

Guidelines for leading a discussion with residents about Housing First and Harm Reduction

Purpose:

Consumer education is vital to the implementation of Housing First and Harm Reduction housing. In a study by Dr. Dennis Watson (2012), data from consumers demonstrated that Housing First education was the mechanism that helped them attach meaning to the choices provided by the model's use of harm reduction practices and reduced service requirements. Attaching meaning to choices helped consumers feel good about their personal achievements. This contrasted with the conditioning and experiences many had with Treatment First programs, whose mandates for adherence and compliance often result in consumers believing that their housing is conditional and therefore tenuous. As a consequence, many consumers avoid interaction with staff to avoid scrutiny, and so don't engage in the support and services they need. Consumer education of Housing First and its associated practices assures the benefits of a flexible service structure are fully realized, which in turn promotes long-term housing stability and recovery. (Watson, 2012)

Goals:

- Gauge residents' current understanding of Housing First and Harm Reduction approaches
- Provide education to residents about Housing First and Harm Reduction approaches
- Understand and respond to residents' questions and concerns about implementation of Housing First and Harm Reduction approaches
- Create a sense of community compassion and accountability to one another

Key Talking Points:

- Housing is a basic human right; not something to be earned.
- Substance use is not in and of itself the problem, but related behavior can be, and that is what we our focus should be on.
- Homelessness is not a cure for addiction...and is often a death sentence.
- People have a better platform for achieving recovery, whatever that looks like for them, if their basic needs are met (i.e. food, water, shelter, warmth)
- Your program or agency's rationale for moving to this approach, including the evidence-base.

Agenda

Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome! The purpose of this discussion is to introduce you to the concepts of Housing First and Harm Reduction, which we are working to embrace in our housing programs. Some of you may have heard about these concepts before, and they may be completely new to others. I hope that you are curious and open to learning about these concepts, and that you feel comfortable sharing your questions, hopes, and concerns. We believe that your understanding and embrace of this new model is important, and are very interested in hearing your feedback. Thank you for your willingness to participate! Before we begin, here are a couple of guidelines for our discussion that we hope we can all agree upon.

- We will begin by explaining the new approach as well as our rationale for moving in this direction. Please hold your questions and comments until after we have provided you this information, after which there will be plenty of time for discussion.
- Remember, there are no right or wrong answers; people come to supportive housing with diverse experiences which are all valid.
- We hope that everyone will participate; no one should dominate the conversation.

Introductory rationale and evidence (10-15 minutes):

- Rationale
 - Commitment to serving those most in need/previously unserved by agency
 - Convinced by the evidence (see evidence below, share based on your audience and what is most important to them)
 - Continuum of Care mandate
- Evidence
 - High housing retention rates (Mares & Rosenheck, 2007; Perlman & Parvensky, 2006)
 - Fewer hospitalizations (Sadowski et al., 2009)
 - Higher perceived choice in services (Greenwood et al., 2005; Tsemberis, Gulcur, & Nakae, 2004)
 - Reduced substance use and abuse (Padgett et al., 2010)
 - Reduced involvement in criminal activity (DeSilva, Manworren, & Targonski, 2011)
 - Decreased cost to the system (Perlman & Parvensky, 2006)
 - ER services – reduced by 34%
 - Inpatient hospitalization – reduced by 80%
 - Outpatient care – increased by 50%
 - Net savings to health costs – reduced by 45%

Videos (5-30 minutes):

- PBS Housing First documentary (<http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/305/video.html>) 26 mins.
- Invisible People @ Home Housing First clip (http://youtu.be/oMg9fc_bOpA) 5 mins.

Handouts:

- Harm Reduction one-pager
- Harm Reduction Housing for Residents brochure
- Good tenant/Good Neighbor agreement

Discussion (15-30 minutes)

- What are your initial thoughts about this shift?

"Maybe there was a time in your life where you weren't ready to stop using but you were able to take additional precautions around your use. Can you tell me about that?"

This exercise helps people see that they are already applying the principles of harm reduction in their everyday lives. The more we can normalize this approach, and help people connect to and empathize with their neighbors, the better.