

CoC Onboarding:

Best Practices

*A guide to best practices in homeless services for
the All Neighbors Coalition .*

Housing Forward

lead agency for

The All Neighbors Coalition



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Using This Guide

Purpose

This guide was compiled by Housing Forward as part of the new agency and program onboarding for the All Neighbors Coalition (our Continuum of Care or CoC).

CoC leaders and decision makers agree that all CoC partnering agencies should strive to follow these best practices and use them to shape organizational policies and procedures. These practices are nuanced and take effort to implement, and they often require additional training, organizational policy change, and ongoing support to be fully applied.

This guide provides only a basic understanding of these practices and resources to explore further training options. Complete training on each topic is strongly encouraged.

Features

For each best practice, the guide will contain the following:

- A brief **summary** of the practice
- A list of **key principles** that highlight the values and standards of the practice
- A list of **core program components** that offer practical guidance or actions programs can take to be more aligned with the best practice
- A list of **resources** and material to be reviewed by agencies and staff

Using This Guide

Review and Evaluation

As part of the onboarding process, each staff person completing the onboarding program must have a basic understanding of these practices. Staff will be required to complete a short evaluation in LearnHC demonstrating competency and understanding of the summary, key principles, and core program components of each best practice in this guide.

A practice evaluation has been provided at the end of this guide so that staff can assess their own learning and build confidence in their knowledge of these topics.



1

PRACTICE ONE:

Housing First

About Housing First

Summary

Housing First is an approach to quickly and successfully connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing without preconditions and barriers to entry, such as sobriety, treatment or service participation requirements.

Supportive services are offered to maximize housing stability and prevent returns to homelessness as opposed to addressing predetermined treatment goals prior to permanent housing entry.

Key Principles

- Housing should be safe and affordable.
- ALL people can achieve housing stability in permanent housing.
- Everyone is “housing ready”.
- Everyone has a right to determination, dignity, and respect.
- Stable housing improves quality of life, health, and employment.

Core Program Components

Programs that use a Housing First approach will structure policies, services, and practices incorporating the following components:

- **Low barrier** admission policies
- **Rapid** and streamlined entry to housing
- **Voluntary** supportive services
- **Full rights**, responsibilities, and legal protection of tenants
- **Prevention** of lease violations and evictions through policy and practices

Resources

[Setting the Record Straight on Housing First](#)

A video overview of the values and benefits of a Housing First approach.

Watch time: 2 mins

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness

[The Evidence on Housing First](#)

A data visualization and resource list literature reviews and domestic and international studies in support of Housing First.

Read time: 5 min (additional time for other resources linked)

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness



2

PRACTICE TWO:

Progressive Engagement

About Progressive Engagement

Summary

“Progressive Engagement is a person centered to approach to ending someone’s homelessness.”³ Instead of a one-size-fits-all action plan, needs are assessed and addressed on an individual basis. Immediate needs are met with small or light touch assistance, while larger needs are addressed over time and with varying levels of support.

Key Principles

- Each person experiencing homelessness is unique and needs a solution tailored to their experience.
- Everyone has strengths that can be levered in their situation.
- Levels of support should vary based on a person’s level of need.

Core Program Components

Programs that use Progressive Engagement will create services, practices, and policies incorporating the following components:

- **Problem-solving conversations** throughout a person’s housing journey
- **Assessment** of a household’s strengths and circumstances
- **Levels of service** that can be tailored to individual needs

Resources

[What is Progressive Engagement?](#)

An article with a look at the progressive engagement approach with examples, practical tips, and resources.

Read time: 5 min (additional time for other resources linked)

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness

[Infographic Overview](#)

A brief overview of the definition and key features of progressive engagement.

Read time: 2 mins

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness



3

PRACTICE THREE:

*Trauma Informed
Care*

About Trauma Informed Care

Summary

A trauma informed approach recognizes that traumatic experiences have ongoing impact on an individual and takes measures to support healing and prevent future re-traumatization. To be most effective, trauma informed practices need to be implemented at all levels of an organization, for staff and the people they serve.

Key Principles⁶

- Physical and emotional safety is crucial for everyone involved.
- Trust is built through transparency in decision-making.
- Peers with lived and shared experience can support each other.
- Healing happens in relationships and is hampered by power dynamics.
- Everyone has strengths and should be empowered to use them.
- Historical, structural, and cultural trauma are real and must be addressed.

Core Program Components⁷

Programs that use Trauma Informed Care will create services, practices, and policies incorporating the following components:

- **Safe physical environment** for everyone – staff and clients
- **Communication** and transparency with clients
- **Involvement** of clients in service delivery and decision-making
- **Regular training** on trauma informed care
- **Reduction** of secondary traumatic stressors

Resources

[TREES: An Introduction to Trauma Informed Care](#)

A video training introduction to trauma informed care, common signs of trauma, and basic actions for being trauma informed.

Watch time: 12 min

Source: Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc.

[What is Trauma Informed Care?](#)

A brief overview of trauma informed care across all sectors, including patient and client care.

Read time: 5 min

Source: Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc.

[5 Steps Toward Trauma-Informed Care: What Can You Do Tomorrow?](#)

A video with practical steps you can take to be more trauma informed in your daily work.

Watch time: 3 mins

Source: AllCEUs Counseling Education



4

PRACTICE FOUR:

***Mental Health First
Aid***

About Mental Health First Aid

Summary

Just like CPR and first aid training for physical medical crises, Mental Health First Aid is training that prepares individuals to respond to a mental health or substance use-related event. Action plans for crisis and non-crisis situations help reduce fear and hesitation in the face of challenging mental health and substance use-related situations. People receive the help and support they need because those trained in Mental Health First Aid know how to respond in the moment and connect those in crisis to additional support or assistance.

Key Principles

- More people should know how to respond to a mental health or substance use related event.
- When people are equipped with the proper training and tools, Mental Health First Aid can save lives, significantly reduce harm, and improve the mental health of everyone involved.
- De-escalation is the safest and most effective method of engagement.

Core Program Components

Programs implementing Mental Health First Aid will use an action plan based on the following generalized actions:

- **Assess** for risk of suicide or harm
- **Listen** nonjudgmentally
- **Give reassurance** and information
- **Encourage** appropriate **professional** help
- **Encourage self-help** and other support strategies

Resources

[About Mental Health First Aid](#)

A link to the Mental Health First Aid website where you can explore educational resources and training options to become MHFA certified.

Read time: 5 min

Source: Mental Health First Aid, from National Council for Mental Wellbeing

[Five Tips for Starting a Conversation about Mental Health](#)

An article and infographic with practical tips for starting mental health conversations with a client.

Read time: 4 min

Source: Mental Health First Aid, from National Council for Mental Wellbeing

[Five Tips for Non-Judgmental Listening](#)

An article and infographic with practical tips for non-judgmental listening

Read time: 4 min

Source: Mental Health First Aid, from National Council for Mental Wellbeing

[What Not To Do: Responding to a Mental Health Challenge](#)

An article with important reminders of what not to do when helping someone through a mental health challenge.

Read time: 5 min

Source: Mental Health First Aid, from National Council for Mental Wellbeing



5

PRACTICE FIVE:

Motivational Interviewing

About Motivational Interviewing

Summary

Motivational Interviewing is a method of communication in which the listener creates an empathic connection with the speaker, encouraging them to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Listeners offer non-judgment and reflection while avoiding shaming, ridiculing, punishing, or giving advice. In this approach, speakers feel heard and valued, while listeners offer support and collaboration.

Key Principles

- Empathetic presence and skillful listening help to build trust.
- Empathy and nonjudgment should be communicated explicitly through verbal affirmation and implicitly through body language.
- A person's autonomy is honored when they know the decision is theirs to make.
- Open-ended and scaling questions allow people to come to their own conclusions and increase confidence in themselves.

Core Program Components

Programs practicing Motivational Interviewing (MI) will services, practices, and policies with the following components:

- **Confidential and safe** spaces for meaningful conversation
- **Workshops** and ongoing opportunities for staff to practice MI conversations
- **Opportunities** for reflection, self-help, and support networking

Resources

What Exactly Is Motivational Interviewing?

An article with an overview of motivational interviewing, its purpose and impact, and helpful resources to start learning more.

Read time: 5 min

Source: Care Innovations

Motivational Interviewing 101

A slide show handout with basic information about the history and approach to Motivational Interviewing.

Read time: 5 min

Source: Care Innovations

Core Motivational Interviewing Skills

A job aid with practical skills and suggestions for types of responses and questions.

Read time: 10 min

Source: Care Innovations

Examples of Motivational Interviewing Questions & Responses

A video with a simulated scenario that gives examples of motivational interviewing.

Watch time: 3 min

Source: Care Innovations and EM Consulting



6

PRACTICE SIX:

Crisis Intervention and De-Escalation

About Crisis Intervention and De-Escalation

Summary

Crisis Intervention and De-Escalation preparedness allows staff to identify and respond to everyday crisis situations. Any person experiencing trauma or crisis may react with disruptive or otherwise harmful behavior. In these scenarios, having a crisis response plan and prepared staff can mitigate harm and support the individuals in crisis with evidence-based strategies and tactics. Crisis intervention involves maintaining a calm awareness of one's actions, gauging the severity of a situation, and making decisions about the level of intervention needed.

Key Principles

- De-escalation is the safest way to avoid physical confrontation or harm.
- Nonviolent and person-centered strategies help keep everyone involved safe.
- Any person (clients, staff, friends, etc.) can experience crisis, and any person can be trained to respond to crisis safely and appropriately.
- A person in crisis needs empathy, empowerment, and respect.

Core Program Components

Programs implementing a crisis intervention policy and using de-escalating practices will involve:

- **A crisis response plan** that are simple, clear, and easy to follow
- **Ongoing training** and support for staff implementing the crisis plan
- **Policies and procedures** that promote person-centered strategies

Resources

What is Crisis Intervention

An article defining crisis intervention, examples of potential causes crisis, and models for intervention.

Read time: 5 min

Source: Vertava Health

Introduction to Crisis Intervention

An introduction to the concepts, approaches, and skills involved in crisis intervention.

Trigger Warning: This video briefly mentions suicide and other examples traumatic crises that clients may experience.

If you are considering suicide or are concerned for a friend, loved one, coworker, or client, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 (English) or 1-888-628-9454 (Spanish), or receive help online at suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

Watch time: 18 min

Source: Kenneth Kinter, MA, LPC, Rutgers University

CPI's Top 10 De-Escalation Tips

A PDF reference guide with easily identified actions a person can take to help de-escalate a situation, with descriptions and examples for each action.

Read time: 5 min

Source: Crisis Prevention Institute

Resources cont.

[Crisis Response Planning Checklist](#)

A job aid with strategies and techniques for planning a basic crisis response. This aid can help initiate a crisis response plan, but agencies should consider having multiple staff trained in crisis response and de-escalation through a certified program.

Read time: 4 min

Source: Crisis Prevention Institute



PRACTICE SEVEN:

Harm Reduction

About Harm Reduction

Summary

“Harm reduction is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use.” In the same way that we reduce harm and risk by wearing a seat belt or take preventative measures by brushing our teeth, harm reduction works to minimize the harmful effects of licit and illicit substance use.

Key Principles

- Strategies and policies should work to minimize harm rather than ignore the problem or condemn people who use drugs (PWUD).
- Services and resources for PWUD should be non-coercive and non-judgmental.
- Successful interventions focus on quality of individual and community life and well-being – not necessarily cessation of all drug use.
- PWUD should have a voice in the creation of programs and policies designed to serve them.
- Drug use is a complex phenomenon encompassing a continuum of behaviors.

Core Program Components

Programs implementing a crisis intervention policy and using de-escalating practices will involve:

- **Accessible restrooms** for participants and staff
- **Person-first messaging**, policies, and direct service provision
- **Services and resources** that do not require abstinence

Resources

Principles of Harm Reduction

A two-page PDF highlighting key principles, interventions, and factors that promote or reduce risk.

Read time: 5 min

Source: National Harm Reduction Coalition

Harm Reduction Truth

An interview-style video with the harm reduction community, sharing their experience and the impact of harm reduction.

Watch time: 5 min

Source: National Harm Reduction Coalition

Homelessness and Harm Reduction

A face sheet with detailed information and action steps for leaders and direct service providers at homeless service providers.

Read time: 10 min

Source: National Harm Reduction Coalition

Best Practices:

Learning Review

Learning Review Questions

1. Which of the following is NOT a core component of a Housing First approach?
 - A. Low barrier admission policies
 - B. Rapid and streamlined entry to housing
 - C. Mandatory supportive services
 - D. Full rights, responsibilities, and legal protection of tenants

2. TRUE or FALSE: Progressive Engagement applies the same approach to each client so that services are standardized, fair, and applied equally to all.

3. TRUE or FALSE: To be most effective, trauma-informed practices should be implemented at all levels of an organization.

4. Which of the following best describes the purpose of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training?
 - A. MHFA training teaches people to respond to a mental health or substance use-related event in the same way CPR/First Aid training teaches responses to physical health crises.
 - B. MHFA training is intended only for mental health professionals or first responders as an addition to their on-the-job training.
 - C. MHFA training prepares people to respond to mental health and substance use-related crises so that professional help can be avoided.
 - D. MHFA training is a more modern version of CPR/First Aid and is intended to replace traditional CPR/First Aid training.

Learning Review Questions

5. Select ALL of the principles below that align with Motivational Interviewing best practices. There may be more than one correct answer.
 - A. Empathic presence and skilling listening help to build trust.
 - B. People often know the right thing to do, they just need to hear someone else say it.
 - C. Open-ended questions help increase people's confidence in themselves.
 - D. Nonjudgment should be conveyed with both verbal and nonverbal communication.

6. When someone is in crisis and reacts with disruptive or harmful behavior, they need
 - A. physical restraint but a calm, sympathetic emotional response.
 - B. law enforcement or other professional support.
 - C. to be isolated so that they cannot harm anyone else.
 - D. an empathetic person-centered response helping them feel respected and empowered.

7. TRUE or FALSE: Harm Reduction is an abstinence-based strategy to reducing the impact of drug and substance use.

Check your answers to this review on the following page!

Learning Review Answers

1. C. Supportive services should be voluntary, and housing should not be dependent on a client agreeing to services.
2. False. Progressive Engagement tailors services and approaches to problem-solving to an individual client's strengths and needs.
3. True. Both clients and staff need to feel safe and empowered, and the organization should work to reduce secondary traumatic stressors for *everyone* involved.
4. A. MHFA training teaches people to respond to a mental health or substance use-related event in the same way CPR/First Aid training teaches responses to physical health crises.
5. A, C, D. A key principle of Motivational Interviewing involves avoiding giving advice and allowing people to come to their conclusions and solutions.
6. D. Empathy, respect, and empowerment are key components of a person-centered strategy in response to crisis.
7. False. Harm Reduction approaches drug use as a complex issue, with abstinence as just one of many options for reducing risk and the harm caused by using illicit substances.

EARN YOUR
Learning Certificate

When you have reviewed the material in this guide and are confident in your basic knowledge of these best practices, log in to LearnHC to complete the Best Practices Assessment course and receive your learning certificate.

Log In to LearnHC



Citations

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