



HOUSING FIRST - PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

As a society, we spend a great deal of public resources on people who are chronically homeless. They are frequent users of jails, emergency rooms and shelters. Housing First for the chronically homeless embodies a paradigm shift: from emergency services to permanent housing, from requiring sobriety and compliance with medication to voluntary services in a harm reduction framework of recovery from homelessness. To be eligible, one must have a disability (mental illness, substance abuse) and a lengthy period of homelessness (over one year or 4 episodes in 3 years).

Mercer Housing First began as a 3-year demonstration project, initiated by the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness in 2008. The project is overseen by a collaborative of funding partners comprised of state, local and city government agencies, private funders and nonprofit organizations. Through a competitive RFP, Greater Trenton Behavioral Health Care was chosen as the lead agency providing services. Under the initiative, 75 long-term homeless have been permanently housed in scattered site apartments and offered the diversified supportive services helpful to retaining housing. Of the first fifteen housed, the average time spent homeless was 6.3 years.

Approach to Services

- Services help participants to obtain and maintain safe, affordable housing and support participants in their roles as employees/students and parents.
- Housing is not contingent on willingness to participate in services or sobriety.
- Services are individualized and based on goals and needs of participants.
- Services promote recovery and wellness.
- Staff use motivational interventions to engage participants and help them move through stages of change needed to address behaviors that may interfere with their self-identified goals and quality of life.

Staffing

- Team approach - Clients are assigned a primary counselor, but all members of the team provide support.
- Team includes Vocational and Co-occurring Disorders Specialists as well as Housing Counselors and an Advanced Practice Nurse.
- Face-to-face services are available 6 days per week with 24/7 on-call availability.

Services Provided

- Housing Search and Tenant Assistance (e.g. rental and subsidy applications, tenant-landlord relations).
- Skills for Independent Living (e.g. household and money management, parenting).
- Family and Social Supports (identifying supports and rebuilding family ties).
- Access to regular income through SSI benefits,
- Vocational Preparation and Readiness.
- Support for Treatment, Sobriety and Medication Adherence.
- Assistance Accessing Other Needed Services/Supports (Physical healthcare, childcare, drivers' licenses etc.).

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Preliminary analysis shows cost savings comparable to those from 65 Housing First studies, where savings range from \$4,000 - \$9,000.

Emergency Health Care is the area of biggest savings. The top consumer of health care services had over \$1M in charges in the year before she was housed and only one emergency room visit in the succeeding year!

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Police, Corrections, Detox and Emergency Shelter all contribute to the cost of emergency services before consumers are housed.

- 75 individuals and families who had been previously homeless are now permanently housed.
- Tenant retention in housing remains high (close to 100%).
- Tenants report increased access to, and utilization of physical and mental health services.
- Tenants have increased access to sources of personal income.
- Tenants report increasing satisfaction in overall quality of life.
- Tenants report increasing measures of community re-integration.
- Tenants report re-established connections with family and other sources of support.
- Tenants have returned to school, are volunteering, and are engaging in new meaningful activities.

TENANT COMMENTS

It just seems like I feel a lot better about myself,The way I was living before on the street.... it was just horrible. #**53 year old male, 18 months housed**#

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When I get up every day I look in the mirror, and I say to myself "You are worthy." #**38 year old female, 6 months housed.**

Mercer Housing First has demonstrated that Housing First is a sustainable model. Using Housing First, we can end chronic homelessness in New Jersey. We need to advocate that the State expand and support Housing First as the policy direction to address chronic homelessness throughout New Jersey. #