



Housing Crisis Resolution System Briefs:

Part 1: The Vision

Why Create a Housing Crisis Resolution System?

At Focus Strategies we believe that in America people living on the streets and in shelters is an unnecessary tragedy. Even with growing income inequality, poverty and high housing costs, no one has to be without a place to live for more than 30 days. We believe this based on the growing [evidence from around the country](#) and our own work which shows that with a reorientation of approach and resources, we can effectively end homelessness in our communities. But to reach this vision, our approach to addressing homelessness must change.

The Traditional Model - “Homeless Programs and Services”

When modern homelessness first emerged in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s it was treated as a crisis. Emergency shelters opened across the country to shelter people who didn’t have housing. When emergency shelters did not solve the problem of homelessness, we began to add more services, longer stays, more “programming” for people to “help them” *while they were still homeless*. Although we understood that most people lose their housing as a result of a crisis¹, we focused our attention on the many more significant problems we observed among people who were homeless...mental health issues, substance use, unemployment. The Federal government increasingly put money into longer-term programs and together we created “homeless people.”

While we invested resources into programs and services to help homeless people, we also identified the lack of affordable housing as a key source of the problem, and the creation of affordable housing as its best solution. This created a conflict in the way the field worked -- the solution was affordable housing we didn’t have enough of, but the resources were invested in programs that did not focus on helping get people into the housing we do have. These programs help **some** people to secure housing – but many do not become housed and many are never served at all. Collectively, the programs and services offered do not add up to a system in which no one has to be homeless for longer than 30 days.

Changing the Response – “Housing Crisis Resolution”

Changing our response requires basing our approach on what the data tells us. Data tells us that homelessness CAN be ended, if we understand what homelessness is and what it isn’t. Homelessness is the state of not having housing. People who are homeless typically live in poverty, but poverty is a different problem than homelessness. If we think we have to end poverty to end homelessness, then we will never take seriously the proposition that homelessness can be ended. But if we understand that people who have lost their homes are extremely low income people experiencing a crisis, then we can address that crisis, and we can do that for **everyone** who needs it.

¹ Medical crisis, sudden loss of income, domestic violence or family dissolution are the primary precursors to homelessness.

Without question, creating more affordable housing is fundamentally important and our continued advocacy for the creation of more units or permanent subsidies is required. Yet efforts to expand the supply of deeply subsidized housing units have not caught up with the need in most communities, and there are homeless people today who we need a response for.

We know that *most* people who have lost their housing are indistinguishable from very low-income people who have housing, with one major difference – right now, they are not housed. Many people in America face significant challenges to their household stability and well-being. Nearly 47 million Americans are living in poverty. On a given night there are fewer than 600,000 people who are homeless. Many people have the same issues that we associate with people who are homeless, and yet they are not homeless and do not require intensive services to make them “suitable” or “ready” for housing. We would not go into the homes of every person who has a substance abuse problem, mental health issue, budgeting difficulties, relationship problems, poor education, underemployment, or other problems, take them out of their housing, and require them to work on those things before they could be re-housed. And yet, with people who have no housing we do exactly that – we identify these things as the “reasons” for their homelessness and try to fix them before we help them get housed.

This is not to say that the people who lack housing may not also need assistance tailored to their specific needs. Quite the opposite. Many issues can contribute to a crisis. Help to address these issues and to achieve greater self-sufficiency is important for many households, both those that are housed and temporarily unhoused. But if we use the limited resources available to address the crisis of homelessness for these longer-term services, we will always serve the few and ignore the many who need help.

Most people who experience a period of homelessness become rehoused fairly quickly, with or without help from the homeless system. Some people with extensive barriers to housing need ongoing support, but the majority do not. Assistance to simply regain housing and connect to other support is sufficient to end homelessness for most people, at least for a period of time. They may not become rehoused in the kind of housing that we might define as ideal – they may pay more of their income for rent than we might think is financially sustainable, they might be sharing housing with friends or family in situations that are stressful, and they might live in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty. But they are housed. They are no longer among “the homeless” and are no longer exposed to the devastating trauma and long-lasting impacts associated with having no place to live.

Changing Our Definition of Our Field

To end “homelessness” we have to change our idea of what our field is here to do. What we need is not just a funding shift -- though we need that -- and not just a change of programs -- though we need that too. It is a wholesale re-visioning of what we are trying to accomplish and how we measure the impact of our work. We must begin to see our role as *the people who get people who have nowhere to live housed*. Not the people who fix people, not the people who try to end poverty, not the people who create more affordable housing, not the people who provide job training, or treat substance abuse or

mental illness – though we may need to help some of our clients get those services– but the people who help get homeless people into housing.

The housing crisis resolution system is like a hospital emergency department (ED). Practitioners who work in ED's have a different view of their jobs than General Practitioners. ED docs are there to stop the crisis from getting worse, to save lives, and get people back to the lives they were leading. General Practitioners are there to help a person address their health issues holistically and over the long-term by making different life choices or trying different medical interventions. Similarly, we are here to help people without housing have a place to live, and then connect them to those systems that can help them address the issues that might have contributed to their housing crisis. We cannot be paralyzed by the lack of affordable housing in our attempts to “save the patient”. We are treating a person experiencing the crisis of homelessness and we must pursue all available housing options.

If the Homeless System is **not** the system that is expert at helping people with no housing to quickly secure housing, then who will do this work? There is an entire anti-poverty system designed to help with other needs that impact long-term well-being, such as education, employment, and behavioral health. There are affordable housing advocates and non-profit housing developers working to create more units of affordable housing and permanent housing subsidies. Along the way, like an ED ensuring the patient gets an appointment with a specialist for follow-up or making suggestions for life changes, we may help households on the road to greater well-being and economic improvement, but the responsibility of the homeless system is to be laser focused on doing what no one else does well: help people with the most difficulty getting housing to get and keep the housing they need.

To do this, every community must develop a [Housing Crisis Resolution System](#) that takes as its mission one thing: to rehouse people who are without housing, and to do so as quickly as possible and with a reasonable expectation that they can remain housed.

Leaders and advocates in this system must:

- Make a commitment to create a HCRS that quickly returns people who have lost their housing to a state of being housed
- Use data to inform decisions and to make the case
- Clarify the message so that the purpose and goals of the system are well understood by providers, clients, decision-makers and the public
- Insist that funders at all levels use their homeless dedicated resources to end homelessness, not to provide services to homeless people.
- Advocate for additional resources *if needed* only after using all current resources

Funders of this system must:

- Invest their resources in proven interventions that target homeless people with the greatest needs, have low barriers to entry, and result in homeless people gaining and maintaining housing at the least cost possible
- Use outcome metrics to measure the impact of their investments and move their funding as needed, even if it means no longer supporting programs the community values and perceives as effective
- Commit to a systematic approach to providing assistance to all, and insist that it be followed

Providers in this system must:

- Be open to the lessons that data has to offer. As data is increasingly used to understand how well the system is housing clients, understand that shift requires letting go of beliefs formed over time that are based on anecdote and personal experience. Change can be hard, but it can be exciting and rewarding, too
- Examine program policies and remove requirements that create barriers for homeless people to access assistance;
- Measure success on the numbers of people they successfully rehouse, how quickly and how permanently
- Orient their programs and staff to this approach; and reorient the private resources they control to this end

Clients in this system must

- Be empowered to make decisions in their own interest
- Be given the dignity to succeed without support, or with support if they choose
- Stop seeing themselves as "homeless" and start seeing themselves as people experiencing a housing crisis

Together we can end homelessness.