



The Role of a Housing Support Worker for Women

Oudshoorn, Van Berkum & Michelucci

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Authors

Abe Oudshoorn, RN, PhD

Amy Van Berkum, RN, MN

Jessica Michelucci, RN, MN-PhCNP (2017)

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Background

Solving homelessness involves moving women from homeless to home. Many women have the capacity and resources to independently navigate from a crisis of homelessness to being re-housed within a short period of time. However, for other women, due to the complexities of their lives, challenges they face, and ways that systems have disadvantaged and discriminated against them, some degree of support is required in their journey out of homelessness. For those with the greatest support needs, intensive case management with ongoing in-home support through Housing First has proven to be the most effective for long-term housing and health outcomes. Housing First program support usually consists of at least four roles: outreach, case management, housing selection, and housing support. The purpose of this resource is to explore the housing support worker (HSW) role for those who identify as a woman and are experiencing homelessness.

With Housing First still being a relatively new modality, roles of workers within such programs have at times been ill-defined. For example, one organization's description of the HSW role may be what others have referred to as housing stability workers, community support workers, transitional case workers, outreach workers, or any other similar terminology. While conducting a program evaluation of a Housing First program for women, it was brought to our attention that there are significant variations amongst the expectations, roles, and skill sets required of HSW staff in Housing First programs. Housing support is not a clearly defined stream of one particular profession and is supported by a limited body of research knowledge, especially when examining gendered differences in the individuals being supported. To this end, we have sought to better define the role and required competencies of the HSW, both for the general homeless population (see "Role of the Housing Support Worker") and specifically for women with this document.

Methods

This document is a revised version of the mixed gender document: *The Role of the Housing Support Worker* (see Further Academic Reading on page 8), which aims to include gender specific considerations for the role of the HSW working with women. In the mixed gender document: *The Role of the Housing Support Worker*, three consecutive methods were used to develop an understanding of the HSW role for homeless individuals: a review of academic literature, an online review of job postings for HSW or related positions, and interviews with 7 of those currently serving in mixed gender HSW roles. Only 7 scholarly articles were retrieved that shed light on this particular role, as well as a resource page from the Homeless Hub. In addition to this data, a gender specific search of academic literature regarding the HSW role with women did not yield any results. However, a point in time search of job postings in February 2017 for a women specific HSW role yielded three results within Canada. Furthermore, the Best Practice Guideline for Ending Women's and Girl's Homelessness (Van Berkum & Oudhsoorn, 2015) was utilized to help inform gender specific considerations in the HSW role.

Although there has been significant literature on community-based in-home support with individuals with chronic mental health challenges, there is much less academic support of the HSW role within the homeless serving sector. The review of job postings was more productive than the literature review and also served to shed light on the diversity

and lack of clarity around the role, even more specifically for supporting women. Some postings were quite vague, suggesting nothing beyond assisting people formerly homeless to maintain their housing and others were far more specific, limiting applicants to select educational and certificate based qualifications, employment experience, and ability to work within particular paradigms (e.g. anti-oppressive, harm reduction).

What follows is by no means a definitive take on the HSW role for women, however we hope it serves as a resource to advance the quality of the work, and the experiences of these dedicated workers. Clarifying the role and including important gender considerations should also assist in developing the best educational resources to support this role.

Women's Housing Support Worker Definition

HSWs work alongside women to build trusting, therapeutic relationships that are centered on providing individualized, woman driven, asset based, trauma informed support. Support provision must be gendered, which may include an understanding and ability to carry out woman centered principles, such as: creating space for a woman's narrative, respecting her way's of knowing, and being flexible in care provision (e.g. gender of the HSW) to support her unique needs. Examples of support may include assistance in accessing community services and community integration, finding and maintaining housing, or acting in a role of advocacy when it is appropriate to do so. HSWs also work with women in areas of the woman's choice, including skill building, goal setting, and safety planning. Often a HSW is a "go to" person for support when problems arise, such as legal or financial concerns. Depending on individualized goals, HSWs may support the woman in whom they are working alongside in areas of autonomy and self-determination.

Women's Housing Support Worker Potential Duties

- Develop supportive relationships with women with strong interpersonal and rapport building skills focused on individualized support provision
- Assisting women to:
 - Access basic needs
 - Access income supports
 - Sustain tenancies
 - Complete applications
 - Access information
 - Set and achieve goals
- May be required to act as a mediator between women and landlords
- May support women with activities of daily living until connections are made with community supports
- Advocate for women when it is appropriate to do so, including not tolerating inappropriate behavior from others

- Support landlords as necessary, including provision of information, and building relationships and rapport
- Collaborate with community stakeholders, including making referrals
- On-going contact and assessment of women being supported
- Clear, accurate documentation including goals and objectives along with related participant outcomes
- Provide public presentations to community service providers, funders, or donors
- Provide after-hour support to women
- Teamwork: For example, work with a housing selection worker to re-house women when necessary, communication with a team leader, or working within an integrated case management plan
- Ability to use a computer/ cellular phone which may include accurate entry and maintenance of participant data
- Obtain a valid drivers license and operate a vehicle for purposes such as outreach and accompanying and supporting women to appointments
- Possesses an intersectional anti-oppressive, anti-racist, feminist perspective of the dynamics that may exist in the lives of women
- Inclusion and equity principles to which all women apply and are treated equally
- If a woman wishes to share her story: listen carefully to develop an understanding of a woman's potential intersecting issues related to mental health, drug and alcohol addiction, correctional institutionalization, reintegration, homelessness, poverty, racism, discrimination crisis interventions, holistic services etc.
- Ability to support and work with children as needed
- Knowledge of the VAW sector, housing related policy, funding supplements, child protection legislation, the legal system and the systemic and political barriers facing women and their children
- Complete necessary and on-going training, such as in the provision of Trauma Informed Care

Women's Housing Support Worker Potential Skills and Competencies

- Housing support work is relationship-based, therefore workers must be able to form and maintain positive and trusting relationships with women, landlords, and other providers within health and social services
- A woman's choice is key to Housing First, therefore workers must be proficient in woman-directed support
- Challenges faced by women are at times unpredictable, therefore workers must be flexible and able to work in an evolving environment
- Because housing support work occurs out in the community and independently, workers must be comfortable with working autonomously
- Due to the potential for negotiating conflict between women and landlords, workers must have excellent communication and negotiation skills
- Mental health challenges and addictions are common issues faced by women of Housing First programs. Therefore, an academic and practice background in mental health and addictions is strongly recommended. Housing First is grounded in a philosophy of harm reduction. Have an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings that drives and supports their work (e.g. trauma informed care and harm reduction)
- Supporting women with complex challenges can be difficult work. Workers should have well established self-awareness, personal coping and self-care skills, be supported in their workplaces and have the required access to supportive resources
- Workers may meet women in their home. Therefore, they should have skills in home-based care, non-violent crisis resolution, safety planning, and trauma-informed practices
- Due to the requirement to connect women with local resources, workers should have a strong knowledge of local services. Existing relationships within the health and social sectors are an asset
- A diploma in health or social services is frequently defined as a minimum requirement
- Previous work experience with the women experiencing homelessness, including support and recovery care
- Housing First is provided within a team setting, therefore workers should have a demonstrated ability to work within a team model, including the ability to work in pairs
- Credentials: First Aid/CPR is strongly recommended, as well as a clear Vulnerable Sector Police Check
- Many programs are based in 24/7 support, therefore workers should have flexible availability and comfort in working overnight
- Workers require transportation to meet with women in their homes
- Walking variable distances and the ability to work outside in all seasons of weather
- Communication in a second language
- Cultural sensitivity

Further Considerations

During our review a number of considerations came to light for those running Housing First programs and employing housing support workers:

1. The potential challenges of the role should not be underplayed. Providing care in a woman's home requires unique relational skills in any context. Adding in the potential of substance use, mental health challenges or developmental disabilities means that at some point in their work HSWs will find themselves in an uncomfortable situation. Applicants need to be aware of this, and should be supported in advance to develop skills to deal with such challenges.
2. Being the "go-to" resource for women can put significant stress on HSWs if there is any blurring of boundaries. Very clear boundaries around access to workers by women are essential, including hours of work, modes of contact, and types of support provided. Job descriptions should clearly outline any unique expectations.
3. Caseloads and team composition can vary significantly between Housing First programs. These details should be included in job postings.
4. Resources for social services provided through non-profit and charitable organizations can be quite limited. However, the goal of all programs should be to hire the most qualified HSWs possible. It should be noted that parallel services in the healthcare system for people living with mental health challenges and addictions are provided by Registered Nurses with four years of baccalaureate education. Employing HSWs with relevant formal education, such as social work or mental health work, will increase the likelihood that they have knowledge in which to ground their efforts.
5. Programs are increasingly recognizing the need to have both a primary worker and a secondary worker assigned to women in order to cover the 24/7 nature of the work. Job descriptions should include any specifics available about which role HSWs will be taking, and how many participants per role. Variations in responsibilities between the primary and secondary worker should be very clear.
6. 'Potential duties' includes "regular" contact with women participants. However, regularity of contact can vary significantly between programs, and has a significant impact on the work experience for HSWs. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that programs be clear about the regularity of contact they require between HSWs and women participants, and perhaps include this expectation on job descriptions.
7. Consider the importance of having HSW's that represent the diversity of the individuals receiving support (e.g. age, gender, race, sexual orientation, lived experience etc.).
8. Collaborative relationship with other social services and supports that puts the needs of women first, in order to help facilitate the unique needs of the participant. This may include the ability to coordinate or refer services with other supports as needed.

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