

**Housing Problem Solving**  
**Alameda County Housing Crisis Response System Policy Guide**  
**FINAL DRAFT**  
**5-13-2020**

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**Housing Problem Solving**  
**Alameda County Homelessness Response System Policy**  
**5-16-2020**

**A. Purpose of this Policy**

This document outlines the system-level policies related to the purpose, intent, timing, delivery, uses of flexible funds, and key outcomes of Housing Problem Solving in Alameda County’s Housing Crisis Response System. These policies are intended to guide the work of all organizations delivering HPS services and the use of HPS resources within the System, regardless of originating funding source, geographic area, location delivered or population served. (Where exceptions are made, these will be noted.)

This document is not a training manual or a best practice guide. Training materials and guidance on employing best practices in delivering Housing Problem Solving will be developed separately. Training will include a focus on developing and honing the skills and approaches needed for a successful HPS practice as well as how to apply the local policies included here.

This document uses the term “participant” to indicate an individual or household participating in HPS services.

**B. Housing Problem Solving Defined<sup>1</sup>**

Housing Problem Solving is both a practice and a system intervention that works with a participant who is experiencing homelessness or at imminent risk of homelessness to identify options for self-help to resolve the housing crisis without the need for ongoing support from the Housing Crisis Response System.

Housing Problem Solving may be offered to participants who are literally homeless, which includes people staying in shelters and in places not meant for human habitation, and those who are fleeing domestic violence<sup>2</sup>, as well as participants who are at imminent risk of homelessness and are living in doubled-up situations, in institutional settings, who are “invisibly housed” (that is, have no legal rights to occupy their current housing situation) and who will become literally homeless if not assisted. Housing Problem Solving may also work with leaseholders *if they are unable to be appropriately assisted by an eviction prevention provider and will become homeless within three days if not assisted.*

**C. Intent of Housing Problem Solving**

Housing Problem Solving is intended to both stem the inflow of new people becoming homeless and to help people who have already lost housing to return to homes quickly. As a system practice, it should prevent participants from waiting for another form of assistance that is not coming, being added to the By Name List

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<sup>1</sup> The term Housing Problem Solving is used in Alameda County to describe a practice that works with people who are already homeless and those who are at imminent risk of immediate homelessness; in other communities these practices may be known as Diversion and Rapid Resolution.

<sup>2</sup> See homeless definitions for a complete list of persons who are considered literally homeless.

when they have little to no chance of being prioritized for a resource, and from unnecessary long-term housing crisis response system involvement.

#### **D. Potential Resolutions**

Housing Problem Solving results in a successful resolution when one of five things occur:

1. A participant who was at imminent risk of becoming immediately homeless is able to safely remain in a place they were already staying, or moves to another safe place without a longer-term resource from the housing crisis response system.
2. A participant moves from streets or shelter to a safe place to stay with family or friends.
3. A participant moves from streets or shelter into permanent housing, on own or shared.
4. A participant who was already homeless or about to become homeless is assisted to return to another community where they will have a place to live.
5. A participant enters a treatment program or other temporary place to achieve a goal related to gaining housing that is outside the crisis response system with the intention of going from there to permanent housing.

#### **E. Definition of Success**

a. Process success: The process of offering Housing Problem Solving is successful when a staff person and a participant identify one or more options for self-help to resolve the housing crisis and the HPS staff has provided appropriate services or resources to support the resolution (including referrals to other resources.)

b. Outcome successes:

The HPS solution is successful when the provision of HPS services and supports has resulted in

- A participant who was at risk of homelessness has a place to safely stay and avoids homelessness and getting onto the By Name List; or,
- A participant who was literally homeless gets rehoused without an additional resource from the Crisis Response System and gets off of the By Name List.<sup>3</sup>

#### **F. Components of Housing Problem Solving**

*HPS Conversation:* All Housing Problem Solving will begin with a conversation designed to unearth potential alternatives to homelessness that could, temporarily or permanently, resolve the participants housing crisis. A conversation guide is available; however, the guide is not a form and is not intended to be completed in the same way for every participant. Training to conduct this conversation, including safety screening and planning, will be offered regularly.

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<sup>3</sup> As the Coordinated Entry Assessment changes these definitions may need to be adjusted as it may be that the option to get on the BNL will not be available even if the participant does not achieve an HPS resolution right away.

Other HPS supports: In some cases, the conversation will be the only support necessary to identify and support a potential resolution that the participant can pursue. If additional support is needed, staff conducting HPS may offer one or more of the following additional supports:

1. Referrals to other programs or services that the participant can access that will support a resolution, including but not limited to public benefits, employment and educational services, child care, health care, mental health services, substance use treatment services, legal services, and/or domestic violence (DV) services
2. Conflict resolution/mediation with landlords/property managers, friend or family members, with participant's permission
3. Housing search/housing location assistance to help a participant seek appropriate housing on their own
4. Flexible Funds to support a specific resolution opportunity. Specific requirements regarding flexible funds including eligible expenses, caps and other requirements are described below.

#### **G. Locations where HPS may be delivered**

Housing Problem Solving may be delivered in a variety of settings. In Alameda County is intended to be offered throughout the Housing Crisis Response System, especially as connected with Coordinated Entry, and among a broad array of community and mainstream agencies. Within the Coordinated Entry model it may occur at:

- A Housing Resource Center or other organization delivering direct services to participants
- With a Street Outreach worker
- Via 211
- At a shelter, including hotels (specifics to be determined)

It is the intent of the system to ensure that HPS services can and will also be delivered in community-based and mainstream agencies that work with households that are homeless and/or those at imminent risk. Agencies that should be invited and encouraged to become trained in HPS techniques and able to connect participants to resources should include:

- Social Service Agency
- Behavioral Health Care Services / Mental Health Services Organizations
- Hospitals, Clinics and Outpatient Services
- Schools / School Districts
- Probation/Sheriff

Details on how these agencies will work with HPS and relate to HPS as delivered within the Coordinate Entry framework remain to be developed.

## H. Delivering Housing Problem Solving within Coordinated Entry

The techniques associated with Housing Problem Solving, including problem solving conversations and support for alternative housing resolutions may be used throughout the system and at other times, by case/care managers, navigators, and others. As a focus of this expansion, however, HPS as a discrete intervention will be focused on people who are at immediate risk for entry into the system or who are newly homeless, and those who are on the current BNL who are not likely to receive another resource.

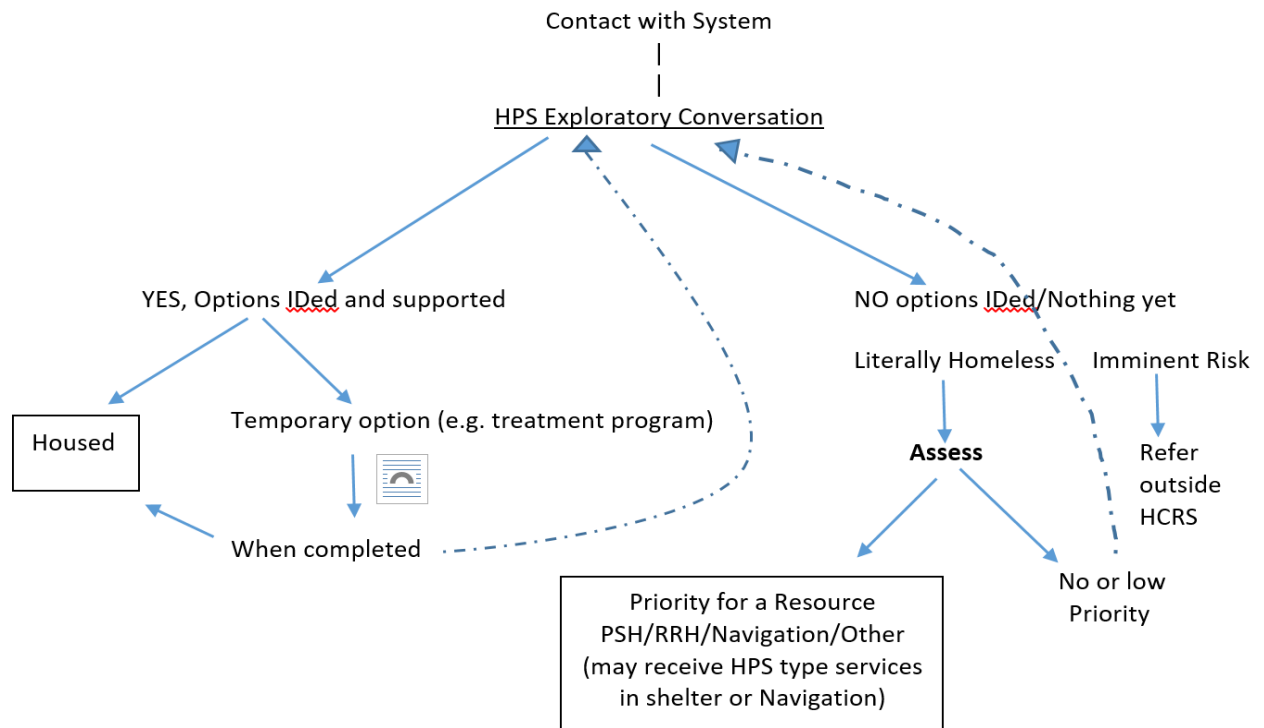
As system practice, HPS will always be offered *at least* once when a participant is first identified as needing help and *before* a participant is assessed for other system resources using the Coordinate Entry Assessment process. It should also be continuously available after a participant has been assessed *and not assigned to another resource* until they receive a system resource, or are housed or lose contact.

Once changes are made to the Coordinated Entry assessment, for some participants HPS may be the primary or only resource that is available to them after assessment, and this should be communicated clearly.<sup>4</sup>

### a. HPS at first connection (prior to assessment)

All people initially seeking housing crisis services will be offered an HPS conversation.

#### **Visual of HPS process**



<sup>4</sup> Changes to the Coordinated Entry Assessment process are anticipated in the coming months. At such time as the new assessment process is finalized and underway, these policies for HPS should be reviewed and updated.

1. Approach and key messaging for literally homeless: If the participant is literally homeless, HPS will be offered after determining homeless status, using the Coordinated Entry guidelines. Staff's initial message to the client *must* include that the crisis response system has very limited shelter and housing resources and is unlikely to be able to help the participant in a timely fashion but that the staff person can help them to determine what options they may have right away and may assist them to secure an option immediately.

i. With resolution: If one or more potential resolutions is identified with someone who is literally homeless, staff will work with the participant to develop a plan to pursue the resolution and will offer necessary assistance, including referrals, conflict resolution, housing search support and/or flexible funds (following the guidelines below.)

If one or more potential resolutions is identified the staff person will not conduct a client assessment. The staff person will ensure that the participant has the information they need to proceed with the resolution and will message that they can return if they need more Problem Solving assistance.

ii. Without resolution: If no resolution is identified, and the staff person is a qualified assessor, the staff person may then offer an assessment immediately, schedule a time in the future to conduct an assessment, or may connect the participant to another person or site that does assessments.

Whether or not a resolution is identified, if the participant will not be in a safe alternative that evening the staff person will also offer information about shelter availability.

2. Approach and messaging for those at imminent risk: If a participant is at imminent risk of becoming immediately homeless, an HPS conversation will be offered to identify ways to stay in their current situation if this is safe, or to move to an alternative situation. In addition to the conversation, HPS staff may offer referrals and, if time permits, conflict resolution/mediation. In order to ensure that HPS is always available to those literally homeless, *unless the entity conducting HPS has specific resources targeted for those at imminent risk, financial assistance will be prioritized for those who are literally homeless*

If no resolution is achieved, the participant will be told that they can return if they identify a potential option, or if they are unable to secure an option they may return for a further conversation and potentially an assessment. *No Coordinated Entry assessments will be performed with participants who are not literally homeless.*

#### b. Housing Problem Solving after Assessment

At this time, once someone has been assessed, they are entered onto the By Name List and may be offered system resources such as rapid rehousing or, if in the highest scoring group, Permanent Supportive Housing. Until such time as the assessment process is reformed and people can be told in real time that they are or are not prioritized for a system resource, all persons will be told that they may be contacted if a resource is

available but that there is no guarantee that they will receive housing support. They should be told that they may return (or call again) for Housing Problem Solving assistance at any time.<sup>5</sup>

c. Housing Problem Solving for those on BNL: Due to the significant number of people on the BNL who are unlikely to receive another resource, HPS should be offered to those currently on the BNL, as funding for staff and support is available. HRC's funded to conduct HPS should proactively reach out to persons who are active on the By Name List in their Zone and have not been connected to a system resource to offer and promote Housing Problem Solving.

## **I. Other Venues for Housing Problem Solving**

### a. Housing Problem Solving with an Outreach Worker

Outreach workers will be trained in Housing Problem Solving techniques and will offer HPS as part of outreach services. In some cases, depending on the specific outreach team, it may be different for outreach workers to access or manage flexible funds and the necessary forms. In this case, resolutions that are identified with an outreach worker that require flexible funds may be referred to an HRC or other program managing flex funds. Protocols may need to be developed for these shared clients to ensure that the participant continues to work with the person they have developed a relationship with as much as possible.

### b. Housing Problem Solving via Telephone

HPS may be initiated over the telephone, and during the COVID-19 or any other public health crisis or emergency, HPS may be delivered exclusively by phone. Efforts to collect documents and to provide financial assistance that avoid in-person contact may include scanning and texting or emailing documents, mailing resources, or dropping off documents or resources in locations where staff and participants do not need to meet in person. Agencies conducting HPS by phone must ensure that all necessary steps are taken to reasonably ensure that the participant's situation is accurate and requires assistance and that the person or entity receiving the assistance is the intended beneficiary and will put that assistance toward ensuring a housing resolution for the participant.

### c. Housing Problem Solving with an Assigned Navigator

Assignment to a Navigator after an assessment means someone has been matched to an ongoing system resource managed by Coordinated Entry. Navigation services are also intended to work with an individual or household to get them housed. When someone is attached to both a Navigator and a system resource (such as a PSH or RRH slot) a Navigator will work with them to utilize the system resource and secure housing. If someone has been matched to no other resource than Navigation, the Navigator may use HPS techniques and may even access flexible funding but any resulting housing exit is a Navigation result, not HPS.

However, there may be times that Navigators offer HPS directly or connect their clients specifically to an HPS resource. This should include:

- The potential for successful HPS should be explored at first contact between the client and the assigned Navigator. This is especially important if the client has not had a HPS conversation within the past 30 days, or if the client situation or attitude has significantly changed since the last HPS conversation.

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<sup>5</sup> Once the reform of the assessment process is done it should be possible to inform them whether they are prioritized for a resource or not. At that time those not prioritized for a resource will be told that they *will not* be receiving another system resource and that Housing Problem Solving is what they are qualified for.



- If the Navigator is concerned about someone who is sleeping outside due to current or imminent weather or illness and no other housing plan is in progress the Navigator should introduce an HPS conversation.

#### d. Housing Problem Solving by 2-1-1

2-1-1 operators will, as time and training permits, conduct initial problem solving conversation with callers seeking housing crisis response system assistance. 2-1-1 will refer those at imminent risk of homelessness to relevant resources such as food, utility assistance, rental assistance, landlord-tenant mediation, eviction prevention and emergency financial assistance, as well as any other places able to conduct more in-depth HPS with those who are not literally homeless. 2-1-1 will continue to refer literally homeless persons to the appropriate HRC.

As resources become available, additional HPS work may be possible via 2-1-1, including more in-depth work with callers who are at imminent risk of homelessness. To deliver full HPS services at 2-1-1 or any other call center will require additional funding for dedicated staffing, training, and access to Flexible Funds. Protocols with an administering agency or clearinghouse to manage Flex Funds should be explored.

#### e. Housing Problem Solving in an Emergency Shelter

[This guidance is to be developed.]

#### **J. Privacy and comfort**

All HPS conversations should be conducted in as private a setting as possible to ensure confidentiality and to maximize the participant's comfort.

#### **K. Safety Screening and DV Resources**

All staff conducting HPS will be trained in safety screening and safety planning.

During Initial Conversation: Safety screening must be part of the initial conversation and key questions designed to determine if someone may be a survivor will be part of the conversation guide and training. Anyone who at this point is identified as a survivor should be offered DV resources. If the person who is a survivor declines these resources, and the housing problem solving conversation continues, safety planning should be part of any resolution plan.

As Part of the Exploration of Options: For all participants, whether identified as survivors or not, all potential resolutions should be screened through the lens of safety. This includes ensuring that the person feels safe with the option selected and, if they have identified any safety concerns, specific plans have been made to address those concerns.

Survivors who can safely stay where they are or obtain secure housing with assistance may be eligible financial assistance and/or legal assistance and advocacy from a DV agency which have Housing First funds.

#### **L. Timeframe for Problem Solving**

Housing Problem Solving is not ongoing Navigation or case/care management. It is intended to be a short-term service and most resolutions should be completed within an anticipated one to three

visits/conversations over a 30-60 day period. Continuation after four or more sessions or after 60 days should be approved by a supervisor.

### **M. Required Forms**

All providers of HPS will be provided with forms to guide and document the conversation and Resolution Plan, and to request and track Flexible Funds.

Form 1: Conversation Guide and Resolution Plan

Form 2: Flexible Funds Request Form

Additional forms and requirements may be created as funding streams are identified and committed to this intervention.

### **N. Flexible Funds Guidance**

#### **a. Flex funds not primary or always offered**

Many HPS resolutions can be reached without need of flex funds. In exploring options with a participant, flex funds should not be presented as the primary service of HPS nor specifically offered unless it is clear that flex funds are needed to secure the resolution under consideration.

#### **b. Flexible Funds for interim needs only**

Flexible funds are intended to cover costs that are necessary to achieve an immediate resolution and may cover some interim household needs or bridge a financial gap while more permanent resources are secured. HPS staff should always seek alternatives to Flex Funds for ongoing needs such as food, childcare, transportation, utilities, etc. HPS staff should help participants develop and implement plans to secure needed resources, including income from benefits for which participants qualify. The anticipated time to secure emergency benefits (GA, TANF, CalFresh) is one to two weeks. Flex funds should be issued with the intent to cover anticipated needs over no more than 30 days at a time.

#### **c. Eviction Prevention assistance only available in limited cases**

Rental assistance payments should not be made for existing housing in order to cover back rent or prevent eviction, unless:

- 1) The person or household does not qualify for any other eviction prevention assistance, as verified by HPS staff contacting third parties offering such assistance or consulting their written guidance; (typical reasons a person may not qualify may include that they have previously used the resource and there is a time-limit or cap or they are not in a qualifying subpopulation.)
- 2) The person does qualify but program does not have sufficient resources at the time of need or the process would take too long and the opportunity to preserve the housing would be lost.

These reasons must be documented on the Flexible Fund Request Form, including how they were confirmed.

#### **d. Third-party or trackable expenditure**

Flex funds may be directly paid to a third party such as a landlord, utility company, moving company or other vendor, or, in cases in which the funds will be used for specific needs such as food or transportation, may be provided to the participant through a trackable means such as a gift card. ***Under no circumstances are flex funds provided in cash or in a direct payment to the participant, even as reimbursement.***

**e. Eligible Expenses**

Flex Funds are intended to be flexible and cover a wide range of potential costs that could be used to secure a housing resolution. In general, expenses should be kept to the minimum needed to resolve the situation. Potential expenses include:

Flex resources for gaining or retaining housing or employment	Housing related costs
Grocery cards Gas cards Certificates or licenses to work Car repair Furniture Pest extermination Storage Essential minor repairs to make a living space habitable Transportation vouchers/passes Costs for birth certificate/documentation	Housing Application Fees Credit Checks Rental Deposits Past Due Rent* (if no other source can cover) One-month rent on new unit Utility deposit Utility payment
Costs related to moving to another community	Other
Bus ticket Train ticket Shipping belongings Incidentals (food)	Other expenses documented and necessary to secure a housing resolution, and approved by a supervisor

**f. Flexible Funds Guidance**

As stated above, Flexible Funds are expected to support successful resolutions and are not intended to be used for expenditures for a period of greater than 30 days. Amounts offered will vary based on the type of resolution, the household needs, and the ability to cover costs with other financial or in-kind resources. Specific maximums and restrictions on use may be set by funding sources, but in the absence of such caps, Flexible funds should be used sparingly and tracked closely. Current practice (early 2020) indicates per household averages of approximately \$2,600 but represents a wide range.

Additional guidance that applies to flex funding include:

**1. Rental payments and deposits:** Unless approved by a Zone Coordinator, costs associated with past or current rent or deposit should not exceed three (3) times the Fair Market Rent for the unit being covered, to allow for a two-month deposit and first months payment. *Note that any payments approved for rent or deposit must include a lease or written occupancy agreement.*

**2. Other Flexible Assistance :** Unless approved by a Zone Coordinator, flex funding for resolutions that do not involve rental payments or deposits should not exceed a maximum of \$1,000 per individual, and \$1,500 per family per resolution.

If a participant returns for additional assistance, they may be supported again but the Problem Solving staff should follow the instructions under item g. below.

#### g. Second request

If Flex Funds are requested for the second time (or more) for the same household/client, a discussion between the recommending staff and their supervisor must occur prior to approval and is noted on the form.

Note that some expenses, such as rental application fees, or support to a family member during a crisis period, may be needed more than once and should not be seen as a sign of unwillingness or inability of the participant to follow through. In particular, for people who face racial or other discrimination in the job and housing markets, more time and multiple periods of assistance may be needed to overcome the impact of systemic racism in the availability of options.

#### h. Form and Approval Process

All uses of Flex Funds must include completion of the Flexible Funding Request Form and approval by a manager or supervisor other than the person making the recommendation.

#### **O. Follow up**

As much as possible, staff that provide housing problem solving support to a participant who identifies and pursues a resolution should follow up within 30 – 60 days after the last contact to determine whether the person or household remains in place and whether any other referrals are needed. Ongoing case management is not expected.

#### **P. HMIS Data Collection**

HMIS is the database that is used to collect information on homelessness in Alameda County and should, to the greatest extent feasible, be used by providers of HPS services.

Given the short-term nature and potential high volume of HPS work, HMIS data collection should be kept as limited as possible while ensuring that information is available to the program operator and to the system to know:

- Who received assistance, including information about household type and demographics
- If there was a process success
- If there was an outcome success and if so, what type of housing outcome was achieved
- Length of time over which service was delivered
- Total Flexible Funds expenditures, and types of expenditures
- If possible, the participant's reported situation at follow up

It will also be important for HRCs, outreach worker or others who are delivering HPS to be able to look up a participant to determine that they are not already receiving HPS or another service from another entity.

#### **Q. Training**

Housing Problem Solving is a skill and a technique that requires training and practice. Alameda County will make regular training available to those practicing HPS, including techniques and best practices, safety screening and safety planning; complying with these policies and any forms, procedures or other requirements that may be developed; data collection, privacy and reporting and other topics.