Housing First Expectations
Focus Strategies

What is Housing First?

At its core, Housing First is an *approach* to solving homelessness within a community. The approach prioritizes matching households experiencing homelessness with permanent housing as quickly as possible; housing should always come before linkage to voluntary supports and services. Providers, programs, and the projects in which tenants reside are set up to meet homeless individuals where they are, offer them the assistance they need, and help them exit them from homelessness into permanent housing as quickly as possible. In a Housing First oriented system, everyone is assumed to be "housing ready" and a housing solution is sought for all people experiencing homelessness, without preconditions.

Housing First became official policy through the federal HEARTH Act of 2009, HUD regulations governing homeless assistance funding, and at the state level through SB 1380 which requires all housing programs to adopt the Housing First[1] model. As such, the No Place Like Home Program (NPLH) Guidelines outline requirements that projects applying for NPLH funds will implement a property management plan that implements Housing First practices, select tenants in compliance with Housing First requirements, and has reasonable standards for Project rental agreements, property management plans, and tenant grievance procedures to ensure compliance with Housing First.

"Core components of Housing First"[2] means all of the following:

(1) Tenant screening and selection practices that promote accepting applicants regardless of their sobriety or use of substances, completion of treatment, or participation in services.

(2) Applicants are not rejected on the basis of poor credit or financial history, poor or lack of rental history, criminal convictions unrelated to tenancy, or behaviors that indicate a lack of "housing readiness."

(3) Acceptance of referrals directly from shelters, street outreach, drop-in centers, and other parts of crisis response systems frequented by vulnerable people experiencing homelessness.

(4) Supportive services that emphasize engagement and problem solving over therapeutic goals and service plans that are highly tenant-driven without predetermined goals.

(5) Participation in services or program compliance is not a condition of permanent housing tenancy.

(6) Tenants have a lease and all the rights and responsibilities of tenancy, as outlined in California's Civil, Health and Safety, and Government codes.

(7) The use of alcohol or drugs in and of itself, without other lease violations, is not a reason for eviction.

(8) In communities with coordinated assessment and entry systems, incentives for funding promote tenant selection plans for supportive housing that prioritize eligible tenants based on criteria other than "first-come-first-serve," including, but not limited to, the duration or chronicity of homelessness, vulnerability to early mortality, or high utilization of crisis services. Prioritization may include triage tools, developed through local data, to identify high-cost, high-need homeless residents.

(9) Case managers and service coordinators who are trained in and actively employ evidence-based practices for client engagement, including, but not limited to, motivational interviewing and client-centered counseling.

---

[1] Codified as California Welfare and Institutions Code § 8255.
[2] *SB-1380 Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council*. Senator Holly Mitchell, 2016, https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB1380.

(10) Services are informed by a harm-reduction philosophy that recognizes drug and alcohol use and addiction as a part of tenants' lives, where tenants are engaged in nonjudgmental communication regarding drug and alcohol use, and where tenants are offered education regarding how to avoid risky behaviors and engage in safer practices, as well as connected to evidence-based treatment if the tenant so chooses.

(11) The project and specific apartment may include special physical features that accommodate disabilities, reduce harm, and promote health and community and independence among tenants.

Examples of Housing First Principles in Action

The table below lists the key components of the Housing First approach, as described above, and provides examples of how those components are, or are not, implemented in projects that serve people who have experienced homelessness.

Housing First	Not Housing First
Remove Unnecessary Barriers to Housing	
• Application decisions are quick, clear, and transparent • Employ Harm Reduction approach to substance abuse • Reasonable accommodations offered in the screening and application process	• Deny many housing applications and require lengthy appeals process for approval • Require clean and sober living • Applicants rejected due to not being "housing ready."
Offer Services, Not Require Them	
• Engage with clients to build a service plan that suits their needs • Help clients understand how services help them maintain housing	• Impose consequences for lack of participation in services • Expect clients to participate in services that are not beneficial to them
Allow for Client Choice in Housing Placement	
• Ask clients about their priorities for housing • Provide housing with attractive location and amenities	• Place clients in housing without discussing whether it meets their needs • Limit the number of times a client can decline a housing referral
Meet Clients Where They Are	
• Ensure clients have a complete understanding of house rules and behavior expectations • Understand clients' housing barriers and work with them to make progress in addressing them • Allow clients the same freedoms afforded to other renters in the area • Prevent eviction whenever possible	• Issue written demerits or warnings for rules violations without discussing how to avoid the violation • Initiating eviction process due to minor rules violations • Creating rules that are stricter than those for standard renters in the area
Build Client Success into Policies	
• Provide proactive updates and maintenance of service plans • Communicate clear and accessible written policies to relay and report issues with units and services • Produce timely and consistent action steps to resolve concerns and maintain housing • Allot space and provide resources for a wide array of services • Practice respect for tenant rights and privacy	• Practicing inconsistent and ever-changing policies and procedures • Having undetermined and undistinguishable timelines for client follow up • Providing inadequate resources and space to sustain supportive services