



National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS

Best Practice: Rapid Re-Housing for Survivors of Domestic Violence Volunteers of America's Home Free in Portland, OR

Overview

Home Free is a domestic violence victim service agency in Portland, Oregon that provides an array of services, including a hotline, emergency housing assistance, advocacy, support groups, and child and teen programs for families impacted by violence. In 2003, the program closed its emergency shelter and developed a Housing First program to more effectively meet the housing needs of survivors. Currently, the program provides rapid re-housing assistance to 80 to 100 households annually.

History

Prior to 2003, Home Free offered both emergency shelter and transitional housing to survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Program administrators recognized, however, that they were only serving a fraction of the households in need. A 1998 study found that only 15 percent of families surviving domestic violence accessed a hotline or a shelter. To meet the needs of households outside the scope of their current programs, Home Free administrators added outreach services. They discovered that when working in the community, they were reaching a different and broader group of survivors. Additionally, to overcome a shortage of shelter beds, Home Free began using motel vouchers, helped families explore housing options, and began using a mobile service delivery approach to serve households in the community.

Moving from providing services exclusively through a shelter-based approach to one that served households throughout the community was transformative. Home Free found that it was serving many more households than it had previously. With a focus on serving households in a community and delivering mobile services to families, **Home Free found that two shelter nights for a family of four was nearly equivalent to providing a month's rent for the same family.** Additionally, with one full-time advocate and \$50,000, Home Free had been able to stabilize 25-35 families in safe housing.

In 2003, after a small-scale pilot of Housing First with community-based services, Home Free decided to close its emergency shelter after 77 years of operation. It also reduced its hotline hours to 8 am to 6 pm Monday through Friday, expanded the motel voucher program, and expanded permanent housing-focused services.

Program Description

Targeting/Eligibility

Home Free serves a variety of populations through its Housing First program, and the basic eligibility criteria for the participants in the program are very inclusive:

- Survival of a domestic violence or sexual abuse situation;
- Immediate crisis caused by violence or abuse has been somewhat stabilized;
- Permanent housing stabilization is a primary need; and
- Financial resourcefulness was compromised by domestic violence or some other barrier.

The assessment process for the program is designed to be minimally intrusive and focuses primarily on rental and employment histories and potential barriers to housing.

Consequently, the program is serving households with an array of needs. A majority of households served are actively involved with the child welfare system, nearly 50 percent have a history of a mental health disability, and nearly one-third have an alcohol and/or drug history. **The Housing First program has assisted a higher proportion of Latino, African-American, and Native American households than Home Free had assisted in its shelter or transitional housing programs.**

Services

Home Free provides an array of services to the households in its Housing First program, including, but not limited to, direct services to children, domestic violence and parenting support groups, and advocacy with landlords and the housing authority. All of the services provided by Home Free are “participant-driven.” This service philosophy is driven by the premise that, given choices and opportunities, participants will work to ensure their own safety and success. **Home Free has found that, if services are meaningful to participants’ goals, they will actively remain engaged in services.**

Services begin with the first contact with Home Free in the form of a crisis intervention addressing the immediate pressing needs of the household. This includes ensuring household safety and a possible motel placement until new housing can be found.

A housing search begins immediately. Short-term goals are developed, and Home Free provides direct financial assistance and advocacy with landlords to help households access housing. Financial assistance can range from short-term rental assistance to assistance with accessing permanent housing subsidies. Home Free has built strong relationships with area apartment management companies and landlords. Because Home Free is there to support its participants, the landlords are more likely to rent to the participants, even when they have spotty rental histories or as yet insecure income.

Once housing is obtained, an advocate begins to work with the household on issues that will promote housing retention. Services offered during this phase include home visits, job search and job training referrals, case coordination with other systems, linkages to legal services, and help with budgeting and goal planning.

Eventually, work begins on long-term goals, including increasing household income and helping survivors navigate public and community-based services independently. **Home**

Free has worked with mainstream and community-based social service providers to make it easier for its participants to access assistance. The relationship with mainstream providers also helps facilitate referrals of households in crisis to Home Free services.

Financial subsidy is commonly provided for 6 months to one year, but other supportive services offered to families may last up to two years if they are needed or welcomed. Services are offered to prepare households receiving short- or medium-term rental assistance for transitioning off of the subsidy. An Employment Access Specialist has recently been added to the staff to help participants increase their income and improve their financial self-sufficiency.

Funding

Home Free first piloted Housing First services utilizing HUD Supportive Housing funds. After observing the high degree of housing stabilization achieved by households served with this approach, the program expanded these services by securing a combination of public and private funds. Diverse funding streams have optimized the program's flexibility in responding to various household circumstances. Households that do not fit the federal definition of homelessness required for HUD eligibility, for example, may be served using foundation funds.

Home Free acts as the lead for 10 domestic violence agencies with the housing authority. It funnels short-term rent assistance and Emergency Food and Shelter Program funds from the housing authority to the local domestic violence system. Additionally, for this year and next year, Home Free will also serve as the lead agency in the distribution of Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program funds within the local domestic violence system.

Outcomes

Home Free's initial outcomes were very positive, which reinforced the organization's decision to invest more resources in meeting the housing needs of families when the organization closed its shelter program. Through its motel vouchers program, Home Free provides emergency housing to 4 times as many families as was possible through its facility-based shelter, expanding the capacity of the community's emergency housing response. Resources formerly utilized to maintain the shelter facility assisted the growth of the Housing First program. Additionally, about 97 percent of households enrolled in Housing First obtain safe housing, with 86 percent of these households remaining stably housed one year after exiting services.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recognized Home Free's Housing First program as a remarkable innovation and is currently studying the outcomes of families assisted by Home Free. Initial findings indicate that families with stable housing have better outcomes on an array of measures, including severity of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, and quality of life. **The findings also indicate that housing**

instability may be a stronger predictor of negative outcomes than the level of danger to which a family is subject. The study will conclude in 2010, and it is expected that the results will have broad implications in affirming the importance of addressing housing stabilization when assisting survivors of domestic violence.

Lessons Learned

The primary lesson learned is that a rapid re-housing approach can work for families impacted by domestic violence. Many survivors are able to quickly stabilize in their own homes and succeed in maintaining that housing, bypassing a prolonged shelter stay or makeshift and sometimes risky temporary housing arrangements. Some families still benefit from the safety and on-site support of shelter or facility-based transitional housing, but others are better supported by being back in their own housing as soon as possible.

While providing consumer-oriented mobile services to families in the community represented a challenge for some staff, this too has proved beneficial to both families and the organization. The voluntary services model allows the staff advocate and client to develop a working partnership that is respectful and based on the survivors' own desires and needs. Home Free leaders believe that allowing participants to choose how they engage with services creates a more genuine, open, and honest relationship with their advocate. Staff also seem to prefer the voluntary services approach, as focusing on the participant's own goals is consistent with their mission to help survivors achieve self-determination.