



The Role of the Housing Support Worker

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Background

Solving homelessness involves moving people from homeless to home. For many, they have the capacity and resources to independently navigate from a crisis of homelessness to being re-housed. In fact, the most frequent length of stay in most emergency shelters is one night. However, for others, 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.

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 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. To this end, we have sought to better define the role and required competencies.

Methods

Three consecutive methods were used to develop an understanding of the HSW role: a review of academic literature, an online review of job postings for HSW or related positions, and interviews with those currently serving in 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. 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, however it also served to shed light on the diversity and lack of clarity around the role. Some postings were quite vague, suggesting nothing beyond assisting people formerly homeless to maintain their housing, others were far more specific, limiting applicants to select educational qualifications. Subsequent to this review, 7 currently practicing HSWs were interviewed regarding their roles, how they would define their work, skills required, caseloads, and other nuances of the role. These interviews again highlighted the diversity of practices and the relative unknowns of working in the field. Some interviewees commented that they themselves were evolving the role as they did the work.

What follows is by no means a definitive take on the HSW role, 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 should also assist in developing the best educational resources to support this role.

Housing Support Worker Definition

HSWs work alongside individuals to build trusting, therapeutic relationships that are centered on providing individualized, person driven, asset based, trauma informed support. 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 people in areas of 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 those in which they are working alongside in areas of autonomy and self-determination.

Housing Support Worker Potential Duties

- Develop supportive relationships with participants
- Assisting individuals 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 participants and landlords
- May support participants with activities of daily living until connections are made with community supports
- Advocate for participants
- Support landlords as necessary, including provision of information, and building relationships and rapport
- Make links and referrals
- Conduct on-going assessment of program participants
- Have regular and ongoing contact with participants
- Document goals and objectives along with related participant outcomes
- Provide public presentations to community service providers, funders, or donors
- Provide after-hour support to participants
- Work with a housing selection worker to re-house participants when necessary
- Accurate entry and maintenance of participant data

Housing Support Worker Potential Skills and Competencies

- Housing support work is relationship-based, therefore workers must be able to form and maintaining positive and trusting relationships with participants, landlords, and other providers within health and social services
- Participant choice is key to Housing First, therefore workers must be proficient in person-directed support
- Challenges faced by participants 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 participants and landlords, workers must have excellent communication and negotiation skills
- Mental health challenges and addictions are common issues faced by participants 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 (such as trauma informed care and harm reduction)
- Supporting individuals 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 meet participants 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 participants 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.
- Housing First is provided within a team setting, therefore workers should have a demonstrated ability to work within a team model.
- As participants may experience urgent health challenges, First AID/CPR is strongly recommended.
- Many programs are based in 24/7 support, therefore workers should have flexible availability and comfort in working nights.
- Workers require transportation to meet with participants in their homes.

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 an individual'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 participants can put significant stress on HSWs if there is any blurring of boundaries. Very clear boundaries around access to workers by participants 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 participants 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 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 participants, and perhaps include this expectation on job descriptions.

Further Academic Reading

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