

Recommendation 12

Address basic housing needs.

Introduction

In January 2021, DHS administered a public engagement feedback survey to collect input on 16 recommendations generated by the [Crisis Response Stakeholder Group](#). In this report, the overall response numbers and a summary of respondents' comments on this recommendation are described. Then, we provide a deeper dive into the specific suggestions and concerns respondents provided, along with quotes that help to illustrate these comments.

Recommendation Description

Recommendations were briefly described in the survey, while more detail was provided in the Recommendations PDF document. Individuals taking the survey had the ability to download the recommendations document before starting the survey, but we do not know who took this step or not. Both descriptions are included below.

Recommendations Document

Address basic housing needs. Many people with behavioral health needs also need access to stable housing. There are a variety of barriers that currently exist, including policies that limit housing options for people with criminal records or quality concerns about housing options for people with behavioral health needs. In an effort to support existing and new efforts, ideas include:

- Provide guidance to local housing authorities and landlords to reduce collateral consequences of criminal records and other barriers to housing for people with behavioral health needs and justice system contact
- Address substandard/poor quality housing that is targeted at people with behavioral health needs
- Reduce or eliminate fines and fees to ensure people have adequate financial resources to access housing
- Expunge criminal records or change policies to limit landlords' ability to use justice history as a barrier to housing (this is also a critical strategy to increase access to employment)
- Convene a network of landlords that are committed to supporting people with behavioral health needs
- Strengthen eviction prevention and intervention supports (e.g., hotels as short-term housing for people who've been evicted or neighborhood legal services for eviction prevention)
- Crisis workers should be able to connect individuals in crisis with temporary housing when needed
- Pilot a permanent supportive housing model designed specifically for individuals who frequently utilize services (such as the FUSE model)

Survey

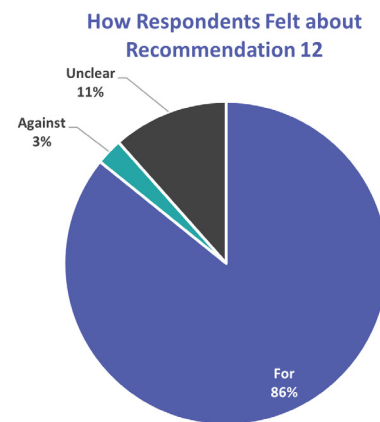
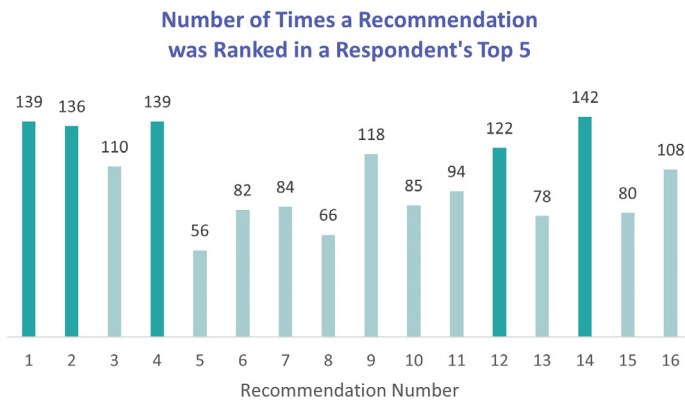
Address basic housing needs.

Many people with behavioral health needs also need access to stable housing. There are a variety of barriers that currently exist, including policies that limit housing options for people with criminal records or quality concerns about housing options for people with behavioral health needs. Solutions may include supporting existing and new efforts to work with landlords, clear criminal records, prevent evictions and provide permanent supportive housing.

What do you think of this recommendation?

Number of Responses and Rankings

303 respondents had written comments about Recommendation 12. Responses were organized into three categories: Pro, Against and Unclear.¹ Additionally, 122 respondents ranked Recommendation 12 in their top 5. See rankings and descriptions for all recommendations in the chart and table below. The top 5 most-ranked recommendations are highlighted in the chart.



16 Recommendations for Improving Crisis Prevention and Response

Rec	Description
1	Improve the quality and increase the availability of crisis walk-in centers and other services that are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to receive a person experiencing a crisis.
2	Improve mobile crisis options and functioning.
3	Support first responders across the county to receive needed, ongoing training.
4	Improve discharge planning from jails, hospitals and emergency departments.
5	Enhance designated phone line(s) for connecting individuals to human services so that healthcare systems, providers and discharge planners have one place to call when patients need immediate human services and supports.
6	Establish a structure and set of protocols that is responsible for overseeing and holding accountable the full crisis system.
7	Develop a system or resource with real time information on service availability (e.g., eligibility criteria, area or population served, appointment availability).
8	Increase availability of easy access, low-barrier respite centers and similar models.
9	Launch co-response teams to respond to 911 calls.
10	Develop awareness around an alternative number to 911 that people can call when someone is experiencing a behavioral health crisis and explore strategies to provide a behavioral health response to 911 calls involving individuals in crisis.
11	Increase the availability of preventative and proactive outreach supports to prevent a crisis before it occurs.
12	Address basic housing needs.
13	Establish and fund more community-led and operated crisis response models.
14	Make sure qualified, trained frontline staff are available 24/7 for individuals experiencing crisis and that these staff have the appropriate compensation, support and caseloads to provide the best services possible, no matter the time of day.
15	Develop a process to address mistrust and hurt between communities and government, including law enforcement.
16	Increase the number of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) behavioral health providers.

The highlighted recommendations were most often ranked in the top 5 by survey respondents.

¹ For responses were in favor of the recommendation. Against responses were against the recommendation. Unclear responses left it unclear what the respondent thought and included individuals whose comments made it seem likely that they misunderstood the recommendation as well as those who wrote comments responding to something other than the recommendation.

Summary of Comments on Recommendation 12

Overall, respondents agreed that before trying to address anything else, an individual's basic needs must be met, including housing. Respondents noted that, in general, there is a lack of high-quality, safe and affordable housing, with waitlists that are years long. Respondents also commented on current barriers to renting that individuals with mental health issues and those who are formerly incarcerated face, and recommended changes to remove these barriers. Some respondents said landlords would be a barrier to change, with others noting that the changes suggested in the recommendation and elsewhere were unfair to landlords. Finally, respondents noted that there was a need for more housing options and better services.

Responses to this recommendation were grouped into the following categories, which are described in more detail on the following pages:²

- Quality Housing is a Basic Need
- Rental Barriers
- Existing Services & Types of Housing Aren't Adequate
- Other Ideas/Concerns

² Some comments were assigned multiple themes and some responses didn't fit into a theme.

Quality Housing is a Basic Need

There was general agreement that before trying to address anything else, an individual's basic needs must be met, including housing. Respondents noted that, in general, there is a lack of high-quality, safe and affordable housing, with current waitlists (if people know how to get on them) being years-long.

1. **Housing is Critical:** Respondents noted that housing is a critical basic need that must be met prior to other concerns (like mental health) being addressed.
2. **Quality Housing Matters:** Respondents stressed that just a roof over someone's head, though, was not adequate – housing must be safe and of high-quality; however, respondents noted that the housing available for section 8, low-income individuals is often low-quality and in poor condition.
3. **Stable Housing Allows for Other Improvements:** When individuals have stable housing, it can resolve mental health issues and allow focus on avoiding recidivism, gaining employment, managing family dysfunction, and substance use issues.
4. **Shortages of Affordable Housing must be addressed**
 - a. Waitlists for affordable housing are years-long, and some people don't know how to get on them
 - b. More units needed to be built and more resources are needed, especially for communities of color
 - c. More section 8 apartments for a variety of family sizes needed
 - d. Luxury developments are taking up land and gentrification is eroding housing
 - e. Tax abatements for high end apartments that perpetuate gentrification should stop
5. **Housing Location is Key:** Respondents noted affordable housing should be located near bus lines, food and parks.

What Respondents Said about Housing Being a Basic Need

“A much needed recommendation that ties into the one addressing basic human needs. This has been an ongoing need for many years within Allegheny County. In [addition] to the barriers, the quality of housing needs to be addressed. Housing is more than a roof over someone’s head!”

“Yes! And it needs to be quality housing in good spaces! Not pushed out of the way...”

“YES. There is too little housing available and not enough preventative support. This creates a snowball effect (CYF gets involved with families, homeless, truancy, mental health, etc).”

“Housing is key. If basic needs are not met, mental health can’t be achieved”

“I think that this could begin to solve many of the other issues identified in these recommendations. I have [experienced] that once a person has a safe place to live with financial and some minimal supportive staff, the return to crime is reduced. They call for help from providers with little police involvement.”

“Yes, I support this recommendation as evidence shows stable, safe, proper housing enhances the quality of life and overall wellness of a person.”

“We have a deficit of 17,000 affordable permanent housing units. Homelessness will never go away so long as low-cost housing and land gets gobbled up by luxury redevelopers and sold at luxury prices. We need affordable housing NOW.”

“People who have a stable environment almost always have better mental health outcomes than people who have housing insecurities.”

“I have seen information to the effect that it has worked in other cities. I think it is key in easing the mind of stressors that certainly do not promote wellness in mental health to cope without help.”

“This is very important. Folks often come to the Western Psych ED outwardly voicing that they’re there to address housing concerns (which the ED can’t help with), or they fabricate symptoms in an attempt to receive psychiatric admission to receive secondary gain of temporary housing. It is also increasingly difficult to get individuals into shelters, especially for folks with no transportation or phone.”

Rental Barriers

Respondents commented on barriers to renting housing that many face, from credit and background checks to discrimination and stigma. Some respondents suggested changes to the rental process that would expand access to individuals with behavioral health needs or prior criminal convictions. Others felt it was unfair to require landlords to continue to rent to individuals who could not pay or who would make housing unsafe for other residents.

- 1. Current Practices that Negatively Affect Vulnerable Populations Must Change:** Respondents felt current landlord practices and beliefs were detrimental to helping individuals struggling with homelessness, substance use, mental health issues and those with a criminal background. Respondents specifically called out as problematic: racism; discrimination of trans/queer individuals; resistance to renting to section 8 tenants; Stigma about mental illness; Background checks and refusal to rent to those with prior criminal records; credit checks and the need for 3x rental income (first, last, security deposit); proof of employment requirements; requirements for prior landlord recommendations.
- 2. Suggested Changes to Rental Process:**
 - a. Respondents suggested: not considering an individual's criminal record at all (or after a certain period) when they apply for housing, expunging low level crimes from criminal records, allowing and assisting appeals of housing denials because of criminal records, allowing those with a criminal record to utilize HUD and section 8 housing.
 - b. Respondents suggested providing tenants emergency funding to cover first month, last month and security deposit costs.
 - c. Respondents suggested providing financial protection/support to assist landlords when a tenant isn't paying rent so that eviction isn't the first option.
 - d. Respondents suggested holding landlords responsible for tenant discrimination.
- 3. Incentivizing and Educating Landlords:** Respondents expressed the need to work with landlords to change their behaviors and practices, and suggested financial protection for landlords to get buy in:
 - a. Incentivizing landlords in typically non-section 8 areas to rent to section 8 individuals.
 - b. Educating landlords on: how to approach housing for vulnerable populations with a trauma/recovery lens, how to support people with serious and persistent mental illness, resources for people with intellectual disabilities.
- 4. Concerns about Landlord Rights & Resident Safety:** Respondents felt the recommendation was unfair to landlords and could lead to unsafe housing for residents.
 - a. Rights of Landlords: Respondents felt that landlords would be deeply negatively affected by this recommendation and felt it was unfair to mandate who a person must rent to.
 - b. Evictions and Delinquency of Rent: Respondents felt landlords would suffer and, in some cases, not be able to make a living themselves if they were not able to collect rent or evict individuals who were not paying rent. Respondents felt superfluous evictions should be discouraged, but that there were legitimate reasons to evict someone including: delinquent rent, vandalism, destruction of private property, threats or intimidation, disruptive behavior and behavior that could result in the harm of the tenant or others.
 - c. Safety: Respondents suggested that housing people with significant mental illness/a criminal record would put other residents at risk.

What Respondents Said about Rental Barriers

“You cannot expect landlords to house people who don’t pay [their] rent.”

“Yes! As someone who has worked in the housing industry for individuals struggling with homelessness, addiction, mental health and criminal backgrounds, housing is a HUGE issue. So many landlords are requiring credit checks, 3x the rent in income, proof of employment and even prior landlord recommendations. Additionally programs like section 8 have such a stigma attached to them that people do not want to give those residents a chance. Without proper housing, people can’t put the correct amount of focus into other issues. Housing is a huge mental health issue and causes intense struggles with individuals who don’t know how to acquire or maintain walls.”

“... We MUST assure that we also provide training to local magistrates, landlords, law enforcement of the rights and resources for clients with intellectual challenges. We see so many clients with an ID diagnosis that have had significant housing challenges and it takes tremendous advocacy to assure appropriate system response for fair housing, appropriate response to crisis, police...”

“This would be beneficial if it came to fruition. People with criminal records can’t access affordable housing making them homeless and transient and potentially reverting back to criminal behavior.”

“Sounds good --but I’m a landlord (minor) and while I agree with the issue, I depend on the income. Not every landlord is a company or rich, as most people think. We’re paying taxes on this property (get the County to help financially in these situations, and you may have agreement--or not.)”

“I think it is very popular right now to talk all about expanding tenants rights, and deferring rent & evictions, and mandating to whom landlords must rent. It is EXTREMELY unfair to people trying to make a living renting property (especially landlords with just 1 or 2 properties). Strong disagree on this one.”

“More housing programs are needed and support and protections for landlords so they will be willing to work with these populations.”

“YES!!! Essential!! Housing should also not be taken away because a person might use drugs. The barrier to housing and shelter for people who use drugs is enormously problematic!”

“I agree with this recommendation completely. Housing is a HUGE issue for at-risk populations in Pittsburgh. It is so difficult to get access or even accurate information on housing resources. Our clients regularly have housing crises and have found the system extremely difficult to navigate and usually just end up on never ending waiting lists for years.”

Existing Services and Housing Types Aren't Adequate

Respondents stressed the need for better services and more housing options. Suggestions included improving/replacing Allegheny LINK; increasing preventative services to help people keep their housing; introducing low-barrier housing; and providing quality, appropriate housing for individuals with disabilities and who have behavioral health needs.

1. **LINK hinders housing:** Respondents noted that navigating the current housing system is a serious challenge, and that getting accurate information about available housing is difficult. Respondents noted that Allegheny LINK is a bottleneck/barrier to getting housing and that it should be available 24/7.
2. **Services to Maintain Housing are Needed:** Services that help people maintain housing (versus services that only respond to the loss of housing) are needed.
3. **Low-barrier/Rapid Rehousing Should be Considered:** Providing rapid re-housing services (low-barrier housing/no preconditions) that can be provided from/referred from behavioral health services. Expand and improve services like Operation Safety Net and Bridge to the Mountains.
4. **Provide Quality Housing for Those with Disabilities**
 - a. Repeal brothel law to allow for congregate living for unrelated people (commune-style living for people with disabilities)
5. **Provide Quality Housing for Those with Behavioral Health Needs**
 - a. Supportive living services/structured housing with 24/7 staff (MH resources, providers, counselors) onsite for those with MH issues
 - b. Consider Oxford movement where patients run their own houses
 - c. Specialized housing individuals with substance use disorder who have been discharged from the hospital with medical needs
 - d. Community Residential Rehabilitation only allows people to live there for a few years before they need to move out
 - e. Create housing options for people who are being discharged from residential treatment programs.
 - f. Consider housing people with MH issues in 3 to 4-person households, like what is done with the intellectual disability population. Create many more small homes like this with varying degrees of supported living (“3-person to 24hr supportive housing to permanent supportive house to Housing as Home”)
 - g. Expand permanent supported housing program (and allow roommates)

What Respondents Said about Existing Services and Housing

“Supported housing would help make sure that landlords know that the individual has the help needed to live in an apartment without fear of damage or violent situations happening.”

“Great idea. You also need to address homeless situations. When families are forced to double up this creates crisis. The LINK is a nice idea but it stops assisting families after 4:30 pm and instructs them to call the very systems they are trying to avoid. Homelessness and housing crisis are a 24 hour a day, 7 day a week, 365 day a year issue. Not only does the LINK not assist people outside of traditional working hours, it actually impedes crisis services because no one can access shelter without their referral - if you are going to use a similar model then nothing will change.”

“This lack of safe housing is a major barrier to care and stability in the BH community and should be prioritized. Both for short term crisis placement, as well as for longer-term, sustained access to housing for particular populations of need.”

“More housing for those in need is a serious issue. building living communities that have 24/7 access to medical providers, counselors, and patient check-ins will assist in the loss to f/u issue as well as provide not only a roof for the patient, but also a SAFE and STABLE environment until patient can find employment, maintain mental health goals, and stay free from substance use (if primary issue)”

“I fully support this effort. I have several clients who have a disability and struggle to get help with making food and keeping their living situation clean enough to remain safe. They have consistently dreaded their annual inspections and feel discriminated against by their landlords and building managers. There is a lot of possibilities here.”

“There needs to be a solution for those who are facing eviction and homelessness. Currently, supports only exist for families and individuals who become homeless, even if they know their housing will no longer be available to them at the end of the week, they still need to wait until the end of the week to get the help they need. There needs to be more support in place to maintain housing, or to identify next steps if it is known this will not be a possibility. Housing and basic needs take precedent over any mental health concern and need to be addressed prior to addressing mental health.”

“housing stability is critical to anyone’s recovery; must ensure a balance between stable housing, teaching residential skills/ADLs and balancing the rights of neighbors.”

“We should consider that people with behavioral health needs may not be able to thrive best in ‘stable housing’. This effort should be accompanied by looking at alternative housing strategies (other than jail) for individuals with mental health issues that have trouble maintaining a home. If they tear out walls, threaten to kill their landlord or wander the streets maybe a cute little single family home is not the best fit. We don’t need to bring back Woodville, but maybe personal care homes, assisted living domiciles or other structured housing may be better. We arent doing this right at all now.”

Other Ideas and Concerns

There were some ideas mentioned that didn't fall into an overarching category. These ideas are outlined below.

1. Those with lived experience with housing challenges should design system to help those with housing challenges.
2. Have the County/city buy vacant houses and renovate them for homeless individuals and safe transitional housing.
3. Consider sweat equity on properties needing repair that are unoccupied, work with banks on properties under default.
4. Look to other places that have done well on this (like Western Europe).
5. Support outdoor homeless camps instead of forcing people indoors.
6. Make sure to include veterans in housing plans.
7. Create/convene landlords of color, meeting out of local churches, to discuss housing initiatives.
8. Idea to create a program like section 8 ("section 9") for people with BH needs/criminal record where those homes are targeted for regular mobile BH visits as part of daily rounds.
9. ODS shouldn't be called when individuals in MH system need housing assistance. "This not only takes away support we can offer individuals already in the ODS system but also lets the MH system continue to be broken."
10. Expand access to emergency shelters and shelter step downs for people being released from jail/hospitals/crisis centers.
11. Assign life coaches to individuals for a minimum for 3 years.

Key Quotes for this theme:

"Housing is a huge need, absolutely. It needs to come with supports for folks to be able to maintain it, and without barriers. Folks who need those supports should be who designs them."

"I think a well planned out program for housing with landlords of color would be positive - again, an initiative like this can start with a meeting at local churches inviting landlords with housing to come and discuss the possibilities. Section 8 is one program that comes to mind, what if there was create a section 9 for people with behavioral/criminal needs? These home could be targeted for regular [mobile] behavioral healthcare visits if they are known and a part of their daily rounds."

"Yes there are so many empty houses and buildings that the city could renovate and use for houseless individuals and safe transitional housing..."

"Please use the FUSE model! Also consider expanding access to emergency shelters, and shelter step downs for persons whom are homeless that are being released from jail/hospitals or crisis centers. Persons are not motivated to recover or change if their basic needs are not met."