

CREATING SYSTEMS AND CULTURE CHANGE

This brief provides guidance for communities interested or currently engaged in efforts to expand rapid re-housing. It examines strategies communities who have transformed their homeless service system used to engage leadership, providers and the community.

A national shift is underway transforming how communities address homelessness. More and more communities are embracing rapid re-housing, a Housing First approach that focuses on permanent housing solutions. Rapid re-housing is an intervention designed to help individuals and families to quickly exit homelessness and return to permanent housing. The resources and services provided through rapid re-housing are offered without preconditions and are tailored to the unique needs of each individual household.

While communities are beginning to understand the value of Housing First and rapid re-housing, the administrative, structural and philosophical changes they must make to adopt these approaches in their system can require navigating a complex set of factors.

Community leaders report that adapting to a new response to homelessness that places rapid re-housing at its core is a worthwhile endeavor. They say expanding rapid re-housing has allowed them to increase the number of people they serve and reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness on any given day. The model also has broader impacts on the homeless system by reducing the waitlist for shelter and capacity demand. This can alleviate the need for overflow shelter and reliance on motels, resulting in savings that can be reinvested to meet other needs of people experiencing homelessness. More importantly, rapid re-housing can free up capacity within the homeless service system to meet the needs of people experiencing housing crises that necessitate shelter stays.

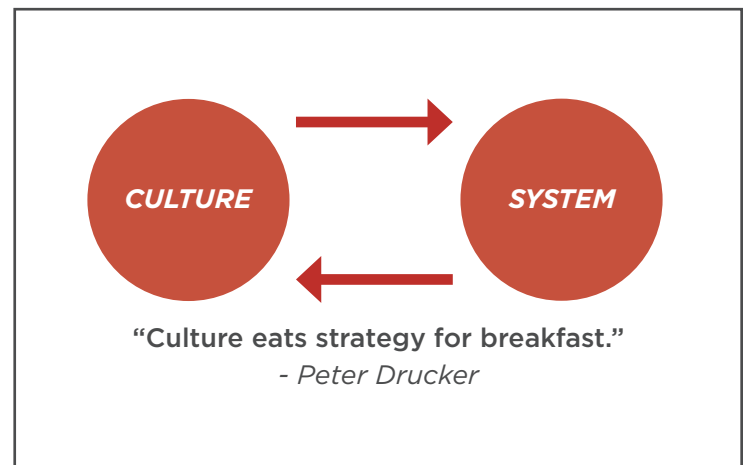
To adopt rapid re-housing homeless system leaders and providers must improve their understanding of and ability to implement a new approach. More fundamentally, however, it requires key system stakeholders to accept a new approach. A different systems and culture change is required of different stakeholders. For funders and systems administrators, supporting more rapid re-housing may require decisiveness in the face of uncertainty that a relatively new intervention that has worked elsewhere can be successful in their community. For existing providers, it requires a shift in the work they do to solve homelessness. For all, it means a substantial cultural shift.

In 2009, the Alliance published a toolkit, [*Organizational Change: Adopting a Housing First Approach*](#). The document outlines the key strategies of a *Housing First* approach with the goal of helping individual organizations shift towards a *Housing First* model. This is an important companion piece to this document as it provides valuable guidance at the organizational level about how to make the shift. The focus of this document is on systems and cultural change to a *Housing First* and rapid re-housing approach.

MAKING THE SHIFT

Shifting the culture towards rapid re-housing is but one step in the process of implementing this new solution to homelessness. Once a community has decided to make this change, they will need to garner significant support to help each stakeholder make the transition and change how they function within the system.¹

The value of cultural change in making such a shift should not be underestimated. You cannot make systemic change without cultural change and vice versa. While realigning the values, culture and philosophy of a homeless service system to one that relies primarily on rapid re-housing may seem like an insurmountable process, the communities described here can attest to the benefits.



STRATEGIES FOR CREATING CHANGE

Described below are some of the common elements that communities who have made the shift to centering their system around rapid re-housing have described as important for supporting change. All communities differ – not all of these actions will be necessary or required to make the shift, but it may be useful to consider them part of a larger strategy when beginning the process.

The Community Alliance for the Homeless in Memphis, Tennessee was able to show the cost-effectiveness of rapid re-housing to providers and funders and was the driving force behind shifting resources away from transitional housing and towards rapid re-housing. Memphis/Shelby County had an original goal of reducing transitional housing beds in the community by 50 percent over five years and increasing rapid re-housing. They have achieved an increase in the number of people who can receive rapid re-housing. The Metropolitan Interfaith Association (MIFA) also repurposed its U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grants that operated a significant number of transitional housing units to rapid re-housing. MIFA also donated the former transitional housing properties to another nonprofit to create permanent supportive housing for child welfare-involved homeless families.

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2014. Community Snapshot of Memphis-Shelby County.

Making the cultural shift requires that key stakeholders (e.g., community leaders and funders, such as business leaders; frontline staff, including providers and case managers; and the broader community) are committed and on board. Different strategies will be required to develop this commitment.

IDENTIFYING AND ENGAGING A COMMUNITY CHANGE AGENT

The first step in the process of adopting a rapid re-housing approach is typically identifying a change agent. These drivers of change can be government officials, homeless advocates, or committed providers, but all must be willing to take a leadership role and drive action in their community.

For example, in **Houston, Texas**, then-Mayor Annise Parker played an instrumental role in driving community change. In 2012, Mayor Parker committed to housing all of the Houston’s long-term homeless people. Then in 2013, Mayor Parker announced the appointment of the Houston’s first special assistant to the Mayor for its newly formed Homeless Initiative. The appointment helped

¹Culture change refers to lasting structural and social changes in shared beliefs, values and policies and procedures. Systems change refers to an “intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting and realigning the form and function of a targeted system.” <http://www.ncdsv.org/images/Putting%20the%20systembackintosystemschange.pdf>

facilitate the creation and implementation of a comprehensive, collaborative plan to address chronic homelessness. Mayor Parker also created the Mayor’s Leadership Team around homeless issues. This team became instrumental in coordinating private fundraising to combat homeless issues.

Richmond, Virginia, found three separate change agents who helped to move the concept of rapid re-housing forward. One, a business leader and nonprofit board member, advocated for the introduction of rapid re-housing based on the successes of the program in other communities. He helped to secure the initial funding for a rapid re-housing pilot. A transitional housing provider participated in the first pilot and learned that not only could her agency serve more households at reduced costs but her case managers were reporting that they could provide more dignified services to their clients. Finally, a local foundation supported the initial pilot and continued to advocate fund agencies changing their programs to be more housing-focused.

Both of these communities reported the importance of a strong champion for the cause. Identifying and fostering a local change leader can ensure that a community’s transition to Housing First-focused system is fully integrated and supported.

USING DATA TO DRIVE THE CHANGE

Communities also described the importance of using data to convince philanthropic, political and other community leaders; providers; and the general public about the value of shifting to a Housing First and rapid re-housing approach. For example, examining data and encouraging funders to be involved in the re-evaluation of the community’s intervention can help create ownership over the issue. It is particularly important that community leaders and funders examine data on the cost effectiveness of rapid re-housing versus other homeless assistance programs (e.g., transitional housing). Data documenting the effectiveness of rapid re-housing is also instrumental in fostering commitment from political stakeholders. Communities found that using data on rapid re-housing effectiveness from other communities was most important when informing providers about the impact of the intervention, how it is delivered, how to combine services and housing and how the program serves more households.

Convincing the broader community to shift the system towards a rapid re-housing approach also requires data about the effectiveness and cost of the intervention. Those communities who made the change stressed that broad scale acceptance by the larger public is key to successfully implementing the shift.

Pierce County, Washington; Jacksonville, Florida; and Spokane, Washington have all described how data on rapid re-housing was critical for changing their systems approaches to homelessness. Pierce County, for example, conducted an analysis to understand how they were serving families in their system. The calculated the number of families in their system, where they came from, how long they stayed in the system and how much was being invested in ending homelessness. The analysis revealed that the length of stay in transitional housing was significantly higher than in rapid re-housing, exits to permanent housing were similar between the interventions, while the cost of transitional housing per family was much higher (see Table 1).

Table 1. Analysis of homeless services interventions in Pierce County, WA

| Intervention | Exits to Permanent Housing | Length of Stay | Cost Per Family |
|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Transitional Housing | 76% | 405 days | \$25,000 |
| Rapid Re-Housing | 81% | 150 days | \$8,000 |

Source: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/transforming-homeless-services-in-pierce-county-washington>

Based on this assessment, the Pierce County found that with no new funds, **rapid re-housing could serve three times the number of households**, with comparable or better outcomes.

Changing the way a system thinks about homelessness:

Ultimately the goal of rapid re-housing is to move households quickly out of homelessness into permanent housing. The benefits of the model extend beyond the direct impact on the household itself. They improve the effectiveness of the entire community's homeless system by increasing the number of people served and reducing the waitlist for shelter.

Rapid re-housing can help to make the homelessness system work more efficiently. The misperception that rapid re-housing is a resource that sets people up to fail can be challenged by the research and by community reports of low returns to homelessness. This latter point is particularly important for providers concerned about the model.

Likewise, Jacksonville used data, including monthly reviews of coordinated entry information,² to encourage systemic movement toward permanent housing interventions, including rapid re-housing.

GETTING LEADERSHIP, FUNDERS AND PROVIDERS ON BOARD

Convincing community leaders, funders, board members and agency leaders about the effectiveness of rapid re-housing is a key part of making a cultural shift. These actors make decisions that determine how and if programs are funded and often drive the development of goals for ending homelessness in the community. Communities who transformed their homeless service system through expansion of rapid re-housing described the importance of getting community leaders on board to drive change, but had different ideas for how to accomplish this. Below are some of the methods used.

LEARNING FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES

Several communities described the importance of traveling to places that have implemented the change to rapid re-housing to learn about practices, outcomes and the impact that it has had. For example, representatives from Houston, Texas visited Salt Lake City, Utah to learn about their model, data and processes. Houston's leaders, funders and providers joined the peer-to-peer learning experience, which the city cited as key to moving these important players closer to this model. Examining data, trends and funding was a pivotal part of the experience for those from Houston. It was particularly important to learn how funding was repurposed to support the changing system and the consequences of that repurposing. Hearing how the transition impacted the system and the providers — more people were served and agencies did not shut down as part of the change — was a critical part of this learning process.

DEVELOPING THE VISION AND STRATEGY FOR ENDING HOMELESSNESS

Communities described the importance of gathering leaders and funders, including those in the business community, to discuss data and develop broader acceptance. For example, Mercer County, New Jersey created the Homeless Advocate Group and Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness, as well as funders subcommittees that helped to develop a vision and community mission toward ending homelessness.

Community leaders can define a unified vision for ending homelessness in the community based on a review of the evidence. It is particularly important to engage funders in this process so they feel invested in the decision-making process and understand “what they are buying” with rapid re-housing.

²“Coordinated assessment,” also known as coordinated entry or coordinated intake, paves the way for more efficient homeless assistance systems by: helping people move through the system faster (by reducing the amount of time people spend moving from program to program before finding the right match); reducing new entries into homelessness (by consistently offering prevention and diversion resources upfront, reducing the number of people entering the system unnecessarily); and improving data collection and quality and providing accurate information on what kind of assistance consumers need. Source: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/coordinated-assessment-toolkit>

A vital step is to document the alignment of culture, beliefs and values around a rapid re-housing approach through a strategic planning process. Community leaders and funders should lead this process and engage providers, consumers and the broader community. Designing a clear vision can help all stakeholders understand how to prioritize their efforts. Communities described the importance of developing written plans that included broad stakeholder input to move the community in this direction. Mercer County, New Jersey, Memphis, Tennessee, and Richmond, Virginia all discussed the importance of involving the community in developing plans to address homelessness. For example, in Memphis and Shelby Counties in Tennessee the broader community participated in the development of a 10-year plan to end homelessness through open meetings and regular engagement.

In 2008, the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness in [Mercer County, New Jersey](#), began a year-long process of examining data on its homeless system, including costs and outcomes. Research on shelter utilization, outcomes of emergency shelter and transitional housing, and rapid re-housing best practices provided the foundation for this analysis. Data examining transitional housing and rapid re-housing showed that those in transitional housing with the longest lengths of stay had the lowest need. Transitional housing also did not have strong outcomes in terms of exiting people to permanent housing. In addition, transitional housing's cost to the system was over \$5 million annually. This data informed community leaders, funders, and the community about the need to reallocate from transitional housing to rapid re-housing.

Similarly, Richmond, Virginia, convened a community forum with over 100 stakeholders to inform the city's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. They formed a strategic planning taskforce to draft implementation details. Homeward, the lead agency in Richmond, facilitated the process and hosted five input sessions with service providers, two input sessions with persons experiencing homelessness and information sessions with community leaders from their city and neighboring counties.

Once a vision and plan are in place communities must change the language for doing business. Mercer County discussed the importance of changing how they referred to Housing First and rapid re-housing to ensure that providers and the broader community began to understand the philosophy and new ways of doing their work. In Richmond, providers were encouraged by messages such as “we are trying to change how we respond to our neighbors in crisis.”

CHANGING PROVIDERS' MINDS

Frontline staff are often those most affected by a cultural and administrative shift to a rapid re-housing model. This is particularly true for providers who have spent years and even decades providing transitional housing. They must rethink the philosophy and approach to how they deliver services. Communities who have undergone this shift have reported that the biggest challenge is that providers appear to feel they are “losing a sense of control and identity” by moving the overall system to one focused primarily on rapid re-housing. Involving front-line homeless assistance staff in the process can help to address these challenges head on by promoting buy-in, addressing resistance and ensuring that their perspectives and expertise inform the model and approach developed. Providers are then also involved in troubleshooting and addressing potential obstacles.

Houston/Harris County, Texas, for example, gave data on rapid re-housing pilot programs to providers as well as the broader community to allow for real-time data analysis and engage these stakeholders in a more concrete way.

³In 2009, Congress appropriated \$1.5 billion for the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing program (HPRP) in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, serving an estimated 1.4 million people with prevention and rapid re-housing assistance over three years.

A Systemic Approach to Rapid Re-Housing in

Virginia: Virginia has significantly reduced family homelessness by taking rapid re-housing to scale across the whole state. From 2010 to 2014, Virginia reduced the number of families experiencing homelessness by 25 percent - from 1,181 family households in 2010 to 877 in 2014, and has continued to decrease family homelessness since then. An important factor in this success was that Virginia shifted from a shelter and transitional housing-based system to one based much more on the use of a system-wide rapid re-housing approach through a new initiative with the goal of reducing family homelessness across the Commonwealth. In 2010, the National Alliance to End Homelessness administered this three-year initiative, funded by the Freddie Mac Foundation, in partnership with the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness, and the Virginia Department of Community Development. During the first two years, the project significantly built provider capacity and buy-in of the rapid re-housing model through intensive training and technical assistance, and increased state investment in the strategy. In the third year the project supported this shift by focusing on community-level planning and support for rapid re-housing. Virginia's success was due to its two-pronged approach of realigning funding and policy to support rapid re-housing, while building provider capacity to effectively implement it. To accomplish this, the project partners generated buy-in from influential leaders, changed funding incentives, released clear performance standards, communicated early and often, offered a variety of training opportunities, and helped communities analyze their resource investments.

ENGAGING IN PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING

Encouraging providers to engage in peer-to-peer learning is one of the most effective ways to convince front-line staff about how the shift to a rapid re-housing model can allow them to do better case work. As an example, the Commonwealth of Virginia successfully used learning collaborative models to encourage peer learning and support. In a learning collaborative, participating organizations establish their own ambitious goals for how to improve their rapid re-housing programs with assistance from their peers and expert. Participants receive training and participate in conference calls, in-person meetings, site visits, hand-on technical assistance and webinars with national experts and other organizations in their collaborative.

GIVING PROVIDERS TIME TO ADJUST AND PILOT THE NEW APPROACH

Several communities noted that a necessary step for effectively implementing a structural change is to give providers time to adjust to the new system and way of doing things. Some communities, such as Mercer County, New Jersey and Houston, Texas, gave providers a year or more notice that they would be required to change. This gave providers an opportunity to assess their own concerns, make adjustments and communicate needs.

Also, once a plan is in place, it is important to provide an opportunity for the community to develop and pilot rapid re-housing projects without worrying about financial or other consequences. This can both encourage innovation and bring more familiarity to and acceptance of the model. For example, in Mercer County, New Jersey the Board of Social Services used state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding to develop a rapid re-housing pilot. The county expanded the small pilot when they received federal Homelessness Preven-

tion and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP) funds. The pilot provided the community the opportunity to develop its rapid re-housing practice and learn what works. Systems leaders in the county noted that, "pilots are helpful in building evidence that is needed to build interventions to scale."

CONVINCING THE COMMUNITY

Convincing the broader community to be on board with the shift to a rapid re-housing approach requires many of the same actions described above, including providing data about the effectiveness, including cost, of the program and how it can impact the system. Community leaders play an important role in taking active steps to engage the community.

Communities who made the change stressed that broad scale acceptance by the larger public is key to successfully implementing the shift. It's essential that communities allow the larger public to be involved in the process by providing opportunities to examine other programs, observe pilot projects and engage in developing a broader vision for ending homelessness. For example, Memphis promoted data on a rapid re-housing pilot project to the broader community so they could become more engaged in the process and learn about outcomes and impact rapid re-housing could have on homelessness. Broader community participation in action plans also helped Richmond build support and a focus on rapid re-housing.

SUPPORTING THE CHANGE

Two key actions that have allowed communities that have made the shift to continue to successfully support the rapid re-housing approach include:

- **Being flexible:** Communities described the need to make ongoing adjustments, continue learning and re-evaluate the implemented changes throughout the process.

For example, several communities used pilots to help them learn, test various approaches and be flexible. This included Mercer County, New Jersey, Houston, Texas, and the State of Virginia. Richmond, Virginia used pilots to understand how rapid re-housing worked and how to transition to the model. This included a pilot program to transform one transitional housing program to a rapid re-housing model. The pilot gave Richmond the flexibility to “try and fail” and ultimately informed its understanding the effectiveness of rapid re-housing and how they might expand it to other programs.

- **Encouraging and maintaining ongoing two-way communication:** Communities should maintain a community-wide process that is open and transparent for voicing concerns at and to all levels. This process should encourage community and consumer participation.

Communities cited peer learning opportunities and open communication with the broader community as effective ways for encouraging this kind of communication. In Richmond, Virginia, Homeward convenes more than 15 committees and work groups consisting of a broad range of stakeholders to understand, discuss and gather input on key issues. In addition, Homeward facilitates an ongoing learning community through trainings, peer exchanges and capacity building, which allows stakeholders to openly discuss the challenges they are facing and identify potential solutions.

Communities, as described above, discussed the importance of engaging the broader public in their plans to end homelessness. The Office to Prevent and End Homelessness in Fairfax County, Virginia, for example, developed community-wide goals through an open process. They share data on rapid re-housing performance using a transparent process, including social media, printed reports and community presentations.

Adoption of a Housing First and rapid re-housing approach requires thoughtful consideration of the needs of a variety of stakeholders, who may each be coming to the issue from very different perspectives. Some of the actions described above, on a general level, may help to garner more widespread support of a rapid re-housing model, although all communities will vary. It is important to note that ultimately “change is a process not an event, which occurs in incremental, discontinuous steps and generally results in significant disequilibrium. This disequilibrium, although often uncomfortable, is evidence that real change is taking place.”⁴

⁴<http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/organizational-change-adopting-a-housing-first-approach>