



**Virginia
Housing Alliance**
Expanding Housing Opportunity and Ending Homelessness

Understanding Homeless Programs and Policies

A Glossary of Terms

Barriers to Housing – People who experience homelessness have multiple barriers and challenges that make it more difficult for them to access and maintain housing of their own. For example, criminal history is a barrier to housing because those with criminal histories are often barred from renting housing in the private market. Poor credit is another example of a barrier to housing because landlords screen out people with poor credit.

Best Practice – A best practice approach or strategy is one that has been shown to have better results than alternative programs. In the field of homelessness, the best practice approaches of permanent supportive housing and rapid re-housing demonstrate outcomes that show greater success in preserving housing stability and do so more cost-effectively than traditional interventions such as emergency shelter and transitional housing.

Case Management – Case management refers to the coordination of a variety of services (mental health, substance abuse recovery, employment assistance, etc.) on behalf of and with a person or household who is experiencing homelessness. Case management is generally delivered by a social worker.

Chronic Homelessness – The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines a person who is chronically homeless as an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or has experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. In order to be considered chronically homeless, a person must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitations (e.g., living on the streets) and/or in an emergency homeless shelter. A disabling condition is defined as a diagnosable substance abuse disorder, serious mental illness, or developmental disability, including the co-occurrence of two or more of these conditions. A disabling condition limits an individual's ability to work or perform one or more activities of daily living. Recent changes to federal law have expanded the definition of chronic homelessness to include families with a head of household who meets the above defined criteria.

Consumer Choice – Consumer choice recognizes self-determination and self-direction as the foundations for service provision as individuals and families define their own life goals and design their unique path(s) towards those goals. Individuals optimize their autonomy and independence by leading, controlling, and exercising choice over the services and supports that assist them in achieving housing stability. In doing so, they are empowered and provided the resources to make informed decisions, initiate recovery, build on strengths, and gain or regain control over their lives.

Continuum of Care – The Continuum of Care (CoC) is a local collaborative of agencies that serve as that area’s applicant for federal homeless assistance funding through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD.) HUD requires agencies to create and participate in the CoC to apply for McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants. CoCs have taken on multiple roles in the community including coordination of resources, advocacy, and development of plans to end homelessness.

Emergency Shelter – An emergency shelter provides short-term overnight housing for people who experience homelessness. While it differs from community to community, generally people who experience homelessness sleep on beds or cots together in one room.

Evidence-Based Practice – An evidence-based practice has been shown to be successful based on studies conducted using theoretical, quantitative, or qualitative research. Permanent supportive housing is an evidence-based practice, as documented through a toolkit created by the United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA.)

Harm Reduction – A harm reduction approach does not create rules and regulations around sobriety and treatment as a condition to receiving housing. This approach recognizes that once a person has housing of his or her own, housing provides the stabilizing force which increases the client’s own motivation to participate in services.

Homeless Management Information System – A Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a database that tracks outcomes for programs assisting people who experience homelessness and demographic data about people participating in homeless assistance programs.

Homelessness – The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines an individual or family as experiencing homelessness if they fall into one of four categories:

1. An individual or family living in a.) A place not meant for human habitation (including a car, park, abandoned building, bus/train station, airport, or camping ground) or b.) Emergency shelter or transitional housing. A person is also considered homeless if he or she is discharged from an institution where he or she has resided for 90 days or less and the person resided in emergency shelter (but not

transitional housing) or place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution.

2. An individual or family being evicted within 14 days from their primary residence and a.) No subsequent residence has been identified and b.) The household lacks the resources or support networks (i.e. family, friends, faith-based or other social networks) needed to obtain other permanent housing.
3. Families with children and unaccompanied youth (up to age 24) experiencing housing instability who have not had a lease in the last 60 days, have moved at least twice in the last 60 days, and who have one or more of: chronic disabilities, chronic physical or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, a child with a disability, or two or more barriers to employment (lack of a high school diploma or GED, illiteracy, low English proficiency, history of incarceration or detention for criminal activity, or history of unstable employment).
4. An individual or family fleeing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence and have no other residence and lack the resources and support networks to obtain other permanent housing.

Housing First – The Housing First philosophy recognizes permanent housing as the first and primary solution to homelessness. Housing First places a person or household experiencing homelessness in permanent housing as quickly as possible, regardless of physical, mental health, or substance use disability, or other barrier to housing. Such issues can and should be addressed only after permanent housing is established.

Length of Stay – Length of stay describes the duration of a single stay in a homeless assistance program such as emergency shelter or transitional housing. Best practices suggest that the length of stay in emergency shelter should be as short as possible. In new regulations, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is urging communities to reduce the average stay in emergency shelter for families to under 30 days.

Low-Barrier Shelter – A low barrier shelter is a form of congregate housing where a minimum number of expectations are placed on people who wish to stay there. The aim is to have as few barriers and rules as possible to allow more people to access services. This often means that people staying in low-barrier shelter are not expected to abstain from using alcohol, forced to adhere to time limits, or other rules. Low barrier shelters follow a harm reduction philosophy.

Motivational Interviewing – Motivational interviewing is a form of collaborative conversation for strengthening a person's own motivation and commitment to change. It is a person-centered counseling style addressing the common problem of ambivalence about

change. It is designed to strengthen an individual's motivation and movement toward a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion. (Definition from the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers)

Permanent Supportive Housing – Permanent supportive housing (PSH) is a successful, cost-effective combination of affordable housing with services that helps people live more stable, productive lives. A permanent supportive housing unit is intended for a person or family whose head of household is homeless or at risk of homelessness and has multiple barriers to housing and housing stability, which may include mental illness, chemical dependency, and/or other disabling or chronic health conditions. The tenant household ideally pays no more than 30% of income towards rent and utilities, holds a lease with no limits on length of tenancy, and any member of the household may access flexible and comprehensive support services designed to assist the tenant in achieving housing stability. Service providers proactively seek to engage tenants in these on-site and community-based services, but participation by the tenant in such services is not a condition of ongoing tenancy. The unit's operations are managed through a partnership among representatives of the project owner and/or sponsor, the property management agent, the supportive services providers, the relevant public agencies, and the tenants. Service and property management strategies include effective, coordinated approaches for addressing issues resulting from substance abuse, relapse, and mental health crises, with a focus on housing stability.

Point-in-Time Count – The Point-in-Time Count is a census, taken during a specific 24-hour period, of people living on the streets and in other homeless situations, including emergency shelter, and transitional housing. The Point-in-Time Count collects data on the number of people and households experiencing homelessness in a community, and surveys a sample of people to collect more in-depth information about them. Every Continuum of Care (see above for definition) is required by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development to complete a point-in-time count.

Progressive Engagement – Progressive Engagement is a best practice strategy of providing services and financial assistance that preserves the most intensive and expensive interventions for households with the most need in order to preserve resources and provide assistance to the widest number of people. In progressive engagement, all households receive a minimum level of assistance and many will be successful. Only those households who need additional assistance will receive it. For example, all households who enter a rapid re-housing program may receive assistance with housing start up costs, but only those families determined to need additional assistance may receive ongoing short term rental assistance. If then a few households are determined to have even greater needs, they may be considered for additional resources.

Rapid Re-Housing – Rapid Re-Housing is a housing first strategy for preventing and ending homelessness that places a family or individual experiencing homelessness in permanent housing as quickly as possible, or prevents a family from experiencing homelessness, by providing temporary financial assistance and targeted supportive services to assist a household to become stably housed.

Transitional Housing – Transitional Housing is temporary housing, often for up to two years. Transitional housing also provides supportive services to address the issues that may have contributed to a person's homeless episode.

Voluntary Services – A voluntary services approach makes acceptance of services for participants optional rather than a requirement. Consumers of homeless housing programs who are empowered to make their own decisions have been shown to have greater success dealing with the issues that may have caused their homelessness.