**Allegheny County Continuum of Care**

**Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) Program Standards**

**Introduction**

Rapid re-housing is an intervention designed to help families and individuals move quickly out of homelessness and into permanent housing in the community. Built upon Housing First and Progressive Engagement approaches, rapid re-housing seeks to get those experiencing homelessness permanently housed as quickly as possible, utilizing the core components of housing identification, rental and move-in assistance, case management and services. Within the Allegheny County Continuum of Care (CoC), rapid re-housing is one form of a permanent housing intervention used, aimed at resolving the immediate housing crisis of individuals and families with moderate service needs. In some cases, it can also be used as a short-term bridge to permanent supportive housing (PSH) while an individual or family is waiting for a PSH unit to become available[[1]](#footnote-1).

This document is intended to provide guidance on the expectations of rapid re-housing programs within the Allegheny County CoC. Standards are described around the guiding principles and core service components of rapid re-housing, the existing prioritization process for individuals and families being referred to rapid re-housing, and the current benchmark goals for all rapid re-housing programs. These program standards have been developed within the planning and operation of the Allegheny County CoC, under the purview of the Homeless Advisory Board and its Committees, and guided by CoC processes and priorities, and national best practice research. These standards provide guidance specifically to rapid re-housing programs, and as such supplement but do not replace the contractual standards found in “Contract Manual: HUD Standards and Operating Procedures.” Furthermore, it is important to recognize these standards are a living document that will be updated as system needs change across the CoC.

RRH providers in Allegheny County meet bi-monthly as a **Community of Practice**. The Community of Practice regularly reviews these standards, provides peer support to its members, discusses local and national best practices, examines performance metrics and shares challenges and ideas with the CoC community.

**Rapid Re-Housing Principles and Services**

Rapid re-housing is an intervention directed at resolving the immediate barriers to obtaining permanent housing. Through a tailored package of services which builds on the strengths of the individual or family, rapid re-housing prioritizes long-term housing while providing short-term housing assistance. Rapid re-housing has been shown to be both effective and cost-efficient, getting individuals and families permanently housed while also reducing the time spent homeless and returns to homelessness.

The core premise of rapid re-housing is to meet people where they are, meeting their housing need, and wrapping around supports services to sustain housing stability. The approaches informing this premise, and the core components implemented to facilitate it are described below.

***Housing First***

All rapid re-housing programs follow the principles of Housing First, which centers on getting individuals and families into permanent homes. The National Alliance to End Homelessness[[2]](#footnote-2) identifies the following as the core elements of Housing First programs:

* A focus on helping individuals and families access and sustain permanent rental housing as quickly as possible;
* A variety of services delivered to promote housing stability and self-sufficiency on an as-needed and entirely voluntary basis; and
* A standard lease agreement to housing – as opposed to mandated therapy or services compliance.

As such, rapid re-housing programs within the Allegheny County CoC will not have any criteria beyond homelessness for entry or retention, such as sobriety, medication/treatment compliance, or employment. Some programs, however, do serve specific sub-populations. These include:

* Youth (ages 18-24), including those transitioning out of foster care
* Individuals and families fleeing domestic violence
* Individuals and families with behavioral health concerns, including drug and alcohol
* Individuals living with HIV/AIDS
* Veterans

***Progressive Engagement***

All programs are expected to implement a Progressive Engagement model. Progressive Engagement is a nationally recognized best practice in homeless services which provides customized levels of assistance to participants and preserves the most expensive interventions for households with the most severe barriers to housing success. This allows a program to stretch resources to serve more households, while meeting the appropriate level of need for its participants. Each program is provided the flexibility to most effectively target scarce resources by assessing clients’ strengths and challenges over time.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Caseworkers must be trained to assess the appropriate level of assistance needed to maintain housing; recognizing when a person has achieved enough stability or when they will need further assistance. At program start, participants should be assessed for level of rent and move-in assistance needed. While up to 100% rental assistance can be provided, the intent of rapid re-housing is to give individuals and families what is needed for stability and not more. Participants’ required level of assistance should be assessed monthly, while their eligibility for services should be recertified every three months[[4]](#footnote-4). Over time, the amount of rental assistance should be reduced as the participant gains the ability to pay more and to prepare the participant for self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. Similarly, participants can be enrolled in a rapid re-housing program for up to 24 months, but the majority should be able to achieve self-sufficiency in a shorter amount of time and the expectation is that most clients will be enrolled in rapid re-housing for less than 12 months. Case management may continue for no more than 6 months after rental assistance has ended and the total number of months of case management assistance can be received must never exceed 24 months.

***Core Components***

Rapid re-housing programs should provide, at minimum, housing identification, rental and move-in assistance, and case management and service linkages. Participants may not require all three components to obtain and maintain permanent housing, but each should be available and accessible given the need. Below, each of these main components are presented with activities that support their effective implementation. The utility of each component should be customized to the strengths and needs of each individual or family, and should be flexible as needs change. As such, it is necessary that individuals and families be reassessed each month so that rapid re-housing services are reflective of their current situation. Further, across these components it is necessary for staff to be appropriately trained and programs to have applicable policies and procedures in place.

*Housing Identification*

* Support participants in finding and accessing housing that is sustainable, appropriately priced (rent reasonableness), and meets their needs (i.e.: location, access, safety)
  + Participants are to be offered at least three (3) housing options of their choice
* Establish and foster relationships with landlords who are willing to provide safe housing to participants
  + Participants must have a written lease agreement with the landlord/owner of the housing unit; for CoC funded Rapid Rehousing, the lease must be for a term of at least one year that is renewable (for a minimum term of one month) and terminable only for cause
* Train staff members on accessing and effectively using housing search resources
* Educate participants on their rights and responsibilities as tenants

*Rent and Move-In Assistance*

* Assess participants and provide the level of assistance that reflects the minimal need of the individual or family to move into permanent, stable housing and can include expenses around security deposits, moving costs, rent, and utilities
* Assist in a progressive manner, supplying rental support that is necessary to stabilize and adjusting as appropriate to needs (whether moving up or down)
* Keep participants updated and engaged around the amount of assistance expected, building towards the individual or family’s ability to graduate from the program
* Develop a process for assessing assistance level need; train staff to use the process and make appropriate adjustments to support participants’ stability

*Case Management and Services*

* Initially focused on overcoming immediate barriers to accessing housing, case management adapts to support the individual or family in remaining housed
* On-going case management should connect participants to community and service supports that will help them maintain housing beyond graduation from the rapid re-housing program
* Case management should support the participant’s plan towards program graduation, with the ability to continue case management for up to 6 months after rental assistance ends as part of assisting in the transition of successfully completing the program.
* Utilize a strengths-based approach that positions the individual or family to be self-sufficient and continue stable housing

**Prioritization within the Allegheny County Continuum of Care**

Within the Allegheny County CoC, rapid re-housing referrals are currently being made for individuals and families with moderate service needs who are experiencing literal homelessness, are actively fleeing domestic violence, or those exiting from a hospital stay of less than 90 days (and were homeless upon entry). Literal homelessness includes those who are living on the streets, in emergency shelter, safe haven, or a place not meant for human habitation. Moderate service need is defined as those individuals who receive a score between 4 and 7 (inclusive) or families who receive a score between 4 and 8 (inclusive) on the Vulnerability Index & Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT)[[5]](#footnote-5) during the Coordinated Entry intake assessment. In addition, the Bureau of Homeless Services and its Coordinated Entry system can also refer, as needed, individuals or families into rapid re-housing as a short-term bridge as they are waiting for a permanent supportive housing vacancy to become available. These individuals or families will not lose their (chronically) homeless status for purposes of remaining eligible for permanent housing.

Once participants are identified as literally homeless and having moderate service needs, referrals to rapid re-housing programs are prioritized as follows:

* 1. **HUD Defined Chronically Homeless Individuals and Families**
  2. **Non-chronic Homeless Individuals and Families**

The waiting list is then ordered by VI-SPDAT score, from highest to lowest. In addition, length of time homeless is also considered in the prioritization.

The Allegheny County CoC will follow the order of priority above for all Rapid Re-housing programs. Individual projects may still serve target populations (e.g. veterans, persons with HIV/AIDS, people with mental illness), but individuals will be referred to those projects based on the priorities identified above. In cases where there are multiple individuals or families that have the same prioritization category, veterans and veterans who are ineligible for homeless services under the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), persons and families actively fleeing domestic violence, and youth (ages 18-24) will be prioritized above others. The final tie breaker will be the date that the referral for service was made.

**Performance Benchmarks**

Setting and utilizing performance benchmarks is an important mechanism for evaluating both program and system performance. The Allegheny County CoC intends to track the following performance measures to assess its effectiveness in making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring as well as to identify programs that might require technical assistance. The established benchmarks are CoC goals.

All rapid re-housing programs are expected to work toward achieving the following set of performance benchmarks:

1. All participants are housed within 30 days of referral to RRH.
2. Average program stay is 9 months.
3. At least 75% of participants will maintain or increase their income during program enrollment.
4. At least 75% of participants will maintain or increase non-cash benefits (e.g., Food Stamps, Medicaid or Private Health Insurance).
5. At least 20% of participants will obtain or maintain employment while in program.
6. At least 85% of participants maintain permanent housing upon exiting RRH.
7. At least 85% of those who exit to permanent housing do not return to homeless within 12 months.

1. Within the current Allegheny County CoC Coordinated Entry process an individual or family who is assessed to need PSH would need to be manually assigned to a RRH program should it be determined via a case conference that RRH would be a beneficial step as they wait for a PSH unit to become available. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/housing_first> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The exception to this are RRH programs funded with ESG. These programs can only serve participants for up to one year. They provide up to 100% rental assistance for the first 9 months and up to 75% for the last 3 months. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While programs can use their own assessment process for determining assistance level, most are using a common Rental Fee Payment Schedule that has been developed and shared throughout the RRH Community of Practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The VI-SPDAT is a pre-screening tool that is designed to quickly assess the health and social vulnerabilities of homeless persons and recommend the most appropriate support and housing interventions that are available. Additional details around the VI-SPDAT and its implementation in Allegheny County can be found in the *Allegheny County Continuum of Care Coordinated Entry* manual. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)