



# Using Shelter Strategically to End Homelessness

By Katy Miller, Regional Coordinator

It is clear there are [significant geographic differences](#) in the progress toward ending homelessness that we're seeing in communities. While some communities are documenting significant reductions in their annual Point-in-Time counts, other communities are faced with increasing numbers of people living unsheltered. Such communities are not only looking critically at strategies to address the immediate health and safety concerns of those living outside, but are also working quickly to develop plans to create more affordable housing and better leverage mainstream workforce, housing, and health care systems to expand permanent solutions.

When looking to address the crisis of homelessness, shelter is a topic that comes up time and time again. And, the question must consistently be "Is shelter being used effectively both to provide immediate safety and to create quick paths to permanent housing?"

If used well, shelter can be a great tool to end homelessness. Here are four things to consider as you assess the effectiveness of shelter services in your community.

## **Emergency shelter has vital roles to play in Housing First approaches to ending homelessness.**

Shelters must be low barrier, focus on assessment and triage, and intentionally link to permanent housing resources so that people move through to housing quickly — this is "[Housing First](#)" at its best. Some shelters start this shift by targeting/prioritizing "long-term stayers," or those that have been in shelters the longest, for permanent housing placements.

When we operate hundreds of individual shelters, transitional housing, and service programs, all targeting different populations, with different screening criteria and models, we create a maze that is impossible to navigate and slows our progress. What if we could deconstruct the complicated emergency shelter, housing, and service system that we have created over the last several decades so that shelter acts as an assessment and triage center to help people quickly get on with their lives?

It is important to step back and look at ways to sync up our current resources so that shelter is not a dead end or a distant hope that someone's homelessness will self-resolve. Many are doing this through [coordinated entry](#) and assessment systems, improving access to the housing and services people need. The questions to ask are: Do those who are living outside and in shelters have direct connections to the community's full array of diversion, rapid re-housing, affordable housing, and supportive housing resources? Or is it pure luck to land on the right referral, have access to all the application forms and the right case manager at the right time, in order to find a safe place to call home?

## **To strengthen our models of emergency shelter, we must embrace innovation and change.**

In order to get to better outcomes, some communities have shifted their model from sheltering people over night (with late entry and early exit) to a model that provides a place for someone to be 24/7. This type of shelter provides a place for people to store belongings, access employment services and healthcare, and quickly move on to permanent housing. When shelter, hygiene centers, storage, food, and other survival services are scattered

around town, it may seem preferable to stay in a tent under the freeway with your belongings, your friends, and your pet, than navigate the logistics of finding a place to be during the day.

San Francisco is testing this theory with its [Navigation Center](#). They are finding that people who are living in encampments are willing to come inside when shelter is something that both allows you to come as you are and also leads to something better.

**We must create many pathways — person-centered pathways — out of homelessness**

On the other hand, there will be those who are not interested in moving inside to shelter, even after consistent outreach. Therefore, shelter should not be the only access point for permanent housing. Someone can be diverted away from entering the shelter system all together. Coordinated outreach teams with “diversion” funds or flexible dollars to quickly move a person to stability, efficient coordinated entry processes that match them to the right housing intervention, and access to permanent housing resources can also be the answer.

Working with urgency to end homelessness for each person, each family, must be our goal. What works for one person or family will not necessarily work for the next. Creating a coordinated system that operates from the position of a Housing First approach, removing barriers to entry and based on the needs of each individual person and family, is key.

**A larger community response must be brought to bear to end homelessness among our neighbors.**

In expensive housing markets, the lack of units and access to affordable housing contribute to the long timeframes that people remain unhoused — definitely true and absolutely hard. Neighborhoods cannot continue to hold contentious meetings about homelessness in their streets and parks without then stepping up to see what they can do to create solutions — be it via their faith communities, as private landlords renting to people exiting homelessness, as vocal supporters of new housing developments, as volunteers in effective Housing First programs, or through many other ways they can help.

Supported by such a broader community and neighborhood response, shelter can become a more effective and efficient part of a systemic response to prevent and end homelessness, no longer operating as individual or standalone programs, but functioning as part of a coordinated system of programs working together to provide everyone with permanent housing solutions quickly.

We know there is much more work to do — including more work for USICH to do — to support emergency shelter providers to play their most effective roles in Housing First systems. How is your community engaging the shelter system as a solution and tool to end homelessness? We want to [hear from you](#).