

Homeless System Response: Emergency Housing Vouchers: Coordinated Entry and Community Success

Purpose

The Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program (see [Notice PIH 2021-15](#) for details) is a new housing voucher program that is funded by the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and provides 70,000 housing vouchers through Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) to assist people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness; are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or human trafficking; or were recently homeless. Implementation of these vouchers must be done in partnership with the Continuum of Care (CoC) and Victim Services Providers (VSPs), and PHAs must accept referrals for EHVs directly from the coordinated entry (CE) system.

The [Coordinated Entry and EHVs webinar](#) provided information about how to develop or update CE policies and processes (including access, assessment, prioritization, and referral) to advance racial equity and make successful direct referrals of households from eligible and prioritized populations to PHAs. The webinar also highlighted opportunities to increase CE capacity to handle EHV referrals and strategies for expediting referrals. This document provides a summary of key themes and takeaways from the webinar.

Equity and Inclusion in Coordinated Entry

- EHVs present a historic opportunity to address racial and other inequities by connecting some of your most vulnerable populations to permanent housing. PHAs, CoCs, and other key stakeholders should work together to determine [how to strategically target EHVs](#) and services to best address unmet needs in the community.
- CE processes and tools can perpetuate and compound racial inequities, or they can be used intentionally to advance racial equity. The tools often conceived to be best practices in assessing housing needs [do not ensure racial equity across our most disenfranchised communities](#). For strategies to advance equity and dismantle embedded racism in CE assessment and prioritization processes, see [Advancing Racial Equity through Assessments and Prioritization](#).
- The processes for making any changes related to CE (and any other parts of the homeless assistance system) should be inclusive, meaning [the people who are most impacted by the decision, policy, program, etc. are involved in the planning](#). People who will have unique expertise to guide your planning and decision-making include Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), who are disproportionately impacted by homelessness and COVID-19, and people with lived experience (PWLE) who have experienced or are currently experiencing homelessness.

Planning

- The EHV program will require PHAs, CoCs, VSPs, and other community providers to work together in ways they have not before. For successful planning:
 - Incorporate the voices of people with lived experience, as well as the voices of people representing underserved populations to ensure the planning process incorporates these perspectives.
 - Build on collaborative work done in the past and use lessons learned to improve your approach.
 - Leverage each partner's strengths and expertise to build a coordination structure.
 - Use the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to clearly document roles, responsibilities, timelines, goals, and expectations around the CE process.

Access

- To ensure eligible and prioritized populations access the EHV program:
 - Identify community partners who can supplement access points. Examples include [school system homeless liaisons](#), [court systems](#) and [legal aid providers](#), [healthcare networks](#) and [providers](#), [community action agencies](#), faith-based organizations, city and county human services, libraries, carceral systems, and other agencies who serve your prioritized populations and potential applicants for all of your resources.

- Identify roles and responsibilities for implementation and evaluation of outreach and access.
- Ensure participants can remain in contact through a case manager, CE navigator, call center, drop-in center, technology, or other source as they move through the CE process.
- Ensure prioritized participants are progressively engaged with services.
- Expand outreach and engagement for those who reside in congregate and non-congregate shelter or [unsheltered situations](#) and are at imminent risk of homelessness, especially in communities without [coordinated street outreach](#), by engaging new/different partners.
- The CE processes must address how all people will have [safe, confidential access, including survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking](#).

Prioritization

- For recommendations on how best to prioritize EHV to a range of subpopulations, see [Strategy for Targeting EHV and Related Resources](#).

Assessment

- Many CoCs have recently updated their assessment processes [in response to COVID-19](#) and [to advance racial equity](#). CoCs may need to further revise their assessment process to accommodate EHV. To assess eligible and prioritized households:
 - Assessors should work directly with outreach teams, housing providers, PWLE, and other relevant groups on how to streamline connections to EHV. This may include conducting assessments where people are (whether in shelters or unsheltered).
 - Focus on timely and relevant information such as current housing options, household income and expenses, or a need to move to new housing.
 - Consider and understand what other resources may best serve a household before referral to an EHV. Coronavirus Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG-CV), Coronavirus Community Development Block Grants (CDBG-CV), Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) can be helpful resources for at-risk populations.
 - Assessments must be trauma-informed to increase the likelihood of disclosure and accuracy of any assessment. For more information, see [Transforming Our Coordinated Entry Systems to Increase Survivors' Access to Housing Options](#) and [Determining Housing Needs for Domestic Violence & Sexual Violence \(DV/SV\) Survivors](#). For people who recently experienced homelessness, a fair and transparent assessment process should let eligible households opt in and remove the possibility of staff bias influencing access to resources.
- Assessments for EHV should follow intentional design and action steps:
 - [Develop and provide appropriate training and support](#) to leadership and staff administering the assessment.
 - Develop standard equitable questions that capture the [unique vulnerabilities](#) of people with lived experience and BIPOC.
 - Conduct a [Racial Equity Impact Assessment](#).
 - Listen to [people experiencing homelessness](#) and include their experiences in the assessment.
 - Ensure [representative staffing and culturally responsive organizations](#).
 - Examine assessment outcomes between different races and ethnicities.

Referral

- CoCs should update their referral system to make it as simple, fast, and easy as possible to make quality referrals. Potential steps to take could include:
 - Explore what technology your PHA and CoCs can use for referrals. If there is a current CE referral system, identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities to innovate.
 - Identify and incorporate flexibility in areas where documentation and eligibility requirements can be reduced.

- Balance the urgency of implementing EHV with a commitment to ongoing, equity-based analysis of CE processes and ensure you have a diverse range of stakeholders and people with lived experience engaged in the review.
- Set a schedule and transparent deadlines for reviewing assessments and referrals to ensure accountability.
- Create or repurpose implementation or case conferencing meetings to review by-name lists or applicant pools and problem-solve bottlenecks.
- Track CE flow at key data points, including access point engagements, CE assessment completion, status of required documentation, referral status, and housing placement.
- To the greatest extent possible, ensure a household's success by planning and coordinating closely to provide a warm transfer, where the handoff occurs with the participant so they can hear what is said and engage in the process. Key steps for increasing coordination include:
 - Assign responsibility at different stages of the referral and lease-up process and introduce the client directly to whomever they will be working with on the next steps.
 - Ensure participants know when they should expect to hear from someone, where they can go for questions, what to do if something changes, etc.
 - Identify partners, technology, and locations households can use to make contact or to be contacted.
 - The collection of required documentation for eligibility is the responsibility of the process, not the participant. Plan for how documents will be collected/recorded and by whom, and identify how documents will be shared between participants and partners.
 - Document and communicate participant preferences and required accommodations.
 - Work with PWLE to create easy-to-understand materials explaining EHV.
 - Ensure front-line staff are prepared to help prioritized households understand the EHV program and what other housing options they may have so they can make an informed choice.
- Finally, as you do for other CE referrals, consider and document a plan for what will happen in various situations such as if:
 - A household prioritized for referral cannot be located.
 - A participant refuses the offer of a referral.
 - The receiving agency denies assistance to a participant.
 - A participant and the provider supporting them with housing navigation services are unable to identify a unit.

Implementation and Improvement

- The EHV partnership's successes or failures will affect participants directly; be prepared for opportunities to learn and grow together. Ensure that all MOU parties know the key points of contact for each partner both at leadership levels as well as for day-to-day operational challenges.
- After conducting the intensive work to plan for and implement CE changes, merge and simplify your leadership team(s) and staffing. Ensure there is still an inclusive core team responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting. Utilize an existing continuous quality improvement process, or create one, to assess data continuously, identify challenges early, and problem-solve them together. See Chapter 4 of the [Coordinated Entry Management and Data Guide](#) for more information on evaluating CE.
- [Collecting complete and accurate data](#) is a core element in ending homelessness. Implement a [data-sharing agreement](#) that allows PHAs, CoCs, and other partners to collaborate more effectively. A data-informed approach, using shared data, helps each party equitably and effectively serve households experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Collect and analyze data on referrals, program outputs, and outcomes and compare to goals set in the MOU. Finally, [use the data you have to advance equity](#). Disaggregate data by race and ethnicity to explore any inequities.