. Generated forms must still have an applicant and staff certification form appended to them that is signed and dated.

Q. Will grantees have to go back and enter each household's prevention score into HMIS since October 1, 2016?

A. Yes, grantees must enter the targeting criteria and targeting threshold score for each SSVF applicant for HP assistance starting 10/1/16, as this is the start date for the revised HP Screening Form and the date that this data element should have been added to your local HMIS.

Q. What do grantees do with households that were already enrolled in prevention prior to the new screener but have carried over into the new grant year?

A. VA does not require grantees to complete a new HP screening for participants enrolled in SSVF prior to 10/1/2016. Similarly, Veterans enrolled before 10/1/16 and being recertified after that date do not need to meet the new threshold screening criteria. They may remain enrolled based on the pre-existing housing stability plan. Starting 10/1/2016, grantees must use the new HP Screening Form and enter the targeting criteria, total points, and the program's targeting threshold score in HMIS for each head of household (Veteran applicant).

For HP heads of household enrolled on or after 10/1/2016, any missing values for this data element will be counted as a data quality error when data quality reporting resumes.

## **Documentation**

Q. What constitutes a “formal written notice from landlord to vacate rental unit” within 30 days?

A. Landlord-tenant laws vary by state, including the type of written notice landlords must provide to tenants when initiating an eviction. For example, some states may require a 30-day “notice to quit,” whereas other states may allow a 3-day notice. In any event, the eviction notice must be issued by the landlord (or their representative) and indicate that the tenant must leave the unit within, at most, 30 days. The eviction notice should conform to your state’s requirements for eviction notices.

Note: VA recognizes that a physical move-out of the unit may not actually occur at the term of a landlord-issued eviction notice if the tenant chooses to stay and ignore the eviction notice, thereby forcing the landlord to pursue a court-ordered eviction.

Q: Can grantees use a handwritten eviction notice from the landlord?

A. Yes, handwritten eviction notices are acceptable if they carry the same legal implications that a formal written notice does in your state and community.

Q: What document does the client need saying that his friend wants him to leave? Does [the notice] have to be notarized?

A. A handwritten notice from the friend indicating the applicant must leave their housing is sufficient. Handwritten notices do not need to be notarized. The handwritten notice must:

- Identify the SSVF participant and unit where SSVF participant is residing
- Indicate that participant must leave owner’s/renter’s housing
- Be signed and dated by the host owner/renter

Q. What documentation is required to verify expected housing loss within a number of days? Is a “3-day notice” sufficient to give points in this area?

A. In Stage 1 screening for eligibility, grantees are asked to obtain any available documentation that supports the reason for and timing of expected housing loss. Examples of acceptable documentation include a court-ordered eviction notice to vacate rental unit, formal written notice from landlord to vacate rental unit (e.g., 30 day Notice to Quit), and written or verbal notice from family, friend or host to leave doubled-up housing. A 3-day notice is sufficient documentation to support housing loss in Stage 1 and is sufficient for determining that an applicant will lose their current housing within 0-6 days in Stage 2 for Urgency of Housing Situation. Similarly, if an applicant received a 30-day notice to quit and only applied for SSVF HP assistance 25 days after receiving the 30-day notice, they would also be identified as losing their current housing within 0-6 days.

Q. Do grantees need to have documentation/proof for the targeting criteria? (i.e. The eviction notices for the past 7 years.)

A. Self-report by the Veteran of past evictions is acceptable. No further documentation is expected or required. However, it is important to understand that the Stage 2 Targeting criteria are not meant to just be “yes” or “no” questions. Instead, staff should use the criteria as part of the applicant assessment and to inform the type, amount, and duration of assistance that may be provided. For example, instead of asking, “Have you been evicted in the past 7 years,” a staff member might ask, “Tell me about your housing the last 7 years.” Then, they might plot out the housing situations and ask what happened at the end of each one to determine past evictions, as well as the reasons for eviction (“Tell me what happened there...”), which might indicate ongoing housing retention barriers to address.

Q: If the VA HUD-VASH case manager writes a letter describing the imminent risk of voucher loss and homelessness, can this be used in lieu of eviction notice?

A. No. A formal, written eviction notice from the landlord or property manager is required.

Q: Would a notice of non-renewal of a lease be considered imminent loss, especially if Veteran receives 60 days or more notice?

A. Possibly. A notice of non-renewal is sufficient documentation of housing loss IF the notice indicates termination will occur within 30 days of the Veteran’s application for SSVF HP assistance. A 60 day notice, therefore, would only be acceptable if the Veteran applies for assistance 30 days or more after receiving the notice.

Q: What documentation would be needed from a Veteran staying in a hotel and has to leave because they are going to run out of money? Is an eviction notice required?

A: Veterans who are staying in a hotel or motel, but can no longer stay there because they lack the financial resources must provide some evidence of their financial situation indicating they can no longer pay for a hotel or motel. At minimum, this must include an assessment of the applicant’s financial situation, which may be completed using the HP Screening Form, Stage 1 questions concerning available financial resources. If practical, grantees should also attempt to obtain third party documentation of the applicant’s financial situation, such as a bank statement indicating insufficient cash resources.

## **Homelessness Prevention Concepts**

Q. What is eviction prevention?

A: Eviction prevention is an attempt to help a household avoid eviction from a rental unit. However, this is not the same as homelessness prevention because many evicted households do not become literally homeless. They often move into doubled up situations or other similar solutions to avoid eviction. Only those who have exhausted all other possible solutions to their eviction and are likely to become literally homeless, “but for” SSVF assistance, are eligible for HP assistance.

Q. Can you clarify how eviction prevention is different than homelessness prevention? Does that mean a family of 4 cannot be assisted if they can move into a friend's spare bedroom?

A: Yes, if a household has another safe, appropriate place to stay while they look for

their own housing, they would not meet HP Stage 1 eligibility.

Q. Please define what “attempting to flee” a domestic violence situation means.

A. With regard to the definition of homelessness, a person may be considered homeless if they are fleeing or “attempting to flee” domestic violence. A person who is attempting to flee domestic violence may not yet be actively fleeing due to threat of harm or other reasons, but desires to leave and may be actively trying to escape a domestic violence situation.

Q. Is the new *HP Screening Form* intended to encourage diversion of Veterans from shelter and assist only those who are most vulnerable and at-risk of literal homelessness?

A: Yes. Stage 2 Targeting includes a criterion for Veterans who presented to coordinated entry or a homeless assistance provider that has authority to make shelter or transitional housing admission decisions. This referral diverted the household from entering shelter because they were screened and determined to have a safe and appropriate place to stay, even temporarily. Such Veterans are at greater risk for literal homelessness and therefore have a more urgent need for assistance than Veterans who are not yet seeking emergency shelter.

### **SSVF Program Guidance**

Q. Does the Stage 2 Targeting assessment have to be done at re-certification for prevention households?

A. No, but there would need to be documentation as to why they still need services, and this should be connected to their housing stability plan. Grantees are expected to review income at re-certification as well as any changes in family composition, etc.

Q. Will there be a shift in the TFA spending ratios for RRH and HP in FY 17 or do grantees still need to apply for a waiver?

A. Grantees seeking a waiver to the RRH ratio of 60% must still apply for a waiver. Grantees should only apply for a waiver if there has been consultation with the CoC, local VA and other partners as part of their ongoing community planning efforts. Grantees should also confer with their SSVF Regional Coordinator prior to submitting a waiver. Waivers should only be requested if there is clear indication and local consensus that changes relative to SSVF funding for RRH assistance will not result in any RRH gaps for eligible Veterans and that changes are consistent with community plans for meeting and then sustaining an end to Veterans homelessness according to the Federal criteria and benchmarks.

Q. If a Veteran becomes literally homeless while enrolled in HP, should they be exited and re-enrolled in RRH?

A. Housing Category is determined upon entry into SSVF. If a household enters in to homelessness while enrolled, grantee should continue to serve them under Homelessness Prevention, adjusting the housing plan, as indicated

Q. Are Veterans who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence eligible for SSVF homelessness prevention or rapid re-housing?

A. Starting with FY2017, VA has clarified that Veterans who are losing their housing because they are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence are literally homeless and should be screened for SSVF rapid re-housing (RRH) assistance.

Q. What is meant by light touch services?

A. If a household screened for HP meets Stage 1 Eligibility Criteria and is then found to not meet the Stage 2 Targeting Threshold Score, grantees may enroll and provide “light touch” homelessness prevention services to this household. Light touch homelessness prevention services include all SSVF supportive services other than Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA). This includes case management and a wide range of non-TFA supportive services. Grantees are required to include all client level data in HMIS for households receiving light touch HP services.

Note that while this limitation on TFA is required for applicants that do not meet the Stage 2 Targeting Threshold Score, grantees should always first attempt to resolve the housing crisis and help clients avoid literal homelessness by first offering non-TFA assistance (e.g., problem-solving assistance, mediation, housing advice, etc.), consistent with a progressive engagement and assistance approach.