

# Top 10 Fears on Housing First

## **I'm afraid that people just aren't ready for housing**

One of the core principles of Housing First is the belief that all people are ready for housing. People may face barriers to renting (low to no income, poor credit, eviction histories, criminal background, sobriety, etc.), but these should not create conditions or barriers for a person who is experiencing homelessness to be denied housing – a basic need. These barriers only point to the need to expand our tools in being able to support the individual who has them. When an individual has a safe and solid foundation (housing), they can rebuild their life (choose to engage in services that will help them maintain that housing).

## **I'm afraid we won't be able to support tenant needs**

It is very likely that you have already been serving tenants with varying levels of need. People experience unexpected crises, and housing staff use a variety of resources and strategies to provide support. This will not change by aligning with Housing First. By working closely with partners who can assist with situations and experiences that are beyond agency staff expertise, such as behavioral health and domestic violence providers, all tenants can be supported in housing.

## **I'm afraid for the safety of other residents and staff**

We cannot predict who will be violent, and when violence may occur. (This may also include an abusive partner or family member of survivors of domestic violence.) The link between violence and mental illness is often overstated by media and in the public mind. More often than not, people living with mental illness are victims, not perpetrators. By training staff in crisis intervention strategies they can assist tenants in managing challenging and escalating behaviors. Training in trauma and mental health can also provide additional tools in helping staff understand behavioral health, and respond to violence only when a true threat exists.

## **I'm afraid to compromise the sobriety of other tenants**

Shifting to a Housing First approach does not necessarily result in serving more tenants with active substance use. Reducing barriers (and aligning with Fair Housing) also prohibits screening out people in recovery. In cases when a person is actively using substances, it is important for property management and supportive services to partner closely to prevent potential eviction caused by behaviors related to active use. Harm reduction supports people in reducing the negative impacts of substance use; ensuring service staff are trained in harm reduction can be critical in supporting all people in various stages of sobriety.

## **I'm afraid the cost of operating our projects will go up because of increased evictions, turnovers and damages**

We cannot assume that lowering barriers to housing will mean that people will struggle more with tenancy issues. Similarly, we cannot assume that people living with disabilities or mental illness will cause more damage to their housing. In fact, research shows that there is no correlation between criminal background histories or behavioral health and future problematic tenancy. Operating housing can come with these kinds of costs, and agencies should anticipate some of these costs in operating budgets to reflect the potential for these kinds of losses.

### **I'm afraid tenants won't engage in services**

Providing voluntary services does not mean engaging tenants is voluntary – it simply means tenants can decide what services to engage in and how frequently they do so. Engaging tenants to participate in services means creating opportunities that are of value to and respectful of tenants. Engagement strategies will likely need to be creative, require off-site/out of office opportunities for meeting, and reflect the individual goals of each person.

### **I'm afraid this won't work for the population I serve**

Housing First is a strategy that can work for any population. Housing First provides the flexibility to tailor interventions and services based on the individualized needs of any person or population. The success of Housing First relies on the responsiveness and motivation of staff and the agency to ensure the strategy and the people served, have a chance to succeed.

### **I'm afraid we'll have to evict tenants and they'll just become homeless again**

We must challenge ourselves to not assume that people will fail. The more we give people the opportunity to succeed, the more success we'll see. National data also demonstrates Housing First is incredibly effective in assisting people in maintaining housing. Even with short term assistance and minimal supportive services, as in Rapid Re-housing, people do succeed. By orienting a system and services around Housing First principles, there is a greater likelihood that people will succeed in housing, and will maintain that housing.

### **I'm afraid we won't be able to do this without extra funding**

While some programs have funding to provide intensive and thorough services to support tenants' mental health needs, it is not a requirement of Housing First. Having established and intentional partnerships with community partners is key. Programs can utilize their partners' expertise to support the individualized needs that are presented by their tenants/clients. Call upon them when their expertise is needed.

### **I'm afraid Housing First will alienate our neighbors and threaten community relationships**

We cannot do this work without the support of our neighbors with homes. Local cities are creating spaces for communities to come together to address some of these concerns. As you become more versed in Housing First, the more comfortable you will become in advocating for this approach within your community. By thoughtfully engaging your neighbors over time, you may find yourself with more positive community relationships and future advocates.

### **A note about fears:**

Some of the fears associated with Housing First and subsequent shifts in who programs may serve and how they are served are often rooted in our assumptions and biases about people living with addictions or mental illness, and people living in poverty. Making these shifts without consciously examining these biases can often limit our capacity for change. Questions that we can ask ourselves/our teams to challenge these assumptions include:

- Why is this policy/practice in place?
- Who or what does it serve?
- What does it communicate to the people we serve?