

Housing Problem Solving Policy Alameda County Homelessness Response System

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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 (HPS) in Alameda County’s homelessness 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 are 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 are provided separately. Training includes a focus on developing and honing the skills and approaches needed for a successful HPS practice as well as how to apply the policies included here.

This document uses the term “participant” to indicate an individual or household participating in HPS services. This document should be used in conjunction with the [Alameda County Homelessness Response System Written Standards](#) and [Coordinated Entry Policies](#). A list of definitions of commonly used terms is included as an Appendix of the Written Standards.

B. Housing Problem Solving Defined¹

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 to resolve the housing crisis without the need for ongoing support from the homelessness 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 violence², 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 within fourteen days if not assisted. Housing Problem Solving may also work with leaseholders *if they are unable to be assisted by a legal assistance or an eviction prevention provider and will become homeless within fourteen 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 they are unlikely to receive or will take too much time, when they have little to no chance of being prioritized for a resource, and from unnecessary long-term homelessness 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 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 homelessness 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 their 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 homelessness response system with the intention of going from there to permanent housing.

¹ 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.

² See homeless definitions in the Written Standards for a complete list of persons who are considered literally homeless.

E. Definition of Success

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

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, or,
- A participant who was literally homeless gets rehoused without an additional resource from the homelessness response system.

F. Components of Housing Problem Solving

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

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. This may also include support with completing housing applications.
4. Flexible Funds to support a specific resolution opportunity. Specific requirements regarding flexible funds including eligible expenses and other requirements are described below.

G. Locations Where Housing Problem Solving May Be Delivered

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

- Housing Resource Centers or other organizations delivering coordinated entry services to participants
- With a street outreach worker
- Via 211
- At a shelter, including hotel-based shelters such as hotel-based winter relief programs

It is possible to scale services so that HPS can also be delivered in community-based and mainstream agencies that work with households that are homeless and/or those at imminent risk.

The following agencies possess the potential to be partners to scale HPS, become trained in HPS techniques and are able to connect participants to resources include:

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

H. Delivering Housing Problem Solving within Coordinated Entry

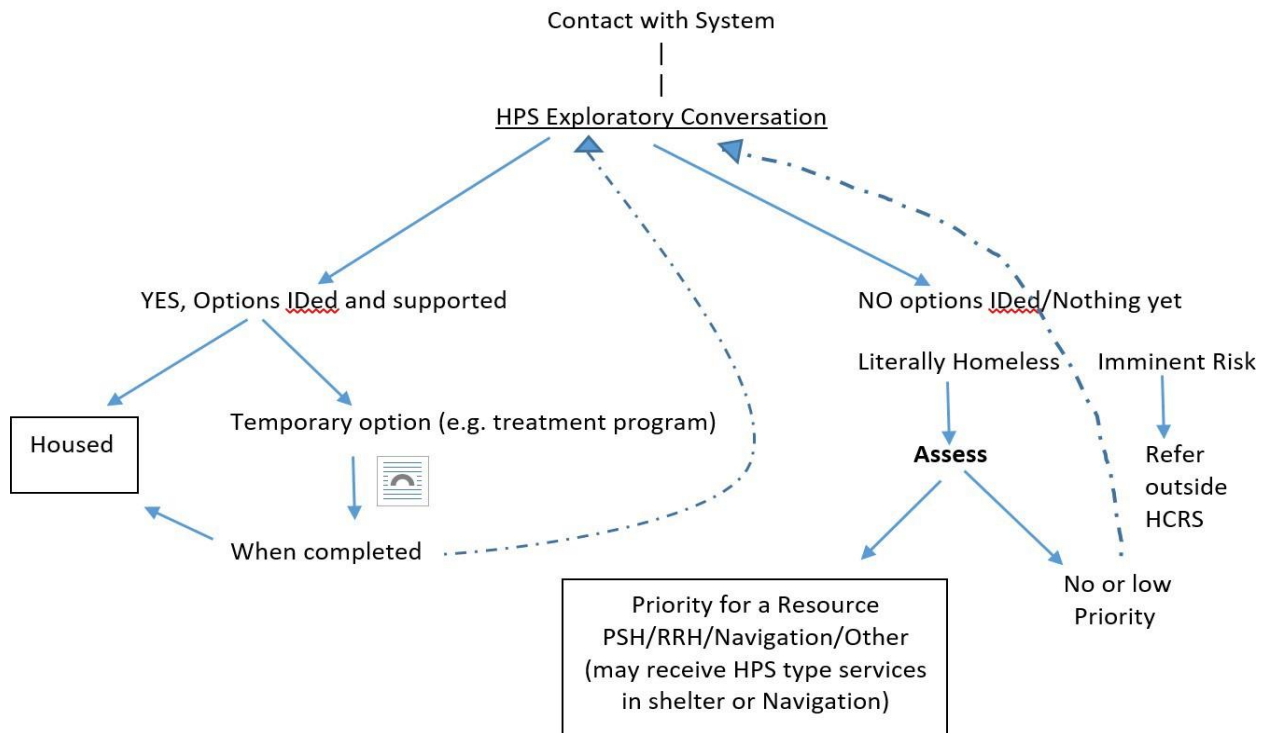
The techniques associated with Housing Problem Solving, including problem solving conversations and support for alternative housing resolutions, may be used throughout the system and at other times, by case/care managers, navigators, and others. As a focus of this expansion, however, HPS as a discrete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

As a 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 resources using the Coordinated 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 resource, or are housed or lose contact. For some participants HPS may be the primary or only resource that is available to them after assessment, and this should be communicated clearly.

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



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 homelessness response system has very limited shelter and housing resources and is unlikely to be able to help the participant with a long-term resource 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 quickly.

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 are identified, the staff person will not conduct a housing 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 coordinated entry specialist, the staff person may then offer to screen for eligibility for a crisis and housing assessments immediately and either conduct the assessment(s) then schedule a time in the future to conduct an assessment, or may connect the participant to another person or site that does assessments if that person is not qualified to complete 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 the crisis assessment and provide 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 it is safe to do so 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. Those who are at imminent risk should be referred to other appropriate prevention providers for financial assistance if needed.*

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.

b. Housing Problem Solving after Assessment

At this time, once someone has been assessed, they may be eligible to be referred to the Housing Queue and may be offered housing resources such as rapid rehousing or dedicated affordable housing or, if in the highest scoring group, Permanent Supportive Housing. After a housing needs assessment is conducted, the staff conducting the assessment will share with the individual if they are being referred to the housing queue, what type of resource they are likely to be matched to, in what time frame, and what next steps should be taken to secure the resource (i.e. document readiness). It is also possible the person will not be eligible to be referred to the housing queue, in which case the staff member will inform them that they are unlikely to receive a match to a long-term resource and offer to continue to provide housing problem solving services and share the resources that are available through HPS, including possible flex funds if a solution is identified. They should be told that they may return (or call again) for Housing Problem Solving assistance at any time and should call if their situation changes significantly and at least every 6 months if they are still experiencing homelessness.

c. Housing Problem Solving for those on the Housing Queue: Due to the significant number of people on the Housing Queue who are likely to be waiting for an extended period of time to receive another resource, HPS should be offered to those currently on the Housing Queue, 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 Housing Queue in their Zone and have not been connected to a resource to offer and promote Housing Problem Solving. People on the housing queue are referred to housing navigation services as available.

I. Other Venues for Housing Problem Solving

a. Housing Problem Solving with an Outreach Worker

Outreach workers trained in Housing Problem Solving techniques will offer HPS as part of outreach services. In some cases, depending on the specific outreach team, it may be difficult for outreach workers to access or manage flexible funds and the necessary forms while in the field. 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.

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 accurately evaluated and requires assistance. It is important to confirm that the person or entity (such as a landlord) receiving the assistance is the intended beneficiary and will utilize the 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 is prioritized and likely to be matched to an ongoing housing 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 housing resource (such as a PSH or RRH slot) a Navigator will work with them to utilize the housing resource and secure housing.

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 an HPS conversation within the past 30 days, or if the client situation or viewpoint related to services or housing has significantly changed since the last HPS conversation.
- 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 conduct an initial problem solving conversation with callers seeking homelessness 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.

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 Domestic Violence Resources

All staff conducting HPS should 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 are part of the conversation guide and training. Anyone who at this point is identified as a survivor should be offered domestic violence 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. Staff conducting housing problem solving should consider consulting with a domestic violence provider (with an ROI or without using identifying information) when warranted by the situation.

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 for financial assistance and/or legal assistance and advocacy from a DV agency which have Housing First funds if available.

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 30-90 day period. Continuation after four or more sessions or after 90 days should be carefully considered and a supervisor should be consulted.

M. Required Forms

All providers of HPS will be provided with forms to guide and document the conversation and Resolution Plan.

Form 1: Conversation Guide and Resolution Plan

Form 2: Flexible Funds Request Form

Organizations administering flexible funding may use their own flexible funds request form, provided the form documents the expenditure amounts and purpose and requires an approver who is not the person requesting the funds on behalf of the participant. Organizations are encouraged, and may be required by contract, to record this information in HMIS. Additional forms or approvals may be required based on funding committed to this intervention.

N. Flexible Funds Guidance

a. Flex funds not primary or always offered

Many HPS resolutions can be reached without the 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 one-time needs only

Flexible funds are intended to cover costs that are necessary to achieve an immediate resolution and may cover some temporary 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, Cal Fresh) 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); or
- 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; and
- 3) The person has no other housing options available and will become homeless within 14 days without the support provided.

These reasons must be documented in HMIS or on the Flexible Funds 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 and must be directly tied to a housing resolution. 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* (only if no other source can cover and is required to remain housed) 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 in order to preserve funds when funding is limited.

Additional guidance that applies to flex funding include:

1. Consider other funding sources: Given that flex funds are one of the most flexible resources in our system, other resources that cover specific costs, such as utility payments, security deposit etc. should be utilized first, if feasible (considering factors such as eligibility and timeliness of payment). This allows for the preservation of flex funds for needs only flex funds can cover.
2. Rental payments and deposits: Unless approved by a Zone Coordinator, costs associated with past or current rent or deposit and first month's rent should not exceed three (3) times the Fair Market Rent for the unit being covered, to allow for a two-month deposit and first month's payment. *Note that any payments approved for rent or deposit must include a lease or written occupancy agreement.*
3. 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.

4. Flex funds for Short-Term Hotel/Motel Stays: In **very limited** cases under exceptional circumstances, a supervisor may approve a short-term hotel/motel stay not to exceed 5 nights when there are no other resources (including no available shelter space) or funding available to meet a client's urgent need, AND that client is particularly vulnerable, AND there is a housing destination already identified that the client will be able to access immediately upon leaving the hotel/motel. The hotel/motel stay must be directly linked to achieving a permanent or temporary housing outcome and cannot be used in lieu of traditional shelter or as an emergency response to conditions such as poor weather. Other exceptions can be brought to County staff overseeing the contract for discussion if needed.

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 it must be noted on the request.

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. Approval Process and Documentation

Flexible Funding Request Form and approval by a manager or supervisor other than the person making the recommendation is required. Agencies who use HMIS must also document the expenditure amounts and types in HMIS.

O. Follow up

As much as possible, staff that provide Housing Problem Solving support to a participant who identifies and pursues a resolution are encouraged to 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. Training

Housing Problem Solving is a skill and a technique that requires training and practice. Alameda County will make regular or recorded training available to those practicing HPS, including techniques and best practices, safety screening and safety planning, complying with policies and any forms, procedures or other requirements, data collection, privacy and reporting and other topics. Depending on the funding source, contracts may require specific training participation and require or encourage participation in a learning collaborative.