



Homelessness Prevention, Diversion, and Rapid Exit

Home, Together, the federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness in America, recognizes that to end homelessness, every community must have in place a systemic response that ensures that homelessness is a rare, brief, and a one-time experience.

In their efforts to develop effective systems, communities are increasingly focused on implementing stronger homelessness prevention and diversion efforts. And they are exploring ways to create more rapid exits out of homelessness through a housing problem-solving approach that doesn't depend upon dedicated permanent housing resources or subsidies. But there is often a lack of clarity about what these terms mean, how these strategies differ from one another, and the most important considerations for implementing these strategies.

This document, which was developed collaboratively by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, is intended to support more effective implementation of prevention, diversion, and rapid exit services. We recognize that federal resources may be limited for traditional homelessness prevention services, but that diversion and rapid exit are more targeted efforts that offer the potential to significantly reduce inflows and demand for limited housing resources available through the crisis response system. Diversion and rapid exit options should be offered to all those who contact coordinated entry systems.

Distinctions in Terms: Agreeing on a Common Language

We believe greater clarity about terminology will be helpful for several reasons. A common language is necessary for effective communication among community partners and stakeholders, as well as across communities. Agreed upon terminology also helps move us forward as we discuss the scale and sources of funding needed for the various activities and stages of the process. Finally, a common language helps foster consistency and effectiveness in our work, and a shared approach to measuring that effectiveness.

We recognize that drawing clear lines between these terms can seem somewhat artificial because there are specific situations that may strain the distinctions. After all, each of these interventions is for individuals and families who are facing housing crises and need help to solve that crisis quickly. And the strategies highlighted here are not standalone programs; it is not in the best interests of the person at risk or experiencing homelessness to be shuffled from one "program" to the next in short order. Instead, these strategies should be considered different elements of a unified, seamless approach to help the household avoid homelessness or exit as quickly as possible—even when they may not be prioritized for higher levels of financial assistance and support services.

In practice, there is much overlap between these approaches. All may include a combination of financial assistance, mediation with landlords, legal services, employment services, and other supports. Strong identification efforts through the implementation of housing stability assessments are important tools to effectively identify the most at-risk households, connect them to the resources that will best respond to their housing crisis, and avert homelessness.

Of course, the same household may move through more than one of the strategies as we have described them below. For example, consistent with the progressive engagement approach, if initial diversion attempts are unsuccessful, the most appropriate place to stay may very well be in the emergency shelter; continuing housing-focused services will then be aimed at helping the household exit rapidly from the shelter; however, if additional barriers and vulnerabilities are identified through continuing engagement, rapid re-housing may ultimately be the appropriate intervention for that household. With this approach, there should be no point at which attempts at quick resolution of the housing crisis cease, regardless of where the person is staying or how much financial assistance might be available to them.

With those considerations in mind, below we define the terms homelessness prevention, diversion, and rapid exit, including indicating when such services are provided, and offer some considerations for effective implementation.

Homelessness Prevention

Homelessness prevention strategies represent a wide array of efforts to prevent housing crises from occurring and to prevent people who face such crises from experiencing homelessness. Prevention strategies are described in *Home, Together* as falling into the following categories:

- 1. Activities that reduce the prevalence of risk of housing crises within communities;**
- 2. Activities that reduce the risk of homelessness while households are engaged with or are transitioning from systems; and**
- 3. Activities that target assistance to prevent housing crises that do occur from escalating further and resulting in homelessness.**

Important Considerations and Practices

Homelessness prevention activities across the three categories described above are not the responsibility of the homelessness services system alone. Rather, homelessness prevention requires a multi-sector approach and an active focus on reducing the prevalence of housing crises.

In the first category of prevention, we recognize that housing crises can be reduced systemically when multiple sectors focus on big picture goals: (1) ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing; (2) addressing systemic racial inequities; (3) improving education and meaningful and gainful employment; and (4) ensuring access to affordable child care, legal assistance, and physical and behavioral health care. While these multisector strategies may be less often framed as homelessness prevention, they can have the greatest impact on preventing homelessness.

In the second category, homelessness can be prevented through enhanced cross-system collaboration, including systems such as health care, child welfare, and corrections. Such collaboration includes increased awareness and attentiveness to housing stability, as well as effective transition and/or discharge planning. In this category,

systems must ensure that individuals are linked effectively to mainstream resources, including employment and health care, to reduce the risk of homelessness upon discharge or following the end of service provision.

Finally, in the third category of prevention, assistance helps prevent housing crises that do occur from escalating further and resulting in homelessness. In most communities, this assistance is provided through mainstream systems and/or through the homelessness services system. Prevention services in this category often include a combination of financial assistance, mediation with landlords, legal services, and other supports. When multiple systems provide prevention assistance, it is critical that they be coordinated and utilizing common assessment tools to identify and assist those at the greatest risk of homelessness.

Diversion

Diversion strategies and practices assist people to resolve their immediate housing crisis by accessing alternatives to entering emergency shelter or the experience of unsheltered living. This typically occurs at the point people request emergency services, such as entry into emergency shelter, or could take place in a day center or through outreach before a person spends a night unsheltered.

Important Considerations and Practices

Diversion occurs at a “front door” of the homelessness service system (e.g., coordinated entry access point, services center, emergency shelter) but before the person spends a night at a shelter, in a motel with a voucher, in a place not meant for human habitation, or unsheltered. In diversion, there is a focused conversation aimed at helping the person identify an immediate housing arrangement that is a safe alternative to shelter or sleeping unsheltered. This housing arrangement may be temporary, allowing time to identify a permanent housing option while avoiding the immediate trauma of homelessness, or it may allow those involved to explore the possibility of extending a temporary arrangement into a permanent one.

Approaching diversion from a client-centered service perspective is critical. Diversion is not a process of turning people away or declining to provide needed services. Rather, diversion offers a valuable service that helps people avoid the experience of being in shelter or unsheltered. Integrating diversion practices into the system helps ensure that scarce resources are better utilized. More importantly, good diversion processes focus on serving the household in crisis by helping them find positive alternatives to entering the shelter system or staying outdoors.

As with prevention, diversion assistance may be limited to services alone, such as conflict resolution or help connecting with family or friends. Alternatively, diversion may combine services with financial assistance, which may take a variety of forms, such as a bus pass to stay with a family member, assistance with past-due rent, or a grocery gift card for the friend with whom the person has been staying. Effective diversion involves keen active listening skills, understanding and access to community-based resources, and flexibility.

Rapid Resolution

The VA’s Supportive Services for Veteran Families program may provide rapid resolution assistance for Veterans. This approach emphasizes the use of services, problem-solving conversations, and financial assistance to help households be diverted from homelessness or rapidly exit homelessness. Rapid resolution, then, encompasses both diversion and rapid exit as we have defined those terms here.

Rapid Exit

Rapid exit strategies are appropriate after a household has entered emergency shelter or stayed in an unsheltered setting, and serves to help them move as quickly as possible back into housing with the support of services and a minimal level of financial assistance.

Important Considerations and Practices

Rapid exit interventions are provided to a household as soon as possible after the household enters a shelter, a transitional housing program, or an unsheltered setting. A focus on rapid exit approaches is built upon the recognition that many people who experience homelessness can effectively resolve their own homelessness independently or with very limited help. By utilizing strengths-based, housing-focused case management, rapid exits can be facilitated for households that would not likely be prioritized for a housing intervention such as rapid re-housing or supportive housing, both of which involve deeper and longer-term rent assistance.

Rapid exit approaches often take the form of housing-focused services intended to help the person identify ways to exit homelessness quickly and, when possible, without utilizing homelessness-dedicated resources. Even when the exit does not occur quickly, attempts at resolving a person's housing crisis with housing-focused services should continue. And, because rapid exit depends primarily on case management skills, it is critical to invest in training that equips staff to provide effective light touch services and implement progressive engagement with all those in shelters and other temporary programs and through outreach. Depending on the community and funding streams, limited short-term financial assistance may also be used, when necessary, to facilitate returns to housing.

Conclusion

By integrating effective homelessness prevention, diversion, and rapid exit approaches into systems, our focus is on providing assistance earlier in a household's housing crisis. It is the goal of these approaches to lessen trauma, identify and create new pathways to housing, reduce isolation, preserve scarce housing resources, and empower households to be partners in their housing plans. Implementing these strategies can best be achieved with clarity regarding terminology, timing, and the nature of the activities and services provided. This in turn reduces the prevalence of homelessness, the length of episodes of homelessness, and trauma, all of which better serve people facing housing crises.

Because these interventions better serve households in crisis, they also improve system effectiveness by reducing inflow and expediting outflow. With system-wide prevention, diversion, and rapid exit approaches, communities will see improvements in their system performance measures – shorter lengths of time people experience homelessness, reduced numbers of households experiencing homelessness for the first time, and fewer households returning to the system.