

DBHDD 2015 Transforming to a Housing First Framework

In 2012, the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) issued a paper outlining a housing vision for people with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities (I/DD) and Behavioral Health (BH) challenges. This paper articulated a desired future state and detailed the values that undergird our work. These values remain essential:

- 1.) We hold the belief that housing is essential to recovery and independence;
- 2.) We recognize that informed choice must anchor the selection of any housing option;
- 3.) We understand that access to a full continuum of housing options is fundamental to informed choice;
- 4.) We wish to promote living arrangements that are integrated into local communities.

The DBHDD team has worked diligently to partner with numerous stakeholders to advance our housing interests. These include sister agencies, led by the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), national technical experts (TAC, the Technical Assistance Collaborative), local Continuum of Care (CoCs) and Public Housing Authorities, federal partners (VASH, HUD), landlords, service providers, housing interest groups, and most importantly, consumers and family members seeking housing. We continue to grow and learn as vital partners in the housing continuum.

DBHDD is at a critical juncture in our housing efforts. As we have embraced expert guidance from all of these partners, we have recognized the importance of an intentional shift in our housing model. In our approach to housing of individuals with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI), we have focused on an individual's "readiness" to secure and maintain housing. While this effort has resulted in many successful housing placements, we are evolving to a new framework. This framework, called Housing First, does not scrutinize an individual's "readiness" to maintain housing, but rather promotes that housing comes first, and that this housing does not need to be linked to compliance with services. It is the service system that must advance its readiness to support individuals once they are in the appropriate home setting. We envision the success of a Housing First approach based on an individual's choice, supported by strong partnerships between housing providers and community behavioral health providers. We believe that transitioning to this Housing First framework is aligned with a Recovery-Oriented System of Care, and keeps the individuals we serve at the center of our efforts.

This Housing First Framework has been adopted in many states and locations throughout the country. It develops differently, depending upon local factors and programmatic and funding preferences and opportunities. The model has repeatedly demonstrated evidence-based outcomes related to permanent housing and long term stability and wellness. Regardless of the particular model, when Housing First is applied to individuals with severe and persistent mental illness, it is characterized by the following features:

- Direct placement into housing with a commitment to permanent housing;
- Assertive outreach to identify individuals that are hard to reach;
- Supportive services are offered but not required for participation in housing;
- Ongoing case management to support individuals through housing interruptions.

Adoption of this framework is a process that will occur over the months and years ahead. It will require adjustments to policies, practices, procedures, but most fundamentally, it is a

transformation of the convictions and approach of professionals involved. DBHDD intends to lead the way in this conversion.

As we seek to apply the Housing First Framework, informed choice will remain as a cornerstone of our efforts. With informed choice at the center, two essential areas of focus result:

- 1.) Developing tools and skills to assess needs and preferences of individuals we serve;
- 2.) Building housing capacity statewide.

In the coming months, a wide variety of stakeholders will be engaged in activities aimed at the development of adequate tools and competencies for the assessment of Housing Needs and Preferences. We cannot accomplish this alone. In addition to national technical assistance, we need the involvement of consumers, providers and advocates to inform our system development. We will seek guidance and input, and even more directly, we will seek external engagement in the need assessment process. The development of tools, the training on the use of these tools and the system-wide gathering of information will advance the entire state's understanding of the need profile in the state. Together, we can strategize about priority populations and allocation of limited resources.

An important element in this process of systems change involves provision of understanding of the Housing First philosophy. To that end, statewide training will be infused throughout our network of providers to assist in their knowledge, understanding and implementation of the Housing First model in their own service delivery systems.

As this construction of tools and acquisition of skills is underway, an equally important parallel strategy will proceed. In fact this work is already underway. This is the enhancement of the state's supported housing capacity. This will require a diverse array of strategies, including the addition of vouchers, the utilization of federal resources, the partnership with DCA, and the development of efficiencies to advance individuals through the housing continuum to assure that individuals are in the most appropriate setting.

The work ahead is exciting and transformative. We issue this announcement to engage your interest, your partnership and your commitment. As we embrace and implement this Housing First framework, we anticipate growth, challenges, learnings and opportunities we had not previously considered. Please stay tuned for requests for your input and involvement. We are eager to work together to make Georgia's housing continuum the country's best.