



## Housing First

Housing First has been recognized as a promising practice by national researchers and policymakers. As a result, communities around the country are piloting projects that employ Housing First principles.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) defines the Housing First approach for addressing the chronic homelessness of disabled and vulnerable people as “a client-driven strategy that provides immediate access to an apartment

without requiring initial participation in psychiatric treatment or treatment for sobriety.”

### **Housing First is based on two core convictions:**

1. Housing is a basic human right, not a reward for clinical success, and
2. Once the chaos of homelessness is eliminated from a person’s life, clinical and social stabilization occur faster and are more enduring.

## Housing First Principles

1. **Move people into housing directly from streets and shelters without preconditions of treatment acceptance or compliance.**
2. **The provider is obligated to bring robust support services to the housing. These services are predicated on assertive engagement, not coercion.**
3. **Continued tenancy is not dependent on participation in services.**
4. **Units targeted to most disabled and vulnerable homeless members of the community.**
5. **Embraces harm reduction approach to addictions rather than mandating abstinence. At the same time, the provider must be prepared to support resident commitments to recovery.**
6. **Residents must have leases and tenant protections under the law.**
7. **Can be implemented as either a project-based or scattered site model.**

# About DESC



The Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC) is a non-profit organization working to end the homelessness of vulnerable people, particularly those living with serious mental or addictive illnesses.

DESC is one of the largest multi-service agencies serving homeless adults in the Pacific Northwest, reaching over 6,000 people annually with a budget of close to \$15 million and a staff of over 250. DESC receives funding from the City, County, State and Federal governments, along with United Way and private philanthropy and has been recognized by HUD and others not just for quality, but for effective integration across programs that constitutes a "continuum of care" within the agency.

DESC's array of **supportive housing** (nearly 600 units), **emergency shelters** (279 beds), and **state-licensed mental health and substance abuse treatment programs** (including street outreach and engagement, case management, short-term and long-term care, psychiatric assessment and treatment, and individual and group substance abuse counseling) provide the organization with the experience and skills needed to effectively work with chronically homeless adults who are ambivalent or resistant to enrolling in highly structured programs that require participants to abstain from alcohol and to accept counseling.

DESC opened Seattle's first Housing First development (the 25 unit Safe Haven project at

Kerner-Scott House) in 1997 and has subsequently brought all of its projects in line with this model. In 2005, DESC opened 1811 Eastlake, which is the region's purest expression of the Housing First philosophy.

Residents in DESC housing are not required to demonstrate clinical stabilization prior to having their housing needs addressed. DESC's approach is to romance, not coerce, participants into service and housing relationships by meeting them wherever they are in their recovery process.

The use of a Housing First model removes traditional barriers that make it so difficult for chronically homeless men and women to find housing. Once housing has been secured, staff work with residents on a plan to maintain their housing that incorporates their unique challenges.

When considering which homeless clients to house in its current stock of supportive housing, DESC utilizes a process designed not to screen-out the most problematic people as is typically the case with rental housing, but rather the process is designed to "screen-in" the most vulnerable and disabled adults.

These are the people who most need the services offered, and whose absence from the ranks of homelessness offers the most relief to the community and to crisis systems like homeless shelters.

"From where I sit, the "housing first" model is an anti-crime program. Let's get people off the street first and then deal with their addictions. It's not easy to beat any addiction...

Yet when we get a person housed, good things happen. This seems to be the case with 1811 Eastlake. Before it opened, the 75 residents of this housing program were regular visitors to our court and jail. Since the project opened, we hardly see them at all."

Tom Carr, Seattle City Attorney, *Seattle Times* Op-Ed, February 2007