

Re-Envisioning Philadelphia's Homeless Assistance System 2018

Summary of Community Input: Charette, Input Sessions and OHS Staff Survey

Our Community Process

Looking to develop and implement a new 5-year plan to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring in Philadelphia, the Office of Homeless Services (OHS) and a [Steering Committee of community leaders](#) engaged a national expert, the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH). Adapting CSH's experiences working with communities across the country for the local context, OHS embarked on a 12-month planning process of "Re-Envisioning Philadelphia's Homeless Assistance System."

On December 19th, 2017, at the Pennsylvania Convention Center, [representatives from 55 organizations](#) gathered together to explore Housing First Approach and craft a broad set of recommended themes for framing the strategic plan. In preparation for this convening, OHS conducted [21 input sessions with 245 people](#) during late November and early December to gather community input from stakeholders who would not be attending the charrette.

Through these input sessions, an OHS staff survey, a discussion of the Continuum of Care (CoC) Advisory Committee, and the December 19th Charrette, more than 350 stakeholders have shared their perspectives on what they think currently works well in Philadelphia's homeless assistance system and have identified opportunities to improve and deepen community-wide commitment to supporting each other in responding to our shared responsibility to make Philadelphia a city for all.

Following the Charrette, the stakeholders who organized the Charrette and input sessions met to summarize and synthesize the key themes that arose in those conversations. The same themes came up again and again. What follows is a summary of the input received and the preliminary takeaways from this input.

Housing First

Our community's plan for the next five years will be grounded in a *Housing First approach* for systems alignment, guided by the understanding that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before attending to anything else. Based on this approach, only when housed can people begin to stabilize their lives, such as seeking and holding a job, budgeting properly, or caring for their health. This understanding supports the belief that we can most efficiently and most effectively end homelessness by using an approach centered on providing access to safe, decent and affordable housing.

Further, although an individual experiencing homelessness may benefit from supportive services, such as mental health or substance use disorder counseling, participation in these services should not be a prerequisite to access housing or a condition of maintaining it. In fact, the stability that a housing unit provides bolsters a tenant's ability to participate in these services.

The core components of programs taking a *Housing First approach* are:

- Rapid and streamlined entry into housing;
- Few to no programmatic prerequisites to entry (low-barrier admission policies);
- Voluntary supportive services;
- Tenant leases with full rights, responsibilities, and legal protections; and
- Practices & policies to prevent lease violations and evictions.

The December 19th Charrette spotlighted a conversation about the Housing First approach among Philadelphia service providers experienced in utilizing the approach, an OHS staff member, and a national expert on supportive housing for vulnerable families. Local stakeholders have not all embraced the philosophy without reservations and implementation has presented significant challenges, but none that are impossible to overcome. Themes that arose in the panel discussion and in comments from audience members during time set aside afterwards for feedback echoed the hopes and concerns voiced in community input sessions.

Chris Simriglia, Executive Director of Pathways to Housing PA, makes a distinction between the *Housing First Model* and the *Housing First approach*. Pathways operates programs that follow the specific, high-fidelity *Housing First Model*, moving people directly from extended time on the street into housing. The model was designed to serve the population most likely to die soonest should they remain on the street. This target population has very high service needs – serious mental health concerns and/or substance use disorders. The success of the model, data on its cost-effectiveness, and what many consider its common-sense logic led to attempts to extrapolate on the underlying principles to serve the needs of other target populations.

Because most of the literature on Housing First focuses primarily on the *Model*, our community lacks a clear, common understanding of *the approach* to which we aspire to adopt. Our input sessions showcased the variety of interpretations and applications of *Housing First approach* being implemented across the system and the real challenges service providers and people experiencing homelessness are having with the system’s adoption of this approach.

Input session participants spoke frequently about the *Housing First approach* because Philadelphia has made great strides in this direction over recent years, along with communities nationwide. In fact, before we complete this planning process, Philadelphia will have completely changed the local process for housing referrals, by implementing our Coordinated Entry & Assessment-Based Housing Referral System (CEA-BHRS; pronounced “Sea Breeze”). CEA-BHRS will offer *housing first* by providing individuals and families at-risk of or experiencing homelessness access to a streamlined and standardized process that links them to the appropriate resources to end their housing crisis as quickly as possible.

Housing First Takeaway:

Philadelphia does not yet have full community buy-in to adopting the *Housing First approach*, and there is a fundamental need for more guidance, clarity, support, and training for implementation. This includes clearly defining and operationalizing the approach for participants and providers at all levels.

Themes - Vision for the Homeless Assistance System

Community members envision a successful homeless assistance system in terms of:

- Trauma-informed – recognizing, understanding and responding to the trauma experienced by people who have nowhere to live and providing services that are sensitive to that. As one person experiencing homelessness reported, *“People are scared – they don’t know what’s going on and what is going to happen. If they give you the opportunity, show that you won’t hurt them. Build their trust.”*
- Person-centered that address people’s needs and are not just based on available resources and funding restrictions. As one person experiencing homelessness reported, *“Take the time to understand the people. Get to know what is going on inside of them.”*
- Efficiently funded; effective programs that get results and are driven by systematic attention to impact measures, with frequent reassessment for continuous quality improvement;
- Aligned and consistent with a common philosophy supported by adequate training for staff at all levels;
- Accessible and easy to navigate not only for people experiencing homelessness, but for the entire community, so that everyone understands the services and resources available.
- Transparent with ample communication around decision-making;
- Inclusive policy development involving providers, participants, and front-line OHS staff throughout the process;
- Connected to and collaborated between the various systems that serve people - Behavioral Health, Criminal Justice, Child Welfare, Healthcare, etc.
- Seamlessly sharing data across these systems.

Takeaway: A new vision for Philadelphia

In Philadelphia, we are all invested in and committed to doing everything in our power to ensure that every person at risk of or experiencing homelessness has access to a holistic and coordinated system of housing and services delivered by caring, well-trained, and well-informed professionals to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring in our great city.

Charrette and Input Session participants identified significant challenges we face as a community to achieving this vision:

- The need for more affordable housing. Based on the work done by the Unit Projections Committee, the City of Philadelphia’s *estimated* gap in housing and services for people at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness is:
 - 5,000 units of Rapid Rehousing
 - 2,000 units of Permanent Supportive Housing
 - and Prevention assistance for 3,000 households
- Lack of sufficient funding to create the needed units of housing in the community
- The desire for more communication and transparency are changes in system rules, regulations, policies and procedures, and plenty of time to absorb them and offer input.

- Stigma - “If you need help, you’ve done something wrong.” This was expressed both about lived experience of homelessness and provider experience of needing support.
- Cross-System and regulatory challenges, such as access to data, barriers to data sharing, and HUD’s chronic homeless definition.

Themes - Broad Set of Recommendations that emerged to frame Philadelphia’s 5-Year Plan

1. Funding

The homeless assistance system must focus its limited resources on homelessness. Leverage new funding resources, particularly more flexible funding, that can be used for strategies like expanded outreach, shallow rent subsidies, and continued support for folks after they move out of homeless assistance system programs into independent housing in the community.

Some recommendations related to funding include:

- Engaging the healthcare system (Medicaid, partnerships with non-profit hospitals);
- Aligning public funding priorities with philanthropic community’s funding priorities;
- Piloting programs and innovative ideas to demonstrate their potential if funded to scale up;
- Influencing City budget decisions, perhaps suggesting specific tax increases;
- Public/private partnerships between government and the business and philanthropic community.

2. Collaboration across Systems

Community stakeholders agreed virtually unanimously that they believe that City agencies (specifically, but not limited to the Health and Human Services Cabinet: OHS, DHS, DBHIDS, PDPH, and CEO) must align their efforts around a shared vision and core values in an effort to deepen their partnerships and working relationships, support the organizations they fund to work more collaboratively around the needs of the clients they share, and reduce the trauma experienced by people at risk of or experiencing homelessness trying to access and navigate services funded by different parts of the City structure.

Some recommendations related to collaboration across systems include:

- Maintaining awareness of the populations touched by multiple systems and the points at which system policies may interact to impede their success, to bring policies in line with each other for producing a shared vision for housing and services programs;
- Improving discharge planning from hospitals, justice system, and child welfare to reduce the flow of people into homelessness through coordination;
- Developing a formal interagency collaborative structure that is solely focused on improving collaboration and coordination between and across systems;
- Improve access to data by creating MOUs that allow different City agencies, systems, and providers to share their data;

- Creating a unified data tracking system to allow for better connectivity;
- Broadening and strengthening partnerships by engaging non-traditional sectors of the community;
- Specific attention to expanding relationships with employment and training, workforce development, behavioral health, the mainstream health system, corrections, and landlords;
- Continuing to strengthen relationships between law enforcement and other parts of the homeless assistance system to address issues related to panhandling and street behavior.

3. Accountability and Performance

As mentioned above, the community clearly expressed a need for definition of the Housing First approach and the expectations of a system that aims to center on it. Stakeholders also stressed the need to address inconsistent skill level and quality of case management services, given the crucial role of case management in our system, ensuring that highly skilled case managers and other front line staff are compensated equitably, have manageable workloads, and have opportunities for training and professional development. Providers want fair, transparent treatment and so do people being served by the homeless assistance system.

Some recommendations related to accountability and performance include:

- Establishing clear standards (performance, policies, trainings, etc.) that hold all publicly-funded organizations accountable for delivering consistent and high quality services that align with federal and local priorities;
- Deciding to fund programs based on compliance with those standards and performance benchmarks, as assessed with consistent, transparent evaluation tools. We heard frustration in input sessions: *“The City keeps funding programs that do not work”*;
- Adopting performance-based contracting to maximize return on investment;
- Maintaining friendly, supportive relationships and open communication channels between OHS and providers, with the understanding that in monitoring programs, OHS will need to attach significance to any findings and will do so fairly across the system;
- Holding the system accountable to the people being served by regularly engaging with and involving people with lived experience in guiding decision-making and direction of services and resources.

4. Training and Technical Assistance

People with lived experience of homelessness stressed the important role that trusting staff and feeling safe played in their success and ability to access and use services and resources. We know that relationships with case managers allow people to *“stay well and stay in housing”* and that relationships with outreach workers allow people to come in from the streets. Additionally, we witnessed a natural support network that currently exists by which people experiencing homelessness build relationships by helping each other out with knowing about and accessing necessary resources. People with lived experience of homelessness also expresses the desire for the system to hold themselves and their peers accountable to a set of expectations, to make

sure that “housing first” isn’t “housing without consequences.”

Staff may burn out and lose passion, empathy and regard for the dignity and worth of the people they serve or that staff members’ own adverse experiences can create mindsets that conflict with centering the participants’ experiences and responses to trauma. This further emphasizes the need for staff training and support, but also need for compensation that reflects staff members’ experience or increased responsibility (such as working with people with higher acuity/needs).

Some recommendations related to training and technical assistance include:

- Establishing standard for onboarding/ new hire trainings on core competencies that hold all publicly-funded organizations accountable for delivering consistent and high quality services;
- Systematic, frequent training and support for all service provider staff, to ensure the capacity, skills, compassionate sensitivity, and cultural competency to serve all people who come through their doors, including those with mental health concerns, active substance use disorders, and other intensive needs;
- Ensuring that providers are able to provide appropriate assistance for differing needs, as we move to a housing first approach across the system, with training on trauma-informed care, incentivizing service participation, and accountability within a low-barrier framework;
- Equipping providers to hold participants accountable to a set of expectations, for the benefit of both parties, so that “Housing First” isn’t “housing without consequences”;
- Hiring more people with lived experience, so that people with lived experience with homelessness feel less judged and more understood.

5. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Stakeholders stressed the importance of clear and consistent messaging throughout all parts of the system. People experiencing or at risk of homelessness need to know what is available to whom and where and how to access resources, or at least who can provide them with that information. Providers also need to be able to trust that they will receive accurate information that they need at the time when they need it. When major policy and/or procedural changes are being considered, providers want clear explanations of why and to be involved in developing the local approach. They want to know what to expect as changes roll out, with advance notice that allows time for considering the implications for their programs and organizations, and as noted above, training, technical assistance and other support for implementation.

Members of the broader community want accessible information to help them understand the homeless assistance system, its components, roles played by different organizations, and how they work together to produce success stories.

Some recommendation related to communication include:

- Developing a multi-channel communications strategy throughout the entire homeless assistance system, ensuring that information communicated via various channels is also

- available in a central location (potentially on OHS' website);
- Using data to show transparently how the system overall is performing;
- Creating a shared and consistent message about homelessness and services in Philadelphia, aligning efforts to implement the system-wide shift to a Housing First approach;
- Create a well-organized advocacy voice around homelessness.

6. Employment: Living Wage Jobs = Ending Homelessness

Many people experiencing homelessness expressed a strong desire to secure employment, while their case managers indicated that this is one of the most challenging goals to help program participants achieve. For people experiencing homelessness to be successful in the long-term they need to be connected to employment services and opportunities.

Some recommendation related to employment include:

- Strengthening collaboration between the homeless assistance system and agencies that focus on employment and training or adult education, as well as with employers;
- Offering tax breaks/credits to businesses that hire formerly homeless individuals;
- Improving access to transportation (transportation subsidy, van service) and working closely with SEPTA to address any route or scheduling issues presenting challenges to people securing and retaining employment;
- Providing daycare options that align with shift work for working parents with young children (outside the 8am-6pm window).