

A Better Approach

Supportive housing is a successful, cost-effective combination of affordable housing with services that helps people live more stable, productive lives. The effectiveness of supportive housing in ending homelessness has depended upon a willingness to take risks and experiment with new models, approaches, and strategies. CSH's approach and strategies also continue to evolve as we learn more about what practices are proving most effective.

From CSH's perspective, a supportive housing unit is defined by the following elements¹:

- The unit is available to, and intended for, a person or family whose head of household is homeless, or at-risk of homelessness, and has multiple barriers to employment and housing stability, which might include mental illness, chemical dependency, and/or other disabling or chronic health conditions;
- The tenant household ideally pays no more than 30% household income towards rent and utilities, and never pays more than 50% of income toward such housing expenses;
- The tenant household has a lease (or similar form of occupancy agreement) with no limits on length of tenancy, as long as the terms and conditions of the lease or agreement are met;
- The unit's operations are managed through an effective partnership among representatives of the project owner and/or sponsor, the property management agent, the supportive services providers, the relevant public agencies, and the tenants;
- All members of the tenant household have easy, facilitated access to a flexible and comprehensive array of supportive services designed to assist the tenants to achieve and sustain housing stability.
- Service providers proactively seek to engage tenants in on-site and community-based supportive services, but participation in such supportive services is not a condition of ongoing tenancy.
- Service and property management strategies include effective, coordinated approaches for addressing issues resulting from substance use, relapse, and mental health crises, with a focus on fostering housing stability.

A Range of Housing Models

While there may not be a single perfect model, there are a number of preferred housing models for supportive housing. The housing setting will vary dramatically and be based on a range of factors including the tenant's preference, the type of housing stock available, and the norms and history of a local community's real estate market, and might include:

- Apartment or single-room occupancy (SRO) buildings, townhouses, or single-family homes that exclusively house formerly homeless individuals and/or families;
- Apartment or SRO buildings, or townhouses that mix special-needs housing with general affordable housing;
- Rent-subsidized apartments leased in the open market; and
- Long-term set-asides of units within privately owned buildings.

¹ This definition reflects CSH's perspective that service participation should not be a condition of tenancy in supportive housing, and that harm reduction and housing first strategies have been shown to be effective approaches. CSH recognizes, however, that a variety of housing options are needed to end homelessness. Therefore, we continue to engage in, and learn from, constructive dialogues on these and other issues with our provider and advocacy partners in the housing, supportive services, and disability rights communities, and with all those engaged in efforts to end homelessness.

CSH's Target Populations

While supportive housing is a useful intervention for a wide range of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, CSH focuses on working with our partners to create permanent supportive housing opportunities for adults, youth/young adults, and families with children who:

- Have extremely low-incomes, defined as household income no higher than 30% of Area Median Income; *and*
- Have chronic health conditions that are at least episodically disabling, such as mental illness, HIV/AIDS, and/or substance use issues, and/or face other substantial barriers to housing stability (such as experiences of domestic violence or other trauma or have histories of out of home placements); *and*
- Are not able to obtain or retain appropriate stable housing without easy, facilitated access to services focused on providing necessary supports to the tenant household.

These target populations include people who may be homeless (for any length of time) or are at risk of homelessness, and includes those who may be leaving other systems of care without a place to live, such as (1) young people aging out of foster care, (2) people with mental illness or other disabilities leaving jail or prison, and (3) some members of the elderly population.

CSH's Priority Population

Within this target group, CSH has increased its efforts to ensure that supportive housing is delivered to a “priority” population that includes persons experiencing long-term homelessness, including persons:

- Who have chronic health conditions that are at least episodically disabling, such as mental illness, substance abuse, and HIV/AIDS, or other substantial barriers to housing stability (e.g., domestic violence, trauma, or history of out-of-home placements); and
- Who have been homeless for long periods of time (one year or more), or have experienced repeated (three or more times) stays in the streets, emergency shelters, or other temporary settings, often cycling between homelessness and hospitals, jails, prisons, or other emergency systems.

CSH has increased its efforts to help communities create supportive housing for such persons because:

- Data shows that this smaller percentage of homeless people currently take up about half of the shelter resources meant to address temporary homelessness;
- Supportive housing is the key intervention that works to end homelessness for them;
- There is too little being done now to ensure that this population is able to get into and stay in supportive housing; and
- Policymakers—particularly at the federal level—are especially focused on making sure that this group obtains supportive housing.

This document is included within the *Understanding Permanent Supportive Housing* section of CSH's *Toolkit for Developing and Operating Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/toolkit2.