

Housing First

Research shows that providing housing without preconditions (Housing First) to people experiencing homelessness keeps them stably housed long term.

This brief is the first in a series of high-level resources on rigorous evidence in housing and homelessness. For a more extensive discussion of the literature, visit the J-PAL North America [Homelessness Evidence Review](#).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Housing First consistently improves recipients' housing-related outcomes.

Research shows that offering housing without preconditions quickly moves people experiencing homelessness into stable housing.^{7,12} Compared to treatment as usual, Housing First programs improve long-term housing stability^{1,3,11,12} and reduce future returns to homelessness.^{2,3}

2 Housing First may have positive impacts on other parts of people's lives.

Once immediate shelter needs are addressed through Housing First, individuals may have expanded capacity to address other priorities. Two evaluations found that Housing First services reduced interactions with the criminal legal system.^{2,3} Some evidence suggests that Housing First can improve one's likelihood of employment² and quality of life¹, though the evidence is inconsistent.^{6,9,11} The effect of Housing First on health outcomes is unclear—one study found decreased incidence of emergency room visits,⁷ and others found no^{2,10} or mixed⁵ effects on other measures of health.

3 Housing First is a viable solution for individuals who are experiencing both homelessness and substance use disorders.

Contrary to common concerns, Housing First can result in similar^{8,12} substance-related outcomes to treatment-first housing (which uses substance abstinence as a precondition) and better substance-related outcomes than no housing at all.⁶

Housing First recipients spent

**MORE THAN
DOUBLE** 

the amount of time stably housed over a two-year period than the comparison group (73 percent vs. 32 percent).¹

Housing First recipients were housed

**MORE THAN
6X FASTER**

than the comparison group (35 days vs. 223 days).⁷

COST EFFECTIVENESS

Limited cost-effectiveness analysis finds that most of the costs of Housing First are offset by cost savings in other areas (e.g. housing services, jail, health care).^{4,10}

INTERVENTION DETAILS

Housing First is an approach to homelessness reduction that provides individuals with long-term subsidized housing without preconditions—such as employment or sobriety—and then offers additional supportive services to residents.

The goal of this model is to help people move into stable housing in their communities as rapidly as possible. Housing First theorizes that having a stable home is an essential first step toward other positive outcomes, such as improved health and employment.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES

Pathways to Housing is credited as the originator of the Housing First model. Pathways specifies five key principles of Housing First: consumer choice, separation of housing and treatment, individualized services, recovery-oriented service, and social community integration.

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At Home/Chez Soi was a large demonstration and research project that implemented the Housing First model in five Canadian cities and evaluated its effectiveness across a range of outcomes, as well as its cost-effectiveness.

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HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) is a federal rental assistance program for unhoused veterans in the United States that leverages the Housing First approach.

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Denver Social Impact Bond, implemented by the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless and WellPower (F.K.A. the Mental Health Center of Denver), uses the Housing First approach to support people who have experienced long-term homelessness and had frequent interactions with the criminal legal and emergency health systems.

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CITATIONS

Papers included in this brief are limited to rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations of Housing First programs in North America.

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