

Santa Clara County Continuum of Care Housing Problem Solving Guidelines

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Overview of Housing Problem Solving

Housing Problem Solving is a person-centered, strengths-based approach to support households in identifying choices and solutions to quickly end their housing crisis. Housing Problem Solving is housing-focused; it is aligned with the Housing First philosophy and is explored with all households accessing the Santa Clara County crisis response system who are at imminent risk of homelessness, experiencing literal homelessness or fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence. Housing Problem Solving supports people through creative problem-solving conversations and resource connections to quickly secure permanent or temporary housing by encouraging creative, safe housing options that meet their unique needs. It is a short-term intervention focused on identifying immediate, safe housing arrangements, often utilizing conflict resolution and mediation skills to reconnect households to their support systems. Housing Problem Solving offers flexible services that may be coupled with minimal financial assistance when needed.

Housing Problem Solving engages households early in their housing crisis. A staff member trained in Housing Problem Solving techniques initiates an exploratory conversation to brainstorm practical solutions for households to resolve their homelessness quickly and safely, as a first step within the CoC's Coordinated Assessment System. Staff supports households in seeing beyond their current crisis by encouraging them to generate creative ideas and identify realistic options for safe housing based on their own available resources rather than those of the crisis response system. This is not a program, but a systemwide approach utilized to support people in real time, acknowledging that far more people request housing assistance than can be referred to supportive housing through the CoC's Coordinated Assessment System.

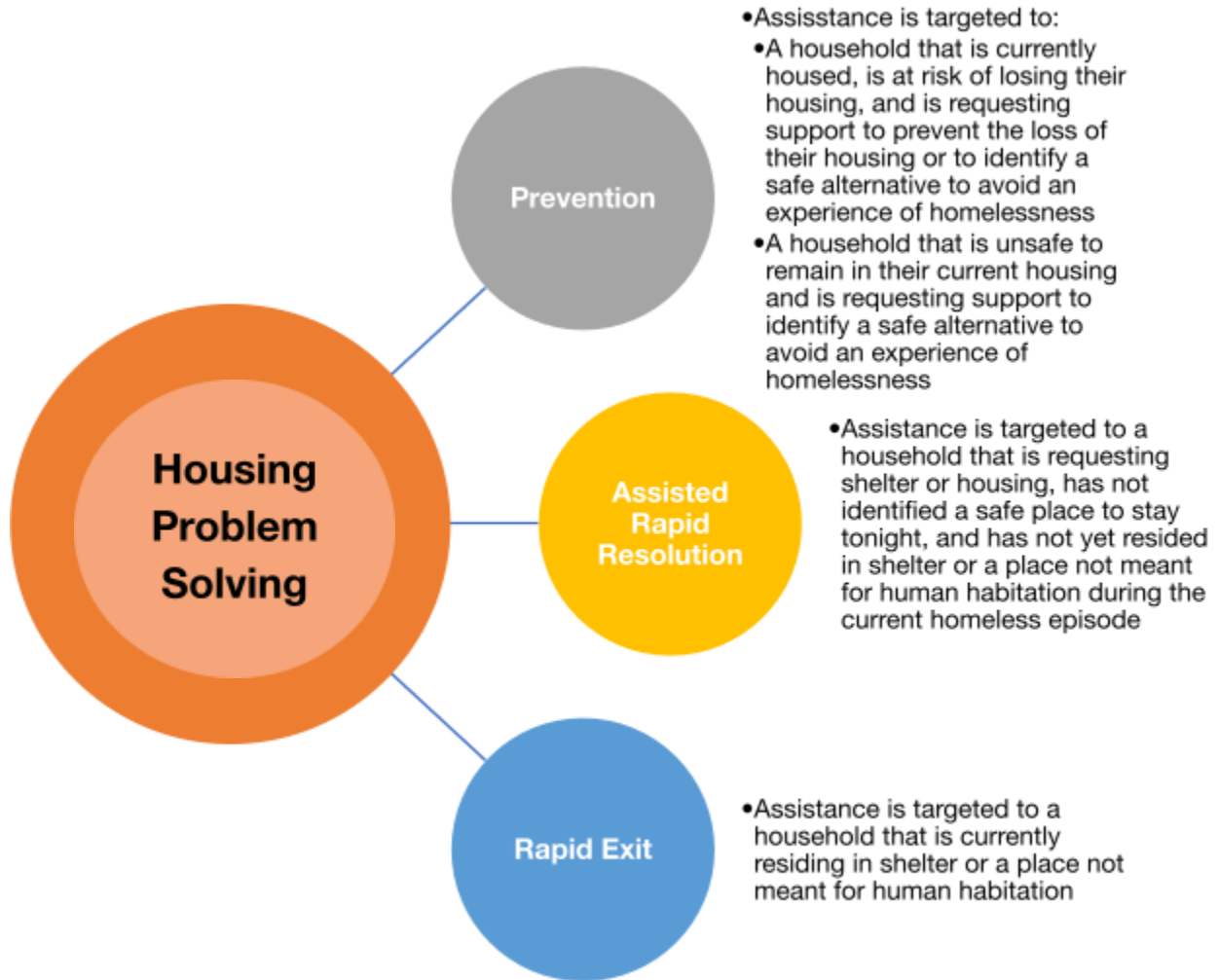
Well-designed Housing Problem Solving that is centered around preventing homelessness or housing instability within the environmental and structural factors that result in the disproportionate rates of Black, Hispanic, and Native American households experiencing COVID-19 illness, housing instability, and homelessness will promote equity. In Santa Clara County, Black/African Americans are disproportionately represented in the homeless population (16.9%) compared to the general population (2.5%). Similarly, American Indian/Native Alaskans experience homelessness in Santa Clara County at a ratio of 7:1 compared to general population data (7.4% of homeless population compared to less than 1% of the general population). People who identify as Hispanic/Latinx comprise 43.7% of the homeless (HMIS) population, compared to 27% of the general population; 65% of families presenting to the Coordinated Entry System are Hispanic/Latinx.¹ The Santa Clara County CoC

¹ Destination: Home and SPARC, Race and Homelessness in Santa Clara County, California, January 2020,

has committed to pursuing solutions that eliminate these disparities, including Housing Problem Solving. Racial equity will be centered in all Housing Problem Solving trainings, Housing Problem Solving outcomes will be available and continuously analyzed by race and ethnicity, and feedback from people with lived experiences will be incorporated at all points of the planning, implementation and refinement work to ensure Housing Problem Solving is serving the community as a racial equity strategy.

It is critical to understand the differences between three Housing Problem Solving strategies for the purpose of tracking outcomes in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Three strategies include Homelessness Prevention, Assisted Rapid Resolution, and Rapid Exit. Similar service strategies are often utilized within these approaches – such as, conflict resolution, motivational interviewing, and trauma-informed care – but *the time at which the intervention occurs is different* and important for the purposes of measuring the success of these interventions.

The guidelines included in this document apply to Assisted Rapid Resolution and Rapid Exit. To learn more about Homelessness Prevention, please visit <https://destinationhomesv.org/homelessness-prevention/>.



The Role of Housing Problem Solving Within the Crisis Response System

Housing Problem Solving plays a critical role in the Santa Clara County Coordinated Assessment System:

- Housing Problem Solving is a Housing-First-aligned, person-centered, and strengths-based approach.
- Housing Problem Solving assists households in identifying safe, alternative options to shelter, reducing the trauma of an experience with homelessness.
- Solutions are often creative and can be implemented quickly – real-time support can make housing instability brief and reduce the number of people entering the homeless system.
- Housing Problem Solving preserves emergency shelter beds and supportive housing resources for households who have no alternative options.
- Housing Problem Solving supports creative and cost-effective solutions to meet each household's needs by recognizing their unique strengths.
- Using a Housing Problem Solving approach can decrease a household's length of time homeless (and the system's average length of time homeless) and open service capacity for others in need.
- Housing Problem Solving principles can be leveraged by staff at drop-in centers, emergency shelters, street and encampment outreach, other access points, and any other initial points of contact within the crisis response system.
- Housing Problem Solving supports a household's obtainment of long-term or temporary housing options outside the crisis response system.

Housing Problem Solving starts with a conversation grounded in a household's current housing situation, available resources, and identification of safe housing options outside of the supportive housing system that they are willing to explore. The role of a Housing Problem Solving specialist (anyone trained in and engaging in problem-solving conversations) is to partner with the household to identify viable alternatives for permanent or temporary housing stability and facilitate connection to the household's preferred alternative.

Services and best practices include:

- Have creative conversations that support participants in identifying and leveraging household strengths, support networks, and other resources in overcoming barriers to housing stability and identifying potential solutions to their housing crisis. These conversations include open-ended questions utilizing motivational interviewing skills.

- Follow the lead of the household to support personal control over one's own problem-solving and empowerment to actively overcome obstacles. Focus on the person's goals, choices, and preferences; respect their strengths; and reinforce their progress. Do not inhibit the household from pursuing a viable and safe housing option, even if it is only a short-term solution.
- Partner with households as advocates to work with landlords and debt collectors if advocacy directly links to a housing solution.
- Serve as a mediator to assist households in having difficult conversations with individuals in their support network, such as friends and family, employers, debt collectors, and landlords. Conversations focus on solutions to securing safe housing options.
- Connect households to short- and long-term supports and resources, including mainstream services that can address ongoing needs as well as housing search resources.
- Facilitate financial assistance for solutions that require financial support.

Who is Eligible for Housing Problem Solving?

Households at imminent risk of homelessness (within 14 days), households who are not safe to remain in their current housing, and households experiencing literal homelessness that have not identified a safe housing option for tonight are eligible for Housing Problem Solving. When evaluating eligibility for Housing Problem Solving, consider where the household anticipates staying tonight (rather than where they stayed last night). Households may either qualify as at-imminent-risk of homelessness, fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, or literally homeless for the coming night.

Documentation of homeless status is not required for the initial Housing Problem Solving conversation; it becomes required only if financial assistance is necessary to resolve the situation. Third-party verification is preferred, but self-certification of homelessness is acceptable -- staff must check HMIS for third-party documentation before resorting to self-certification. Verification is required that a household considers themselves at-risk of losing their housing (self-reported), and they are within 14 days of losing housing.

Housing Problem Solving is available at any entry point of the crisis response system, including drop-in centers, emergency shelters, outreach programs, and other access points. Even if a household has accessed Housing Problem Solving services previously, they are eligible to re-engage and receive assistance if they meet the eligibility requirements outlined in this section. Financial assistance that exceeds a cumulative total of \$5,000 must be approved by the County Contract Monitor.

Households at Imminent Risk of Homelessness are Eligible for Homelessness Prevention

The household is currently housed and is at risk of losing their housing. “At risk” is defined as being within 14 days of losing housing or missing a rent payment. Households against whom eviction proceedings have been initiated, including those that have received a Three-Day Notice to Pay Rent or Quit or a Notice to Vacate, are also considered “at risk.” These households therefore meet this eligibility requirement, as long as they are still residing in the unit, even if eviction proceedings are ongoing or have concluded.

Households residing in garages converted into places intended for human habitation are considered housed, regardless of the legality of the conversion. A converted unit is defined as one that has access to a bathroom, running water, and electricity. Staff should inquire about all three of these elements to determine whether a garage unit meets conversion criteria to determine whether the household is housed or unhoused.

After exiting an institutional setting, an individual is considered housed if they were housed prior to institutionalization. Institutions are defined as hospitals, jails, psychiatric wards, and substance abuse treatment facilities.

To learn more about Homelessness Prevention, please visit <https://destinationhomesv.org/homelessness-prevention/>.

Households Fleeing or Attempting to Flee Domestic Violence are Eligible for Homelessness Prevention, Assisted Rapid Resolution or Rapid Exit

1. The household is fleeing, or attempting to flee, domestic violence, including dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, human trafficking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member that has either taken place within their primary nighttime residence or that makes them afraid to return to their primary nighttime residence;
2. The household has no other residence; **and**
3. Lacks the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing.

Households fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence are eligible for homelessness prevention services. These households are automatically defined as at-risk even if there is not the standard documentation to support that status. It is important to note that a household fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence have a higher safety risk of death related to their abuser finding out they are trying to leave. Under no circumstances should a worker make contact with the alleged abuser in an attempt to verify the situation.

To learn more about Homelessness Prevention, please visit <https://destinationhomesv.org/homelessness-prevention/>.

Literally Homeless Households are Eligible for Assisted Rapid Resolution or Rapid Exit

The household lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, which includes a primary nighttime residence of:

- A place not meant for human habitation, e.g., a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground;
- An emergency shelter, safe haven, or hotel or motel paid by a charitable organization or a government program for low-income individuals; or
- A hospital or other institution if:
 1. Their stay was 90 days or fewer **and**
 2. They resided in an emergency shelter or in a place not meant for human habitation within 14 days prior to admission.

When Should Housing Problem Solving be Attempted?

Housing Problem Solving should be attempted and tracked in HMIS for 100% of households making contact with the crisis response system via drop-in centers, emergency shelters, outreach programs, and other access points. Housing Problem Solving is ideally attempted during the first conversation with every household making contact with the crisis response system, and it should be completed as rapidly as possible to minimize the household's experience of homelessness. Having a Housing Problem Solving conversation with every household making contact with the crisis response system will help to reduce the overall number of households experiencing homelessness in our community and ensure the crisis response system is reserved and dedicated for households with no safe alternative housing options.

Housing Problem Solving conversations are not limited to one-time occurrences. If a viable option is not discovered initially or a household is not interested in having the conversation, a Housing Problem Solving specialist should continue to attempt the conversation whenever the household is willing throughout their engagement with the specialist. At this time, everyone should complete a VI-SPDAT assessment as part of evaluating the homeless system and for whom each approach and type of intervention fits best.

Flexible Financial Assistance

Flexible financial assistance is available for households who identify it as a need for resolving their housing crisis through Housing Program Solving conversations. When financial assistance is necessary to obtain safe housing, Housing Program Solving funds can be used in a variety of ways **provided they directly result in a housing solution, whether permanent or temporary.**

Common uses of Housing Program Solving financial assistance funds may include, but are not limited to:

- Move-in costs, including deposit and first month's rent, moving supplies, the cost of a moving truck and storage;
- Rental applications fees and payments for background and credit checks;
- Fees for securing identification documents, birth certificates, and social security cards;
- Transportation, including bus tickets for both local transport and to facilitate relocation to verifiable, safe housing out-of-the-area;
- Previous housing debt/rental arrears if resolving will facilitate an immediate housing placement;
- Utility deposits and arrears needed to secure housing; and
- Certifications or license fees related to school or employment.

Households have unique needs and each situation will require different strategies. A progressive engagement framework should be used to determine the amount of resources needed to end the housing crisis of each impacted household. **To promote the expertise of local Housing Program Solving specialists as well as flexibility and efficiency in service delivery, our CoC does not have a maximum or cap on the amount of financial assistance one household can receive. Financial assistance that exceeds a cumulative total of \$5,000 must be approved by the County Contract Monitor.** However, individual funders may have maximum amounts per household, more specific lists of eligible costs, and unique documentation requirements in their contracts. Documenting circumstances and uses of funds helps inform what households truly need to connect to housing solutions without long-term support from the crisis response system.

Service providers accessing flexible financial assistance must have a valid Housing Problem Solving Partner Agency Agreement with the County, and each staff person requesting assistance for a client must first complete the 2-day training with the CoC and complete the 1-hour local training on HMIS data entry, flexible fund policies, and successful outcome definitions.

Defining a Successful Outcome

Successful Housing Problem Solving occurs when a household remains in or moves to safe temporary or permanent housing. The household may be in their own home, living with family or friends, relocating to safe housing, or living in shared housing. Housing Problem Solving might support a household returning to their recent home (e.g., via mediation and/or food assistance); moving to a safe housing option (e.g., via financial assistance to cover move-in costs and/or bus fare to a safe housing option); or moving into a new housing situation (e.g., via landlord advocacy, deposit assistance, and/or financial assistance to cover their first month of rent).

It can be difficult to estimate how long temporary housing will be available, and the household's options should not be limited due to the fear of not meeting outcomes. **All self-reported housing options to an eligible exit destination² are considered a positive Housing Problem Solving outcome, regardless of the length of time an option is projected to last.** It is the role of the Housing Problem Solving specialist to not only support a safe temporary option, but to establish a service plan with a household that ensures a permanent housing plan has also been identified. For the purposes of tracking quality data in HMIS, a “temporary” Housing Problem Solving solution includes living with family or friends on a time-limited basis, and a “permanent” solution is an option a household reports that does not have a time limit.

Housing Problem Solving System Performance Standards

Assisted Rapid Resolution and Rapid Exit performance standards will be populated by the Performance Measurement Work Group in 2021. Those include the following targets, by population and program type:

- X% of all enrolled family households with children are successfully rapidly exited from emergency shelters
- X% of all enrolled adult households without children and young adult households without children are successfully rapidly exited from emergency shelters
- X% of all enrolled households are successfully rapidly exited from emergency shelters (all populations)
- X% of all enrolled households are successfully rapidly exited from day centers and outreach programs (all populations)

² **Eligible exit destinations:** 1) Rental by client, no ongoing housing subsidy; 2) Rental by client, with other ongoing housing subsidy; 3) Staying or living with family, permanent tenure; 4) Staying or living with friends, permanent tenure; 5) Owned by client, no ongoing housing subsidy; 6) Owned by client, with ongoing housing subsidy; 7) Long-term care facility or nursing home; 8) Staying or living with family, temporary tenure; 9) Staying or living with friends, temporary tenure; 10) Living in an RV with water and electricity hook ups and no risk of being ticketed/towed due to illegal parking.

Housing Problem Solving should be offered during the first interaction with access point staff (unless client safety precludes so) and must be attempted within 72 hours of initial enrollment at emergency shelter programs accessing Housing Problem Solving funds.

There is no time limit for completing Housing Problem Solving with unsheltered households at day centers, within outreach programs, and at emergency/overflow shelters.

HMIS and Data Collection Requirements

All Housing Problem Solving services must be documented in HMIS. HMIS is currently being enhanced to accommodate the Housing Problem Solving workflow. Detailed instructions will be released in 2021.

Comprehensive quarterly Housing Problem Solving dashboards will be made available starting upon Housing Problem Solving launch. The dashboards will reflect Housing Problem Solving outcomes for drop-in centers, emergency shelters, outreach programs, other access points, and any other initial points of contact within the crisis response system. Outcomes data will be disaggregated by race and ethnicity to help assess how well Housing Problem Solving meets the needs of communities of color, as well as disaggregated by gender, age, and veteran status.

Ongoing Training and Learning Opportunities

The Santa Clara County CoC has made a commitment to Housing Problem Solving training based on the Cleveland Mediation Center (CMC) Model. The CoC, through the County's Office of Supportive Housing, will provide training monthly beginning in 2021. Housing Problem Solving training opportunities are posted on the [CoC Events Calendar](#). Individual and organizational access to CoC centralized flexible financial assistance requires completion of this training, including a course on local policies.

Starting in 2020, facilitated Learning Circles will be made available countywide. They are opportunities for staff trained in Housing Problem Solving approaches to troubleshoot, share best practices, look at local process and outcome data, and connect with other providers. Learning Circles will be offered throughout the county at varying times and locations – opportunities are posted [here](#). Learning Circles are led by the network of Housing Problem Solving coaches, consisting of people who have experience in practicing the CMC model.

Want more information on Housing Problem Solving training and learning opportunities?

Contact Homebase at SantaClaraCoC@homebaseccc.org.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between Homelessness Prevention, Assisted Rapid Resolution, and Rapid Exit?

The services and resources offered through each intervention all align with the Housing Problem Solving approach – including creative problem-solving conversations, connection to community resources, and when needed, flexible financial assistance. We differentiate between these three terms for the sake of outcome tracking and understanding what’s effective and what may need improvement.

Homelessness Prevention targets households who are still housed but at imminent risk of homelessness; typically, within 14 days. Households who are at risk of homelessness may include people who are facing eviction from their own or rented home, couch-surfing, doubled up with friends or family, or paying for a motel with their own resources. Assisted Rapid Resolution targets households who do not have a place to stay the night they request assistance; they are past the imminent risk of homelessness and anticipate needing emergency shelter that night. Rapid Exit targets households who have stayed at least one night in shelter or an unsheltered situation.

How is Housing Problem Solving supportive of the Continuum of Care’s Racial Equity goals?

In Santa Clara County, Black/African Americans are disproportionately represented in the homeless population (16.9%) compared to their numbers in the general population (2.5%). Similarly, American Indian/Native Alaskans experience homelessness in Santa Clara County at a ratio of 7:1 compared to their general population numbers (7.4% of the homeless population compared to less than 1% of the general population). People who identify as Hispanic/Latinx comprise 43.7% of the homeless (HMIS) population, compared to 27% of the general population; 65% of families presenting to the Coordinated Entry System are Hispanic/Latinx.³ Our CoC has committed to pursuing solutions that eliminate these disparities. We are committed to centering racial equity in all Housing Problem Solving trainings, measuring Housing Problem Solving outcomes by race and ethnicity, and incorporating feedback from people with lived experiences to continue to refine the Housing Problem Solving model.

How is Housing Problem Solving different from traditional case management services?

The focus of Housing Problem Solving services is to quickly support a household to find a safe housing solution. Housing Problem Solving services are flexible short-term interventions with limited follow-up. If the household needs more intensive support, they may be referred to

³ Destination: Home and SPARC, Race and Homelessness in Santa Clara County, California, January 2020, https://destinationhomesv.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/RacialEquityReport0131020.pdf?mc_cid=06a7865957&mc_eid=c14c809e84

appropriate case management or other longer-term supportive services embedded within provider agencies.

If someone explores a safe housing option through Housing Problem Solving, should they still complete a Coordinated Assessment System vulnerability assessment?

Yes. At this time, we are collecting VI-SPDAT data on every household that enters the homeless system so we can effectively evaluate our approach and understand what interventions are effective, and for whom.

Can I use Housing Problem Solving financial assistance for households to access a supportive housing program (e.g., deposit for transitional housing)?

No. Housing Problem Solving financial assistance is meant to support individuals and families in connecting with safe housing options outside of the homeless system, which means emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid rehousing, and permanent supportive housing are not exit destinations for which Housing Problem Solving flexible funding is available. Those housing programs should be providing support with deposits, for example, when needed.

Do we need to document homeless status before working with a household?

To promote flexibility and urgency in resolving the homeless situation, proof of homelessness is not required. However, if a Housing Problem Solving Specialist engaged in ARR or Rapid Exit discovers that a household is not literally homeless or fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, they should stop Housing Problem Solving services and refer the household to resources that better fit the household's needs to maintain and strengthen their housing situation. Often, that means accessing prevention resources because the household is at imminent risk of homelessness.

If flexible financial assistance will be utilized to support a successful exit destination, homelessness status must be documented per instructions on page 5 of this document.

What if a household has previously accessed Housing Problem Solving and requests Housing Problem Solving assistance again?

If a household has accessed Housing Problem Solving services previously, they are eligible to re-engage and receive assistance if they meet the eligibility requirement outlined in these guidelines.

Housing Problem Solving Case Examples

Example #1

A couple and their two children came to a Housing Problem Solving Specialist for help. Through the assessment process, the Specialist learned they were evicted from their apartment a week earlier because they used their rent money to pay a child's medical bills. Embarrassed by their situation, the family decided to stay in their car and put their belongings in storage. Their former apartment was conveniently located near the father's job and the children's school, but the family feared their relationship with their former landlord was damaged beyond repair and they could not return.

The mother said she might have a co-worker who would be willing to put them up for a week or so but felt too ashamed to ask and did not want people at work to think she was a bad mother. The Housing Problem Solving Specialist helped the family strategize about how to ask the co-worker for assistance and provided a referral to a low-cost health care clinic nearby where the family can take their sick child for continuing care. The Specialist also provided information about affordable health insurance options.

Once the family confirmed they could stay with the mother's co-worker, the Housing Problem Solving Specialist focused on the family's longer-term housing plan. Together, they called the former landlord to discuss the family's situation. During the call they found out that the family had a positive rental history and was previously well-regarded by the landlord, but when the rent did not come and they lost contact, the landlord did not know what else to do and moved forward in the eviction process. With Housing Problem Solving financial assistance, the household was able to pay the rental arrears and return to their unit. After a few days of staying with their co-worker, the family moved back into their previous unit.

Example #2

A single adult visited a Housing Problem Solving Specialist and requested emergency shelter. The Specialist learned that she was previously on a lease with a partner in another Bay Area county. When their relationship ended, she felt she had to get out of the area and heard Santa Clara County had a thriving job market. While job hunting and staying in a motel, her savings ran low and she began sleeping outside. She was working part-time and was not able to save enough for a deposit and first month's rent.

The Housing Problem Solving Specialist asked her what kind of housing situations are safe and viable for her. After confirming that she did not have any connections in the area but had lived with roommates in the past, she decided that a shared living situation would be her best option. The Housing Problem Solving Specialist assisted her with searching for a room to rent and facilitated financial assistance to cover her moving costs.

Glossary of Terms

Continuum of Care (CoC) – The Santa Clara County Continuum of Care carries out the responsibilities required under HUD regulations, set forth at 24 CFR 578 – Continuum of Care Program. The CoC is comprised of a broad group of stakeholders dedicated to ending and preventing homelessness in Santa Clara County. CoC membership is open to all interested parties and includes representatives from organizations within Santa Clara County. The overarching CoC responsibility is to ensure community-wide implementation of efforts to end homelessness and ensuring programmatic and systemic effectiveness of the local Continuum of Care program.

Crisis Resolution – Assisting individuals and families without housing to have a place to live, while connecting them to systems that can help to address the issues that may have contributed to their housing crisis.

Housing Problem Solving – A Housing-First-aligned, person-centered, and strengths-based approach to support households in identifying choices and solutions to end their homeless experience with limited interaction with the crisis response system.

Housing Problem Solving Specialist – Anyone trained in and attempting Housing Problem Solving.

Eligible Household – Homeless status is the only eligibility criteria for Housing Problem Solving services. Households who are requesting crisis housing response system assistance and have not identified a safe place to stay tonight are eligible for Housing Problem Solving.

Emergency Shelter – Temporary shelter from the elements and unsafe streets for homeless individuals and families. Emergency shelters typically address the basic health, food, clothing, and personal hygiene needs of the households they serve and provide information and referrals about supportive services and housing. Emergency Shelters may range from mats on the floor in a common space to beds in individual units. Some shelters are overnight only, while others operate 24/7.

Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) – A local information technology system used to collect data on the provision of housing and services to homeless individuals and families.

Household – An individual or group of people that present together for assistance and identify themselves as a household, regardless of age, relationship, marital status, actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or whether or not a member of the household has a disability.

Housing First – Housing first is a low-barrier homeless assistance approach that prioritizes providing housing to people experiencing homelessness without preconditions. This approach

is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before attending to anything less critical, such as getting a job, budgeting properly, or attending to substance use issues.

Permanent Housing –Permanent housing resources within the homeless system include RRH & PSH. Permanent housing outside of the homeless system includes any safe housing option that a household self-reports as having no time limit.

Progressive Engagement – An approach to supporting households to resolve their housing crisis by tailoring services to their unique needs and reserving more intensive services for those that need additional assistance.

Temporary Housing – A housing solution with a time limit, as self-reported by a household.

Young Adult – An individual who is 18-24 years old.