

## The Matt Urban Center HOPE Center and the Housing First Model

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### What is Housing First?

Housing First successfully addresses homelessness by giving chronically homeless people permanent housing. Once in a Housing First program, chronically homeless people get a permanent place to live immediately, despite possible untreated drug, alcohol, or emotional health problems. Matt Urban Hope Center operates one of the first Housing First programs in the Buffalo region.

### What is Different about Housing First?

Housing First is permanent housing, while shelters are only temporary, meaning people are only allowed to stay there 30-45 days.

Housing First is aimed at the chronically homeless. A chronically homeless individual is defined by HUD as “an unaccompanied adult with a long term disability who has been homeless for one year or more, or has experienced four episodes of homelessness in a three year period.”<sup>i</sup> These are people traditional shelters often have failed to help.

### **Why don't traditional shelters work for some people and why is Housing First better for them?**

First of all – shelters are temporary housing and Housing First is permanent housing. That being said, the chronically homeless typically do not do well in shelters due to the highly structured environment – which is necessary to efficiently run a shelter. For example, many shelters have a curfew and wake up time, set meal times, shower time, etc.

Matt Urban's Housing First program takes the opposite approach, and does not force structured living on its residents. With Housing First, residents can come and go as they please without people telling them what to do, or what time they have to eat and sleep. Housing First residents get one on one attention in low demand style from a case worker that visits them weekly.

### **What do residents do at Housing First?**

The goal is for chronically homeless people to recover from homelessness. To facilitate this transition Housing First helps residents to deal with issues in their everyday life. Housing First also re-socializes its residents through activities such as bowling, picnics, bingo, and a club that meets for coffee. Additionally some residents participate in the Job Skills Development Program for the formerly homeless, where individuals gain valuable job skills with the goal of securing employment. Housing First is not a religious organization, and accepts people from all backgrounds.

### **How Much Does Housing First Cost?**

It costs about \$10,000 to house one person in Housing First for a year. This includes their rent, intensive case manager and furniture. The yearly budget of the Matt Urban Housing First Program is about \$460,000. This houses 46 people. Housing First is funded mostly by the Department of Urban Housing and Development (HUD), the United Way, and individual donations.

### **How Does Housing First Save Money?**

Housing First saves the community money by reducing the costs associated with homelessness, including extremely high emergency medical bills. It costs approximately \$10,000 per year to house someone in Housing First in Buffalo, compared with as much as \$50,000 to \$100,000 in medical bills for someone who is homeless for a year.<sup>ii</sup> These medical costs are borne mostly by Medicaid and, for uninsured patients, by hospitals that must pass the costs on to other patients. Either way, it costs the community a large amount of money to leave people homeless, and costs far less to house them in a Housing First program.

The Denver Housing First Collaborative, for example, has saved the city over \$30,000 per participant, due to the reduced amount of emergency services used. There was a 60% decline in participants who accessed emergency services, such as detox, jail and substance abuse inpatient treatment.”<sup>iii</sup> A housing first program in Seattle paid for itself in 6 months with the saving in emergency service spending.<sup>iv</sup>

A study of a supportive-housing initiative in Boston found that the average client ended up in the hospital 102 times in the two years before getting into supportive housing. That dropped to seven days in the two years after getting into a home, saving the state \$20,000 per patient in hospital costs.<sup>v</sup>

## **Does Housing First Help the Community in Other Ways?**

Yes. Housing First is helping Buffalo meet its goal of reducing the number of people living here who are homeless. Including those currently sheltered, Buffalo has a sizable homeless population of over 2000.<sup>vi</sup>

Recently, crimes against the homeless are becoming worse than ever. “Bum Bashing” has become an internet phenomenon, where people beat up homeless people on camera to be cool. Gang initiations often involve beating up homeless people. Homeless women are sexually assaulted at an alarming rate.

If homeless people only had to worry about the cold winters, it would still be horrible to be homeless in Buffalo, but unnatural human dangers are often much worse than the weather. One Buffalo homeless man was forced to put his hand on the curb while someone stepped on it, smashing all of his fingers and leaving him in the hospital emergency room.

Housing First also helps the social structure of a community. Whenever you improve the lives of any segment of society, the community benefits overall.<sup>vii</sup>

## **What Challenges does Housing First face?**

Because the Matt Urban Center’s Housing First Program is scattered site, Housing First rents apartments from area landlords. A major challenge is finding landlords willing to rent to the chronically homeless because they have had problematic housing histories. Many landlords are afraid to rent to chronically homeless people because they are afraid they will not take care of the apartments. Housing First had landlord training workshops to let the landlords know that Housing First would assist residents take care of the apartments by helping them with their activities of daily living (ADL’s). Housing First tries to solve any issues landlords have with residents to keep good relationships with the landlords.

### **How is Housing First Expanding?**

Matt Urban Center's Housing First program was recently awarded a new grant. This grant will be used to house twenty additional chronically homeless women and build a new building to house them in. The new building and program will be called "Hope Gardens."

### **How can people help Housing First?**

People can donate money to Housing First and know that their money is directly helping people in their community. They can also donate supplies and food. They can also donate their time. Volunteers with special skills can help Housing First residents through social, therapeutic work like art therapy.

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<sup>i</sup> Housing First, Matt Urban Center for the Chronically Homeless  
<http://www.urbanctr.org/matturbanhopecenter/housingfirst.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Government of Alberta, Canada, Human Services  
<http://employment.alberta.ca/14600.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Homeless Alliance of Western New York, Policy Paper: Housing First Solutions, page 2 <http://wnyhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Housing-First-Policy-Paper-PDF.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Homeless Alliance of Western New York, Policy Paper: Housing First Solutions, page 2 <http://wnyhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Housing-First-Policy-Paper-PDF.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> The Christian Science Monitor, Moving the Homeless out of Shelters and Into Homes [http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0820/p01s04-usgn.html/\(page\)/2](http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0820/p01s04-usgn.html/(page)/2)

<sup>vi</sup> Homeless Alliance of Western New York, Policy Paper: Housing First Solutions, page 1 <http://wnyhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Housing-First-Policy-Paper-PDF.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Interview with Karen Carman, Matt Urban Center, Housing First

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