



Crisis Response and Systems Change: Community Profile

Program Name: HomeStart

Agency Name: HomeStart

City, State: Boston, MA

HomeStart is an example of a nonprofit organization formed for the purpose of preventing housing loss and moving individuals and families experiencing or at-risk of homelessness into affordable housing and providing the stabilization supports necessary to help them retain their housing. It is an alternative to shelter-based programs that may struggle to retain a focus on rapid housing placement and stabilization due to competing demands on staff time.

Problem or Challenge

HomeStart began in 1994 when advocates and shelter providers in Boston identified a critical gap in services. Case managers in homeless service agencies were becoming increasingly specialized in order to deal with the multiple challenges presented by a growing number of clients. When programs were taxed with addressing high demands and high levels of complex needs, it was often housing search services that were cut. As a result, Boston's homeless shelters gave single adults a place to stay, but few services to help them find and stay in housing. The result was a gridlocked system with an overflow of people.

Advocates recognized that expanding housing search and stabilization services within existing homeless service centers would have limited effectiveness because staff would inevitably be pulled from these services to meet the urgent, daily demands of clients. An initiative with funding streams and dedicated staff that were separate from the provision of shelter would essentially create a "firewall" that would enable it to focus solely on housing placement and stabilization.

Solution

With a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance launched HomeStart as a pilot project with three staff to test a simple premise: with the right housing assistance and expertise men and women experiencing homelessness could make it in housing. By 1999, HomeStart was an independent agency. The organization now has over 65 staff and a budget of over \$7.1 million. While initially created to serve single adults, it now serves both individuals and families.

Implementation Steps and Tips

HomeStart's focus is to prevent homelessness and to move individuals and families at-risk of or experiencing homelessness into affordable housing and provide the stabilization support services necessary to help them retain their housing. To accomplish this, they take a multi-pronged approach:

1. **Establish a network of partner agencies.** HomeStart receives referrals from more than 50 different agencies in the greater Boston area. Its housing search staff has developed close working relationships with staff at area shelters, transitional housing programs, and other homeless service agencies.
2. **Streamline the referral and assessment process, break down personal barriers to housing, and locate housing.** Close to 70% of households receiving HomeStart housing search services are individuals and 30% are families. For HomeStart prevention services, 70% are families and 30% are individuals.

HomeStart's Housing Search Advocates meet with households while they are in shelter to assess their individual housing barriers, identify housing options, and assist the household to complete housing applications, negotiate with landlords, gain priority for competitive housing resources, secure upfront rental funds and furniture, and move into housing. The Advocates have regular hours at the shelters at times convenient for shelter residents.

To facilitate the movement to housing, HomeStart staff members rely on an array of resources they have developed or secured. This "toolbox" includes the following:

- *Rental Assistance Funds* provide financial assistance for move-in costs, security deposits and first month's rent, at an average cost per recipient of \$603. The funds come from a variety of sources, including HUD's Continuum of Care, the City of Boston, Community Development Block Grants, and private donations.
 - *New Frontiers Program* helps men and women with jobs move from shelter to private market housing. Their first year in housing includes a declining one-year rent subsidy, budgeting help, and financial workshops on topics such as choosing a bank, repairing credit, and buying a house.
 - HomeStart administers 450 government-funded *Rent Subsidies*, including subsidies targeted to people experiencing homelessness with disabilities through the HUD Shelter Plus Care and Supportive Housing Programs and Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers through the Massachusetts Housing Options Program (HOP).
3. **Identify housing resources and build connections to major housing providers.** HomeStart works with a network of housing providers to secure private apartments or government subsidized housing units for their clients. It has identified and cultivated relationships with a number of private landlords and property management companies, and formed mutually beneficial relationships with area housing authorities. Landlords now call HomeStart when they have openings.

HomeStart also manages the *Vacancy Clearinghouse* for the city of Boston. In the 1990s, the City of Boston established the Homeless Housing Set-Aside Program, which attaches requirements to

all monies loaned by the City of Boston to new housing developments or rehabilitation projects. Most developments must set-aside 15 percent of units for residents of Boston experiencing homelessness. Through the Vacancy Clearinghouse, HomeStart matches people who are homeless with these housing units, conducts outreach to property management companies, streamlines the tenant application process, verifies that each unit is filled with a homeless family or individual, and provides tenants with follow-up support services.

4. **Provide housing stabilization supports.** When an individual or family is housed, they are transferred to a Stabilization Advocate. Stabilization services are focused on providing support to help the family or individual sustain their housing and begin to re-integrate into the community. Services may include help accessing programs in the community such as mental health services, substance abuse recovery supports, and job search and vocational services. Stabilization Advocates also assist clients with budgeting, communicating with landlords, and obtaining disability benefits and food stamps. They also provide representative payee services for disability benefits and bills if needed. Staff members meet with clients in their homes as well as in the community.

Stabilization services are usually voluntary, although participation in services may be required as a condition of some rental subsidies. There is no time limit on service supports, and the frequency of contact depends upon the needs of the individual or family. Each Advocate works with a mix of both low and high-need households. Services are generally more intensive in the first weeks after housing placement.

Outcomes/Results

Since its inception in 1994, HomeStart has tracked data on every person the organization has served and the housing outcomes achieved. This tracking information is incorporated into the Homeless Management Information System and is used to monitor recidivism back to shelter. Among HomeStart's accomplishments are the following:

- More than 4,500 people experiencing homelessness moved into housing since 1994; 448 in 2010 alone.
- 98 percent of those receiving HomeStart's follow-up housing retention services remain housed when tracked one year later.
- 92 percent of households assisted by HomeStart over a five-year period remain housed.

Contact Info for Follow-up:

HomeStart: www.homestart.org