

# Housing-Focused Shelter

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In partnership with:  
**Canadian Shelter Transformation Network**



**CANADIAN SHELTER  
TRANSFORMATION NETWORK**

and  
**Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness**



**Canada**

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## Foreword

OrgCode Consulting Inc., in partnership with the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, are proud to bring you this manual on how to become a housing-focused shelter. It encapsulates many years of practice, evaluation, training and leadership by Iain De Jong and Tracy Flaherty-Willmott of OrgCode in helping shelters from California to Rhode Island, Alberta to Northern Ontario make the transformation. This has included shelters with fewer than 20 beds to shelters with more than 1,500 beds. What is clear in case study after case study is that lengths of stay go down, positive exits to housing go up, and returns to homelessness go down.

Over the past few years, OrgCode has also been working closely with the Capacity Building team of the National Alliance to End Homelessness in the United States to improve shelter practices so that the shelters are more housing-focused. We have jointly prepared materials, presentations and workshops in the past. Presentations have been given at both National Alliance to End Homelessness and Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness conferences. Some of the ideas and materials shared in this manual are built upon our shared work with the National Alliance to End Homelessness, and reiterates some of the key themes presented at conferences.

This guide is meant to help get the process started of becoming a housing-focused shelter. For some shelters the information in this manual may be enough to hit the ground running. It would not be surprising if other shelters feel it necessary to get more technical assistance and support to work through all of the details of the transition. We welcome opportunities to be more engaged with your shelter or your entire community of shelters to help you make the necessary changes to be housing-focused. We believe that shelters are critical in the work of ending homelessness when they are housing-focused. We want to assist your community in ending homelessness.

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## 1. What is a Housing-Focused Shelter?

A housing-focused shelter is unrelenting in its pursuit to make homelessness as brief as possible while returning people to permanent accommodation. This may be through a Coordinated Access approach, but in many instances is achieved through self-resolution, outside of Coordinated Access. From the moment an individual or family pursues shelter, there are efforts to ensure a safe and appropriate exit from shelter.

Shelters are critical to ending homelessness. As shelters go, so too does the rest of the homeless service delivery system. Have shelters focus on short-term stays with a strong housing orientation and the system works well. Have shelters focus on programming and longer lengths of stay – perhaps in the pursuit of healing, fixing or preparing people for housing – and the system bottlenecks; people get stuck in shelter for months if not years.

Shelters will always be necessary. At any point in time there will be people dislodged from housing that need temporary accommodation. The real question in many communities is “How many shelter beds do we need?” Not until a community has grappled with and implemented a housing-focus to shelters can that answer be known. Otherwise, need is too often over-inflated, which also too often means more of the wrong approach to sheltering.

Housing-focused sheltering has growing momentum. Many shelter providers, through self-reflection and critical questioning, have come to appreciate that they have instituted practices and embraced philosophies that do not yield strong

### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **This is not about adding some housing workers into the shelter, this is a radical transformation of how the entire shelter operation functions and the identity of the shelter.**
- **Be prepared for upheaval from staff and guests as you work through the process of becoming housing-focused.**
- **Ensure your funders and supporters know that you are making the move to become housing-focused.**
- **Do not apologize for using shelter to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.**

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positive housing outcomes. Instead they have overwhelmed their operations with too much programming that has nothing to do with exiting the shelter. Others have made the mistake of acting like an unpaid hostel where shelter users become the proverbial tail wagging the dog, and treat the shelter as their permanent home at no cost. In some jurisdictions there is no incentive to make shelter stays shorter, and in fact, may have billing practices that promote more people staying in shelter longer.

The movement towards having housing-focused shelter, while customizable within the opportunities and constraints of a local jurisdiction, is replicable. From massive shelter operations that accommodate more than 1,500 people a night to smaller operations that serve fewer than 20 people a night – all shelter sizes are capable of becoming more housing-focused. Furthermore, transformations to become housing-focused in shelter, are possible in all different types of housing markets and communities of various sizes; the transformation has been successful in major metropolitan areas through to rural communities alike.

Making the shift to become housing-focused is neither easy nor fast. This is not to say there are no quick wins (there are) but sustaining the change within the shelter operation turns out to be a difficult, challenging task. Most shelters that make the switch to become more housing-focused find that it takes 12-18 months of careful planning and implementation to get right and create a pathway for sustainability.

It is hoped that this manual will provide the information and detail necessary to help expand curiosity and implementation of more housing-focused shelters.

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## 2. Claim the Identity: We are a Housing-Focused Low Barrier Shelter

There are some shelters that have an identity crisis. They may claim to be a shelter – may even claim to be a housing-focused shelter – but continue to operate things like substance use recovery programs within the shelter or provide second stage housing for people leaving incarceration and as such have breathalyzers and zero tolerance policies. A housing-focused shelter is just that: it’s primary focus is housing and does not operate other programming that can interfere with ensuring stays are short-term with a return to housing rapidly.

### Housing-Focused Shelter Tips

- **Be clear and unrelenting that it is a housing-focused shelter, starting with first engagement with the shelter.**
- **Ensure that the shelter is accessible as possible for people with the highest acuity and deepest needs.**

The messaging within the shelter, from intake through to all other engagements with staff, must be consistent as it relates to the housing goal. Some shelters find it helpful to post this messaging in the shelter, advertise metrics of how many people have moved into shelter, and/or have staff uniforms with slogans like, “What is your housing plan?” The housing-focused shelter must work to ensure that people do not see the shelter as a place to stay indefinitely or where there are no messages explicitly stating the housing goal.

Housing-focused shelters must also be low barrier. This does not mean no barrier. It simply means that every reasonable barrier to shelter access (and by extension housing access) has been removed. It can be helpful to think of some of the most vulnerable people who are homeless in your community and ask, “Do they have easy access to shelter?” If they would not easily be able to access shelter, then policies, procedures and practices need to change.

To become a low-barrier shelter, it may be necessary to examine things like intake processes, rules and expectations, sleeping arrangements, hours of service, and how belongings are investigated or stored when brought onto the shelter premises. Some shelters fear that they will lose control over people if they become low-barrier or that staff will be at risk from a health and safety

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perspective. Training is important and often necessary to help staff better accommodate people who tend to have higher acuity and who may exhibit behaviours that are challenging to cope with in larger communal settings.

### 3. Where Do We Start?

Four key pieces are necessary from the start of the transformation:

1. Do we really want to do this?
2. What principles do we hold in common that will anchor and guide our work?
3. What model of governance are we going to use for the transition?
4. What is the role and function of leadership in the process?

#### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **An organization has to be “all in” to be successful.**
- **Develop shared principles - common beliefs - that will ground and guide the transformation.**
- **Good governance leads to good transformation.**
- **A leader or leadership group must be identified to lead the process and changes for transformation.**

Becoming a housing-focused shelter is one of those endeavours where you have to be “all in” if it is going to work. This, often, is not about playing at the margins of shelter operations. This is about getting into the weeds of the operations and transforming them, usually quite radically. It frequently leads to difficult questions, different opinions, and feelings of loss of identity.

In answering whether or not you really want to do this, consider that there is often two factions that can work against you every step of the way, and sometimes a third. The first faction that can work against you are some long-term staff that have become accustomed to delivering shelter services in a particular way. On face value they are likely to say they are on-board with becoming more housing-focused. But their questions and actions will lead you to a place where they can seem obstructionist or polemical. The second faction that often works against you in the pursuit of becoming housing-focused are existing long-term and repeat shelter users. It is entirely possible that they chose and like your shelter because there have not been demands or expectations related to short-term stays with a housing-focus. What housing-focused shelter represents to them can be quite disruptive. From time to time a third group works against

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the shelter transformation process of becoming more housing-focused: funders. While on the one hand many funders have been speaking the language of outcomes over outputs for quite some time, that does not mean that all funders want to provide leadership to ensuring there are housing outcomes, especially when that may come in conflict with shelter operators. Similarly, there are some funders that just flat out refuse to have the tough conversations internally (including with elected officials) on changing funding models to have a stronger housing-focus.

Principles are the fundamental beliefs that we hold in common. Often implied or assumed, rarely do organizations make explicit what their shared principles are, and even more rare, how those principles inform their work and decision-making. Principles should not be a list of aspirations or platitudes. They should be – or have the potential to be – operationalized. Let’s say, for example, that one of the shared principles is that homelessness should be rare, brief and non-recurring. That sounds great. It begs the question, though, of *how* would we ensure that homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring, as well as *what* are we doing currently that makes this not the case (or at least presents opportunity for refinement and improvement).

At the start of the process of becoming more housing-focused, it is recommended that the relevant stakeholders spend time determining the 3-5 principles that they hold in common and will inform the work. It is better to have 3-5 strong, shared, clear principles than a laundry list of platitudes or hopeful aspirations.

For the transformation to become a housing-focused shelter to work, there must be an appropriate governance model put in place from the start. Governance determines what is in scope, who is responsible, and provides for authority in decision-making. Depending on the size of the shelter and the amount of transformation required, governance may be very centralized with one group that meets on a regular basis and makes decisions, or it may be decentralized with committees looking at various aspects of the transformation. In the latter it needs to be determined which decisions are made at the committee level and which decisions needs to be made by a centralized body.

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For governance to be effective, it must define accountabilities in the process. There are many moving parts in the transformation of becoming a housing-focused shelter. The complexity makes it ripe for finger pointing when things go awry. By identifying who is accountable for what in the process, and knowing who the champions are in the overall process, the transformation is made easier.

An extension of governance is leadership. To that end, every successful transformation needs a vision of the future, and a person or small group of persons to drive change towards achieving that future. While a lot of transformations rely on position power like the Executive Director to lead the charge, there are many examples of successful transformations to becoming housing-focused where the person(s) tapped with leading the process reports into the Executive Director and the Board of Directors, but does not have position power.

From the leader comes the overall management in execution of the changes necessary to become a housing-focused shelter. There are a large number of tasks that must be fully completed in order to achieve success. It may be that every single process is provided leadership by the same person. However, buy-in can be improved if different shelter staff are designated as the lead for different parts of the transformation. This only works, though, if each of those people leading different tasks shares the common principles and is empowered to lead their particular task area.

#### 4. Service Orientation

Housing-focused sheltering ultimately comes down to how we go about serving people who are homeless, and what our shared feelings are about their capabilities.

Shelters should work to reduce harm and promote health. Many go about doing this remarkably well in how they serve and respond to people who use substances or

##### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **Housing-focused shelter is harm reduction in action.**
- **Supporting people in the process of finding housing must be strength-based and trauma-informed.**
- **Following the core principles of Housing First is key.**



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participate in sex work. This is commendable. Housing, though, is a form of harm reduction. Housing is also good health care. By reducing the amount of time spent homeless, shelters are practicing a form of harm reduction and health care.

Shelters should be trauma-informed. Longer shelter stays can have the unintended consequence of exacerbating trauma. Shelters should be safe places where there is transparency that the shelter is going to focus on helping people exit the shelter. There should be a strong emphasis on collaboration in this pursuit, as shelter staff work *with* people to achieve this outcome rather than doing it *for* people or *to* people.

Shelters should work to be strength-based. A deficit-based orientation to shelter tries to figure out what is wrong with people and goes about providing a litany of programs and services to address those deficits, often because of very good intentions. For example, a person is living with chronic health issues, so health-services are brought into the shelter to help the person with their health. However, if the person can have their health issues addressed in shelter but loses their connection to health services if they leave shelter, then a longer shelter stay has been (inadvertently perhaps) incentivized. Or another example is the shelter that has guests with money-management concerns, so starts a trusteeship program in-house for shelter guests. However, if the person leaves the shelter they lose their trusteeship.

Shelters should follow the principles of Housing First. Perhaps most importantly, there must be emphasis on social and community integration. This integration needs to occur outside the walls of the shelter. People must return from shelter to the neighbourhoods and communities that are most supportive of their needs. Keeping people in shelter longer does not make them *more* ready for housing or more capable of integration. The opposite is more likely to be true.

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## 5. Diversion

Whenever it is safe and appropriate to do so, a person or family seeking shelter should be diverted from shelter. Diversion is not about saying “no” to service; it is about saying “yes” to meeting housing instability needs without requiring a shelter stay. A range of strategies from family reunification to issues mediation, from short-term financial assistance to tapping into existing financial resources are all on the table.

### Housing-Focused Shelter Tips

- Integrate Diversion into routine practices.
- Leverage people’s natural supports before providing shelter supports.
- If a person/family needs access to shelter because they cannot be diverted, get a housing-plan in place prior to shelter entry.

Diversion is not a program, per se. It is an approach to service delivery that is embedded into the DNA of the intake process. Except for already long-term, chronic shelter stayers, diversion is the *modus operandi* of the “front door” of the shelter system. Shelter should be reserved exclusively for those individuals and families that have no safe and appropriate alternatives.

There are different models for diversion. In essence they all share the same features: understand the current housing situation (or lack thereof) and problem-solve to figure out alternatives. There are multiple steps to the process, with the opportunity to progress through the steps if the diversion alternatives are not immediately known or operational.

The OrgCode model of diversion, which is one of the more popular approaches in North America, is as follows:

### STEP ONE: Explain the Process

Explanation of the diversion conversation.

*“Our goal is to learn more about your specific housing situation right now and what you need so that together we can identify the best possible way to get you a place to stay tonight and to find safe, permanent housing as*

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*quickly as possible. That might mean staying in shelter tonight, but we want to avoid that if at all possible. We will work with you to find a more stable alternative if we can.”*

What is being established in the opening script is a transparent explanation of what is about to happen for the person that is seeking shelter, understanding this may not be what they wanted to hear. First, we are interested in their housing situation *right now* – not the entire housing history. Second, it emphasizes that the work moving forward is something that will happen *together*. In other words, this is not a situation where a household can drop their housing crisis onto someone else’s lap to fix. Third, it focuses on safe, permanent housing, while being clear that if it is possible to avoid a shelter stay to achieve that, then doing so would be most desirable.

## **STEP TWO: Today’s Urgency and Untested Options**

Why are you seeking emergency shelter today?

What are all the other things you tried before you sought shelter today?

What are all the other things you have thought about trying but have not attempted yet in order to avoid needing shelter today?

The key element of the first question is emphasis on *today*. Another way of looking at this, and even probing for more information, is why they were not seeking shelter yesterday, and why they are not here tomorrow. In most instances, the diversion worker will learn of a specific conflict or event that has occurred that has brought them to a place of seeking services today. If it is possible to resolve the conflict or address the event before progressing any further, that should be done.

The two other questions are exploratory in nature. In learning what they have already tried, there is an opportunity for the diversion worker to learn what worked and did not work. There is also an opportunity to not suggest things that have already been attempted. The more important of the

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questions by way of diverting people from shelter is that which they have thought about doing but have not tried yet. In most instances this results in concrete actions that can be attempted at that moment, though taking those actions may require assistance with accessing a phone, counselling/briefing on what they are thinking of attempting, accessing transportation, etc.

### **STEP THREE: Last Night's Safety**

Where did you stay last night?

- a. If staying with someone else, what is the relationship between them and you?
- b. How long have you been staying there?
- c. Where did you stay before that?
- d. Would it be safe for you to stay there again for the next 3-7 days?
- e. (If a couple and/or household with children under 18) Would your whole household be able to return and stay there safely for the next 3-7 days?
- f. If indicate that the place where they stayed is unsafe, ask why it is unsafe.
- g. If cannot stay there safely, or if were staying in a place unfit for human habitation, move to Step Six.

You are trying to ascertain whether the place they are coming from is safe to return to while the household works on a more permanent housing solution. There are discernible differences in the diversion process when the person seeking shelter services has been in a safe, appropriate place for some time versus the person that is bouncing around from one location to another without safety and security.

### **STEP FOUR: Story Behind the Story (At Last Night's Safe Place)**

What is the primary/main reason that you had to leave the place where you stayed last night?

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Are there additional reasons why you can't stay there any longer?

Another way of looking at this step is “what is the story behind the story?”, which is intended to enrich the contextual understanding for the diversion worker to figure out a pathway forward.

### **STEP FIVE: What Would It Take to Stay (At Last Night's Safe Place)**

Do you think that you/you and your family could stay there again temporarily if we provide you with some help or referrals to find permanent housing or connect with other services?

If no, why not? What would it take to be able to stay there temporarily?

This is an entry into progressive engagement with diversion. Instead of going “all in” with a solution or even a range of resources, the fundamental question is “What would it take to be able to stay there temporarily?” In other words, the diversion worker is asking the service-seeker what they feel the solution would be rather than, perhaps, providing more resources than are actually required or more intervention than what would be necessary. Importantly, the diversion worker has to be able to take action on the types of “asks” the service-seeker may have, in order to divert them from shelter. For example, if the person identifies that helping out with groceries would make it possible to go back temporarily, the diversion worker has to have the immediate ability to support that, as opposed to having many layers of approval or passage of time to reach accessing the resource.

### **STEP SIX: New Place to Stay Temporarily**

If no, is there somewhere else where you/you and your family could stay temporarily if we provide you with some help or referrals to find permanent housing and access other supports? For example, what about other family members? Friends? Co-workers?

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What would it take for you to be able to stay there temporarily?

Again, step six is progressive engagement in action. It empowers the service-seeker to identify both other people and the resources that would be necessary to achieve the outcome rather than having finite resource options to suggest or trying to solve the problem for the service-seeker.

### **STEP SEVEN: Identifying Barriers and Assistance Required**

What is making it hard for you to find permanent housing for you/you and your family - or connect to other resources that could help you do that? What do you feel are your barriers? What assistance do you feel you need?

The fact that this step comes later in the diversion process is also progressive engagement in action. Rather than leading with barriers or history in the diversion engagement, we are focused first on action. It is entirely likely that many of the people seeking shelter services can be diverted before ever reaching this step. Rather than trying to prescribe a program or service response, the ball is put into the court of the service-seeker to name the barriers and assistance required.

### **STEP EIGHT: Current Resources**

What resources do you have right now that could help you and your family find a place to stay temporarily or find permanent housing?

The intention of this step is to focus on what the individual or family has rather than what they do not have, in order to progress further into finding a solution that does not rely on the service provider or system of care to solely be the solution to their housing instability. While additional questions can be added to probe for information, this step intentionally does not rely on a series of forms or a particular decision-making matrix in order to dictate how to proceed.

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## STEP NINE: Housing Planning

If admitted to shelter there is still an expectation that you will be attempting to secure permanent housing for you (and your family). What is your plan at this point for securing housing if you are admitted to shelter?

If the household has a plan in place, terrific. If not, there is an opportunity to engage in solution creation without provision of a one-size fits all solution. It is better that, from the front door of the shelter, there is a focus on having people plan their own exit prior to entry rather than having people come into service and then find the way out. This also is critical for setting up opportunities for self-resolution within shelter.

### 6. Intake

Intake is often a long, and in some instances intrusive, process. Shelters should leverage the information gathered in the Diversion process to inform the intake. Most notably, a shelter entry should never occur without a planned shelter exit – at least at a high level.

#### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **Limit information collected at Intake.**
- **Ensure there is a housing-plan in place at the end of the intake process.**
- **Make sure the intention of your shelter – HOUSING – is clearly communicated.**

In becoming a housing-focused shelter, it is important for the shelter to scrutinize their intake process. An eye towards progressive engagement is necessary. Another way of looking at it: *what do I absolutely need to know now about this individual or family and what can I probe for more information in the future if necessary?*

In the intake process, careful attention must be paid to what is required for billing purposes versus what needs to be known for a service purpose. Where billing is concerned, a shelter may need to work with its funders to decrease the information requirements of the individual or family at the time of intake. It is not necessary to know a person's entire housing history for billing purposes,

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though that does not stop some funders from requesting more information. There is an opportunity for advocacy in that regard.

Intake is the opportunity to make expectations of the shelter clear. The expectation that needs to be impressed upon people the most is that the shelter has a housing focus. Guests of the shelter are expected to work on housing every single day until housing is secured. The shelter is not to be used as an unpaid hostel. It is fair to say that in a housing-focused shelter more time is spent impressing the importance of housing upon people than trying to explain all of the other shelter rules or expectations.

## 7. First-time Shelter Stayers

For many, if not most, individuals and families the first experience of homelessness and use of a shelter is wrought with a range of emotions, from feeling overwhelmed to anger, from feeling depressed to confusion. The truth is, of those that are homeless for the first time, they want help quickly and they want to exit homelessness in almost all instances. A shelter must be designed to allow and encourage rapid exits. There must be a strong focus on rapid resolution while meeting immediate needs, not meeting immediate needs at the expense of rapid resolution by over-programming or offering too much support to people.

### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **Support first-time shelter stayers differently from repeat and long-term shelter stayers.**
- **Leverage resiliency.**
- **Do not immediately enrol first-time shelter stayers into programs.**
- **Have intentional conversations about housing daily for the first couple of weeks.**
- **If the person/family has not secured housing within a couple of weeks, the relationship must become more intensive.**

Data and evidence are onside with an approach that encourages rapid resolution. From the work done in Toronto in the late 1990s by Joe Springer and Jim Mars as part of the Golden Report through to game-changing research completed by Dennis Culhane, the data shows that most people who use shelters are more likely to be short-term stayers in their first experience of homelessness, with



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many never returning to shelter again. A housing-focused shelter will see benefits of leveraging this natural resiliency within people to get out of shelter quickly.

How first time shelter users are served can look quite different from how shelters serve repeat or long-term shelter users. One of the things that several shelters who have made the switch to being housing-focused have realized is that keeping the population of people who are first-time shelter users separate from other shelter users can be helpful. The thinking behind this is that when (exclusively) in the company of other first time shelter users there is a natural affinity towards encouraging each other to get out of homelessness and even looking at roommate type situations to exit homelessness. When mixed with longer-term shelter stayers this can have the unintended consequence of having people improve their expertise in being homeless and accessing homeless services rather than getting out of homelessness.

The first morning after the first night in shelter, a housing-focused shelter will round first time stayers together (head(s) of household in the case of families) and have a 5-10 minute discussion about operationalizing the housing plan starting that day. The intention is to identify tasks that can be taken while relaying urgency of working on housing. During the first two week period an intentional conversation must occur daily. These may be short in duration and either the morning or the evening. Shelters may find it helpful to prepare and share a variety of passive resources that can be provided to people to assist in the housing process. For example, resources may be prepared on getting social assistance, how to find a suitable roommate, how to fill out a housing application, and, preparing to meet a prospective landlord.

After approximately two weeks of short daily conversations, if the person/family has not secured housing the nature of the relationship must change. A staff person must be assigned to do a debrief with the individual or head(s) of household on what has worked well and what has not worked well in the relatively independent housing search up to this point. This is the time when an assessment should be completed to better understand strengths and barriers to housing. An individualized service plan must then be created incorporating the information from the debrief and the assessment results. The individualized housing plan becomes the backbone of the relationship with the shelter. The

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goals and tasks outlined within the plan should be tracked daily. Should a person or family begin to deviate from the plan, it may be reason for further intensive conversations with staff, up to and including transfer to another shelter or removal of services.

## 8. Repeat Shelter Stayers

Serving repeat shelter stayers looks a lot like how Diversion is practiced and how first time shelter users are served. The difference is in understanding where people were staying in between their returns to shelter. For those people where hospitalization and/or incarceration are the norm in between stays in shelters, it may be best to serve them like long-term shelter stayers. For those that are staying with friends or family or in their own apartment in between shelter stays, then there needs to be an understanding of what is breaking down in the in-between shelter periods, with a focus on strengthening safe and appropriate alternatives to shelter for longer or more indefinite periods of time.

### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **The characteristics and circumstances of the repeat shelter user will inform whether they are served more like a first-time shelter user or a long-term shelter user.**
- **Repeat shelter use must be examined across all shelters whenever possible, in communities with multiple shelters for the same population.**

Repeat shelter stayers, in communities with multiple shelters, need to be identified not just by return to the same shelter, but by returns to any shelter. A shared, open Homeless Management Information System is key to success. Through the use of data, it is possible to flag and understand the difference between rapid-cycling repeat users (say, for example, 10 or more returns to shelter in a six month period) versus longer duration out of shelter repeat users (say, for example, returns once in a twelve month period). While each case needs to be examined on individual merits, chances are the former would be better served through an approach that looks a lot like long-term shelter stayers and the latter would be better served through an approach that looks a lot like first-time shelter stayers.

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## 9. Existing Long-term Shelter Stayers

For a shelter to be successful at being housing-focused, there must be a strategy to address and serve existing longer-term shelter stayers. While the cut-off of what constitutes a long-term shelter stayer can vary, a good rule of thumb is six months or more of shelter stays consecutively (or very close to consecutively maybe with a night missing here or there) or one or more years of shelter stays cumulatively in the past two years. Like repeat shelter users, this must be examined across various shelters in communities that have more than one shelter, as opposed to just looking at stays at one particular shelter. Through inquiry at intake, it is also possible to learn about people's shelter stays in other communities, which would influence the identification of being a long-term shelter stayer (even though the data available is likely not an open, shared system across jurisdictions).

### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **A special strategy is required for existing long-term shelter stayers to overcome the bottleneck of accounting for a disproportionate number of bed nights.**
- **Create a list of all long-term shelter stayers and work to develop a housing strategy with each person/family.**
- **The strategy to serve the long-term shelter stayers will be informed by both their chronicity and their acuity.**
- **Be prepared for some long-term shelter stayers who have no desire to leave the shelter.**

Once the list of individuals and families have been identified who are long-term shelter stayers, it becomes clear that if the shelter system examines the majority of bed nights over the past year, they will likely have been occupied by these households. By assisting these households in exiting shelter, it improves flow for the rest of the shelter system. It also helps normalize that shelter stays should be short in duration with a housing focus. It can be difficult to nuance messaging to first time and repeat folks that they should move out of shelter quickly and focus on housing when, say, the person on the top bunk has been in the shelter for two years.

Two approaches have shown success in assisting long-term shelter stayers. One approach is to name this group as a priority in the community's Coordinated

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Access process. As such, these individuals and families are more likely to be selected for Rapid Rehousing or Supportive Housing resources. Some communities may also have preference for some social housing vacancies for this group. This strategy can be quite effective for those households that are both chronically homeless and acute in their needs. The second approach is to create a specialized team of housing staff, internal or external to the existing shelter staff, whose mission it is to decrease the volume of people on the long-term shelter list. This can be a very effective strategy for those households that are chronically homeless but not particularly acute in their needs.

Unlike most of the approaches outlined in the manual to have a housing focus to the shelter where existing resources are primarily used in different ways, because there is a surge quality to how a shelter (or the entire shelter system) goes about addressing long-term shelter stayers, there can be accelerated results if there is a time-limited infusion of one-time resources to address this particular issue. Those resources may be used for staffing, rental assistance, set-up costs, and the like. The more flexibility that is provided in how the resources are used, the more rapidly long-term shelter stayers can exit the shelter.

It must be noted that some long-term shelter stayers will be adverse to the idea of vacating the shelter for housing. There will be many reasons for this - from social to economic. There will be some long-term shelter stayers who consider the shelter to be their home. There will be some individuals and families who question their own capacity to live independently. Frankly there will also be some shelter staff who have become so accustomed to having some of the long-term shelter stayers around, especially those who help out with shelter chores or orientation, that the staff themselves will be reluctant to help them leave.

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## 10. Revamping Policies and Procedures

Look at the existing policies and procedures of the shelter. Is there any policy or procedure that is in place that inhibits the ability of the individual or family to access housing rapidly? This can be a function that includes a range of shelter staff, from frontline through to managers and executives, as well as including people with lived experience, whether they are current or former shelter guests.

Two areas can often require the most attention to ensure the policies and procedures promote housing access rapidly. The first is how bed assignment works. The second is expectations of people during the daytime.

Bed assignment is often done in the most efficient manner possible. When the shelter has a bed available and someone needs a bed, the empty bed is assigned. All of the other shelter guests return to the bed they slept in the night before. In some shelters this practice of having the same bed night after night turns into year after year complete with people storing all of their personal belongings in their bed area, putting up photographs and adding other personal touches as if their bed is their home. In a housing-focused shelter there are benefits to having positive disruption by assigning beds daily as opposed to assigning beds indefinitely. Not only does this reinforce the temporary nature of sheltering, it also allows shelter staff to accommodate guests with particular needs. For example, it can be helpful in bunk bed environments for shelter staff to make conscious choices of which guests get top bunks and which guests get bottom bunks.

### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **Form a diverse committee, including people with lived experience, to review the policies and procedures for their alignment to being housing-focused.**
- **Amend any policies and procedures that negatively impact the ability of people to access housing rapidly and/or create new policies and procedures that promote a housing focus.**
- **Make the move from shelter rules to a limited number of shelter expectations that are easily understood.**

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Bed assignment should not come with rewards or graduation to different types of beds. Historically, some shelters had guests start in a common dormitory, and the longer the person or family stayed they would graduate to smaller rooms, and in some shelters, to single occupancy units. People were rewarded for having long lengths of stay with commensurate behaviour that was pleasing to shelter staff. In some housing-focused shelter this is flipped on its head. What that means is people start in the best, most private rooms and if they are not achieving housing devolve to the point where they are in a shared dormitory with others.

Bed assignment can also be linked directly to working on a housing plan. In some housing-focused shelters the best beds are reserved for those individuals and families most actively working on their housing plan. The thinking in these cases is that they will not be staying long in the best accommodations before they are out of the shelter and into a place to call home.

Daytime expectations of people can be difficult to figure out even in housing-focused shelter. If someone is looking for housing, do they really need access to their bed during the day? Is it reasonable to expect that people will spend an entire day searching for housing? During their downtime should they be permitted to sit in a common lounge and watch television? Should staff be responsible for organizing social activities during the day? What about having staff organize clinics and workshops on housing? How will shelter staff deal with instances where a person or family decides they would like to stay inside and sleep or watch television instead of working on their housing?

There is no conclusive data that shows one approach to daytime expectations is better or worse than another. To most housing-focused shelter operators it has seemed common sense to remove access to the bed area for most guests under most circumstances so that people are not lounging in beds all day or settling in (the exceptions being people who worked late or are ill) when they could be working on housing. Similarly, most housing-focused shelters do not allow access to television or other entertainment until later in the afternoon or early evening.

One other thing that can require remedy is the removal of “Marvin Rules”. A Marvin Rule is a policy or procedure that was created in the past because a single guest (conveniently named Marvin) exhibited behaviour that resulted in

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problems. Examples of Marvin Rules in action range from bathroom access times to having to see staff to get toilet paper, from what people are allowed to wear in the shelter to whether or not they can keep their lighter in their possession.

Low-barrier, housing-focused shelters socialize expectations rather than enforcing rules. This is more than semantics. Helping people achieve expectations requires patience and effective communication as primary strategies rather than enforcement and punishment.

Many shelters, prior to working on becoming housing-focused, have pages upon pages of rules. The intention in a lower-barrier environment is to limit the number of expectations and to have a housing-orientation to aspects of the expectations. A sample from housing-focused shelters are as follows:

*All shelter guests are requested to meet these expectations during their stay:*

- 1. To work on their housing plan, and to exit the shelter as rapidly as is safe and appropriate, for permanent housing.*
- 2. Shelter guests are expected to work on their housing pursuit during the daytime and should not be in their beds or common areas without prior approval from staff.*
- 3. All individuals are responsible for their personal belongings. The shelter is not responsible for any personal belongings.*
- 4. To not have any unlabeled or mixed medication or medication belonging to someone else while a guest at the shelter.*
- 5. To not buy/sell anything or collect debt while on the premises*
- 6. To not participate in inappropriate intimacy on the premises*
- 7. To not take any photo, video or audio recording while on the premises without administrative approval. This is to protect the privacy of everyone at the shelter*
- 8. To not bring any weapons (real or replica) onto the property*
- 9. To not vandalize any of the shelter property*
- 10. For the safety of all guests the shelter requires all bags entering the building to be searched. Individuals may have bag searched by staff or they may opt to conduct a self-search*

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## 11. Changing Roles of Shelter Staff

Historically, for many shelters, if there was any emphasis on housing it was done by specialized staff within the shelter or specialized staff that were external to the organization. It was common for there to be evaluations of an individual or family's "housing readiness". Those viewed as being easier to serve and house were often assisted ahead of people that were not viewed as favourably, and the latter group often stayed homeless for a longer period of time. Chronic homelessness blossomed. And in this environment, many shelter staff become complacent, creating a culture where it was acceptable for people to be in the shelter for months or years at a time. Many shelter staff did not see it as their job to assist people with exiting the shelter for housing.

### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **Be prepared for the change management and relationship building that is necessary to help the staff team make the complete transformation to being housing focused.**
- **Invest in training to help staff succeed in being housing focused.**
- **Plan for some staff turnover in the process.**
- **Set housing expectations for every shift in the shelter, including overnight.**
- **Job descriptions likely need to be amended.**

Which shift a person worked within the shelter also seemed to impact whether or not they felt it was part of their job to be engaged in housing-related activities. For example, many staff that worked overnights saw their job more as safety officers or caregivers who were vigilant at keeping people safe and secure and enforcing policies and procedures, rather than seeing their job as working on housing – either directly with program participants who happened to be awake in the middle of the night or indirectly by improving housing resources.

In a housing-focused shelter, staff roles change. While this can present exciting opportunities for some existing staff, the changes in staff roles is also the reason why it is common for some staff to quit as a shelter goes through the transformational process. Exit interviews with some of these staff demonstrate that they either did not agree that a shelter should be housing-focused, that they felt ill-equipped to be housing-focused (required more training), or that if there was to be a focus on housing that doing so should come with additional pay.



Others had no issue with being housing-focused but rejected being low-barrier, and while there were no reported health and safety incidents as a direct result of moving in that direction, felt that they were unsafe in the workplace. This, too, was often a matter of being insufficiently trained to perform the task that was asked of them, placing them at unease.

While it is understood that not every shelter can operate 24 hours a day, the following are guidelines that can be modified for different types of shelter operations:

| <b>SHIFT</b> | <b>HOUSING RESPONSIBILITIES</b>   |
|--------------|---|
| Overnight    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updating passive housing resources</li> <li>• Searching for and printing out online listings of apartments for rent, completed nightly</li> <li>• Updating housing information bulletin boards</li> <li>• Engaging in housing conversations and planning with guests who are up during the night</li> <li>• Identifying first time shelter stayers for morning staff to engage with in the intentional housing conversation</li> </ul>   |
| Morning      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentional housing conversations with first time shelter stayers and provision of passive housing resources</li> <li>• Design and delivery of housing-focused workshops</li> <li>• Assessing housing needs for those that move beyond two weeks lengths of stay, and development of Individualized Housing Plan accordingly</li> <li>• Assistance filling out housing applications</li> <li>• Diversion attempts with people that show up for the first time</li> <li>• Partnership development with landlords</li> </ul> |
| Afternoon    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversion attempts with people that show up for the first time</li> <li>• Design and delivery of housing-focused workshops</li> <li>• Follow up on housing searches completed by guests during the day</li> <li>• Assistance filling out housing applications</li> </ul>   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessing housing needs for those that move beyond two weeks lengths of stay, and development of Individualized Housing Plan accordingly</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

In almost all instances, a change in job descriptions is necessary to ensure that staff will perform the housing-focused functions. Re-training is also quite common in order for staff to be able to meet the requirements of performing their duties in a housing-focused manner. In unionized environments, obviously, there is a process that must be followed to amend the job descriptions which can take cooperation from multiple parties, as well as requiring the time necessary to work through the process.

## 12. Housing Through Coordinated Access and Housing Outside of Coordinated Access

Housing-focused sheltering does not work if a shelter thinks it is the responsibility of Coordinated Access to house every single person or family within the shelter. That would create an impossible bottleneck in pretty much every community. There simply is not the capacity within Coordinated Access and associated resources to handle the volume of people that touch the shelter system. As such, there needs to be an understanding of when and how to attempt to house people outside of Coordinated Access versus how and when to house people through Coordinated Access, while not disturbing the integrity of the community’s Coordinated Access process.

- Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**
- Do not plan on everyone having their housing needs met through Coordinated Access.**
  - Create an expectation that self-resolution outside of Coordinated Access is the norm for most individuals and families.**
  - Build relationships with landlords.**

When housing outside of Coordinated Access the focus is on self-resolution – not using Rapid Rehousing resources or Supportive Housing resources. Occasionally it can mean housing through social housing, but not through any special process that places people ahead in the queue. The primary focus is on accessing housing in the private market.

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The first reaction to this in many instances is that this will be impossible to do because of a lack of affordable housing in the community. This is a defeatist mindset that can interfere with the ability to do housing-focused sheltering. As part of the planning and implementation process of becoming a housing-focused shelter, field research is often necessary to learn two things. One, where and how are most people in your community that are on social assistance finding housing? This requires speaking to tenants who are low-income that never become homeless. The shelter needs to learn what strategies these non-homeless people (often with the same or similar characteristics to the people the shelter is trying to house) and replicating them at scale. Two, recruiting landlords of low-income housing that are interested in working with the shelter to keep their units filled. This can even mean set-aside units specifically for prospective tenants that are recommended by the shelter.

Sometimes a shelter may balk at these two strategies, suggesting that they do not have the resources to implement them. How can a shelter afford not to if it is the answer to making homelessness brief? That said, these tasks (at least to get started) can be kicked off with volunteers, interns, or staff on modified duties (as resources allow). The strategies can also be implemented incrementally. Every answer to these two questions does not have to be answered overnight.

When housing through Coordinated Access the focus is on ensuring those accessing shelter most clearly resemble the priorities set in your community for Rapid Rehousing and Supportive Housing. If a person or family would be one of your top candidates for Supportive Housing because of their acuity and other characteristics, but they cannot access shelter, that is a problem.

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## 13. Rethinking Barring and Service Restrictions

One of the challenges of any shelter operation, whether they are housing-focused or not, is determining the conditions under which a person or family is denied service or has services taken away. What is the intention of doing so? Is it meant to be rehabilitative or is it meant to be punitive? Was there a specific concern regarding safety that could only be addressed if the person or family was removed from service? What if barring or restricting that family or individual from service means that they lose contact with supports that are trying to help them access housing?

### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **To be a low-barrier, housing-focused shelter it is likely that service restriction and barring practices need to change so that vulnerable individuals and families with behavioural challenges can be successfully housed.**
- **Try to be rehabilitative rather than punitive when a barring or service restriction must be issued.**
- **If at all possible, avoid permanent barring from all services.**

Housing-focused shelters, especially low-barrier ones, need to think critically about under which conditions a person or family will be barred or service restricted, the length of time for that service restriction or barring, and how they can maintain contact to address housing needs in the event of a service restriction or barring. When an entire community of shelters moves towards being housing-focused, there is a considerable amount of work necessary to try and harmonize these reasons across shelter providers.

Barring someone should always be a last choice when confronted with a complex behaviour situation. When an expectation is not being met, the first step should always be dialogue. The expectation that is not being met should be explained again. Once that (re)explanation is provided, an expectation should be set regarding what happens if the expectation is not met again in the future. Nonetheless, there will still be instances where a service restriction is necessary for the safety of the individual, others within the building, or the facility itself.

When it gets to the point where a bar is going to be issued, it is important that these are clear and transparent to all guests, and applied consistently by all staff.

Therefore, organizing types of service restrictions can be helpful, and keeping the number of categories small makes interpretation easier. Here is how one shelter transformed their barring infrastructure into four simple categories:

| Category   | Description  | Duration                                 |
|------------|--|--|
| Category 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence requiring more than first aid medical attention</li> <li>• Sexual Assault</li> <li>• Arson</li> </ul>  | 3 months                                 |
| Category 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Property damage over \$1000</li> <li>• On-going drug trafficking</li> <li>• On-going predatory behaviour</li> <li>• Violence requiring first aid</li> </ul> | 14 Days                                  |
| Category 2 | Repeated breach of Category 1  | 24 - 48 Hours                            |
| Category 1 | Breaches to the guidelines of the Emergency Shelter  | 10 minutes to 2-hour break from building |

Notice above that there is no such thing as an automatic lifetime ban. However, at the end of each bar period there can be a meeting between the guest and the shelter staff to assess where the person is at in wanting to meet the expectations moving forward. While in most instances the end of the bar duration is the end of the service restriction, there can be instances where there is no intention to meet the expectation and the bar is extended.

A shelter must also decide which staff under which circumstances can issue a service restriction. For example, Category 1 can be issued by any shelter employee, but a Category 4 restriction requires a Director level sign-off. For shelters that have multiple staff on per shift, there may even be a process by which peer review goes into issuances of the likes of Category 2 or 3.

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## 14. Clarity of Messaging and Intentions

A shelter environment that is housing-focused needs to provide clear consistent messaging to shelter guests, volunteers, interns, external partners and staff that the intention is to be housing-focused. If this is in any way ambiguous in key talking points or vague in how guests are engaged, then the benefits of being a housing-focused shelter are rarely realized. Shelters must be vocal and explicit in being housing-focused.

Every shelter looking to become housing-focused should do a walk-through of the facility and look at every flyer and poster. While postings related to housing should be prolific, messaging related to everything else should either be consolidated to one defined (small) area or eliminated altogether. There should be a housing-resource board (perhaps several of them) that are kept relevant and up-to-date by overnight staff.

Many shelters take pride in their food services and amenities. While a nice gesture, a housing-focused shelter tries to mimic what a person or family's food and amenities will be like when housed. Demonstrating that it is possible to eat (somewhat) nutritiously while on a tight budget is a positive example for guests. Similarly, amenities should resemble the sort of amenities that people will have when housed. Shelters should think critically about whether or not they want WiFi to be available to guests, the type of television cable package they have, access to gaming systems, the type of education resources available for families, etc.

Partner organizations operating out of the shelter should align their messaging to be in accordance with the housing-first approach. This includes both professional and voluntary services that may be made available on the shelter property. There is no point to have shelter staff work hard to build a consistent message around the importance and urgency of housing only to have it thwarted by partners that don't share that message or worse, provide a counter message.

### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **The housing-focused orientation must be clearly communicated to all people internal and external to the shelter.**
- **The shelter must put housing front and centre in all of the materials it produces.**
- **Clutter, like flyers and brochures for non-housing related activities should be kept to a minimum and consolidated in one place.**
- **Ensure food and amenities closely resemble what it will be like when people are living outside of the shelter.**
- **All partners working with the organization must share and promote the housing-focused approach.**

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When lengths of stay are prolonged there also needs to be consistent messaging of expectations. For example, a shelter may consider providing written messaging about the importance of working on housing at various intervals like 15 day, 30 day, 180 day and 365 day. The implications of not working on housing must be made clear and the shelter should not be used in place of housing. The language should be supportive, clear and non-punitive.

## 15. Data & Metrics Matter

Information, at regular and pre-set intervals, allows housing-focused practitioners to continue to reflect upon practice and make refinements whenever possible. In a housing-focused shelter there are three primary pieces of data that need to be collected:

1. How long are people/families staying in shelter(s)?
2. How many people/families move to permanent housing?
3. How many people/families return to homelessness?

### **Housing-Focused Shelter Tips**

- **Data is key to understanding if the transformation is working.**
- **Having a data committee, including some people who profess to not like data, can be very helpful.**
- **Rather than overwhelming yourself with a data overload, focus on doing a few simple metrics very well.**
- **Share your results transparently and broadly.**

Most housing-focused shelters start with collecting data and reporting on averages on a monthly basis. This is a very good start and a practice to spend time learning to do well. The data is easily graphed and trends are easily seen when plotted. Over time, a housing-focused shelter may choose to focus on enriching and deepening their understanding. Mean, median, mode and range may all be important. New insights can further be gleaned by breaking down the data by the likes of age cohorts of guests, gender of guests, income source, number of homeless episodes, acuity scores, whether they are a first time shelter user or repeat user or long-term user, and the like. For families, in addition to these some housing-focused shelters have gained valuable insights by examining the size of the family, as well as the number of heads of household.

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Having good data that is used to make program improvements is not a back-office function where frontline staff are unaware of the trends or where information is hidden from program participants, funders or the general public. Housing-focused shelters aim to be transparent in their performance and invite input from a broad range of stakeholders to further refine the work to improve results. As the organization gets better at being a housing-focused shelter and has amassed enough data points to actually illustrate trends, the data may also be used at the time of intake to further impress upon new shelter guests the importance of working on housing and demonstrating it is possible to exit the shelter without a likely return.

In the beginning, the shelter should report the data monthly. As the data collection matures and data is collected over quarters and years, it is possible to report out on annual results as well as make year over year comparisons. When working to become a housing-focused shelter, do not fret if in the beginning lengths of homelessness seem long, exits to housing seem low, and returns to homelessness are unknown.

Again, the importance of having an open, shared data system across shelters when there is more than one in the community serving the same population (for example, more than one single male shelter) is critical. This is not to say that shelter specific data is unimportant or should not be tracked – it is and it should. However, it becomes important to understand how people are served, and the results, of getting served by the shelter system, not just one shelter. This is especially true for two of the metrics: understanding how long people are homeless, and, understanding returns to homelessness.

Form a data committee comprised of a mixture of staff to improve your collection and use of data. Pay special attention to ensure this includes some people who claim no expertise in data and/or may claim that they do not understand or like data. This increases the likelihood of shared ownership of the data throughout the organization. It also expands ideas and insights of what the data means, how to use it, and what other data may be helpful to collect and report on in the future to make program improvements.



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## 16. Considerations for Shelters that Specifically Serve Survivors of Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence

There are an increasing number of shelters that specifically serve survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence who have made the choice and taken the steps to become housing-focused whenever it is both safe and appropriate to do so. The housing-focus becomes an integral part of the overall response with safety planning and support resources often shifting (at least in part) to how best to serve people in housing in community rather than prolonged shelter stays with second-stage or transitional housing.

### Housing-Focused Shelter Tips

- A shelter that serves survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence can also transform to be housing-focused.
- Safety and appropriateness are key.

## 17. Create a Change Plan

As the manual demonstrates, there are a large volume of tasks that need to be completed over a period of time to make the transformation into a housing-focused shelter. In most instances, the transformation takes 12-18 months. By the end of that period of time not only have the technical elements of becoming housing-focused been accomplished, the culture of the shelter (or the entire shelter system) has changed to be one that is unrelenting in its housing focus.

### Housing-Focused Shelter Tips

- Mapping out all of the changes that need to occur in the transformation is an encouraged first step.
- Do not be overly ambitious and try to do too many things at once. Plan on the transformation lasting 12-18 months.
- Ensure each task clearly articulated what needs to be done, who needs to do it, and when it will be completed.

The change plan should be prepared by the leader (or leadership group) tasked with making the shelter housing-focused. Good governance and a project charter will make it clear when the task is done, how the task is done, who is leading the task, and when/how sign-offs occur during the transformation. Even when there is one leader assigned to the

transformation it is best that the change plan be shared amongst other shelter staff and be transparent. This way, in the event that the leader leaves the shelter during the transition the work can continue to completion.

Here is a general list of the tasks that need to be completed. For some shelters there may be more than this, and others less. Consider the list a generally understanding as opposed to exhaustive detail of what must be accomplished. Furthermore, while some tasks like establishing leadership, articulating shared principles and developing a governance structure naturally are earlier in the process, there is flexibility in the order for a number of the other tasks. Put them in the order that makes most sense for your shelter (or shelter system).

| <b>Task</b>   | <b>What do we need to do?</b> | <b>When will we do it by?</b> | <b>Who is in charge of making it happen?</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Establish leader or leadership group  |                               |                               |  |
| Articulate shared principles  |                               |                               |  |
| Develop governance structure for transformation   |                               |                               |  |
| Develop a communications plan for the transformation  |                               |                               |  |
| Review policies and procedures  |                               |                               |  |
| Amend job descriptions of staff   |                               |                               |  |
| Review barring and service restriction approach   |                               |                               |  |
| Review rules and expectations   |                               |                               |  |
| Create data committee   |                               |                               |  |
| Train staff on service orientation  |                               |                               |  |
| Train staff on being low barrier  |                               |                               |  |
| Train staff on delivering housing-focused sheltering  |                               |                               |  |
| Review operations to identify any programming that interferes with housing access or prolongs shelter stays |                               |                               |  |
| Establish diversion approach  |                               |                               |  |

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|   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| Amend intake procedures                                   |  |  |  |
| Change messaging  |  |  |  |
| Establish strategy for existing long-term shelter stayers |  |  |  |
| Make amendments to bed assignments                        |  |  |  |
| Recruit landlords   |  |  |  |
| Change food services                                      |  |  |  |
| Amend amenities   |  |  |  |