

SUPPORTIVE SERVICES FOR VETERAN FAMILIES (SSVF)

User Guide: Direct Service Staff

Providing client services in a rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention program is a difficult balancing act. It may seem, at times, that short-term crisis intervention makes no difference to the long-term stability of program participants unless it is accompanied by behavior changes. It can seem as if short-term assistance "enables" dysfunctional behaviors or lifestyle. Increasing income so households can continue to pay the rent is often another long-term process that may not be completed by the time services must end. Program participants' choices may conflict with professional judgments about goals, action steps and referrals. The work requires difficult decisions: denying applications, closing cases, the depth and length of rental subsidies.

This User Guide summarizes issues commonly experienced by direct service practitioners, with some suggestions about steps that can be taken to improve staff knowledge and skills. The Guide is intended to be used with the Practice Areas and Standards, and is relevant for all staff responsible for providing non-financial and/or financial assistance to program participants.

- The program's mission and philosophy;
- How that philosophy is translated into the program's design and operations, policies and procedures;
- How the funder's requirements are shaped by laws and regulations that govern the program, as well as legislative action (including federal and state budget shifts or cutbacks), policy interpretations and, sometimes, court decisions;
- The characteristics, crisis situations and needs/preferences of the target population;
- The findings of good research concerning the most effective and efficient approaches to preventing or resolving homelessness;
- The local housing market: vacancy rates, rents, subsidized units, occupancy limits, etc.
- The perspectives of landlords, how/why they screen potential tenants, and the reasons they evict or fail to renew leases;
- Landlord-tenant laws, rights and responsibilities, including Fair Housing laws;
- Understanding and quickly assessing the stress behaviors of program participants, including coping strategies that are generally within or outside the normal range;
- The skills necessary to follow the lease: paying the rent on time, caring for the unit and avoiding problems with other tenants and the landlord;
- Understanding the importance of Tenant Screening Barriers and Housing Retention Barriers, including how to assess barriers and how to use that information;

- The process and format for developing, monitoring, and revising short-term, highly-focused Housing Plans;
- How to use brief, immediate "teachable moments" to increase tenancy skills where they live;
- Basic stress management skills—for both participants and staff themselves;
- The full range of resources typically needed by very low-income households, including income-enhancing programs (benefits and employment), child care, legal assistance, credit counseling, etc.
- Other community-based resources and services needed by some households before, during or after a housing crisis, including medical care, domestic violence interventions, protective services, mental health and chemical dependency services, etc.

Using the guidance and Standards in the five Practice Areas, and the associated research, training, courses, and tools, can be an effective beginning point for shared knowledge and practices. The SSVF University can also enable independent study of the core concepts and best practices.

Special Consideration: When Staff Share Significant Life Experiences with their Participants.

Highly effective programs value staff who have experienced homelessness, poverty, single parenting, a disability or other life-changing events, such as active duty in the armed forces. When staff have important commonalities with program participants, those staff have special strengths, including:

- **Rapid engagement.** Participants are generally more willing to trust someone who knows the kinds of challenges they are facing;
- **Practical advice.** Staff who has overcome the same barriers has learned—and can share—many practical tips: "how to."
- **Respectful confrontation.** Often, a staff who has had the same experiences can more readily identify and respectfully challenge a participant when she is in denial or misrepresenting her situation.
- **Role model and inspiration.** By having overcome similar obstacles, the staff person can become a role model for a discouraged program participant. Staff explicitly or implicitly conveys hope: "I did it and so can you."
- **Avoiding shame.** Shame and guilt are common among people in crisis, and these are the very emotions that tend to lead to more failure in the future. Staff who has "been there" can recognize and dispute those feelings, replacing them with acceptance, respect and support.

At the same time, staff who have shared many experiences with their participants face some special concerns:

- **Impatience**. Sometimes, a staff who successfully resolved a similar situation may lose patience with a person who appears not to value or won't implement the strategies that worked for the staff. It can be hard to pull back and let people learn for themselves.
- **Emotionality**. Knowing from personal experience how hard it can be to face the challenges of homelessness, a staff person may become overly emotional. It can be difficult to avoid memories and feelings from one's own past.
- **Dis-empowerment**. Knowing the difficulties the household is facing, a staff may be tempted to do too much, such as offering more financial and non-financial assistance than is absolutely necessary. This can result in problems with over-spending and limit the number of households who can be assisted.
- **Keeping grounded**. This may include talking with a supervisor, trusted colleague or therapist when strong emotions are triggered by one or more cases. It may also include asking a supervisor or trusted colleague to watch for indications of over-involvement and then supportively bringing this to staff's attention.
- **Stress management**. It is important for staff to know their own triggers for stress and how to prevent and resolve stress. This applies to all staff who work in a crisis response program, but it applies most of all to staff who have the most in common with their participants.
- **Using supervision**. Sometimes a case is just too close to staff's personal experience and staff can't effectively work with that household. There is no shame in asking for the case to be transferred to another staff. It is better for the household, too. Or role playing an approach to a participant (with a colleague or supervisor in either role) may also help staff regain perspective and practice other ways of handling a difficult situation.

Role Issues

Lack of Role Clarity. Role issues are extremely common in all human service programs, but can be especially prevalent in programs based upon newer service delivery models. For some agencies (and some communities), a Housing First, crisis response program that focuses on rapidly obtaining or retaining housing is still a relatively new concept. Program start-up involves other challenges, too. Agencies have to quickly implement programs to comply with funding requirements, while those requirements are still changing.

Sometimes this results in lack of clarity in defining program outcomes such as housing stability. Is this a long-term goal or a short-term one? Does stability mean the household has resolved all the problems that could affect their ability to maintain housing in the future or does it mean that at the time of case closing, the housing is not in immediate jeopardy? This can result in potential "mixed-messages" from funders vs. agency management-- and staff can feel caught in the middle. Staff may be confused about whether they are performing adequately, and anxious about whether they will receive support from their program management.

Resolving lack of role clarity. It is likely that role confusion will continue until the program's mission, policies and procedures, and funding requirements are clear. Staff should request updates from their managers/supervisors, recognizing that management, too, needs time to understand new requirements. Staff can help by pointing out the areas where program operations and program requirements are unclear.

Role Conflict. Many times, staff's training and experience has been focused on assisting people to make significant changes in dysfunctional behaviors: learning to manage a disability, improve their parenting, achieve sobriety, and acquire independent living skills. In this role, the focus has been on long-term outcomes, often using a holistic approach over an extended period of time.

Staff roles in a rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention program are very different. Instead of using counseling skills, staff may need to teach care of an apartment or negotiate with landlords around lease violations. And even though many participants may have other problems in addition to their housing crisis, the focus is not on those personal issues but on Housing First and rapid intervention to resolve a housing crisis, without any preconditions or requirements for significant behavior change. This can feel as if the program is providing only "Band-Aid" assistance that cannot succeed in the long-term, or that actually enables dysfunctional behavior. With this conflict between traditional roles and program expectations, staff may feel angry, frustrated and/or disengaged from the job. It can be tempting to intervene in participants' life issues anyway, but since there is no overt management support for this approach, staff may feel unappreciated or vulnerable to criticism.

Resolving role conflict. Staff can address their own discomfort by learning more about the rationale and research on homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing. The Housing First approach is very successful, for the great majority of households, despite its short-term, highly-focused (as opposed to holistic) strategy. Listening to feedback from former program participants whose housing crisis was resolved through rapid re-housing or homelessness prevention can also alleviate concerns. Ultimately, to work in this kind of programming, staff must learn to embrace the effectiveness of a Housing First, crisis intervention practice. Acquiring the skills to do the role well, recognizing success, and seeking insight from supervisors, peers and participants alike can, over time, help eliminate role conflict.

Special Consideration: Conflicting Beliefs about Housing First

When a staff strongly believes people should be required to work on "housing readiness" before obtaining permanent housing, it may be difficult to shift to a Housing First philosophy where households experiencing homelessness move directly into housing without preconditions.

While there is strong research support for Housing First, many practitioners will continue to believe in the model with which they have the most experience. At some point, it is normal to simultaneously hold two conflicting sets of beliefs, attitudes, and values—both the traditional approach and Housing First. This is known as "cognitive dissonance" and it is very uncomfortable, resulting in guilt, anxiety and/or dread. People experiencing this kind of internal conflict (over any subject or issue) will – deliberately or unconsciously – take steps to reduce their cognitive dissonance. This may include:

- **Searching for ways to discount the new idea**, such as arguing against the Housing First philosophy, the design of supporting research, and the motivations of people who espouse the philosophy.
- **Searching for ways to support the old idea**: looking for good outcome data and case studies of people who were successfully helped by the traditional program model.
- **Adopting one model**. At some point, people cannot continue to hold two opposing ideas and must discard one. If they cannot find enough evidence against the new idea and cannot find enough evidence to support the old model, they will likely adopt the new model. Conversely, if the evidence for the old idea appears stronger, they will likely reject the new one.

When staff find themselves frequently and angrily opposing the Housing First model or investing significant time and effort into trying to refute the concept, that person should consider whether cognitive dissonance might be part of the problem. If so, it is often helpful to compare the pros and cons of the two approaches, and discuss the rationale for each model with a trusted colleague. Understanding that the discomfort of cognitive dissonance is part of a natural process may de-escalate the emotions and allow a more thoughtful analysis of each approach to homelessness.

New Role Acquisition

Most of the roles learned in other human services programs still apply in rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention programs: engagement, problem-solving, setting goals and devising action steps, making referrals and advocating for participants. But there are some roles in this housing program that may not have been frequently practiced in other types of human service programs.

Landlord-Tenant Rights and Responsibilities. Staff in many programs is rarely familiar with the laws and rules governing rental housing units and tenancy. Thus, it may seem daunting to be expected not only to have a working knowledge of landlord-tenant rights and responsibilities, as well as fair housing laws, but also to teach those basics to participants. Staff in rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention programs does not offer specific legal advice, but a primary staff role is to *help participants obtain and maintain housing by understanding landlord-tenant rights and responsibilities, fair housing laws, and fulfilling the fundamental expectations for leasing*.

Staff can seek training from tenant advocates, legal assistance providers or other experts to gain a good grounding in the applicable laws. Most communities also have written summaries and descriptions of landlord responsibilities and tenant rights and the basics of fair housing that can be used by staff and participants alike.

Tenant Supports. While inability to pay the rent is the most frequent cause of housing crises, other factors may also contribute to housing instability. There are many tenants who have problems retaining housing simply because they do not fully understand how to be better tenants. They may have wrong information about their rights. They may not understand that they can lose their housing for failure to control noise, trash, guests, or children or for conflict with other tenants or the landlord. These are often knowledge and skill deficits that cannot be effectively identified or taught in classes, but can become effective "teachable moments" in the participant's housing, during a home visit.

The program should identify the tenant skills that will avoid problems and devise a checklist of red flags staff might look for when making a home visit. Staff should share their experiences with "teachable moments" and successful "in vivo" learning with each other.

Landlord Supports. In some human service programs, landlords are generally viewed as the problem. While there are certainly bad landlords in every community, the majority of landlords do not fit this profile. And without landlord partners, many program participants are unable to obtain decent housing run by competent management. Successful rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention programs are as attuned to the needs of their landlord partners as to their tenants. Creating this level of partnership requires that staff be willing and able to balance both the landlord and the tenant's legitimate rights and responsibilities. This means responding promptly to all landlord calls about tenancy concerns and finding a win-win solution to conflicts. It may also include calling landlords periodically to see if any problems or complaints have arisen.

A good method of overcoming bias against landlords is to invite landlords to make presentations about their experiences and perspectives. Ideally, the landlord(s) would even bring photographs of damage caused by tenants, estimates for repairs of tenant damage, police reports and other documentation to reinforce their concerns about accepting tenants with poor rental histories. Staff can also ask the landlords what kinds of assistance or support from program staff would allow them to feel comfortable accepting a tenant who may, on paper, look like someone at high risk for damage, arrears, conflict with other tenants, and/or criminal behavior.