

Collaborative(s): Chronic and Veterans

Driver: Accelerating Housing Placements

Strategy: Implementing Housing First Policies and Practices; Adequate and Targeted Housing Resources

Bright Spot(s): Community-Wide Housing First (through CES); Closing side doors for referrals to permanent supportive housing

Community Name: Houston

Contact(s) (OK to list publicly? Yes/No): Yes

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Problem You are Trying to Solve:

Houston began planning and implementing the Way Home Houston Action Plan in 2014 to address the following challenges:

- The path for a homeless individual or family to end their homelessness (secure permanent housing) was not clear
- While Houston had some Housing First programs, the system as a whole was not oriented toward Housing First
- Funding for homeless services was not efficient or coordinated
- Chronically homeless people were not generally prioritized for permanent supportive housing
- Chronically homeless people represented less than 20% of Houston's homeless population but were consuming more than 75% of Houston's homeless resources, often without resolving their homelessness

Description of the Bright Spot for this Change Idea (Bottom Line Up Front):

In 2014 Houston Coordinated Access System launched an Action Plan that prioritized the most chronic and vulnerable. Chronic and vulnerable homeless people are prioritized for permanent supportive housing (PSH) and all access to is PSH is controlled by the Coordinated Access System. Interestingly, while this Action Plan resulted in chronically homeless people with substance use issues, mental health

issues and other challenges being prioritized for permanent housing and in many barriers/extra steps toward permanent housing placement being removed, the term “Housing First” is barely used in their detailed plan.

Implementation Process:

The key in Houston to achieving moving Houston to a Coordinated Entry System with a Housing First orientation was the development and implementation of the Houston Way Home Action Plan in 2014 (see relevant materials below). This plan led to the creation of the Houston Coordinated Access System that prioritized the most chronic and vulnerable for permanent supportive housing. In addition, the implementation of this plan resulted in the following:

- Effectively closed all “side doors” into permanent supportive housing so that all access was controlled through the Coordinated Access System
- Set up a new governance structure to ensure coordination, system-wide transformation and accountability
- Using data driven decision-making to make best use of limited resources and to right-size the system
- Prioritized families and individuals with a moderate level of acuity for Rapid Rehousing
- Created “bridges” to other systems
- Coordinated the following programs and services:
 - Outreach
 - Assistance with benefits, finances, employment
 - Rapid Rehousing
 - Permanent Supportive Housing

As the plan was implemented, staff working in homeless services began using a common assessment, began prioritizing chronically homeless people (and others who had been assessed as being the most vulnerable) and quickly placing them into permanent housing (without requiring that they “graduate” from transitional housing, take medication for a mental illness or ensure their sobriety as a condition for housing placement).

In the past, these clients wouldn't have been prioritized, would have been made to “jump through many hoops” before being deemed “ready for housing” and generally wouldn't have been placed into permanent housing. As it rolled out, Houston saw skeptics begin to change and give the Coordinated Access System with its prioritization of chronic and vulnerable homeless people a chance, and they saw

that Houston was housing (and seeing good housing retention) among people that many skeptics thought weren't housable.

As Houston was launching the implementation of this plan, they emphasized frequent and transparent communication with leadership from the local homeless and housing providers and ongoing training for the dedicated Coordinated Access staff. The plan's leadership went to local providers and asked them to dedicate case managers and staff for Coordinated Access.

Communications and building support and excitement for Coordinated Access was crucial. Houston created a logo for Coordinated Access, marketing materials, t-shirts, business cards, etc.

Rather than beginning everywhere within the Houston area (multiple counties), Houston started in the downtown area. This process began with conversations with The Beacon (the main provider downtown) to get some space at their location and get them to dedicate some staff to Coordinated Access. They approached this downtown provider with "can we try this out?" not with "we have figured all of this out and here's how you need to implement Coordinated Access" and that appears to have reduced resistance and to have been helpful in securing buy-in. The downtown hub started with 2 dedicated housing assessors (including one re-purposed staffer from the Beacon) and 2 housing navigators (both at the Beacon).

Resources Needed for Implementation:

- Support from government leadership and leadership of the Continuum of Care (CoC)
- A detailed plan (that can be updated as needed)
- Communications and marketing materials
- The ability for homeless providers to dedicate some staff time and resources toward Coordinated Access
- Data and a commitment to data transparency

Measures, Outcomes and Evidence of Effectiveness:

Among the measures of effectiveness of Houston's Coordinated Access System are the following:

- The Coordinated Access System closed all "side doors" into PSH so that all entry into PSH goes through this single system
- Homelessness is down 57% in Houston between 2012 and 2015
- Houston has an 88% retention rate among chronically homeless individuals placed into permanent housing

Adapting to Other Contexts:

Houston's overall approach that relies on planning and the ability to continually update and refine the plan should allow for it to be readily adapted for use in other urban centers.

Bringing the Leadership Along:

Houston had strong support from leadership within government from the start, but had to bring along leadership from homeless and housing organizations. By starting small (with one provider and in one neighborhood) they had a chance to demonstrate some success before asking other providers to come onboard.

Houston also found that data transparency was crucial in bringing the leadership or local organizations along. This included performance dashboards since starting in 2014 for PSH, Emergency Shelter/Transitional Housing and Rapid Rehousing, in which these dashboard indicated whether individual programs were hitting local and federal targets.. The dashboards started out being anonymous (individual programs were not named) but after the first 6 months, Houston began naming agencies/programs and providing targeted support to help programs to meet their targets.

Relevant Materials:

- [Houston Coordinated Access Fact Sheet](#)
- [Houston The Way Home Action Plan \(2015-2017\)](#)
- [Houston Resource Guide \(for people experiencing homelessness\)](#)
- [Houston Income Now One-Pager](#)
- [Houston Income Now Fact Sheet](#)
- [Houston Rapid Re-housing Fact Sheet](#)

Pro Tips:

- Start small with a neighborhood or zone of within the community and with just a few providers. Once you have worked out some of the kinks into the system and are starting to see success, you can expand to other parts of the community.
- Consider using both carrots and sticks with stakeholders. As Coordinated Access rolled out providers received bonus points (on HUD renewal funding application) if they accepted clients only through coordinated access. After the first year, points were docked points if they didn't accept coordinated access.