

Five things I wish I knew before starting a Housing First program

By: Christine Simiriglia, CEO & President

1. **Housing First, as a concept, means different things to different communities.** It is important to be clear about the differences between adopting a housing first philosophy and running a Housing First program that follows the tenets of the model. Funding the philosophy, and not the program, will leave you disappointed with the outcome.
2. **Fears associated with Housing First and subsequent shifts in programming are often rooted in our assumptions and biases about people living with addiction or mental illness, and in poverty.** Making these shifts without consciously examining these biases can limit our capacity for change and affect the outcomes of our programs. Yes, that means we need to work on our own biases in order for the people we serve to be successful. It speaks to organizational culture.
3. **Housing First does not mean “housing forever,” or “no matter what.”** It means that a person is afforded an opportunity for housing with choice and without preconditions that are based on their disability. That person is offered an appropriate level of support to help them thrive in their unit and the community. If they break the law or the lease, they can be subject to eviction just like any other person who breaks the law or their lease. Actions have consequences.
4. **The practice of harm reduction does not mean “anything goes.”** It is an approach for working with people with behavioral health needs that involves a set of practical techniques openly negotiated with clients around their stated goals. The focus is on reducing the negative consequences and level of risk related associated with substance use. By incorporating strategies on a continuum, from safer drug use to managed substance use, and up to abstinence, harm reduction practice helps clients affect positive changes in their lives. Harm reduction does not enable drug use or high risk behaviors. Harm reduction does not endorse or encourage drug use. Nor does harm reduction exclude or dismiss abstinence-based treatment models as viable options.
5. **Furniture is not a luxury, it is essential.** For many individuals, homelessness has meant needing to carry one’s possessions with them at all times. Having an apartment in which to store things is a significant marker in the transition out of homelessness. But housing is more than just four walls — without a bed to sleep in, a dresser for belongings, or a table where you can share a meal, an empty apartment provides almost no comfort. Families spend an average of three months longer in emergency shelters simply because they have no beds for their children or furniture for their new apartments. Qualitative data shows us that providing furniture is a vital part of honoring the worth and dignity of each individual recovering from homelessness.