

The NC 504 (Greensboro/High Point/ Guilford) Continuum of Care (CoC) has gone through many shifts and transformations since its inception in the mid to late 1990's. These have corresponded to similar shifts at the Federal and National level resulting from increased growth in knowledge and practice on ending homelessness. In 2009 Federal Government adopted the HEARTH Act. Implementation of the Act began in early 2012. The Act shifted focus from individual program outcomes to a focus on how all programs work as a system to achieve results for an entire community emphasizing quick returns to housing for people experiencing homelessness.

In response, NC 504 has spent the past few years learning the best ways to meet this mandate and also improve how the CoC serves people experiencing homelessness as a system. In early 2013 the NC Coalition to End Homelessness led a leadership retreat in Guilford County focused on this end with an emphasis on the system impact of increasing housing resources. At the same time Orgcode Consulting was hired to assist NC 504 further grow as a system by developing a Coordinated Intake and Assessment plan for the CoC. It was here that the idea of Housing First was introduced to the CoC leadership as a whole.

Later in 2013, thanks to a generous gift from the Phillips Foundation, a Housing First Initiative was created to specifically serve chronically homeless households. As a result, all CoC programs were invited to take part in a series of trainings on Housing First Philosophy, Housing Case Management, Assessments and other core components of Housing First Implementation across a system. In the Fall of 2014 a second leadership retreat was held, this time hosted by Orgcode Consulting. Expanding Housing First Philosophy and practice across the entire CoC was adopted as a priority goal of NC 504.

The Housing First Philosophy is the belief that individuals should be assisted in accessing housing as quickly as possible with supports delivered in the community after housing. Expanding Housing First Philosophy across a CoC is a key recommendation from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the National Alliance on Ending Homelessness (NAEH), and the US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). Housing First is empirically proven, consistently across multiple Continuums' of Care in the US and abroad to:

- Get better outcomes for youth, adults, and families experiencing homelessness
- Reduce costs to the homeless service system and the mainstream service system
- End homelessness

The move towards expanding Housing First philosophy across the CoC is anchored in the following facts and beliefs:

- NC 504 Continuum of Care (CoC) is committed to ending homelessness.
- A myriad of factors may influence a household's ability to maintain housing, but only housing itself ends homelessness.
- The sole purpose of programs and services dedicated to the homeless population is to end homelessness
- Mandatory program participation does not result in better housing outcomes.
- Everyone is housing ready
- The homeless service delivery system should be a process, not a destination.

A third CoC leadership retreat was held on July 21, 2015 solely dedicated to the expansion of a Housing First Philosophy across the entire CoC as previously adopted. A series of commitments was agreed to at this retreat and presented to the Executive Committee of the CoC Board of Directors on July 22nd then to the full board on July 27, 2015 where the 4 commitments were adopted.

The commitments are as follows:

1. Fund only those services aligned to a Housing First Philosophy
  - a. CoC, ESG, and other state or local funding that flows through Partners Ending Homelessness will be dedicated to programs and services that align to a Housing First System philosophy
  - b. Programs that reside outside of this philosophy are an important contributor to the safety net in Guilford County, but will not be eligible for funding through the Continuum of Care
2. Programs committing to a Housing First Philosophy will review rules to ensure they are as least restrictive as possible and that they do not intentionally create barriers to housing, nor prolong homelessness
  - a. Rules should focus on behavior, not the person
  - b. Rules should reinforce dignity
  - c. Restricting, barring, or denying access or service should be limited to:
    - i. Matters of violence and serious threats (including sexual violence)
    - ii. Excessive damage to property
    - iii. Theft
  - d. Rules and practices that create barriers for the most acute people to access programs and services should be removed
3. The CoC will use data to make decisions
  - a. The following measures will be used
    - i. Average length of stay (by acuity)
    - ii. Number of people housed (by acuity)
    - iii. Percentage of people staying housed (by acuity)
  - b. Other measures may be used for particular programs that reflect the nature of that program (ex. Diversion)
  - c. The CoC will create meaningful takedown targets and measure programs against them
  - d. Renewal funding may be expedited or automatic for programs that meet or exceed takedown targets
4. The CoC supports programs that are aligned to Housing First Philosophy, and will change or reinvest resources toward housing whenever it can.
  - a. Specifically related to funding that flows through Partners Ending Homelessness-CoC, ESG, and other state or local funds.
  - b. Programs aligned toward a Housing First Philosophy will shift from managing homelessness through a charitable response to ending homelessness through professionalization of service
  - c. The CoC will focus on the system acting as a process for returning people to housing as quickly as possible and will invest resources towards that end.