

Part 3: Process Steps to Create a Housing Crisis Resolution System

In Part I we discussed “the vision” and established the rationale for communities to create Housing Crisis Resolution Systems (HCRS). Part II lays out the key features of a HCRS. In this document we lay out a recommended process to develop an HCRS.

The table below provides an overview of the key steps. Following this we have provided detailed suggestions for each step of the process.

1: Convene Leadership and Make Decision to Create HCRS
2: Approve Planning Process and Decision Making Structure
3: Define the Scope of the Homelessness Problem
4: Assess Effectiveness of the Existing System
5: Identify Strategies to Improve Effectiveness: System Entries – Coordinate Entry and Diversion Strategies Shelters and Other Interim Housing System Exits – Housing Interventions
6: Model the Impact of Identified Strategies
7: Establish and Approve New Goals and Set Quantifiable Objectives
8: Develop Five Year Implementation Plan To Achieve Objectives
9: Begin Implementation!!!
10: Monitor Progress and Refine Strategies

Step 1: Convene Leadership and Make Decision to Create an HCRS

Purpose and Desired Result:

Creating a Housing Crisis Resolution System (HCRS) typically requires high level buy-in from community leadership that has authority to set and implement policies and change how resources are invested. The creation and oversight of the HCRS must be embraced as a system-change initiative that will have a measurable impact on the size of the homeless population in the community. The desired result of this step is that key leaders make an affirmative commitment to measurably reduce homeless by designing and implementing a Housing Crisis Resolution System.

Key Activities:

This document assumes there is an individual, group or organization that has decided the community needs to move to a HCRS and is beginning to initiate the process. This person or entity should:

- Identify leadership group members. Who oversees the key sources of funding for homeless services and housing? Who has the “juice” to drive change in our community?
- Typical members include local elected officials, City or County Department heads (housing, health, human services), large private funders of homeless programs in the community, Continuum of Care board leadership, business leaders who are directly involved in homeless initiatives.
- Review the latest data and evidence on Housing Crisis Resolution from the homelessness field (e.g. HUD, NAEH, Focus Strategies website) to understand and communicate the benefits of shifting to an HCRS: it will actually end homelessness, ensure system resources are invested more effectively and with better results.
- Convene meetings to get identified leaders on the same page about what a HCRS is and what it isn’t; and why it is important to create one (See Parts 1 and 2 of this series).
- Reach agreement to create an HCRS.

Important Dos and Don’ts

Do: Include stakeholders who have authority to enact changes that will directly impact homelessness.

Do: Include local public and private funders who have the authority to make strategic resource shifts.

Do: Be sure leadership understands the purpose of an HCRS (to quickly help people with nowhere to live secure housing) and what the key features are.

Don’t: Include in the leadership group organizations that are conflicted – recipients of funding from the homeless system. These organizations should have opportunities to provide input as described in Step 2.

Don’t: Start from a blank slate. A real HCRS will have the same key essential features, regardless of the local community context. (See Part 2 of this series). If the leadership wants to insert other features or consider other approaches, this is most likely a distraction from creating an HCRS.

Step 2: Approve Planning Process and Decision-Making Structure

Purpose and Desired Result:

The purpose of this step is to design a planning process that will lead to the adoption and implementation of a Housing Crisis Resolution System that has strong support and buy-in, is feasible to implement and will have a real impact on homelessness. The key challenge of the planning process is deciding who will have input and how their input will be used. Since the main features and strategies that actually end homelessness are already well known and supported by evidence, the work to get there is less about “what will we do?” than “how will we do it?” It can be challenging to figure out how to meaningfully involve organizations who are currently funded by the existing system and who may have to change their programs when the HCRS is implemented.

The desired result of this step is agreement about who will be involved in the planning process, what their roles will be, and what elements or features they will have the ability to shape.

Key Activities:

- Affirm the role of the leadership group in making the decisions about the design of the new system
- Identify other organizations, existing planning groups, or other stakeholders from whom the leadership group would like to solicit input (e.g. homeless providers, CoC board, homeless people)
- Identify lead staff who will do the day to day work
- Identify any needed technical support, such as from organizations outside the community or from consultants
- Design a decision-making structure, making clear the role of the different groups
- Create a work plan and timeline to design the HCRS, identifying what will be decided at each stage and by whom. A suggested work plan would follow steps 3 through 8 of this document
- Consider what local factors might shape the timeline (e.g. release of local funding NOFA, CoC planning calendar)

Important Dos and Don'ts

Do: Make clear what aspects of the system are open for debate and what are not. For example, an effective HCRS must include a strong diversion component, so whether or not to incorporate diversion is not something to be decided. How to implement diversion (e.g. where it will take place, how it will be resourced, whether provider training would be helpful) would be an appropriate question for the planning process.

Do: Present data and evidence at every step of the process to inform decision-making.

Do: Create opportunities for providers and homeless people to express their fears and hopes about the new system.

Don't: Ask for input that you don't intend to use or is not a strategic component of achieving the goal of a HCRS.

Step 3: Define the Scope of the Homelessness Problem

Purpose and Desired Result:

Being clear about who is homeless in the community is a key first step in developing an HCRS. Ideally the system design will encompass strategies to ensure that no one is homeless for longer than 30 days. While some communities may create their systems in phases, beginning with particular populations, it is essential to understand the whole and set a goal to house everyone who is homeless.

Another purpose of this step is for the leadership and planning groups to affirm who the HCRS is designed to serve and who it is not. An HCRS helps people with nowhere to live to secure housing as quickly as possible. It is not a system to prevent all housing crises or to address housing instability and poverty. (See Parts 1 and 2 of this series). The desired result of this step is a clear understanding of the size and composition of the homeless population, meaning those people who are unsheltered or living in emergency shelter or other forms of interim housing.

Key Activities:

- Review and analyze Point in Time (PIT) data, HMIS data, and other local data sources
- Create a definition of the scope of the problem that includes your best estimates of the number of homeless people at a Point in Time and over the course of a year, including only those who are unsheltered (living outdoors, in vehicles, other unsheltered locations) or in shelters/transitional housing
- Estimate how many of these literally homeless households are single adults, families with children or youth, and how many are chronically homeless
- If available, estimate how many people newly enter homelessness each year (meaning they become unsheltered or enter shelter).
- Use these estimates to create a description of the problem you are trying to solve that is focused on the problem of literal homelessness

Important Dos and Don'ts

Do: Be inclusive of all populations of literally homeless people, including single adults, families, youth, veterans, people who have fled domestic violence, and others.

Don't: Try to solve poverty and housing instability. If you define the problem as inclusive of all the people in the community who are rent-burdened, facing possible eviction, living in informal or doubled up situations, or otherwise experiencing unstable housing, you are not designing a HCRS.

Sample Summary Problem Description:

At a point in time our community has approximately 400 homeless people, of whom 300 are living in shelters and 100 are unsheltered. This includes about 50 chronically homeless single adults, 250 non-chronically homeless single adults, 80 people in families, and 20 youth. We estimate that over the course of a year, about 650 people become homeless each year. Our HCRS needs to be designed to find solutions for approximately 650 homeless people on an annual basis, as well as strategies for addressing the existing population of chronically homeless people and long-term shelter stayers.

Step 4: Assess Effectiveness of the Existing System

Purpose and Desired Result:

Most communities have a collection of services, shelters and housing programs for people who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, but they do not have a Housing Crisis Resolution System. To begin shifting to an HCRS, communities have to take a hard look at their existing strategies and programs and assess which ones are contributing to ending homelessness and which ones are not. All existing efforts should be looked at with the lens of whether they are helping people who have nowhere to live secure a place to live as quickly as possible. The desired result of this step is to identify what elements of the community's existing approach are effective and what needs to change.

Key Activities:

- Review your community's strategic approach to address homelessness
- Make an inventory of initiatives, strategies, programs, and services
- Include CoC and ESG funded programs, locally funded programs and other initiatives or projects that are central to your community's approach to homelessness
- For each one identify what are the key objectives and whether the objective includes helping people with nowhere to live get into housing
- For each one identify if there are data sources that will allow you to measure what it is accomplishing. Is there HMIS data? Information from another data system or data source?
- Collect the data you need to assess how well each element of the system is meeting the overall goal of an HCRS. Key measures to consider:
 - How many literally homeless people does this initiative, program, or service assist? How many of the people served in this program are actually housed but deemed to be "at risk" of homelessness?
 - Does this initiative, program or service help people secure housing? How long does it take on average? How many people actually secure housing as a result of this program?
 - How much does this initiative cost in relation to the numbers of people who secure housing?
 - How many people who are served by this initiative, program or service return to homelessness within a defined period of time?
- Analyze the data you have collected and use it to identify what elements of your system are really addressing the problem you identified in Step 3 and what parts of the system are addressing other problems. What parts of the system are effective at addressing the problem you have defined? What could be improved? Is available data adequate to even assess results?

Note: Focus Strategies has tools that can help with this analysis: www.focusstrategies.net/swap

Important Dos and Don'ts

Do: Use data to assess performance.

Don't: Assume activities or initiatives are effective based on anecdotal evidence or on assumptions about "what works." Unless there is data that shows the activity, initiative or program is returning literally homeless people to housed situations at a reasonable cost, it is not effective.

5: Identify Strategies to Improve Effectiveness

Purpose and Desired Result:

The purpose of this step is to use the data gathered in Step 4 to develop a set of strategies, programs and initiatives that will be more effective at reducing homelessness and that will function together as a seamless Housing Crisis Resolution System. The desired result is a preliminary plan to either create new system components or re-tool existing components in three broad categories: (1) system entries; (2) shelter and interim housing; and (3) system exits.

Key Activities:

- Review information collected on what parts of your existing approach to homelessness is effective and what is not working well
 - Review data and evidence from other communities to help inform choices about what might work better
 - Develop a list of the key system changes you think are needed to transform your current approach into an HCRS. To truly create an HCRS, this list must include three key elements. See Part 2 of this series for additional details:
 1. **System Entry - Coordinated Entry and Diversion.** An HCRS must have a Coordinated Entry System (CES) designed to streamline access into housing for people who do not have a place to live. An effective CES:
 - Includes intensive outreach and engagement with people who are unsheltered and do not seek help from the HCRS;
 - Connects people who are not literally homeless to other systems that can meet their needs.
 - Integrates a robust diversion approach at every entry point, so that when literally homeless people first approach the system, the initial intervention is to problem solve to find a no-cost or low-cost solution to their housing crisis.
 - Uses standardized tools and processes to assess housing needs and match people to the most appropriate and least intensive intervention possible;
 - Prioritizes people who have the highest housing barriers for assistance from the HCRS.
 - Has no side doors - access to the HCRS is only through the CES.
 - Is integrated into HMIS
- See Part 5 of this series for more information about Coordinated Entry Systems
2. **Shelter and Other Interim Forms of Housing.** In an HCRS, shelters are where people go to get housed. An effective shelter and interim housing component:
 - Includes a robust diversion component, so that shelter capacity is preserved for people who have no other places they can safely go.
 - Provides people with a safe place to stay while they resolve their housing crisis.

- Has minimal barriers to access and program participation requirements.
 - Offers all shelter residents help with devising and executing a plan to secure housing quickly and provides access to trained and knowledgeable housing locators or housing specialists.
 - Offers other crisis services and connections to others service systems, but the main focus is on helping residents secure housing.
3. **System Exits – Housing Interventions.** An HCRS has an array of interventions available to help people exit from literal homelessness or a shelter stay into a safe and permanent housing situation. These should include:
- **Rapid Re-Housing.** Data suggest that the vast majority of homeless people can exit homelessness through rapid re-housing. Like diversion, rapid re-housing is a major components of the HCRS – not a standalone “program.” An HCRS should offer rapid re-housing for all population types (families, single adults, youth, etc.) and have minimal barriers to participation.
 - **Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH).** PSH is reserved for those chronically homeless people who have very high service needs and high levels of functional impairment. PSH is operated using a housing first approach. Chronically homeless people are screened in, not out, and there are low barriers to entry.

Important Dos and Don’ts

Do: Make **data-informed** decisions about what strategies and interventions are needed to improve the performance of your system.

Do: Develop strategies that will provide each homeless household with the least amount of assistance they need to end their homelessness. While ideally we would like every homeless person to have a deeply subsidized and permanent affordable housing unit, most literally homeless people do not need this level of intervention to become housed and not return to the HCRS.

Don’t: Engage in mission creep. The purpose of HCRS is to help people without housing secure housing as quickly as possible. Along the way the HCRS should connect them to systems and programs that can help meet their other service needs.

Data Informed Decisions: Example

Not Data Informed	Data Informed
Homeless people need to have incomes before they can be housed, so we need more employment services in our shelters.	We have reviewed data from our rapid re-housing programs for people with and without employment upon program entry. People who enter without income have slightly higher rates of return but most do not return to homelessness. We will increase our connections to external employment programs and we will budget to provide longer stays for a percentage of those who enter programs without income.

6: Model the Impact of Identified Strategies

Purpose and Desired Result:

The purpose of this step is to take the strategies developed in Step 5 and assess their quantitative impact on homelessness in the community. The desired result is that the approaches are further refined and prioritized.

Key Activities:

Using data you have analyzed in Step 4 and the activities identified in Step 5, model what would happen if you implemented the various different approaches at different scales and then use this information to refine your approaches.

- Be clear about any assumptions you are making and ensure they are grounded in your local context and supported wherever possible by your own data or national data.
- Examples:
 - What would be the impact on the rate of entry into homelessness and the overall size of the homeless population if 20% of the people currently entering shelter were diverted from shelter? What if it was 30%? Based on what you know about the people currently entering shelter, what is a feasible percentage that could be diverted?
 - What would be the impact on the size of the homeless population if you expanded your rapid re-housing programs to include single adults? Based on what you know about the cost per household in your existing RRH programs, what is a reasonable estimated cost per household? How many could be housed in a month? In a year? How many would likely return to homelessness? What would be the impact on the shelter system? Would you be able to reduce the number of shelter beds in the system?
 - What would be the impact of implementing a move-on initiative targeting 30% of existing PSH tenants? How much capacity would be freed up in the system and how many chronically homeless people could be housed?

Note: Focus Strategies has tools that can help with this analysis: www.focusstrategies.net/swap

Important Dos and Don'ts

Do: Use local data wherever possible to make informed projections about the impacts of various strategies.

Do: Make assumptions that are grounded in what is feasible in your community given the existing level of funder buy-in and available financial resources, political appetite for change, and capacity of the provider community.

Do: Be bold and optimistic. Doing things differently can make a big impact on the problem.

Don't: Pretend you can do the impossible. Don't model the impact of things that cannot possibly happen, such as sudden huge expansion of the supply of affordable or permanent supportive housing, unrealistically short program stays, or zero returns to homelessness.

7: Set Goals and Quantifiable Objectives

Purpose and Desired Result:

The purpose of this step is to finalize the set of strategies that will be included in your HCRS and set measurable goals and objectives so that you can track your progress. The desired result is a list of key goals and objective and a plan for how you will use data to evaluate whether you are succeeding.

Key Activities:

- Use the results of the modelling conducted in Step 7 to set specific and measurable objectives for your HCRS.
- Ensure measurable objectives relate specifically to helping people secure housing as quickly as possible and reducing the overall size of the homeless population to the point where no one is homeless for longer than 30 days.
- Objectives may be different for different populations and subpopulations.
- Examples of measurable objectives for the HCRS:
 - Percentage or number of homeless people who will be diverted from shelter
 - Percentage or number of people who will enter shelter or transitional housing and how quickly on average they will secure housing;
 - Percentage or number of people who are rapidly re-housed and do not return to homelessness
 - Amount of new rapid re-housing capacity created
 - Amount of new permanent supportive housing created and/or rate of increased utilization through move-on initiatives
- Identify the systems you will use to ensure data is collected and analyzed to determine if the objectives are being met. Generally speaking, activities designed to address and resolve housing crises can and should be tracked within HMIS.

Important Dos and Don'ts

Do: Set objectives relating to numbers of homeless people who obtain housing

Do: Be ambitious

Do: Be realistic

Don't: Set objectives that you have no systems to measure

8: Develop an Implementation Plan to Achieve Objectives

Purpose and Desired Result:

Once the key strategies have been identified and refined and measurable objectives have been met, the final step is to develop a detailed implementation plan. Generally speaking, an HCRS cannot be created in one huge shift, but must be done incrementally over an identified period of time. The implementation plan maps out a sequence of steps, including the responsible entity, activity and timeline for each step. The implementation plan might span more than one year, but should have a relatively short time frame for change (10 years would be excessive). The Plan will likely need adjustment over time (see Step 10), however it's important to act with urgency and make change continuously. The desired result of this step is a clear and feasible implementation plan.

Key Activities:

- Inventory existing funding sources in the community for homelessness-related activities and identify where resource shifts could be possible
- If your community has local funds that are made available through a local RFP or NOFA process, this can be a very good way to begin rolling out changes
- If local funding is invested in the HCRS, a shift to performance-based contracting can be a key implementation lever
- Assess where there are opportunities to implement changes relatively easily as a way to get started and generate excitement about results (i.e. find the “low hanging fruit”). For example, what would be involved in implementing diversion as part of your CES or in your shelters? Could you start a move-on initiative with your Housing Authority?
- Consider incorporating Learning Collaboratives where providers work together to support each other to make programmatic changes in alignment with the overall system change initiatives, such as strategies for shortening programs stays, working with households that are more difficult to house, etc.

Important Dos and Don'ts

Do: Break down the work into manageable steps.

Don't: Lose sight of the overall goal. If pieces are implemented independently of the overall plan for HCRS, you can end up with a collection uncoordinated programs and initiatives rather than a *system to end homelessness*.

9 and 10: Begin Implementation -- Then Monitor Progress and Refine Strategies

Purpose and Desired Result:

Once you have begun to roll out the implementation of your HCRS, use data to regularly track progress and use the results to refine your strategies. Although you will likely see strong results in many areas, it is also true that some assumptions you have made during the planning phase don't prove to be correct or that some aspects of the system change process are more challenging than expected or yield unintended consequences. Continue to identify what is working, what is not working, and make the shifts needed to improve effectiveness. The desired result is an HCRS that is continually refined and improved over time until you have reached a state where no one in the community is homeless for longer than 30 days.

Key Activities:

- Using the objectives you established in Step 7, develop a set of desired progress reports that will help the community understand what is being accomplished as the HCRS is implemented.
- Create a process and structure to collect and analyze the needed performance data. What organization will be responsible for this process? What authority will they have and decisions are they authorized to make?
- Create a process and structure for reviewing the data and determine what it means for the design and implementation of your HCRS (e.g. resource shifts, program development, policies, etc.). Who will be involved in this process? What decisions are they authorized to make? How will results be communicated to the community?

Important Dos and Don'ts

Do: Create a clear and transparent process for collection, analysis, and reporting of system level performance data.

Do: Present information in a clear and easily digestible way to all parties on a regular basis.

Don't: Collect and report on performance measures that are not related to your HCRS.

Don't: Collect information and then not share it, or share only good news