Defining Homelessness Diversion: The Fundamentals of System and Practice Strategies

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Session Objectives

• Define “diversion” as a system intervention including guiding principles
• Clarify difference between prevention and diversion
• Gain an understanding of the important role of diversion within a crisis response system
• Gain an understanding of the key fundamentals of effective homelessness diversion
• Identify steps to get started
• Clarify important measures of successful diversion
Who Is Here?

- Provider Staff (Prevention, ES, TH, RRH, PSH)
- CoC Leadership
- Coordinated Entry
- Local/State/Federal Government
- Funders
- Community Leaders
- HMIS Staff

Who here believes you are doing diversion?
On your index card

1. What is one question or concern about diversion?
2. What is keeping your community from doing diversion?
DIVERSION DEFINED

What the heck are we talking about?
What is Diversion

A strategy that **diverts people from imminent homelessness** by helping those **seeking shelter and/or assistance from the homeless response system** to preserve their current housing situation or make immediate alternative housing arrangements.
## Determining the Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumer’s Housing Situation</th>
<th>Intervention Used</th>
<th>Services Provided In All Interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| At Risk of Losing Housing *(precariously housed and not yet homeless)* | PREVENTION | Services *(Not Exhaustive)*
| At Imminent Risk of Losing Homeless & Requesting Shelter *(at “front door” of system and seeking a place to stay)* | DIVERSION | • Strengths-Based Case Management  
• Creative Problem Solving Conflict Resolution  
• Housing Search/Placement  
• Landlord/Tenant Mediation  
• Connection to Mainstream Resources  
• Tenant Legal Services  
• Credit Repair |
| Literally Homeless *(on the street/place not meant for human habitation or shelter)* | HOUSING FOCUSED, RAPID EXIT SERVICES | Financial Assistance *(Not Exhaustive)*
| | | • Rental Application Fee  
• Rental Subsidy/Arrears  
• Security/Utility Deposits  
• Utility Arrears  
• Moving Costs  
• Transportation Costs  
• Other Financial Assistance |
Diversion is Targeted Prevention at the “Front Door of the Shelter”

Traditional Prevention is generally eviction prevention that provides one time assistance to renters at risk of losing their units. Diversion typically occurs once housing is lost, and other resources have been used, and the person is presenting at shelter.
Housing Focused Rapid Exit Services When We Can’t Divert From Shelter

When a household is not diverted from shelter and/or the homeless response system, the same diversion strategies - effective problem-solving conversations, that are client-centered, and focus on creative solutions – should continue in order to quickly resolve a households homelessness.

These continued strategies provide much needed housing focused, rapid exit services for all households assessed for housing and support services and are critical for those who will not receive interventions such as rapid re-housing or permanent support housing.
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So Why Divert People from Homelessness?
Lots of people face a housing crisis but few become homeless, even when it looks like they will

SO

How do we determine the best use of our current resources?
Things to Keep in Mind

• Households experiencing a housing crisis are not significantly different than other poor households

• Majority experience homelessness due to a financial or other crisis

• Prolonged exposure to homelessness has a significant negative impact on adults and children
Homelessness and Poverty

Source: Census and HUD PIT Count

Poverty and Homelessness in West Virginia

- Persons Living in Poverty: 321,583
- Household Severely Rent Burdened: 215,460
- Persons Experiencing Homelessness: 1,387

Poverty and Homelessness in West Virginia

Source: Census and HUD PIT Count

Persons Living in Poverty
Persons Experiencing Homelessness
Households Severely Rent Burdened

Homeless
At-risk
In poverty
Soo…. What Are You Saying?

- Many people experience a housing crisis -- far fewer actually become homeless.
- Traditional prevention typically starts further upstream and often screens out those closest to homelessness.
- Targeting homeless resources to traditional prevention has not been shown to reduce homelessness.

Soo…. 

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National Alliance to End Homelessness
ENDHOMELESSNESS.ORG
Soo….

• Diversion before homelessness:
  • Helps people avoid trauma of a shelter stay by connecting them with safe alternatives
  • Improves system outcomes by reducing new entries and re-entries into homelessness
  • Improves quality of life by helping people avoid the stress of shelter stays
  • Conserves and targets resources – shelter beds used only when needed
  • Cuts down on shelter wait lists
AND…

- Stems inflow into the shelter system
- Reduces demand for limited shelter beds
- Reduces costs, allowing limited interventions and resources to be concentrated on those with higher needs
When we don’t use diversion to prevent shelter stays and literal homelessness…

- Too many people are accessing emergency shelter when they could have been successfully diverted
- Crisis response system becomes overloaded and cannot adequately respond to those who have no other safe affordable housing options
- Increase of unsheltered homelessness – not enough shelter beds
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Key Principles – the building blocks for implementing effective diversion to prevent shelter entry?
Principle 1: Crisis Resolution for Everyone

Homelessness is a crisis – and everyone one is assisted in solving that crisis (not just a score)

Every Response must include:

• Triage
• Focus on personal safety as the first priority
• De-escalation of emotions
• Clear, achievable action steps
• Returning the person to control over their own problem-solving
Principle 2: Client choice, respect, and empowerment

• Staff help people in crisis regain a sense of control
• Focus is on client’s goals, choices, and preferences
• An unwavering respect for client’s strengths, and reinforcement of progress, are essential for empowerment.
• This does not mean clients are protected from the natural consequences of their actions.
Principle 3: Provide the minimum assistance necessary for the shortest time possible

- Use the progressive engagement model
- “Problem Solving Conversation” is as important (or maybe more) as financial assistance
- What are some examples of lesser amounts of assistance that help people become housed or maintain current living situation?
Principle 4: Maximize community and mainstream resources

• Lightest touch
• Reserve shelter beds for those with no alternatives
• Connect people to community resources
• Leverage non-traditional partners
• Homeless system cannot do it all
Principle 5: The right resources to the right people at the right time.

AGAIN

- Lightest touch
- Reserve shelter beds for those in need
- Connect people to resources – both natural supports and on community resources outside the homeless system
- Deeper interventions for those with higher needs
HOMELESSNESS DIVERSION AND THE CRISIS RESPONSE SYSTEM

What Role Does Homelessness Diversion Play?
An Effective Homelessness Response System that *Ends Homelessness*

- Homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring
- Housing focused system: all strategies and interventions divert people from homelessness or quickly end the episode of homelessness and move people to permanent housing
- Right mix of interventions that match the needs
- It is easily understood and navigated by persons experiencing homelessness
Characteristics of an Effective Crisis Response System With Good System Flow

- **Diversion** from homelessness when possible
- **Rapid identification and engagement of people** experiencing unsheltered homelessness to connect them to crisis services
- **Quick, accessible pathways to shelter with rapid exit and housing focused strategies** to help those not diverted for short stays in shelter
- **Rapid connection to permanent housing interventions for the priority on most vulnerable**
Coordinated Entry System in Context

- Coordinated Entry
  - Diversion
  - Targeted Prevention
  - Street Outreach
  - Temporary Shelter
  - Households avoid homelessness
- Rapid Re-housing
- Transitional Housing
- Permanent Supportive Housing
- Community-Based Housing, Services and Supports
- Market Rate Housing

From HUD Webinar 3.17
An Outcomes Focused System

- Targeted Prevention/Diversion
  - New Entries

- Rapid Re-Housing
  - Length of Episodes

- PSH Stabilization Prevention
  - Repeat Episodes
HOMELESSNESS DIVERSION AND THE CRISIS RESPONSE SYSTEM

Why?
Status Quo

- Majority of homelessness response systems do not have enough resources to meet the needs of all households seeking assistance
- Standard CoC approach:
  - Shelter entry based on availability
  - Fully assess all households regardless of availability of targeted homelessness resources
  - Assign/match to a waitlist for a specific intervention type resulting in more people waiting
Current Approach
Using Score Ranges with Some Prioritization
Changing the Way We Do Business!
Changing the Way We Do Business!
System-Wide Orientation: Housing-Focused Problem Solving

- To end homelessness, more must be done to assist a household in crisis using creative problem solving and limited financial assistance.
- Diversion occurs *before* a household becomes homeless (i.e., first presenting at emergency shelter or other CES access point).
- When homelessness cannot be prevented, housing-focused services provide to rapidly *exit* households.
- Effective problem solving should be client-centered and focuses on a conversation that explores creative, flexible, and cost-effective solutions that can be implemented quickly.
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How the heck do we start all this?
## Integrating Shelter Entry with Coordinated Entry is Important

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From</th>
<th>To</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you willing to enter shelter?</td>
<td>What can we do to keep you from entering shelter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What programs are you eligible to enter and who has a bed?</td>
<td>What would resolve your current housing crisis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment/eligibility</td>
<td>Brainstorming and structured problem solving conversation about household situation and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake screening/assessment tool and shelter waitlist</td>
<td>Support crisis resolution to avoid shelter entry through problem solving conversation</td>
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Shelter Diversion

- Diversion is NOT a separate “program” but rather part of the entire system
- Diversion is problem solving and solution focused
- Diversion should always be **safe and appropriate** for the client.
Keys to Successful Diversion

✓ Coordinated entry process and shelter front door
✓ Resourceful staff trained in mediation
✓ Strength based and problem solving
✓ Recognizes client choice and safety
✓ Linkages to mainstream services and natural supports
✓ Flexible dollars (but not necessarily a lot of $$)
7. When you first became homeless, were you offered assistance to help you stay in your previous housing situation, or with family or friends, to help you avoid entering shelter?

- Strongly Agree: 12%
- Agree: 24%
- Disagree: 23%
- Strongly Disagree: 33%
- I don't know: 8%
HOMELESSNESS DIVERSION

Okay, Give Me An Example…The Salt Lake City Utah Approach
Diversion Pilot—launched November 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategize</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Implement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partner Meetings</td>
<td>NAEH Conference Training—Identify Partners</td>
<td>Community Outreach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philosophical Conversations</td>
<td>Resources Ed Boyte—Cleveland Michelle—Seattle Sophia—Texas</td>
<td>What is Diversion?</td>
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<td>Grant Application Grant Award</td>
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<td>Role in the Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td></td>
<td>Design/Implementation Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Partners</td>
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Program Start-Up
Monthly check-in
6 month check-in
Client Services

- Started with the Family Shelter (300 families)
- Added singles diversion at our main Shelter (currently averages 800 individuals per night)

Initial Conversation

- Assessment
- Strengths Based
- Empowering
- Validating—Listening
- Opportunity to explore different ideas and act upon them
- Mediating, conflict resolution with landlords, potential housing options
- Explore all immediate and housing arrangements
- Housing stabilization plan—temporary and permanent
- Case Management
- Eligible Financial Assistance: Background and credit checks, landlord fees, utility deposits and arrears, transportation, grocery cards, move-in costs, arrears
Where we are now

Client Services
- Lessons learned: Hiring the right staff, on-going training: trauma-informed care, lethality, conflict-resolution, mediation skills

Data Analysis
- Brought in Ashley Tolman, national expert for guidance to ensure fidelity
- Able to now track:
  - Percent of successful diversions
  - Destination of successful diversions
  - Recidivism
  - Resources/Referrals given
  - Financial services given
  - All touchpoints of entry into our agency
  - Trends
Percent of Successful Diversion - Families 7/17 - 6/18

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diversion Conversations</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverted From Shelter</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
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HOMELESSNESS DIVERSION

Okay, I get why and the basics of how, but what about program design?
The Fundamentals – The Four “C’s” of Diversion Practice

- Community-wide Buy In
- Problem Solving Conversation
- Community Connections
- Continuous
C-1 Community-Wide Buy In

- Mainstream and homeless service providers must believe households are better served outside of homelessness system

- Funders and providers are committed to use of prevention resources (personnel and financial) at the shelter front door as having the most impact on reducing homelessness in the community

- Diversion in fully integrated at shelter door – before people are literally homeless

- Diversion is embraced across the entire crisis response system
Community-wide Buy In

- Community-wide clear message about what diversion is and role it plays in the system
  - Diversion ensures that more intensive interventions are reserved for those with no alternatives to shelter
  - Empowers clients by focusing on strengths and not barriers
  - Reduces the number of households that experience the trauma of shelter
- Clear and consistent training on diversion across the system
  - Clear understanding of the intervention
It’s Your Turn - Group Brainstorm

- Brainstorm with your colleagues the following:
  - Who do we need buy-in from
  - What should our messaging be to those groups
Salt Lake City Example

How we got community buy-in
C-2 Problem Solving Conversation

Diversion is a problem solving, strength based conversation, not an assessment tool with a list of questions.

Conversation should be realistic discussion on client’s housing, employment and financial needs and opportunities:

• Brainstorm client’s housing, employment and financial needs/realities/opportunities (ex. security deposit)
• Provide tips on making a “doubled up” situation more tolerable (ex. contributing to household supplies)
• Essential to explain the realities of shelter life - and that shelter is not an automatic entry point for Rapid Re-Housing.
Problem Solving Conversation

• First *listen* and *validate* their experience – *honor all and build their capacity to act*.

• *Client-centered. Don’t* assume what people need - help them articulate their needs.

• Use a *strength-based approach* – help clients identify and mine strengths, successes and resources they’ve used in the past to help them with this bout of homelessness.

• Consistent with *honoring, validating and building persons’ capacity to act*, be non-judgmental.

• Support and trust that persons want to succeed, have done so previously and help them tap into their own strengths and past successes to help them with their current situation.

Ed Boyte, previously of the Cleveland Mediation Center
Problem Solving Conversation = Creative Solutions

• Help clients think of creative solutions and explore every option
  • Employment related, car issues, food banks, other supports used previously (people and organizations)

• More about creative solutions than financial assistance
  • More about staff time and less about rental assistance

• What other options might be available; help clients identify their current supports
  • Is there someone in another community that could be a resource
  • Bus tickets home or to relatives etc.
Tips from SSVF Conversation Guide

The process should include a **guided conversation** with the person to determine their situation, their available supports and resources, and how SSVF might help them avoid shelter. This conversation should be collaborative, strengths-based, and **focused on action steps that the client and staff can take to avoid shelter**. This guided conversation should not be an intake assessment.

When meeting households in person, try to **create a private, quiet space to help put participants at ease while they work through their crisis with you**. Set up the meeting space and meeting practices to foster trust building with the participant—minimize note taking, actively listen, and work together in partnership with the person to identify options and take next steps.

A key component to this process is listening carefully to both what is said, and not said by the person. **Observe body language**. Use open-ended questions to elicit information. Questions for the participant should build on each other and help identify potential temporary housing locations and available networks and personal supports that the person, in their crisis and stress, may have overlooked, or written off. **Listen carefully and assume that you can help the participant find another/better situation than entering the shelter system**.

While this may not always be true, we need to act and work as if it is a good possibility. **We want to help someone who is in very real crisis be able to think creatively and positively about their temporary housing options.**
Salt Lake City Example

Our conversations and what we have learned
C-3 Community Connections

- Community Partners are critical for successful diversion
- Remember, homeless system cannot do it all
  - Create partnerships with mainstream programs for connecting to alternative resources
  - Create partnerships with non traditional partners
  - Connect to natural support
  - Provide warm handoffs to other organizations for assistance – not just referrals and phone numbers
Community Connections

Community resources:

• legal services,
• financial assistance
• transportation vouchers,
• food banks, etc.
It’s Your Turn - Group Brainstorm

Brainstorm a list of potential connections that you will need to build in your community.
Salt Lake City Example

How we built our community connections?
Which ones proved to be invaluable?
C-4 Continuous Diversion

• Diversion conversation may need to happen more than once
• Not a one time “service
• Follow-up is critical
  • A progressive engagement approach
  • Short term resolution ➔ Long term resolution – always follow-up
  • Incorporate into the intervention
  • Just because first solution does not “pan out” doesn’t mean diversion failed.

Try Try Again (and maybe again and again)
Salt Lake City Example

What kind of follow-up do we do?
Do we have limits on how often someone returns?
What About a Diversion Assessment Tool?

Question:
We have someone who wants to fund a diversion program… He would like to find a good diversion screening tool and I am wondering your thoughts on this and if you have anything you could recommend?

Answer: (Ed Boyte)
I suggest that the screening tool is in fact the relaxed, client-centered, strength-based, empathetic conversation we have with the client. In other words unfortunately no short-cut screening tool
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So how will we know its working?
How to Know You Have You Have Effective Diversion

The MUST haves:
1. Decreased number of first time homeless
2. Decreased number of people on shelter wait lists
3. Decreased number of shelter entries
4. Percentage of persons diverted returning to shelter/homeless system (determine appropriate time-frame to track... 30 days, 90 days, 180 days, 365 days)
Other stuff you might choose to measure…

- Change in types of need/barriers to sheltered population
- Decrease in family/friend; unsubsidized and subsidized housing prior residence to shelter
- Type of diversion service provided and impact
- Outcome of diversion service
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Now What? Where Do I Start?
Plan

How will you implement your four “C’s

• Create your messaging for Community-Wide Buy In

• Know who will be having the Problem Solving Conversations and train, train, train
  • Where are your front door entry points to avoid shelter stays
  • What staff will be responsible

• Identify your Community Connections
  • Reach out and create relationships to engage them

• Determine what Continuous follow-up can be provided, and how often assistance can be accessed (if providing financial resources)
Things you should know

Look at your data

- Who is entering shelter and where are they coming from
- What is your baseline for first time homeless, and monthly shelter entries
- What does your unsheltered population Change in types of need/barriers to sheltered population

Current funding sources that can be prioritized for diversion

- List of eligible activities included in diversion that resources can be used for
- Develop a list of current funding that can be matched to those activities
Lots of people face a housing crisis but few become homeless, even when it looks like they will. A problem solving conversation focuses on strengths and alternatives to shelter – as long as it’s safe.
Don’t limit your challenges, challenge your limits.

QUOTEDIARY.ME
Suggested Sessions to Attend

• 1.04 Diversion: A System-Wide Strategy to Reduce Entries into Homelessness
• 2.05 Shelter Diversion: A Problem Solving Conversation
• 3.02 Innovations in Understanding In-Flow
• 4.06 Can We Really Prevent Homelessness?
What Did We Miss?