

Results from Consumer Input Forum, July 2016

A focus group was held on July 11, 2016 at the offices of the Coalition for the Homeless, Houston/Harris County, facilitated by Dr. Catherine Troisi, University of Texas School of Public Health. Fourteen clients who had sought housing assistance through The Way Home took part in the discussion. All had been placed in housing. Participants were asked about their experiences during the coordinated assessment, enrollment, and apartment search processes and suggestions for improvement.

Participants were assessed for housing assistance at the following organizations:

- BEACON
- Star of Hope Women and Families
- Salvation Army
- Memorial Assistance Ministries (MAM)
- Jail Diversion Program
- Northwest Assistance Ministries (NAM)
- SEARCH
- Houston Area Community Services (HACS)
- Harris County Housing Resource Center

Clients had heard about the assessment process and where to access it through a number of means including word of mouth, Lord of Streets, Jail diversion program, Red Cross, churches, street guide, Help Card, Memorial Assistance Ministries, Humble area Assistance Ministries, and Catholic Charities.

Experiences:

Many of the participants had problems accessing the organization to which they went for assessment and thought that assessment hubs located in shelters would make the process easier by not requiring bus passes. The wait to be contacted for housing assistance (RRH case manager) was longer than expected for most, between 2 and 6 months. Some were contacted only two weeks later and some had been told it would take 1-2 months so they were prepared for the wait. During this wait time, most did not receive updates or, if they did, they were few and far between. If they were staying at Star of Hope shelter, they received more information

but this was not true at Salvation Army Family Residence. Part of the frustration was that clients were told to wait until they were contacted, otherwise they couldn't get any help. Besides the concern this caused, it also made it difficult for clients to plan their lives.

When asked if they were treated with dignity and respect during their assessment, most felt they were treated with respect but didn't like the lack of information. MAM and NAM were specifically mentioned as places where personnel were respectful and helpful. Some participants mentioned they were referred to Income Now which they found very helpful.

Suggestions to improve the assessment experience were to get more frequent updates and a contact person they could reach for updates. Knowing ahead of time how long the process might take would help assuage some of the anxiety.

HOUSING ASSISTANCE

Participants felt that once they met with a case worker, the process went very smoothly. One person mentioned that her case worker was fast and efficient. Another liked the support with supplies for her children. The Harris County Housing Resource Center was felt to be a good source of information. Two clients had gone to the leasing event. One participant found an apartment in Champion's apartments on Walters which was an excellent choice as they have onsite job opportunities. The best result for all was getting a roof over their head.

Working with landlords who may not know how the process works and no availability of assistance for furniture were mentioned as parts of the experience that did not work as well. In addition, landlord lists were not always accurate and a lot of walking and bus rides were involved in finding an apartment. Housing inspections took a very long time and participants were frustrated as they were all ready to move in but had to wait quite a while for the final inspection.

Participants had many suggestions for how to improve the process. More information in the form of leasing packets and more information for landlords was mentioned. The most common suggestion was improved communication during the whole process. More housing inspectors to speed up the process were suggested. More help in finding jobs was mentioned. The difficulty of finding housing and a job if you had a felony, even decades ago, was repeatedly stated by one participant. All participants felt that they needed longer than six months assistance with rent subsidies.

SUMMARY

Fourteen clients who had been placed in housing through The Way Home took part in a focus group in which they discussed their experiences with the process and made recommendations for improvements. All were grateful for having been placed in housing but experienced challenges and barriers, some of which could be addressed to make the process smoother. The major issue was the lack of communication after the assessment but before being assigned a case manager. Participants shared that they often did not receive updates on how their case was progressing and would like more information about the process in general. Some felt the wait (2-6 months) was too long. They thought the list of potential landlords should be reviewed and corrected more frequently. All felt that the six months of assistance (many were not aware that, depending on the situation, this time period could be extended) was not long enough for them to get back on their feet.

Some of the difficulties mentioned are not within the purview of the Continuum of Care to fix. Clients with felonies have a difficult time finding housing and jobs. Houston covers a large geographic area and much time is spent getting from place to place. The hiring of more housing inspectors could speed up that part of the process.