

Houston, We Solved a Problem

A lot is going on in Houston, and most of it couldn't be more positive. Houston is a very large, spread out city with a huge homeless population. Over the last decade, they have moved 25,000 formerly homeless persons into apartments and houses, where the majority of persons have stayed housed for over two years. In total, Houston has reduced homelessness by 63% since 2011. They are the only major city that has had a reduction in homelessness.

In the last decade Houston has gone all-in on Housing First with most of its providers doing it right, by following all “5 Principles.”

Note that many agencies and municipalities — including the City of Salem — claim to follow Housing First, but do not subscribe to the actual definition.

1. **Immediate access to real housing**, sometimes called Rapid Re-Housing.
2. **Individual choice and self-determination:** people decide where, and with whom, they will live.
3. **Robust menu of client-driven support services:** Case Managers are assigned before move-in. They arrange all services needed.
4. **Social and community integration:** returning people to integrated communities near work, family, or friends, rather than moving them to segregated shelter housing.
5. **Recovery orientation:** individuals focus on reducing harm they may do to themselves or others.

To accomplish this success, you need a lot of apartments and houses that are spread out. In 2011, Houston had a housing surplus and high va-

cancy rates. Landlords were more than willing to take a chance on people, especially with the guaranteed market rent from a voucher and a case manager to help the landlord with any problems they might encounter.

Providers and the city received large funding for services from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Medicaid. These were funded from President Biden's American Rescue Act and the Care's Act. Our Congressmen and Senators should get our share of that funding. Case managers are the foundation of services. Each individual in a Housing First program has ready access to one.

In the last decade, Houston's housing surplus has turned into a deficit. Despite a slow-down in new development for Housing First, the city has had so much success they remain committed to Housing First.

Another reason for Houston's continuing success is “The Continuum of Care,” also known as “The Way Home.” In 2011, Houston organized all providers, nonprofits, state offices and others committed to ending homelessness under one umbrella. The Continuum of Care supplies funding for providers and coordinates services across the city. It is a single point of entry for all services and all providers.

Houston took full advantage of federal funds and developed “an array of services that anyone can access from the Continuum of Care. It is not a “one size fits all” service; it is individualized and custom tailored for each unique person.

Houston boasts quite a few creative programs. They operate on the belief that shelter living is so damaging to one's self esteem that even one night can

be destructive. So, on first contact with the Continuum of Care, a case manager is assigned — someone with specialized training and resources. They have money for back rent, utility bills, etc., and they try to get people back into their last situation or they can offer short term vouchers and housing leads for temporary housing.

Houston was so successful with Housing First and its ability to leverage private investment for housing that they used the bulk of city and federal funds for services. The Way Home has more than one hundred partners working as a collective to end homelessness.

It is easy to argue that the shortage of affordable housing on the North Shore means that Houston's model cannot be applied. But there are houses and small apartment buildings for sale throughout the North Shore — for far less than the eventual cost of the Lifebridge/Harborlight proposal — and more immediately.

Since 2019, Housing Connector has successfully provided links between service providers and the private rental market. The program was first established in Seattle, and recently expanded to Tacoma, Portland, Denver, and Dallas.

The Housing Connector concept is familiar to Massachusetts. In 2015 and 2016, the Massachusetts Senate Special Commission on Housing proposed a program that would have provided a risk reduction fund for landlords. It was endorsed by MassLandlords, and many MassLandlords members were interested in participating, but it languished without the advocacy of large entrenched

agencies. The idea has been recently adopted by the Rapid Housing Initiative of Metro Housing Boston, a nonprofit agency that administers federal rental vouchers and other housing assistance in Greater Boston.

Now, the most important aspect of advocacy is compelling our political leaders to support homelessness services in both our federal and state budgets.

— *Edward Sacco*

Member,
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Greater Endicott Street Neighborhood Association

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Edward Sacco is a retired social services professional and longtime executive director of an organization providing group homes and apartments for deinstitutionalized and disabled individuals throughout the North Shore.

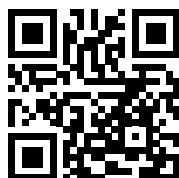
Resources

- The Way Home Houston, The Continuum of Care program thewayhomehouston.org
- MassLandlords, a landlord trade association masslandlords.net
- Metro Housing|Boston, Rapid Housing Initiative metrohousingboston.org
- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) www.hud.gov

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