



Seattle/King County Integrating Principles of Diversion in our Homeless Response System

Table of Contents

- Overview of Diversion Services 3**
- HMIS and Data Collection Requirements 6**
- On-going Training and Learning Opportunities 7**
- Frequently Asked Questions 8**
- Examples of Diversion Services 9**

Overview of Diversion Services

Diversion services, sometimes called *shelter diversion*, assists households in quickly securing temporary or permanent solutions to homelessness outside of the shelter and homeless services system. The main difference between diversion services and other housing-focused interventions centers on the point at which intervention occurs. ***Diversion services targets households that are requesting entry into shelter or housing and have not yet accessed homeless services.*** Diversion services assists households to identify immediate, alternative housing arrangements and, if necessary connect them with services and financial assistance to help them obtain or return to housing. Skilled diversion providers partner with households in finding creative solutions to their needs while reserving shelter beds for those families or individuals who have no other options.¹

While the term “diversion” is specific to the point at which the intervention occurs, the **approach used in diversion can be implemented throughout the entirety of the homeless response system.**

Role of diversion services within the Seattle/King County Homeless Services System

Diversion services has an important role to play in the homeless services system:

- Diversion services supports households to look for creative solutions that can be quickly implemented. Creative, time-sensitive services can make housing instability brief for diverted households.
- Diversion services prevents households that have short or longer-term options for housing stability from entering the homeless system. This reserves emergency shelter beds and other homeless services for households who have no other options available to them.
- Diversion services support creative and cost-effective solutions to meet households’ needs by recognizing their unique strengths.

Integrating diversion principles throughout the homeless response system:

- Diversion principles can be leveraged by emergency shelter or other non-permanent homeless service staff to support household’s obtainment of temporary or long-term housing options outside of the homeless system.
- Using a diversion approach can decrease the length of time homeless and open service capacity for others in need.

Explanation of diversion services, or diversion approach

Diversion services are flexible, light-touch services that may be coupled with minimal financial assistance that results in a temporary or permanent housing arrangement. Five diversion (and prevention) principles outlined by the National Alliance to End Homelessness include:

- **Principle 1: Crisis resolution**

Every situation that could result in homelessness is a crisis for the person experiencing it. Crisis resolution responses must include: rapid assessment and triaging, based upon urgency; an instant focus on personal safety as the first priority; de-escalation of the person’s emotional reaction; definite action steps the individual can successfully achieve; assistance with actions the individual is

¹ Modified from *National Alliance to End Homelessness*, “Closing the front door: Creating a Successful Diversion Program for Homeless Families” (2011).

temporarily unable or unwilling to attempt; and returning the person to control over their own problem-solving.

- **Principle 2: Client choice, respect and empowerment**

People in crisis may feel paralyzed by the urgency and the potentially devastating consequences of their situation. Homelessness prevention services must help people in crisis regain a sense of control and feeling of empowerment to actively overcome obstacles. A constant emphasis on the client's goals, choices, and preferences, an unwavering respect for their strengths, and reinforcement of progress are essential for empowerment. This does not mean clients are protected from the natural consequences of their actions.

- **Principle 3: Provide the minimum assistance necessary for the shortest time possible**

Respect includes “letting go” as soon as the person has the resources, knowledge and tools to continue their lives—however they choose to live them. Providing “just enough” to prevent homelessness enables a program to help far more people in crisis. Often this means ensuring resources are used to help persons at-risk of losing housing of any kind—persons who would otherwise end up on the street or in an emergency shelter—before using resources to provide assistance for other needs. Providing non-essential assistance to a program client will cost someone else in the community their housing.

- **Principle 4: Maximize community resources**

Mainstream assistance programs are intended to be the backbone of every community. Creating duplicate services for a sub-population such as people at risk of homelessness allows mainstream agencies to continue to bypass or ineffectively serve people who have a right to better quality and access. Duplication also wastes valuable, limited resources that could be spent to keep more households from becoming homeless.

- **Principle 5: The right resources to the right people at the right time**

The earlier a program intervenes in a housing crisis, the lower the cost. The outcomes may look impressive, but research shows that most people who receive prevention assistance would not have become homeless even without assistance. The later the intervention, the more costly and the lower the success rate. But at the latest stages of an individual's housing crisis, it is virtually certain she or he would have become homeless without assistance. Good prevention programs strive to target people who have the highest risk of becoming homeless but who also have a good chance of remaining housed if they receive assistance.²

No conversation about accessing diversion services will be the exact same, however, the questions for the household should be designed to begin exploring potential resources and solutions to address the immediate need for housing stability. Diversion conversations may include the following questions/topics:

- **Where was the last place you slept where you were housed and felt safe?**

If they slept somewhere where they could potentially safely stay again, there might be an opportunity for diversion.

- **Even if it's temporary or means staying with someone you know, can you think of any housing options that might be available to you in the next few days or weeks?**

² National Alliance to End Homelessness, “Diversion and Prevention Principles”.

Even if there is an option outside of shelter that is only available for a very short time, it's worth exploring if this housing resource can be used.

- (If there is an option to stay in someone else's housing) **What needs to change or happen in order for you to stay with your friend/family? Can those issues be resolved with reunification, dispute resolution, financial support, etc.?**

If the issues can be solved with mediation or financial assistance (or all of the above), there might be an opportunity for diversion.

- (If moving into their own unit is an option) **What resources or steps would you need to obtain housing on your own (financial assistance, landlord advocacy, transportation, etc.)?**

If the household could obtain their housing with some assistance, let the family or individual know what role diversion services can play.

Diversion conversations should be focused on an individuals' housing situations, resources, and ability to identify and obtain safe housing options outside of the homeless housing system. The role of staff is to partner with the household to identify viable alternatives for temporary or permanent housing stability. Services and best practices include:

- Hold diversion conversations that foster effective participant "problem solving". These conversations include open ended questions, and motivational interviewing.
- Follow the lead of the household and do not inhibit the household from pursuing a housing situation, even if it's only a short-term solution.
- Be accessible advocates to landlords and debt collectors, if what's required is short-term and directly links to a housing solution.
- Serving as a mediator to assist households in having difficult conversations with individuals in their support network. This sometimes will be with friends/and or family, debt collectors, or landlords if it is short-term and leads to a housing alternative.
- Share ideas or resources for housing search.
- Serving as an advocate or negotiator with landlord or debt collector
- Connect households to longer term supports and resources, including mainstream services that can address on-going needs.
- Facilitate financial assistance for solutions that require a financial component.

Integrating Principles of Diversion throughout our Homeless Response System

While the term "diversion" is specific to the point at which the intervention occurs, the **approach can be used throughout the entirety of the homeless response system.** This intervention approach is intended to be flexible and responsive to the needs of households experiencing homelessness no matter where they are in their experience of homelessness. Unless otherwise indicated by the funding source, households should not have to provide any documentation or 'proof of homelessness'.

Successful diversion

Successful diversion comes in multiple forms. The household could be in their own home, living with family or friends, or they could be in shared housing. In obtaining these outcomes, diversion might support a household go back to the home they have recently stayed (i.e. mediation, food assistance, back rent) or it might support

a move out of the area to stable home (i.e. bus fare, phone facilitation) or it might be a move into a new housing situation (i.e. landlord advocacy, first/last rent).

A successful diversion solution may be temporary. Sometimes it's difficult to project how long a temporary housing solution will last, but a good practice is to aim for a solution that will last for at least 90 days.

Flexible financial assistance

Diversion does not always include financial assistance, but when it does diversion funds can be used for in a variety of ways provided they directly result in a housing solution. Refer to your funding sources for any constraints, but the most common uses of financial assistance include:

- Transportation (including bus tickets for both local transportation and relocation)
- Fees for assistance securing ID's, birth certificates, social security cards
- Payment for background and credit checks
- Move-in costs (including deposit and first month's rent; cost of moving truck; storage)
- Utility deposits and arrears
- Previous housing debt/rental arrears
- Grocery card
- Certifications or license fees related to school or employment
- Vehicle repair
- Work or education related assistance
- Other types of financial costs that will help the household obtain housing

Financial assistance limit per household

May vary by funding source.

HMIS and Data Collection Requirements

Including data in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) assists our community in evaluating the impact of diversion and other homeless services. Whether a household enrolls in formal diversion or if they are exiting from emergency shelter, providers should complete the standard HMIS intake.

If a household is successfully diverted or if a household finds a housing solution outside of the homeless response system and has completed a Coordinated Entry for All assessment, homeless service staff should notify the CEA so they can remove the household from the CEA queue. This can be done by sending an email with the Clarity ID to cea@kingcounty.gov.

On-going training and learning opportunities

To support on-going learning and best practices, various Learning Circles were created. These are an opportunity for staff trained to provide diversion services to come together to problem solve, share best practices and connect with funders or evaluators.

Additional resources on how other communities are using diversion services can be found here: [Cleveland Mediation Center Ed Boyte](#) or [National Alliance to End Homelessness Prevention and Diversion Tools](#)

Diversion questions

For best practices and skill building contact All Home at Danielle.winslow@allhomekc.org.

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the difference between homelessness prevention and diversion?

Homelessness prevention targets households who are still in housing and at imminent risk of homelessness. Households who are at risk of homelessness may include situations such as, facing eviction from their own or rented home, couch surfing with friends/family, or paying for a motel without assistance. Diversion targets households when they are no longer sleeping in doors and when they are seeking emergency shelter or homeless housing services.

How are diversion services different from standard case management?

The goal of diversion services is to be focused on responding quickly to finding housing solutions. Diversion services are meant to be a very flexible, light-touch intervention, with limited follow-up. If the individual or family needs more intensive support, you can refer them to appropriate case management or other supportive services.

Can someone explore diversion services AND complete a CEA housing assessment?

Yes! While we want to do our best to find housing solutions outside of the homeless system, situations are dynamic and sometimes diversion services does not work out the way the household thought. For that reason, we don't want to miss the opportunity to complete a housing assessment while we are already working with them. However, once an alternative housing solution is found, even if it's temporary, you will need to alert the CEA referral team at cea@kingcounty.gov to remove the household from the community queue so they aren't considered for a CEA resource.

Can I use diversion financial assistance for households to access a homeless housing programs?

No. Diversion financial assistance is meant to divert individuals and families from the homeless housing system, which includes shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing.

Do we need to document homelessness status before working with a household?

Proof of homelessness is not required in order to allow for flexibility and speed in resolving the homeless situation. However, if the RAP staff working with the household and discovers they do not meet the homelessness definition to be eligible for CEA and diversion services, they should stop services and refer the household to resources that might better fit the household's needs to maintain and strengthen their housing situation.

What if the household isn't able to divert in 30 days

If a household cannot divert within 30 days, exit them from diversion. A household can reconnect with RAP staff to access diversion services when they are ready and have identified a housing solution. Households in CEA continue to be in the community queue for housing resources until they are housed.

Examples of Diversion Services

Example #1

A couple and their two children came to a Regional Access Point (RAP) for help. From the assessment process, the RAP staff learned they were evicted from their apartment a week earlier because they used their rent money to pay one of the children's medical bills. Embarrassed by their situation, the family decided to stay in their car and put their belongings in storage. They wanted go back to their old building because it is conveniently located near the father's job and the children's school, but feared their relationship with their former landlord was damaged beyond repair.

The mother said she might have a co-worker who would be willing to put them up for a week or so but felt too ashamed to ask and didn't want people at work to think she was a bad mother. The RAP staff helped the family strategize about how to ask the co-worker for assistance and provided a referral to a low-cost health care clinic nearby where the family can take their sick child for continuing care and gave them information about affordable health insurance options.

Once the family confirmed they could stay with the mother's co-worker, the RAP staff focuses on the family's longer-term housing plan. They made a call to the old landlord to discuss the family's situation. During the call they find out that the family had a positive rental history and was previously well-regarded by the landlord, but when the rent didn't come and they lost contact, the landlord didn't know what else to do, but move forward in the eviction. With diversion financial assistance, the RAP staff was able to pay the rental arrears if the landlord worked with the family in returning to the unit. After a few days of staying with their co-worker the family was able to move back into their previous unit.

Example #2

A single adult comes into a RAP for a housing assessment requesting shelter. The RAP staff asks about her situation and finds out that she was previously on a lease with a partner in a small town in Eastern Washington. When their relationship ended, she felt she had to get out of the area and heard Seattle had a thriving job market. As she searched for a job she spent her savings on motels, but as her savings ran low she started staying outside where she got connected to an encampment. She is working part-time and hasn't been able to save enough for first and last month's rent.

The RAP provider asks her what kind of housing situations she feels would be safe and viable for her. After confirming that she didn't have any connections in the area, but had lived with roommates in the past, she decided that figuring out a shared living situation would be her best option. Knowing that diversion financial assistance could be used for moving costs, she was able to reconnect with diversion assistance after identify a woman renting a room in her home.