

Shelter System Diversion Program – COVID-19 Response

Purpose:

This program will serve to divert people from entering the shelter system by helping them identify alternate housing solutions and connecting them to the services and financial assistance they need to remain stably housed. One-year contracts with providers will include staffing costs as well as funds for financial assistance to individuals/families seeking emergency housing assistance.

Provider Eligibility:

Eligibility will be based on good standing as an ESHAP provider and the ability to quickly implement the program with staff trained on Rapid Resolution strategies and the capacity to enter data into the HMIS system or a comparable database as required by HUD (for DV Providers).

Program Participant Eligibility:

This assistance may be provided to individuals and families who access the ‘front door’ of the homeless response system and meet the criteria under the HUD “at risk of homelessness” definition, defined below.

At risk of homelessness means:

(1) An individual or family who:

- Has an annual income below 50 percent of median family income for the area, as determined by HUD;
- Does not have sufficient resources or support networks, *e.g.*, family, friends, faith-based or other social networks, immediately available to prevent them from moving to an emergency shelter or another place described in paragraph (1) of the “homeless” definition in this section; and
- Meets one of the following conditions:
 - (A) Has moved because of economic reasons two or more times during the 60 days immediately preceding the application for homelessness prevention assistance;
 - (B) Is living in the home of another because of economic hardship;
 - (C) Has been notified in writing that their right to occupy their current housing or living situation will be terminated within 21 days after the date of application for assistance;
 - (D) Lives in a hotel or motel and the cost of the hotel or motel stay is not paid by charitable organizations or by Federal, State, or local government programs for low-income individuals;
 - (E) Lives in a single-room occupancy or efficiency apartment unit in which there reside more than two persons or lives in a larger housing unit in which there reside more than 1.5 persons reside per room, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau;
 - (F) Is exiting a publicly funded institution, or system of care (such as a health-care facility, a mental health facility, foster care or other youth facility, or correction program or institution); or
 - (G) Otherwise lives in housing that has characteristics associated with instability and an increased risk of homelessness, as identified in the recipient's approved consolidated plan;

(2) A child or youth who does not qualify as “homeless” under this section, but qualifies as “homeless” under section 387(3) of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (42 U.S.C. 5732a(3)), section 637(11) of the Head Start Act (42 U.S.C. 9832(11)), section 41403(6) of the Violence Against

Women Act of 1994 (42 U.S.C. 14043e-2(6)), section 330(h)(5)(A) of the Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C. 254b(h)(5)(A)), section 3(m) of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2012(m)), or section 17(b)(15) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (42 U.S.C. 1786(b)(15)); or(3) A child or youth who does not qualify as “homeless” under this section, but qualifies as “homeless” under section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11434a(2)), and the parent(s) or guardian(s) of that child or youth if living with her or him.

Assistance may also be provided to persons who meet the criteria in the following paragraphs of the “homeless” definition and have an annual income below 30 percent of median family income for the area, as determined by HUD:

(2) An individual or family who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence, provided that:

- The primary nighttime residence will be lost within 14 days of the date of application for homeless assistance;
- No subsequent residence has been identified; and
- The individual or family lacks the resources or support networks, *e.g.*, family, friends, faith-based or other social networks, needed to obtain other permanent housing;

(3) Unaccompanied youth under 25 years of age, or families with children and youth, who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this definition, but who:

- Are defined as homeless under section 387 of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (42 U.S.C. 5732a), section 637 of the Head Start Act (42 U.S.C. 9832), section 41403 of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (42 U.S.C. 14043e-2), section 330(h) of the Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C. 254b(h)), section 3 of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2012), section 17(b) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (42 U.S.C. 1786(b)) or section 725 of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11434a);
- Have not had a lease, ownership interest, or occupancy agreement in permanent housing at any time during the 60 days immediately preceding the date of application for homeless assistance;
- Have experienced persistent instability as measured by two moves or more during the 60-day period immediately preceding the date of applying for homeless assistance; and
- Can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time because of chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse (including neglect), the presence of a child or youth with a disability, or two or more barriers to employment, which include the lack of a high school degree or General Education Development (GED), illiteracy, low English proficiency, a history of incarceration or detention for criminal activity, and a history of unstable employment; or

(4) Any individual or family who:

- Is fleeing, or is attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member, including a child, that has either taken place within the individual's or family's primary nighttime residence or has made the individual or family afraid to return to their primary nighttime residence;

- Has no other residence; and
- Lacks the resources or support networks, *e.g.*, family, friends, faith-based or other social networks, to obtain other permanent housing.

Program Description:

Shelter Diversion is a strategy that prevents homelessness at the front door of the homelessness response system by helping people identify immediate alternative housing arrangements and, if necessary, connecting them with services and financial assistance to help them remain in or return to permanent housing. Every effort should be made to divert clients to other housing solutions at their first contact with the homelessness response system.

Diversion is an intervention designed to immediately address the needs of someone who is at imminent risk of losing their housing or someone who has just lost their housing and become homeless. Diversion is a client-driven approach; its goal is to help the person or household find safe alternative housing immediately, rather than entering shelter or experiencing unsheltered homelessness. It is intended to ensure that the homelessness experience is as brief as possible, to prevent unsheltered homelessness, and to avert stays in shelter. Diversion should not be a mechanism for denying access to available shelter, but rather one for finding a better alternative than shelter or the street.

The core components of a Diversion program are a Rapid Resolution problem-solving approach to conversations with individuals experiencing a housing crisis paired with access to flexible funding that supports creative solutions to keep people housed or create new housing options.

The services individuals/families are provided with when being diverted are services that caseworkers in most poverty and homeless assistance organizations are already trained and funded to deliver. They include:

- Provision of financial, utility, and/or rental assistance;
- Short-term case management;
- Conflict mediation;
- Connection to mainstream services (services that come from agencies outside of the homeless assistance system, such as DHHS) and/or benefits; and
- Housing search.

How Does Diversion Work?

Diversion is an intensive service intervention. Through an interactive problem-solving conversation with the client, staff seek to:

- understand what caused a person’s housing crisis;
- explore what immediate solutions to the crisis may be possible by identifying natural and community resources and supports; and
- help them pursue a solution(s).

These conversations should be person-centered, strengths-based, trauma informed, culturally appropriate, housing-focused and solutions-focused.

The idea is to immediately get the client into a safe housing alternative. Some of these options may include:

- a negotiated stay at or return to their previous housing;
- short-term, non-shelter accommodation;
- apartments or homes, (including shared housing);
- returns to family.

Staff should have training in skills like mediation, negotiation, conflict resolution, active listening, and strengths-based approaches. They should have access to flexible financial resources for things like rent arrears, transportation, utilities, and deposits. Staff also should have the ability to connect the client with community-based services, as needed.

Creativity is one of the keys to successful diversion, as there is not a single strategy that makes diversion effective. Staff who engage in diversion conversations with households are creative in their solutions, and explore every option to divert households from shelter. This can range from helping someone locate a family member or friend that can help, to acting as a mediator in the current housing situation, to developing a resolution that can allow the household to stay where they are.

Rapid Resolution Problem-Solving Approach:

The Rapid Resolution approach takes the form of a problem-solving conversation between an intake worker and a person seeking crisis services. The intake worker conducts a brief but intensive assessment to determine the circumstances contributing to the client’s immediate housing crisis. The focus of the conversation is on clearly delineating the material conditions directly related to the client’s choice to seek shelter at that moment, rather than long-standing poverty or behavioral health issues which might also be present. It is a proactive way to help clients explore their own housing options earlier. It is:

- **Client-centered**—with a focus on the client’s agency in resolving his or her own housing crisis;
- **Flexible**—all available housing options are creatively explored through a problem-solving conversation; and
- **Immediate**—providers recognize a critical window of opportunity to act swiftly to resolve the housing crisis.

Rapid Resolution is a practice that allows us to help the person find their strengths and resources to resolve their homelessness. This practice is centered in support and trust that, with some help, people might be able to identify resources to help them resolve their housing crisis. In many cases, just having staff engage in a conversation to get to know the household allows for a successful resolution without any financial assistance. It can include the following services:

- Conflict mediation (with a landlord, family or friends);
- Financial, utility, and/or rental assistance;
- Short-term case management focused on housing stabilization;
- Connection to mainstream services and benefits;
- Housing location and advocacy.

This strategy does require skilled staff who are well-trained and supported in the practice. Effective staff will be attentive listeners and solution-oriented thinkers who ask open-ended questions to help clients identify housing options they hadn’t considered or resolve housing problems that previously seemed intractable. Staff will be open and transparent about the pros and cons of each housing

option. Staff will provide conflict resolution services so that landlord issues and relationship problems that are getting in the way of stable housing can be resolved. Most critically, though, staff will identify the strengths and resources present in each client and leverage those assets to support the client in exploring and securing appropriate housing options.

Required Program Standards:

1. Staff are trained on the Rapid Resolution Approach to diversion.
2. Staff are familiar with mainstream resources for referral purposes.
3. Program assists participants in making an informed housing choice that is safe and appropriate.
4. Staff are trained on HMIS or a comparable databased as required by HUD and meet data entry and reporting requirements.

Access to Flexible Financial Assistance:

The goal of this assistance is to provide short-term assistance to households so they can pay for housing and avoid entering the homeless system. Some examples of this assistance may include:

- Utility deposits, payments and arrears (gas, electric, water, sewage – no more than 6 months arrearages, no more than 24 months total, including arrears)
- Rental assistance (no more than 2 months of rent if the Client can be diverted, more than 2 months of rental assistance is RRH) ***N.B., This assistance can only be offered if the household is not eligible for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERA) administered by the Community Action Agencies.***
- Rental arrears (up to 6 months including late fees) ***N.B., This assistance can only be offered if the household is not eligible for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERA) administered by the Community Action Agencies.***
- Rental application fees
- Security deposits, last month's rent (no more than 2 month's rent for SD, no more than one month's rent for last month's rent – which is included in total 12 month rental assistance cap)
- Moving costs (truck rental, moving company, temporary storage fees up to 3 months not to include arrears)
- Transportation
- Housing search and placement
- Housing stability case management
- Mediation costs
- Background/Credit checks
- Obtaining IDs/Birth certificate

Required Program Standards:

1. Staff are familiar with eligible expenses and utilize other organizational funds for financial requests that fall outside of ESG eligibility requirements.
2. Financial reporting on both staffing costs and participant financial assistance is completed within 15 days of each quarter – by July 15, 2021; October 15, 2021; January 15, 2022 and April 15, 2022.

Successful Outcomes for Program Participants:

Success will look different depending on the situation of the individual/family. Most important is that the housing solution is **safe** and **appropriate**.

Successful outcomes can include:

- Permanently back with family and friends
- Return to their own residence
- Temporarily diverted as they seek new housing
- Relocating permanently to a safe place out of town if there is a safe and appropriate host within the client's support system who will agree to host them for at least 30 days

Performance Benchmarks:

The effectiveness of a Diversion program is ultimately determined based on a program's ability to accomplish the model's primary goal:

- To assist individuals and families in finding safe alternative housing immediately, rather than entering shelter or experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

Evaluation of the Diversion Program will be based on the following data points captured in HMIS for program participants over the span of the contract with MaineHousing:

- % of households diverted from entering homelessness
- % of households that do not enter the homeless system within 180 days of being diverted

Goals for program effectiveness include:

- 20% of individuals deemed eligible for program are diverted to stable housing
- 30% of families deemed eligible for program are diverted to stable housing
- 85% of participants do not return to homelessness within 180 days of being diverted

Application Process

- I. Providers must submit an email expressing interest in participating in this program to esgcvprograms@mainehousing.org by **end of day Wednesday, March 10, 2021** that includes the following:
 - Confirmation that your organization has staff trained in Rapid Resolution, including staff names and positions.
 - Confirmation that staff will meet HMIS (or comparable database as required by HUD) data entry and reporting requirements.
 - Confirmation that organization will meet financial reporting deadlines of 15 days after the end of each quarter.
- II. Funding amounts to each organization will be based on the total number of qualified applicant organizations and will be distributed in advance according to the ESHAP Operations Share funding formula. The 2020 Housing Inventory Count (HIC) Emergency Shelter bed numbers will be used to calculate each agency's specific share. Funding will be provided for the following activities only:

1. Staffing – to include salary and benefits. Duties may be assigned to any number of trained staff as an agency sees fit. If staff are performing diversion duties in addition to other duties, agency must document time spent performing diversion duties.
2. Financial assistance to participants eligible under the ESG requirements (see above).

Administrative costs/overhead are not allowable costs for this funding opportunity.

- III. Applicants selected for funding will enter into a one-year Grant Agreement with MaineHousing. Providers must provide an accounting of grant funds spent and submit data using a standardized tracking system. Funds that are not spent in accordance with the Grant Agreement must be returned to MaineHousing.

Information Contact

The MaineHousing contact for all questions and for submission is lbustard@mainehousing.org

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