



Key Considerations for Implementing Emergency Shelter Within an Effective Crisis Response System

Introduction

The [Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness](#) calls on communities to transform their homelessness services into crisis response systems that prevent homelessness whenever possible and rapidly return people experiencing homelessness to stable housing. While some communities are documenting significant reductions in their annual Point-in-Time counts, others are faced with increasing numbers of people living unsheltered. Such communities are not only looking critically at strategies to address the immediate safety and health concerns of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, but they are also working quickly to develop more pathways into housing people can afford and to better leverage mainstream workforce, housing, and health care systems to expand permanent solutions.

Emergency shelter can and must play an essential role within an effective, housing-focused crisis response system. However, it should not be assumed that every community in which there are currently people experiencing unsheltered homelessness needs to expand the supply of emergency shelter. Communities should also consider how a broad range of changes and improvements within their crisis response systems will impact the need and demand for emergency shelter and other crisis housing.

This document presents key considerations for ensuring that emergency shelters and similar crisis settings (referred to collectively as “emergency shelters”) are equipped to provide low-barrier access and to create quick and effective pathways to permanent housing. While the focus of this document is on the role of emergency shelters, they should not be thought of as the only part of a community’s crisis response system. An end to homelessness requires the **prevention of homelessness** whenever possible, **identification of and engagement** with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness or living in encampments to connect them to crisis services, as well as **pathways back to safe living arrangements or directly into housing** for people in emergency shelter, as well as for people who never enter emergency shelter.

We have identified specific areas of focus for strengthening the implementation and impact of emergency shelter. These are to:

- Promote **dignity and respect** for every person seeking or needing shelter
- **Divert people** from the homelessness service system when possible
- Adopt a Housing First approach and create **low-barrier access** to emergency shelter
- Equip emergency shelters to serve as a **platform for housing access**

This resource was developed in partnership with the Minnesota Office to Prevent and End Homelessness and the Minnesota Department of Education.

Emergency Shelter: An Essential Component of a Crisis Response

Responding effectively to homelessness requires a combination of strategies at the local level: preventing or diverting people from experiencing homelessness whenever possible; ensuring people transition rapidly from homelessness to housing and services; and providing immediate low-barrier shelter options for people experiencing homelessness who cannot immediately access permanent housing.

These strategies are reflected in the federal criteria and benchmarks, which set the vision for what it means for communities to end homelessness among [Veterans](#), [people experiencing chronic homelessness](#), [families](#), and [youth](#). Common across these criteria and benchmarks is the understanding that ending homelessness requires that people have immediate access to emergency shelter and other crisis settings when they need and want it.

Emergency shelter should support *flow* from a housing crisis to housing stability, in which the aim of the system is to produce the most rapid and effective permanent housing connections for individuals and families facing crises. Unfortunately, many communities are facing high numbers of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness—sometimes in the form of encampments—as well as the need to address long stays in emergency shelter. This can result in limited capacity to provide immediate emergency shelter access to everyone who needs it.

Additionally, high barriers to entering emergency shelter, too many rules within emergency shelter, curfews that make it difficult to maintain a job, and a lack of focus or capacity to rapidly connect people to permanent housing are a few other factors that contribute to a lack of flow within a community's crisis response system. Addressing flow into and out of shelter is critical to having an effective crisis response system and for ensuring that emergency shelters can improve their capacity and to play their role in connecting people to housing quickly.

Promote Dignity and Respect

For many people experiencing homelessness, emergency shelter is their initial contact with the homelessness crisis response system. This initial contact can significantly shape first impressions and convey the values of the community's response to homelessness and housing crises. People seeking shelter are often facing traumatic situations and crises. To establish trust and autonomy, and to de-escalate the stress and trauma resulting from the crisis people have experienced, it is critically important to: treat people with dignity and respect; provide safe, clean, and accommodating conditions; emphasize that the goal is to connect them back to housing; and focus on strengths rather than needs. Shelter staff and volunteers should receive training in trauma-informed care and support to work effectively and nonjudgmentally with people facing these crises. Emergency shelter policies and their mission, values, and expectations of staff should reflect a commitment to promoting dignity and respect.

Ensuring Equal Access, Addressing Disparities, and Promoting Cultural Competency. Homelessness disproportionately impacts people of color, people with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) populations. Recognizing this disproportionality requires that all parts of the homelessness service system, including the crisis response system, directly address disparities in both access to programs and in program staffing and structure. Organizations must also develop and demonstrate cultural competency, defined by the National Center for Cultural Competence as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or amongst professionals and enable the system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.”

There are many ways that emergency shelters can exhibit cultural competence and responsiveness, and each provider should establish an approach to cultural competence that is informed by and reflects its community, the

people seeking shelter, and the people experiencing homelessness. In addition, emergency shelters must ensure that they do not contribute to unlawful gaps in access based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, or other demographics, as defined by federal, state, and local laws and ordinances.

It is often helpful for organizations to couple stated values and policies about inclusion and cultural competence with specific measurable goals and actions. Such actions can include ensuring that staff reflect the population of those seeking shelter, analyzing data to determine if there are disparities in who is receiving access to shelter within the community, and monitoring the proportionality of shelter access and housing success rates across racial, ethnic, ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation differences.

Adapting Policies and Expectations. Operating an emergency shelter that safely and effectively meets the diverse needs of guests requires establishing clear expectations for staff, volunteers, and guests. Emergency shelters can foster an environment of trust and respect by ensuring that services are voluntary and that rules are reasonable, expressed openly and clearly, and that their enforcement is transparent and proportional. To ensure that these policies and expectations reflect changing circumstances and opportunities, emergency shelters can also create explicit ways for guests to participate in their development and updates, through consumer participation in organizational governance and regular feedback mechanisms. This can include consumer advisory boards or regular “house meetings”—where guests can provide candid feedback and input into how to support connections to permanent housing as well as shelter operations. This process of continuous review and adaptation is critical to ensuring that the diverse strengths and needs of guests are reflected.

Questions to consider about the values and orientation of your community’s emergency shelter:

- Does your emergency shelter consistently implement practices to meet people where they are, and provide person-centered care that focuses on personal strengths?
- What policies or value statements convey clear expectations that guests will be treated with dignity and respect, and how does the shelter monitor adherence to these expectations?
- Are expectations of guests clearly communicated and easily accessible for review by guests?
- What specific practices help ensure that the shelter exhibits cultural competency and provides appropriate protections for shelter seekers across demographic differences?
- Does the shelter set only minimal and reasonable requirements for guests, and does the shelter enforce these requirements in a fair and transparent way?
- Does the shelter involve guests in governance and operations?

Community Spotlight: Worcester, MA

The Greater Worcester Housing Connection, operated by the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, provides emergency shelter for up to 88 single adults, a capacity that allows them to offer shelter to nearly everyone who seeks it, using overflow capacity when needed. By focusing on individualized housing plans connected to the community’s coordinated entry process, shelter stays average only 30 days. Shelter seekers work with engagement specialists whose role is to assess the fastest housing outcome possible for each person seeking shelter. Their approach includes diversion services for people who may have a viable alternative to emergency shelter, and includes viewing every shelter stay as a bridge back to housing.

[Learn more about their work.](#)

Divert People from Emergency Shelters When Possible

Emergency shelters should be reserved for providing temporary housing for people facing crises who are seeking safety and/or have nowhere else to go. A growing number of communities are using targeted diversion strategies to decrease entries into homelessness and to quickly connect people who may be facing a housing crisis with a viable housing option *before* entering into emergency shelter. Effective diversion employs motivational

Community Spotlight: Hennepin County, MN

In 2014, Hennepin County launched the Stable Families Initiative to demonstrate successful strategies for creating housing stability among families who had repeatedly accessed emergency shelter. The initiative had three components: a prevention effort focused on supporting precariously housed families with at least two prior shelter visits to prevent their return to shelter; an enhanced form of rapid re-housing for young parents in emergency shelter; and improved access to county-administered mainstream benefits, including child care assistance and employment services connected with the state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. To identify families for the prevention initiative, the County reached out by mail to families who had previously accessed emergency shelter, offering support if their housing was in jeopardy. The initiative's evaluation used random assignment to identify treatment and control groups, and documented decreased returns to shelter, increased household incomes, and increased employment for the treatment groups. Hennepin County is subsequently adapting this approach across its shelter and human service system.

[Learn more about the initiative.](#)

interviewing strategies that focus on strengths and existing connections. If diversion is unsuccessful, these strategies can continue to be employed to connect people back to safe options quickly when possible.

Determining Other Viable Options. Diversion is a strategy that keeps people from entering emergency shelter, when possible, by helping them immediately identify alternate, safe housing arrangements (e.g., moving into a shared living arrangement with family members) and, if necessary, connecting them with services and financial assistance to help them return to permanent housing. Communities that are effectively employing diversion are often doing so with flexible financial assistance that allows them to quickly support pathways out of housing crises.

Some communities build diversion strategies into their coordinated entry processes as well as shelter intake procedures. Staff and volunteers are trained to emphasize the goal of helping people seeking shelter to find viable and safe housing options. Sometimes shelter diversion involves providing mediation and problem-solving support to determine if going back home is a safe alternative to emergency shelter entry. Other communities are proactively engaging people who have exited shelter and may be facing another housing crisis, offering targeted support and assistance before the crisis escalates to homelessness.

Connecting to Mainstream Resources. Effectively diverting people from homelessness often requires connecting people to other types of assistance, such as landlord mediation and/or other mainstream resources, like legal services, SNAP benefits, health and behavioral health care, early childhood development and education, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and other resources. Some coordinated entry processes and emergency shelters co-locate staff who can assess and provide access to these mainstream resources for people as they seek assistance. Effective diversion can help people seeking shelter access financial assistance or other mainstream resources *prior to* shelter entry as part of the shelter screening and intake process, and can continue after shelter to prevent re-entry.

Questions to consider about your community's capacity to divert people from shelter:

- Does your community's process for accessing shelter assess options for diverting from shelter?
- Does your community's diversion approach include, when needed, financial assistance, mediation, housing location, legal assistance, or other supports?
- What role do mainstream programs play in supporting shelter seekers and diversion efforts?

Adopt a Housing First Approach and Create Low-Barrier Access to Emergency Shelter

Everyone seeking emergency shelter is facing a housing crisis. When a crisis cannot be immediately resolved, people will assess and choose options most consistent with their needs and preferences. If guests perceive that an emergency shelter stay requires conforming to rules or expectations that seem unreasonable, punitive, or that divide them from their defined family, they may decline the support they need. For an emergency shelter to achieve its intended purposes, the expectations placed on guests should be minimal, transparent, and reasonable. Intake, screening, and assessment processes should reflect the system's Housing First orientation to helping everyone seeking assistance connect quickly with permanent housing. Our [Housing First Checklist](#) helps communities consider how they can implement a Housing First approach at the project- and system-level. Additionally, in communities with large numbers of people living unsheltered where emergency shelter beds are limited, it is critical that access to those beds be as low-barrier as possible.

Providing Low-Barrier Access. Communities should ensure that there are low-barrier shelters available and accessible. For emergency shelters, using Housing First approaches means removing as many pre-conditions to entry as possible and responding to the needs and concerns of people seeking shelter. Historically, concerns about safety have prompted many shelters to limit access to people using substances or living with substance use disorders.

Innovative shelter programs across the country have been able to design their approach to accommodate people regardless of substance use or other perceived barriers to entry. Low-barrier shelters emphasize welcoming guests in as they are, while having clear and simple behavioral expectations that apply to anyone residing in the shelter. These expectations are narrowly focused on maintaining a safe environment for all. Staff are trained in trauma-informed care and de-escalation techniques in order to help residents understand and conform to these expectations. Some programs are also integrating restorative justice principles into their methods for ensuring that behavioral expectations are met.

Community Spotlight: Multnomah County, OR

Led by the Joint Office of Homeless Services of Multnomah County, the emergency shelter system in greater Portland is in the process of a significant expansion and transformation, one goal of which is to make emergency shelter work better for people who have historically avoided shelter. This includes operating shelters 24 hours per day and creating broader geographic distribution of shelter capacity throughout the county. The community has organized housing navigators that can support people seeking housing at any shelter or unsheltered location to promote continuity and increase housing outcomes. Intake processes have shifted in several of the community's shelters to encourage self-defined groups of friends or family members to access shelter together. Shelter locations no longer screen for drug or alcohol use and have created options for people to remain with their pets in shelter and keep their possessions with them. All new emergency shelters operate on a reservation system, and without fixed maximum stays, so that guests are able to maintain beds for as long as they need them.

[Learn more about the initiative.](#)

Engaging People with Barriers to Accessing Housing. Emergency shelters should also work closely with outreach teams to specifically and intentionally outreach to and engage people who are reluctant to access shelter or have high barriers to permanent housing. This will likely involve seeking to understand the reasons for their reluctance and, if possible, addressing those concerns through shelter and engagement policies.

Accommodating Partners, Pets, and Possessions. Many people seeking shelter report that being separated from their relatives, partners, friends or chosen family, pets, or possessions leads them to remain unsheltered. In some communities, new shelter models are identifying ways to reduce these barriers, inviting self-defined groups of friends and family to access and stay in shelter together, creating safe arrangements for pets within the shelter, and providing safe storage for possessions. Making these changes in existing shelter operations may require new resources.

Extending Hours and Ensuring Predictable Access. Emergency shelters can help people in crisis achieve stability by providing predictable and extended access. They can create reservation systems that allow people to confirm whether they continue to need their shelter bed, and to arrange for late arrivals, if needed. Some shelters remain open and available during all hours of the day, which can help shelter guests access work and other supports without having to transport their possessions. Additionally, shelters can consider providing meals or snacks at any time during the day rather than at set times to better accommodate differing schedules and needs of guests. Often, communities secure additional financial resources to support low-barrier policies and practices.

Questions to consider to help lower barriers to accessing your community’s emergency shelter:

- Does your emergency shelter have minimal expectations or requirements of people seeking shelter?
- Does your emergency shelter focus on addressing disruptive or dangerous behaviors rather than compliance to rules or case plans?
- Does your shelter welcome self-defined family and kinship groups to seek shelter together?
- Can your emergency shelter identify financial resources that can support the adoption of low-barrier policies and practices and support extended or flexible hours and adapted service-delivery models?
- Does your shelter accommodate pets and belongings?
- Do your shelter intake process and housing navigation services coordinate closely with community-based outreach services and coordinated entry?
- Does your shelter create flexible and predictable access for people seeking shelter?

Use Emergency Shelter Stays as a Platform for Housing Access

Perhaps the most critical service of an emergency shelter—beyond providing a safe place to stay—is to ensure that guests are connected to permanent housing opportunities. Services within emergency shelters should focus on facilitating quick access to permanent housing, which may reduce the need for other types of services, such as financial literacy, parenting education, and computer classes.

Creating Quick Connections to Permanent Housing. Emergency shelters should intentionally link people to permanent housing resources without assessing housing “readiness,” so that they can move through the system quickly. Throughout an emergency shelter stay, staff and volunteers should emphasize and maintain focus on assisting shelter guests to identify and connect to permanent housing. This focus can include: prominently

displaying information about how to access housing; linking people rapidly to local coordinated entry processes that can further assess their strengths, needs, and preferences; ensuring easy and rapid access to housing navigation services; and providing assistance with collecting documentation necessary for determining program eligibility. Some shelters have started this transition to supporting permanent housing outcomes by targeting and/or prioritizing “long-term stayers,” people who have been in shelters the longest, for permanent housing placements.

Providing Housing Navigation Services. Emergency shelters can make access to available housing resources as easy as possible for shelter guests by having on-site access to the community’s coordinated entry process and by connecting guests to housing navigation services. In some communities, these housing navigation services exist at a community level and support people experiencing homelessness in a variety of settings, including unsheltered settings, rather than being situated in each individual emergency shelter. Regardless of how they are configured, emergency shelters can contribute to a rapid flow into permanent housing opportunities by ensuring that everyone experiencing homelessness has quick access to sufficient supports needed to obtain housing. That will likely not be a “one size fits all” approach, nor can it be a purely “self-service” model, either.

Using Data to Improve Flow. Emergency shelter use patterns are not static. Shelters should maintain essential data—minimally defined by the Universal Data Elements for the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)—about people using and seeking to access shelter. This information can help the community:

- understand shelter use patterns and detect changes in them,
- identify frequent users for more intensive follow-up or targeted interventions like supportive housing,
- reduce the length of time spent in shelter, and
- right-size emergency shelter capacity within the crisis response system.

Ideally, this information can also be connected to the community’s coordinated entry processes and, if appropriate, to agencies and programs that administer mainstream resources that can help resolve the underlying crises leading to homelessness.

Ensuring Safety and Tailoring Responses. Many emergency shelter models specialize in specific populations, such as single adults, families, youth, or people fleeing domestic violence. Shelters should tailor their responses to the needs and strengths of the populations seeking assistance. This tailoring could include special provisions to

Community Spotlight: Bergen County, NJ

As the country’s first community to end chronic homelessness, Bergen County’s approach to preventing and ending homelessness involves extensive coordination among partners. The county’s one-stop center, which is managed by the Housing Authority of Bergen County, provides shelter for 90 single adults and offers access to numerous co-located housing and mainstream resources. Shelter guests complete a coordinated entry assessment to guide needed referrals and create a housing plan, and the center promotes awareness among staff and guests that the emergency shelter is designed to promote movement into housing as quickly as possible. To demonstrate that their community had successfully reached an end to chronic homelessness, the community assembled community-wide data—including data on shelter users and use patterns—to confirm that every person experiencing chronic homelessness had been connected with housing and that the community was able to sustain these results.

[Learn more about the initiative.](#)

address safety and confidentiality risks for survivors of domestic violence or population-specific services designed to address the circumstances that triggered the housing crisis.

Planning as a System. Perhaps the greatest challenge is to ensure that every community's capacity for outreach, diversion, housing navigation, and shelter are sufficient to promote an effective flow through the system and to maintain continuous availability of an adequate supply of shelter beds. As mentioned above, communities have an opportunity to use their data to right-size the number of crisis beds available and staff needed to support them based on demonstrated need and the ability of programs to connect people to permanent housing.

In communities with little or no congregate emergency shelter, this may require providing financial assistance for rent, utilizing motel voucher models, or exploring other crisis housing models. Particularly in rural communities where shelters are often very long distances apart, these strategies are important for ensuring that people experiencing housing crises have access to safe accommodations while permanent housing is being secured.

Rather than positioning these different components of a community's crisis response system in competition with one another, the scale of outreach, diversion, housing support, and shelter capacity must be sufficient to ensure smooth flow from any homelessness situation rapidly back into housing. Determining the scale of the needed resources requires seeing emergency shelter in the context of a community's entire system to prevent and end homelessness, and to have strong partnerships and collaborations across these interventions.

Questions to consider to help your community's emergency shelter serve as a platform for housing access:

- Does your emergency shelter provide immediate assistance and link guests with housing options?
- Does your emergency shelter use data routinely to detect trends, identify frequent users, and monitor housing success and other performance measures?
- Does your emergency shelter provide population-specific supports, as appropriate, and how does it promote safety and reduce risk for all shelter guests?
- Does your emergency shelter coordinate with the broader homelessness service and housing systems in system-level planning?
- Does your emergency shelter assess and address the safety risks for people fleeing domestic violence?

Scaling and Financing Emergency Shelter

Every community faces the challenge of ensuring that shelter capacity is scaled to meet local need and that it is financed accordingly. Not every community in which there are currently people experiencing unsheltered homelessness needs to expand the supply of emergency shelter. In making projections and decisions regarding necessary capacity, communities should also consider how a broad range of changes and improvements within their crisis response systems will impact need and demand for emergency shelter, including: increased emphasis on diversion strategies and services; reductions in the length of time it takes for guests to move from shelter to permanent housing, including through expanded rapid re-housing interventions; removal of barriers to entry; and increased emphasis on long-term or frequent users of emergency shelter. Here are some specific options that communities could explore in that process:

Modeling and Using Data. Determining the right scale for emergency shelter requires understanding who is already experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the community, the inflow at which people enter the system, and the permanent housing (both targeted and mainstream affordable) units available for creating pathways out

of homelessness. Having sufficient outreach capacity to effectively identify and engage people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the community will be a critical component. The communities' current capacity and balance of resources must be assessed systemically. Data about shelter stays, exits, and outcomes are essential to create a realistic and appropriate emergency shelter model.

Leveraging Federal Sources. While a few communities are able to finance emergency shelter development and operations using federal sources alone, many will need to braid and blend local, private, and federal funding sources to develop new emergency shelter. Communities should assess the potential uses of:

- HUD's Emergency Solutions grants
- USDA's Community Facilities program
- HHS' Runaway and Homeless Youth Basic Center program
- HHS' Community Services Block Grant program
- HHS' Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
- HHS' Family Violence Prevention and Services program
- DOJ's Office of Violence against Women program grants
- GSA's disposition of Federally-owned property

All have been used to support shelter development and operations in communities.

Building Local Public and Private Partnerships. Many communities rely on local revenues to support shelter development and operations. In addition to direct investments from state, local, or Tribal governments or philanthropic partners, some communities have fostered innovative public/private partnerships with local businesses providing funding or leading fundraising campaigns to support shelter development and operations.

Resources

The following resources may be helpful for communities seeking to increase the impact of their emergency shelters and creating an effective crisis response system in their communities:

- [Using Shelter Strategically to End Homelessness](#)
- [Housing First Checklist](#)
- [Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments](#)
- [HUD's Final Rule to Ensure Equal Access to Housing and Services Regardless of Gender Identity](#)
- [National Resource Center on Domestic Violence](#)
- [National Alliance to End Homelessness' Emergency Shelter Learning Series](#)
- [National Alliance to End Homelessness' Low Barrier Self-Assessment and Action Plan](#)
- [HHS' Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters and Related Resources](#)
- [National Alliance to End Homelessness' Closing the Front Door: Creating a Successful Diversion Program for Homeless Families](#)

Checklist for Implementing Emergency Shelter within an Effective Crisis Response System

This checklist can help your community maximize the impact of its emergency shelter capacity and strengthen its crisis response system.

Promote Dignity and Respect

- Does your emergency shelter consistently implement practices to meet people where they are and provide person-centered care that focuses on personal strengths?
- Do your policies or value statements convey clear expectations that shelter guests will be treated with dignity and respect, and does the shelter monitor adherence to these expectations?
- Are expectations of shelter guests clearly communicated and easily accessible for review by guests?
- Do you have specific practices that help ensure that the shelter exhibits cultural competency and provides appropriate protections for shelter seekers across demographic differences?
- Does the shelter set only minimal and reasonable requirements for shelter guests, and does the shelter enforce these requirements in a fair and transparent way?
- Does the shelter involve shelter guests in governance and operations?

Divert People from the Homelessness Service System When Possible

- Does your community's process for accessing shelter assess options for diverting from shelter?
- Does your community's diversion approach include, when needed, financial assistance, mediation, housing location, legal assistance, or other supports?
- Do mainstream programs play a role in supporting shelter seekers and diversion efforts?

Adopt a Housing First Approach and Create Low-Barrier Access to Emergency Shelter

- Does your emergency shelter have minimal expectations or requirements of people seeking shelter?
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