UNLOCKING THE FULL POTENTIAL
OF THE HOUSING FIRST APPROACH

National Alliance to
End Homelessness

Decades worth of evidence demonstrates that the Housing First approach – which pairs affordable and accessible housing with voluntary supportive services – **increases** housing stability for people experiencing homelessness, and also **increases** use of outpatient care. In addition to these benefits, the Housing First approach saves communities money. By prioritizing moving people into permanent housing, systems can end peoples' experiences of homelessness, and people who had experienced homelessness can gain a platform from which they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life.

But how do we square these data points with a recent **12% rise** in homelessness reported in 2023? The answer lies not in the failures of individuals, caseworkers, nor an evidence-based model, but rather many larger and societal factors that drive people into homelessness each day, such as the ongoing **affordable housing crisis**.

HOUSING FIRST is a philosophy that values flexibility, individualized supports, client choice, and autonomy. A Housing First approach can be successful for any person, regardless of actual or perceived need. Successful approaches rely on trauma-informed practices to meet people where they are, no preconditions or mandatory requirements, and adequate housing and supportive services (i.e., health care, behavioral health services, substance use disorder treatment, employment/education supports, etc.) which meet the needs and choices of the people being served. Core components **include**:

- Rapid and streamlined entry into housing
- Supportive services are voluntary, but can and should be used to persistently engage tenants to ensure housing stability
- Tenants have full rights, responsibilities, and legal protections
- Few to no programmatic prerequisites to permanent housing entry
- Practices and policies to prevent lease violations and evictions

MORE PEOPLE ARE GETTING REHOUSED, BUT EVEN MORE ARE ENTERING HOMELESSNESS.

Each day, more and more people are unable to pay for their basic needs. **Rising** rents and **falling** incomes have created the perfect storm where more neighbors struggle to put food on the table, and increasingly, pay the rent. While an **understaffed**, **underpaid**, and **overworked** workforce still managed to end homelessness for roughly 900,895 people each year between 2017 and 2020, on average during that same time period, an even larger number of people (908,530 people) **entered** homelessness. In 2022, a staggering 17,000 people a week on average entered into homelessness systems for the first time. Despite the homelessness response system lacking control over major drivers of inflow into homelessness, such as an exclusive housing market, some people choose to blame evidence-based practices, such as the Housing First approach, instead of failing under-funded systems which drive people into episodes of homelessness.

But with bold policy change and historic resources, homeless service providers across the country have shown that they can stem this tide.

Historic investments made and policies enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic helped stop a tidal wave of homelessness. Major federal resources prevented a more significant increase via crucial pandemic-era funds and protections: expanded SNAP benefits, Emergency Rental Assistance, the temporary Child Tax Credit expansion, unemployment insurance, and the eviction moratoria.

In a public health emergency and associated recession, a temporarily expanded social safety net allowed the country to maintain a relative status quo.

But by 2023, after many of these resources and protections dried up or expired, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s Point-in-Time Count reported the highest number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night since data collection began in 2007.

IN 2023, the same year where the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs exceeded its goal of placing at least 38,000 veterans experiencing homelessness into permanent housing through pairing housing and services resources in a Housing First approach, the number of veterans experiencing homelessness increased by 7.4% from the prior year, reinforcing the need to look upstream and prevent homelessness.

HOUSING FIRST HASN'T FAILED US; WE MUST FUND PROGRAMS TO SCALE

Discussions around the core tenants of the Housing First approach often highlight the importance of reducing barriers and centering client choice. But positive outcomes also depend on adequately funding and scaling deeply affordable housing and accessible and voluntary supportive services.

While we've long known about the severe housing crisis we're in because of the gap between people's incomes and rent (for example, extremely low-income renters in the U.S. face a shortage of 7.3 million affordable and available rental homes), we're also experiencing a severe supportive services shortage. For example:

- **Substance Use:** According to a new study supported by the National Institutes of Health, only about half of the residential addiction treatment facilities caring for adolescents under 18 years old had a bed immediately available, and for those that had a waitlist, the average estimated time before a bed opened was 28 days.

- **Mental Health:** 122 million people in the U.S. live in a mental Health Professional Shortage Area. An additional 62,490 psychologists are required to address current unmet need.

- **Other Direct Services & Case Management:** An American Network of Community Options and Resources report from 2023 polled nearly 600 direct services providers and found:

  - 95% of respondents indicated they had experienced moderate or severe staffing shortages in the past year.
  - More than half (54%) of respondents indicated they deliver services in an area where few or no other providers deliver similar services.
  - More than three-fourths (77%) of respondents reported turning away new referrals in the past year due to ongoing staffing shortages.
  - 72% of respondents reported that they had experienced difficulties adhering to established quality standards due to ongoing staffing challenges.

Just as a rent hike or drop in income could make the difference between housing stability and homelessness for someone living with a substance use disorder, the availability of voluntary and accessible treatment and other services could make the difference between someone recently rehoused living with a mental health condition stabilizing in housing or returning to the streets. Expanding our nationwide network of supportive services alongside increasing access to affordable housing will allow communities to scale the Housing First approach, and implement its best practices with fidelity, stabilizing people re-entering housing, and ultimately, ending homelessness.