

SCREENING GUIDELINES FOR HOUSING PROGRAMS

The screening process is often the first step for trafficking survivors in accessing a housing program. As a service provider, this may be your first interaction with a survivor. The questions that are asked, as well as how they are asked, can impact who accesses the program, how a survivor experiences the program, and how trauma-informed values are put into practice. This process can help build trust and rapport with the survivor, so it is important to continually treat the survivor with dignity and respect at all times.

Preparing to Screen Survivors

As programs prepare to screen and serve survivors, it takes a proactive approach to review the ways in which survivors can access the program and how staff are prepared to screen people for their current housing needs. Programs may utilize an agency specific crisis line, a national hotline, walk-in services or street outreach to gain referrals to the housing program. Each access point may have a different purpose and corresponding details that staff need to understand.

There are recommendations all programs and access points should have in place. All programs should have a language access plan that supports all survivors to access services regardless of their primary or preferred language. The plan should also include interpreters for survivors who are deaf or people with hearing loss. All staff should be trained on how to properly access the identified interpreter services. Staff should also be mindful of the level of comprehension skills or learning disabilities survivors may have. Finally, front line staff that are completing the screenings should have training on how to use open ended questions and problem-solving skills when the screening process encounters challenges.

Screen In, Not Out

By applying a Housing First approach, programs can ensure that survivors are screened into housing services without preconditions, eliminating barriers to housing access. A Housing First philosophy acknowledges that having access to safe and stable housing can allow survivors to engage in other services that they identify as useful. Many programs experience a scarcity of resources given the high demand and cost for housing assistance. There are more people than rooms, beds or program spots available. Because of limited resources, it can be easy to fall into a habit of screening out because a survivor does not seem “homeless enough”, is not “in enough danger”, or “is not a good fit for the program”. Having clear eligibility guidelines can assist staff in providing unbiased screening for services. In addition, it is important to ensure that the program is not discriminating against survivors, which would violate federal law. If a program is exclusively serving a specific population, then it is important to also have established partnerships with other service providers to ensure any and all human trafficking survivors can receive services.

Eligibility Criteria

Having set eligibility criteria for your housing program can facilitate consistency and remove subjective decisions of who is screened into the program. As you set program eligibility

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criteria it is important that it does not serve as a barrier to those needing access to housing. Eligibility parameters that are based on criteria outside of trafficking status typically create higher barriers to program access and are contrary to trauma-informed care principles. You may consider the following parameters when determining program eligibility:

1. Program goals (e.g., to provide rental assistance for trafficking survivors who are experiencing housing instability or homelessness)
2. Funding requirements for the housing program
3. Assessing for duplication of services. This could be undertaken by conducting a community assessment. This will help identify service providers who offer similar services and lead to partnerships with those that serve different populations or provide different services.

To align with a voluntary service and Housing First approach, criteria such as clean criminal records, dedication to change, history of violence or other subjective requirements typically screen survivors out of housing services. Other less examined barriers that programs may contemplate putting in place include requiring that a survivor be sober to be eligible for housing. These parameters not only increase the barriers to meeting their basic need of housing, but also are contrary to trauma-informed care principles. Survivors may use or have used substances to cope with traumatic experiences, and substances may have also been used by traffickers as a means of control. Because of this, following a harm-reduction approach when working with survivors who have substance use or addiction concerns is key.

It is important to recognize that there may be times other systems or funding streams may require survivors to comply with certain tasks. As a provider outside of those systems and/or working with those systems, it is crucial to recognize the impacts that these requirements may have on the survivor as you advocate for their needs. It is also important to clearly communicate to the survivor why the parameters are in place.

Warm Referrals

It is important that when your program is unable to offer housing assistance to a survivor, meaningful steps are taken to connect the survivor with programs that offer comparable services that may be able to meet a survivor's housing need. Having established community outreach and building connections with other housing providers is crucial for seamless referrals to take place. Consider having a point of contact at other shelters or housing services in order to minimize survivors potentially being turned away from other programs, due to not being eligible, or possible discrimination. As you are able, expand the number of contacts within referral agencies in case of staff turnover or other unexpected programmatic changes. Also consider enhancing the overall relationship between programs. This is a great opportunity to cross train staff at the corresponding entities. For example, if referring to a domestic violence program for housing, train their staff about human trafficking, and have their staff provide training about their housing services.

It is also recommended that advocates offer to call housing referrals with the survivor to minimize the survivor having to retell traumatic details of their trafficking experiences. In addition, your established connections will help speed up the screening process. Instead of simply giving phone numbers to the survivor to navigate the system on their own, warm referrals helps reduce barriers for survivors and allows advocates to help bridge the gap between the two housing programs.