

Special Topics

Addressing Housing Needs of People with Mental Illnesses Involved in the Justice System

CASE STUDY

Johnson County, Iowa
Population: 130,882



Stepping Up is a national initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails and is a partnership between the National Association of Counties, The Council of State Governments Justice Center and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation. Stepping Up hosts regularly scheduled webinars featuring topics to help counties' planning efforts. The Stepping Up Special Topics Case Studies serve as a quick reference to the counties highlighted in some of these webinars. Webinar recordings featuring these counties are available on the **Stepping Up Resources Toolkit**. The webinar on this Special Topic also highlighted Harris County, Texas.

Background

Located in eastern Iowa, Johnson County has some of the highest housing costs and lowest vacancy rates in the state. This, in combination with the fact that the county sits astride two interstates and hosts three hospitals, each with psychiatric inpatient units, results in a higher incidence of homelessness and chronic homelessness than most other areas of the state.

Since January 2015, the county has partnered with Shelter House, a nonprofit homeless services provider, to offer the Low Barrier Winter Emergency Shelter for adults who experience chronic homelessness. Since the shelter was established, there has been no loss of life due to exposure, "vagrancy" calls for service to Iowa City Police have fallen by as much as 74 percent and corrections, Emergency Medical Services and hospital emergency departments have noted significant reductions

in incarceration and ambulance and emergency room utilization for individuals who had frequently, if not habitually, been seen previously.

In 2016, Johnson County joined both the national Stepping Up initiative to reduce the prevalence of individuals with mental illness in jails and the Data-Driven Justice initiative to provide alternatives to jail for people who frequently cycle through health, human services and justice systems. The impacts of the Low Barrier Winter Shelter, combined with a cost analysis of the cross-sector service utilization of four individuals who experience chronic homelessness, compelled community leaders to explore a permanent housing solution to chronic homelessness. The community identified taking a Housing First approach as a possible solution to this challenge, which served as a major paradigm shift for the community.

What is Supportive Housing?

Housing First is based on the premise that the primary need for someone experiencing homelessness is to obtain stable housing and that other needs, such as getting a job and attending to substance use disorders or other health issues, can and should be addressed voluntarily and only after housing is obtained.

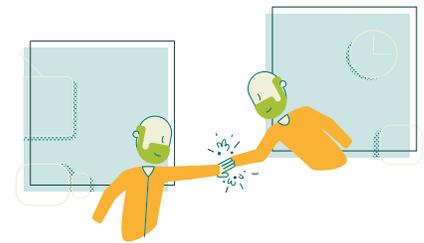
Permanent supportive housing (PSH) is an intervention that combines permanent, affordable housing with voluntary support services designed to help tenants stay housed and address health needs while building the necessary skills to live as independently as possible. PSH is an evidence-based housing solution that significantly reduces returns to jail and homelessness, decreases reliance on emergency health services and improves overall quality of life.

Supportive Housing Projects

In March 2011, Shelter House opened the Fairweather Lodge—a recovery-focused, peer-driven PSH program for adults experiencing homelessness and diagnosed with a serious persistent mental illness. The model incorporates basic principles of group process and peer support and is predicated on the belief that people who live and work together, and have significant control over their lives, can overcome homelessness and recover from their mental illnesses. There are currently three Lodge homes, each housing up to six adults. Homes are self-governed (staff do not live on-site), with Lodge members determining their respective house rules and attending to medication management. Psychiatric services are embedded in the Lodge in partnership with the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC) and the Veterans Affairs Health Care System. The University of Iowa (UI) Counseling Psychology Program and College of Nursing provide daily and weekly counseling, workshops and clinics. Supported employment and competitive wages are ensured through Fresh Starts—a Shelter House social enterprise delivering professional janitorial services contracted by area nonprofits and Iowa City. Fairweather Lodge properties were acquired using Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Continuum of Care and HOME funds in combination with local private funds, and program operations are supported through local county funds, city funds and private gifts. Recently, the

Iowa City Housing Authority adopted a targeted preference for individuals identified through Coordinated Entry for Permanent Supportive Housing and in so doing ensures Housing Choice Vouchers.

In January 2019, Shelter House opened a second PSH solution, Cross Park Place. Cross Park Place is staffed 24/7 and offers 24 one-bedroom units, on-site case management provided by Shelter House and embedded primary and behavioral health care services provided by Johnson County Jail Alternatives, UIHC Psychiatry and the UI College of Nursing. Cross Park Place provides housing opportunities for adults meeting HUD's definition of chronic homelessness which, in addition to specifying the duration of homelessness, requires that the individual have a diagnosed disabling condition. A majority of the units are prioritized for individuals that further demonstrate frequent cross-system service utilization. Funding for Cross Park Place construction was a combination of National Housing Trust Fund and local Housing Trust Fund monies. Operations are funded through a combination of Project Based Housing Choice Vouchers from the Iowa City Housing Authority and a HUD Continuum of Care grant.



Promising Outcomes

While it is too soon to assess the benefits of Cross Park Place, the Fairweather Lodge has shown significant positive impact. A 2017 analysis of pre-housing versus post-housing placement of 19 Lodge tenants, which followed them five years prior to entering the Lodge and five years after demonstrated that these individuals perennially showed a rate of 98 percent medication compliance and their hospital lengths of stay decreased by 79 percent. Additionally, the number of psychiatric stay days and inpatient treatment days fell 90 percent each, and the number of emergency room visits also fell 90 percent. Further, the number of incarceration days decreased 99 percent among these Lodge tenants. Shelter House has partnered with the University of Iowa School of Social Work to conduct a three-year evaluation of the effectiveness of the two housing interventions.

For more information on Johnson County's efforts, contact:

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