

## **Brenda Siegel: Housing First Overview h.91 4/9/2025**

I wanted to provide a little overview, you heard testimony that housing first is only for people living with disabilities. That is absolutely not accurate. In Vermont we have an org for whom that is the focus, but that is not what Housing First is. In fact, Housing First is the most well researched data driven way to provide and maintain housing and shelter for people. That is why that language exists in the bill. Other models do not succeed at the high level that Housing First does when compared. I highly recommend leaving it in the bill. Also, Anne Sosin is an expert on this model and could share more about why it is critical to have in H.91.

Housing First means providing housing—and in absence of housing, shelter—as a primary need and without conditions. It means that services should be robustly available but not required as a condition for getting or staying housed or sheltered. Housing First also recognizes that people have varied housing needs and works with them to find, and if necessary, change housing to meet their needs. Housing First means eliminating the many barriers and requirements that put housing out of reach for many people.

Here is what Housing First does not mean. Housing First does not mean housing only, or only housing some people. It does not mean that people struggling with mental illness or substance abuse can be excluded from housing, isolated to institutions or specialized shelters, or evicted to the street.

Housing First means making our policy decisions based on decades of research, not on stigma and prejudices.

Study after study has shown that Housing First works to solve homelessness.<sup>1</sup> The Denver Supportive Impact Bond offers one of many examples of what is possible using a Housing First approach. As many other studies have shown, people that received housing stayed housed after the three years of the trial. Study participants also had dramatically fewer police

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob, Verugheese, Sajal K. Chattopadhyay, Sharon Attipoe-Dorcoo, Yinan Peng, Robert A. Hahn, Ramona Finnie, Jamaica Cobb, Alison E. Cuellar, Karen M. Emmons, and Patrick L. Remington. "Permanent Supportive Housing With Housing First: Findings From a Community Guide Systematic Economic Review." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 62, no. 3 (March 2022): e188–201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2021.08.009>.

interactions, jail and prison stays, and use of detoxification facilities and emergency room visits.<sup>2</sup> Use of basic healthcare services increased.<sup>3</sup>

We know that too many people are losing housing or shelter for reasons related to their disability.

### **How End Homelessness Vermont Applies Housing First:**

Right now End Homelessness Vermont uses Housing First Principles in our process and we would suggest that the statewide emergency shelter rules and laws adopt these principles. Meaning that we don't turn anyone away regardless of how challenging their disability may be or what disruptions there have been in their housing or shelter before. This has actually helped us to learn so much about how these challenges occur. We work closely with hotel owners, to ask them to reach out to us, instead of exiting people, and allow us to work on finding a better hotel situation for that particular individual. Unfortunately the current rules don't allow us to move someone until the end of their voucher and this is a barrier, but we work hard to ensure success, even with this barrier. As result in all of our clients, we have only had one client who has received periods of ineligibility that were not reversed. We work with some of the most challenging and complicated situations across the state and we have successfully been able to use Housing First principles for our clients and they have remained sheltered.

### **Center Any and All Policies In Housing First Principles:**

As discussed above, Housing First means that services are robustly available, but not required. Right now, "shelter first", periods of ineligibility and categorizing individuals are not in line with Housing First. Also creating categorical eligibility, as Chair Wood said, eliminates people who may very much need the shelter just as much as others. Framing Housing First principles in shelter would mean moving individuals with their dignity and input into places that will overall have a better outcome. This is the model that End Homelessness Vermont is using right now. We work very hard to support the client in moving to a shelter or hotel that is most likely to have a better outcome when they are struggling in their current sheltering option.

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<sup>2</sup> Urban Institute 2023, "Denver Supportive Housing Social Impact Bond Initiative: What We Learned from the Evaluation," <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/denver-supportive-housing-social-impact-bond-initiative/what-we-learned-evaluation>What We Learned from the Evaluation | Urban Institute.

<sup>3</sup> "'Housing First' Increased Psychiatric Care Office Visits And Prescriptions While Reducing Emergency Visits." Accessed February 2, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2023.01041>.

Housing First does not mean that people have to stay where it is not tenable, it means that they are not left without shelter or housing when it is not tenable. This would mean working with clients to rehouse or reshelter them without returning individuals to the street.