

Homelessness Prevention and Shelter Diversion Toolkit for Service Providers in Michigan

The Quest for Service Excellence in Preventing and Rapidly Resolving Literal Homelessness

Toolkit Prepared for
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

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CHAPTER ONE – AN OVERVIEW OF PREVENTION AND DIVERSION

Prevention & Diversion - A Practice & A Mindset

Since the early 2000’s, communities across the United States have focused on Long Term Plans to End Homelessness, Re-Housing and Support options that target people experiencing chronic homelessness and ensuring that emergency responses to literal homelessness are sufficient to meet needs. The result of this focus has created a systemic approach and investment strategy that resembles the following reality:

Figure 1: Homelessness Response Priorities¹ 2000-2022



The last two decades have demonstrated that when shelters operate as housing focused connections to permanent solutions and re-housing programs are delivered with a high degree of fidelity to practice, communities can indeed demonstrate reductions to chronic homelessness numbers. Current responses to homelessness remain primarily focused on Emergency Responses with a second priority focusing on Re-Housing and Supports. However, when we only respond to the existing problem of homelessness and do not also focus on improving efforts to prevent literal homelessness and inflows into the homelessness response system, we get trapped in a never-ending cycle. If systems of care remain trapped in this cycle of reaction and response, our quest to prevent and end the trauma of homelessness for our residents remains elusive.

Prevention of literal homelessness demands that policies, practices and mindsets that revolve around the capacity of providers and investments to resolve the

¹ Adapted from Gaetz, S., Scott, F. & Gulliver, T. (2013). *Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness*. Toronto: Homeless Hub Press, page 20.

housing crises experienced by people in our communities through person-centered, strengths-based and housing-focused resolution activities. Such a focus on Prevention of Literal Homelessness will begin to reduce the inflow into the homelessness emergency response system and change the landscape of responses by service providers.

A more proactive response to homelessness steps back from the pressure placed on emergency and crisis responses and increases its emphasis on evidence informed prevention and re-housing supports to address the crisis in a more humane way. The below chart identifies what such a refocus could look like throughout Michigan:

Figure 2: A More Proactive & Person-Centered Approach to Homelessness²



Does Prevention and Diversion Matter?

Reducing and ending homelessness requires focusing on both inflow and outflow from the system of care. Diversion and prevention services help address inflow into the system of care. In examining the strategies that have the greatest impact on reducing inflow, diversion which targets people who have already lost their housing and are seeking shelter admission or are preparing to stay outside obviously has the greatest, immediate impact on the homelessness response system. Prevention activities that target highly vulnerable households that are about to lose their current housing option, either through legal eviction process or loss of formal housing connections have a significant impact on reducing inflow³. Traditional eviction prevention programs that provide financial assistance to households that meet the basic eligibility for service tend to have

² Adapted from Gaetz, S., Scott, F. & Gulliver, T. (2013). *Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness*. Toronto: Homeless Hub Press, page 20.

³ National Alliance to End Homelessness (October 19, 2020). *Effective Diversion: A Key Strategy for Ending Homelessness*. Source: <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/effective-diversion-a-key-strategy-for-ending-homelessness-webinar/>

the lowest impact on inflows into homelessness. The below chart summarizes the impact of these three interventions on the homelessness response system⁴.

High	Medium	Low
<i>DIVERSION</i>	<i>HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION</i>	
	<i>Housing Loss Prevention</i>	<i>Eviction Prevention</i>
Targeted to: People who have lost housing and are about to enter shelter or sleep outside	Targeted to: Extremely vulnerable people about to lose their housing.	Targeted to: Low-income people who have received an eviction notice.

Whenever it is safe and appropriate to do so, services need to help individuals, couples and families not enter the homelessness response system. This often means an investment of time and resources at the “front door” of the system of care to detect and respond to the needs of households that have just become homeless or are at the precipice of homelessness to find alternatives to entering the homelessness response system.

Within homelessness and re-housing sector, the term “prevention” does not have a commonly accepted definition. Such a lack of clarity often results in many communities struggling with the delineation of poverty alleviation activities and homelessness prevention activities. Any revision to practices and approaches must consider the available research and the recognition that, thankfully, most households that live in economic poverty, have challenging rental histories and regularly rely on such important community resources as food services and utility assistance will never experience homelessness. Such a reality encourages communities to redefine what the prevention of literal homelessness looks like if the goal of investments is to reduce the inflow of households into the homelessness response system.

This toolkit has been developed to assist agencies and communities to enhance their efforts to reduce homelessness locally by ensuring that homelessness prevention and shelter diversion activities align with evidence informed and person-centered approaches. Where possible, this toolkit also provides samples of tools and resources identified and/or endorsed by service providers across the

⁴ Adapted from Diversion Workflow Infographic (2020). Written by Lindsay Hueston for National Alliance to End Homelessness

State of Michigan. We trust that this resource will assist communities in enhancing their quest to reduce the experience of literal homelessness for local households.

An Opportunity to Prevent Homelessness

Prediction is impossible in homelessness. Some people think they can tell which people will become homeless and which will not, or which people will return to homelessness and which ones will not. Most prevention programs think they demonstrate cause and effect where they do not; that the provision of rental or utility assistance, for example, has a direct relationship with that household not entering homelessness. Furthermore, many prevention programs have elements of risk assessment that go into them. While arbitrary at best, these assessments generally reach the conclusion that the lower the risk (for example, having an income, not having experienced homelessness in the past) the better the investment. Research does not support these assumptions and beliefs. The use of valid and reliable strategies and approaches that are consistently delivered across the community – regardless of the agency – are essential.

As mentioned, proving cause and effect in homelessness prevention can be difficult, and many research studies⁵ of prevention resource allocation demonstrate that most people that do not receive prevention assistance do not become homeless; however, those that had similar characteristics as those who are already chronically homeless, were a good prevention resource investment. Moreover, some communities have found that it is best to use most prevention resources for individuals, couples and families that have previously experienced homelessness rather than most of the investment going towards those people that have never been homeless before.

Keeping people in housing is better than the financial and emotional toll of people experiencing homelessness. Investment in prevention and diversion (P/D)

⁵ Important research on homelessness prevention includes the following:

Shinn, M., & Baumohl, J. (1999). Rethinking the prevention of homelessness. Paper presented at the 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research, Arlington, Virginia.

Shinn, M., Baumohl, J., & Hopper, K. (2001). The prevention of homelessness revisited. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 1, 95-127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1530-2415.00006>.

Shinn, M. B., Greer, A. L., Bainbridge, J., Kwon, J., & Zuiderveen, S. (2013). Efficient targeting of homelessness prevention services for families. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(S2), S324-S330. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301468>.

Pankratz, C., & Nelson, G. (2017). An evaluation of rent assistance for individuals experiencing persistent homelessness in Waterloo Region. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21911>.

activities can and should be part of a local strategy to address housing crisis and homelessness. To promote evidence and trauma informed prevention and diversion practices, the next sections examine service definition and the service culture that must be fostered to successfully maximize the reduction of inflows into literal homelessness

Key Definitions for Prevention & Diversion

Three concepts - diversion, prevention and rapid resolution - are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are really three different interventions.

Prevention activities occur before an individual/couple/family has lost their ability to reside at an address. The goal is sustaining an existing safe, appropriate housing.

Eviction prevention is a form of prevention when the household is the legal leaseholder. Think of an individual living in a bachelor apartment where they have a signed lease. The activation of the legal process by the landlord to have the household vacate the premises, often results in people accessing eviction prevention services. Most eviction prevention work occurs within the 60 days prior to when the household is expected to leave the unit and usually involves referrals to community legal services.

Housing loss prevention is a form of prevention that *replicates the housing crisis that most commonly leads to requests for shelter admission and the onset of diversion problem-solving*. It's when the household is not the legal leaseholder but is still located in a safe and appropriate housing situation and may have formal ties to the housing. Think of an individual living in their sister's spare bedroom or a room-mate situation where the person seeking service is not identified on the lease, but they have been living in the unit for a period.

Diversion activities occur once an individual/couple/family has lost legal tenure for their housing option, but prior to shelter entry. Emphasis is on securing safe, appropriate options in community - even temporary options - rather than a shelter stay, whenever possible.

Rapid Resolution activities occur within the first few days and weeks of a shelter stay or staying outside when an individual/couple/family cannot be diverted

before entry into literal homelessness. In most communities, rapid resolution is seen as an extension of diversion activities and often focuses on housing solutions outside of the Coordinated Entry process. Both diversion and prevention services are most effectively delivered through a strengths-based and person-centred approach that capitalizes on a problem-solving intervention with the goal of safe and appropriate housing options, even temporary options.

Assisting a household solve their housing crisis demands the following skills and practices:

- A trauma informed approach to engagement focusing on creating safety, transparency and an overview of your role
- Incorporation of Motivational Interviewing skills throughout your engagement, in particular active listening, open ended questions, empathy, and a focus on goals
- Exploration of strengths, opportunities and resources to move from crisis to empowerment in order to regain confidence and identify options in addressing the housing issue
- Move forward by identifying safe, appropriate options and next steps that can be reality-tested and validated as SMART (Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic & Timed)
- Build bridges to identify and activate reality-tested solutions. Connecting households with other community resources will be essential. Mediation is valued as a worthwhile endeavor to improve relationships between clients and landlords/clients and potential host households.
- Summarize the action steps and follow-up with specifics including activities, persons responsible, timelines and communication expectations. Set a time to follow-up

The following sections identify the approaches and skills that prove essential for prevention and diversion specialists in their work with households experiencing a housing crisis.

Service Delivery Excellence Optimizes the Impact of Prevention & Diversion Activities

Person-Centered Care

Aligned with trauma informed care, a person-centered practice is grounded in the commitment to service that espouses best practices for serving people who are far too often excluded and systemically marginalized. To provide prevention and diversion supports to people at imminent risk of entering/re-entering homelessness, it is essential to meet people where they are, with dignity, respect, and compassion. It is also essential to look beyond their current housing crisis (or the issues that caused this current crisis) presented by an individual, and instead see the intersecting challenges and strengths that make up the whole person. As we recognize and consider all these factors into our engagement and partnership with the household seeking service. It must be recognized that most of our systems are designed to prioritize the needs of the system, the agency or the funder over those of the households that seek supports to solve their current housing crisis. To be person-centered is to partner with the people we serve, explore options and choice and promote shared decision making. Being person-centered encourages clients to take an active, self-directed role and to define the goals and outcomes that matter most to them, rather than prioritizing the system or the service providers' goals for that client. Being person-centered also requires providers to recognize and move past their own biases, assumptions, and judgments about a person and what is best for them.

Trauma Informed Care

Being trauma informed demands that practitioners recognize the prevalence of trauma in the lives of people that are at imminent risk of entering and re-entering literal homelessness. Many of the most vulnerable households have experienced violence, abuse, loss, intergenerational and racial trauma, social exclusion and toxic stress. It is also acknowledged that entering/re-entering literal homelessness also increases the exposure to additional violence, loss of stability, safety and community. Failure to actively prevent literal homelessness ensures that households also have a greater risk of returning to homelessness again in the future. Prevention and diversion specialists offer services and engagements that support crisis resolution, optimization of people's assets and natural supports while actively avoiding causing additional harm tied to unsafe housing options and literal homelessness.

Trauma Informed Care recognizing such important pillars of Safety, Trustworthiness, as well as Empowerment and Choice and Collaboration. Within prevention and diversion service delivery, the starting point for trauma informed care begins with the creation of a safe space to engage.

There are two considerations when creating a safe space: 1. Is the household emotionally safe? and, 2. Is the household physically safe?

To create emotional safety in the practice of diversion or prevention, lead with empathy, exercise reflective listening, be trauma-informed in the engagement, respect the emotional state of the household, and be transparent on what is happening and why, as well as the next steps.

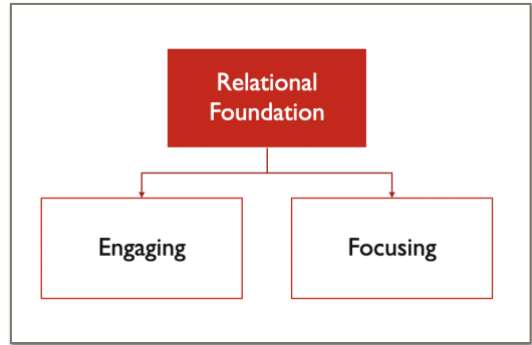
To create environmental (physical) safety for the purpose of conducting diversion or prevention, be aware of and sensitive to the environment within which diversion or prevention is happening. This can include things like empowering the people accessing diversion or prevention to have an active voice in where they want the conversation to take place (for example, in an office, outdoors on a park bench, in a secluded corner of an otherwise busy drop-in center, etc.), as well as assessing the physical environment to decrease or mitigate potential surprises during the conversation and being sensitive to the ability of others to overhear the conversation.

Create the Relational Foundation for Engagement and Problem-Solving

The relational foundation is comprised of two important components: the ability to engage; and the ability to focus the conversation to address primary issues of concern. Be aware of and sensitive to:

- (1). The tendency to spend considerable time engaging without moving to a focused conversation on problem-solving the current situation.
- (2). The tendency to jump ahead to focusing on the steps of diversion or prevention without developing suitable rapport first through engagement.

The challenge with creating the relational foundation with new clients is that this engagement approach is often more art than science. Making the move from engagement to focusing on problem-solving is more of a feeling of the staff doing diversion or prevention rather than a set of tangible indicators that demonstrate the transition to focusing within the engagement.



Engagement conversations start with more general, open-ended questions. In practicing diversion or prevention ask questions like, “What’s going on?” or “What brings you in today?” and “How are you feeling?” to start the conversation. That engagement should lead to other open-ended questions to explore what resources and strengths they either have or can readily access. This generally starts the transition from initial engagement to a more focused conversation. In this part of the discussion, focus on getting information on the likes of income amount and source, overall health, natural supports, recent rental history, overall motivation, what ideas they have about what to do next, connections to cultural supports (when appropriate), and even things like previous military experience with the US Military as that can unlock other resources.

The more focused part of the engagement is when the transition to more formalized questions or steps of problem solving will be used. This transition from general engagement to focused discussion should be explicit for the household being assisted. Focusing is about structured exploration to result in options and a concrete course of action that will be implemented.

Remain Housing and Solution Focused in Engagements

The provision of prevention and diversion services are guided with a steadfast commitment to assist the household in finding a safe, appropriate housing option in community. This commitment fuels all interventions and problem-solving discussions with households experiencing a housing crisis. Having a safe and appropriate housing option – even a temporary option – ensures that households can tap into natural supports and community resources to find housing solutions. Ensuring that households are identified and treated as

strategic partners in exploring options to address their housing crisis will be essential. Having choice in exploring potential ways of addressing the housing crisis ensures future motivation, ownership and momentum to continue seeking housing options.

As solution-focused professionals, diversion and prevention specialists understand that people seeking assistance are not the problem. The housing crisis is the problem. We need to help solve the problem. We are not trying to solve the person.

There are steps to problem-solving⁶ that are worthy of careful consideration when practicing diversion or prevention:

1. Identify the issue(s).
2. Understand everyone's interest(s).
3. List the possible solutions (options)
4. Evaluate the options.
5. Select an option or options.
6. Document the agreement(s).
7. Agree on contingencies, monitoring, and evaluation.

How practitioners operationalize these problem-solving steps will be customized to meet the needs of the households and the realities of community and programming resources.

Practice the Strengths-based Approach

Individual and environmental strengths need to be uncovered and leveraged in the process of assisting with both prevention and diversion. Individual strengths are things like talents and skills. Environmental strengths include resources that can be accessed and social networks.

To perform diversion or prevention well, understand how to go about identifying strengths and assessing how they can be applied to the situation at hand. The ability to envision the short-term and long-term actions should be built upon these strengths and applying them in action.

⁶ See Appendix A for Tools to Assist with Housing Focused Problem-Solving Engagements.

To incorporate a strengths-based approach within the diversion and prevention practices, it will be essential to explore both relationship and community factors that can support the household:

Relationship factors - who do they know, how strong is that personal or professional relationship, what resources, options and supports do those relationships bring to the problem-solving table

Community factors - association and connectivity to other groups/networks with shared beliefs and experiences, what resources that community has to bring to the table, beliefs and practices of the community regarding helping others of that community

Households experiencing a housing crisis often present in a heightened emotional state and their ability to see their current crisis as insurmountable is diminished. As practitioners help them feel safe to re-examine the strengths, relationships and resources that they can tap to resolve their current housing crisis, they will be better able to listen, consider and negotiate with others.

Support and Enhance Resilience

Resilience is not a trait that people either have or don't have. Resilience exists in most people, and when necessary, how to be resilient can be taught or we can walk people through steps to maximize their resiliency. But to maximize the resilience of people that will be supported in homelessness prevention or diversion, there are times when an organization or an entire community needs to spend more time understanding what resilience is and how to leverage the strengths and skills within the household to meaningfully navigate a solution to a stressful situation.

Central to the promotion and support of resilience in people facing homelessness is a set of core beliefs that you are encouraged to evaluate within yourself and may benefit from additional conversation with colleagues across the organization that deliver prevention and diversion services. Here are four questions to guide your internal and community-based considerations of resilience:

Do you believe that people can quickly recovery from adversity?

Do you implement a strengths-based approach during housing crisis intervention and problem-solving opportunities?

Do you believe that people have elasticity and can bounce back, and that helping professionals can optimize this capacity?

Do you believe that people can navigate to the resources they need and negotiate engagement with appropriate resources?

Know Available Resources Well

Implementing prevention and diversion can require tapping into other community and state-level resources and helping the household navigate to those resources. Examples of the types of resources that can come in handy when practicing diversion or prevention include, but are not limited to, the following:

Flexible Funding - a “catch all” funding source that operates somewhat like petty cash that can be used for emergency situations that have no other natural or already defined funding source in the community. Key to success is a framework on spending limits based upon different types of presenting needs, and the ability to access the funding quickly without multiple layers of approval that delay issuance. Maintaining accountability for the funds still occurs.

Utility Arrears - most often used in a prevention situation, whether through formal local programs that are integrated with a utility provider or a stand-alone program, the ability to address some or all utility arrears can prevent homelessness.

Rental Arrears - most often used in a prevention situation, the ability to address some or all rental arrears can prevent homelessness for highly vulnerable households and certainly assists low-income households in overcoming the current housing crisis. Most often there is an analysis of amount of rental arrears relative to income sources and amounts the household is able to use to pay for rent.

Emergency Motel Assistance - advanced knowledge and sometimes even existing contracts with local motel operators that will provide low-cost,

temporary, safe places to stay while sorting out housing instability situation.

Family/Friend Reunification - whether through a formal program or informal connections, this resource allows for telephone or electronic engagement with the family/friend, as well as the provision of transportation assistance to get to that safe and appropriate family/friend opportunity - regardless of whether that travel is local, regional, provincial/territorial, national or international.

Assistance with Damage or Repair Costs - funding for landlords or repair services available to landlords to make reasonable repairs or provide reasonable compensation for damages caused by the tenant that is now seeking service. The intention is to ensure the household can stay housed if the damages are repaired or the landlord is compensated financially.

Transportation Assistance - can take different forms. Locally, transportation assistance may be provided through the likes of bus tickets, taxi contracts, or use of ride-share services. In some communities' street outreach vans can also provide assistance from time to time. Outside of the local transportation needs, if it is part of reunification with family or friends in a different community, there can be purchasing of train, bus or plane tickets.

Storage Assistance - the ability to provide a simple and easily accessed, secure storage facility can make a difference in diversion or prevention. This can occur from secured spaces specifically for households being assisted with diversion or prevention. In some rare instances, funding for the likes of a storage unit can be considered.

Vouchers/Gift Cards for Food & Gas - often short-term assistance through the ability to provide a voucher or gift card for the likes of food or gas can help divert or prevent homelessness, especially when other natural supports are involved in helping to prevent or divert the household from homelessness. For example, a family member may say the person can stay with them - and it would be safe and appropriate to do so - but the family member needs some additional assistance with food for a short while to be able to help the household in need.

Shelter Location and Availability - in the event that prevention and diversion are not possible or do not work, it is important to have either real time data on shelter bed availability by population group, or else an easy way of contacting shelter for information on availability when engaging with a household through prevention or diversion.

Kenneling or Short Term Stays for Pets - in some instances short-term solutions can be found for the household to divert or prevent their homelessness, but an existing pet is proving to be a challenge in the short-term solution. Without surrendering their pet, diversion and prevention programs can find it helpful to have established connections with rescue organizations, foster organizations, and/or, the local humane society to provide low-cost or free assistance with short-term stays for pets.

Food Security Resources - if you are practicing prevention or diversion, knowing where there are meal programs, food programs or other forms of access to food can be critically important, especially if financial resources that otherwise would be applied to food are needed to address arrears, damages, or rent.

Budgeting, Trusteeship and Financial Management Resources - for some households, especially when there is prevention activities, may benefit from additional assistance with money. This can include community-based assistance with budgeting, access to a voluntary trusteeship program, or other community resources that assist with financial management.

Income Support Resources - most diversion and prevention programs benefit from having streamlined access to provincial/territorial income support programs like general welfare assistance or disability support assistance. Whenever possible, access to a dedicated person(s) within the income support system is necessary to get immediate and intensive assistance to troubleshoot existing income supports, access discretionary benefits, or newly access income assistance.

Assistance with Tax Preparation and Filing - based upon the housing situation and income support situation, it may be necessary to navigate access to assistance to an organization that can assist with preparing and filing taxes.

Services that Support Survivors of Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence

- because safety screening is completed with every household seeking diversion or prevention assistance, knowledge of available resources for survivors, how to apply for and access those resources, and navigation supports so people can receive the specialized services for survivors is necessary.

Faith-based Resources - churches, synagogues, temples and other places of worship often have faith leaders or members of their congregation that can provide assistance either financially, through other voluntary programs, or even through the likes of transportation assistance.

Resources Available to Veterans - there are a number of emergency supports dedicated to veterans and their families. The Support Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) has a variety of homelessness prevention and rapid resolution services and financial assistance options that can be activated.

Legal Services and Resources - it is not uncommon for knowledge of provincial/territorial residential tenancy legislation to become an important part of problem-solving in a particular situation, especially eviction prevention. Those conducting diversion or prevention with households should be aware of what community-based legal resources that are free or low-cost are available, and how to access those legal resources with or for the household that is being supported in eviction prevention.

Core Skills & Training Requirements

Mediation, Negotiation and Conflict Resolution:

- Mediation is a dynamic, structured, interactive process where a neutral third party assists disputing parties in resolving conflict using specialized communication and negotiation techniques
- Comfortable with negotiating and mediating between landlords, property managers, friends, family, and/or neighbors
- Ability to remain calm and de-escalate discussions, emotional stress and tense situations while remaining focused on the present and future options related to resolution of a housing crisis

Safety Planning and Trauma Informed Care: the ability to recognize signs of distress, domestic violence, mental health concerns or other emergency

situations that may require immediate action/response. Keen awareness of community resources for referrals and safety planning.

Active and Attentive Listening: using essential skills of listening to what is spoken but also ensuring reflective listening and remaining attentive to body language. The ability to remain non-judgement and not make assumptions or view situations through personal biases. Remaining comfortable with periods of silence to allow people time to explore their thoughts, feelings and options while also demonstrating their ability to paraphrase to ensure clarity and summarize discussions and options to move the problem solving forward.

Motivational Interviewing: training on the methods and strategies that can positively influence individuals' journey through the stages of change by resolving ambivalence and insecurities and improve confidence to move forward towards stability.

Maintain Boundaries: training on placing an individual's needs first and foremost, while also considering dynamics of trust, power, respect and closeness.

Progressive Engagement: recognizing the resilience of households and our quest to support the identification of solutions to housing crisis using natural supports, practitioners focus on providing the least amount of assistance needed to stabilize a household's housing crisis while enhancing their sense of control over next steps in identifying safe and appropriate options. Progressive engagement ensures that households are given just as much services and support as they need to succeed. From a system of care perspective, this approach preserves costly interventions like rental subsidies for households with significant and lasting barriers to housing stability. Service providers rely first on the client's own resources and networks to solve financial crises, and to use system resources only as needed.

Safety Screening is Essential

Housing crises may be caused by a variety of reasons, including relationship breakdown, economic stress, lack of safety, etc. As identified below, creating physical and emotional safety while assisting households address a housing crisis will be essential. This culture of safety begins with diversion and prevention specialists ensuring that the household is currently feeling safe from harm so they can engage to address their housing concern. The following sample

prompts (adapted from NMCAA Youth Diversion Script) can assist in screening for immediate safety:

First, I want you to know that your safety is very important to me.

If engagement via phone: *Are you in a safe place right now to answer some questions? Are you in a place where you feel comfortable answering some questions about your housing situation that might be personal? If our call gets disconnected is there a safe phone number that I can use to reconnect with you?*

If engagement is in-person: *Are you/you and your family feeling safe right now? Are you/your family able to take some time to answer some questions about your housing situation that might feel personal?*

If **NO** or the client identifies they are not in a safe place, proceed with a safety planning workflow. Such a workflow should be customized and consistently implemented for your local community. Below is a sample of questions to consider as you define safety screening processes.

If engagement via phone:

Can I ask where you are calling from?

Are you safe right now?

If **NO**...

- *Is the person making you feel unsafe with you right now?*
- *If yes, can you go somewhere safe like a neighbour, friend, or public space?*
- *If no, do you need to get somewhere safe right now? (Immediately start problem solving around getting them safe right now)*
- *Do you need me to contact the police for you?*
- *Would it be easier to text me or provide me with a number where I can safely connect with you? If yes, exchange contact information.*

If engagement is in person:

Are you safe right now and able to discuss your current housing situation with me?

If **NO**...

- *Is the person making you feel unsafe here or waiting for you outside?*

- *Would you like me to call the police or another first responder for you?
We can stay together as we wait for them to arrive.*

If **YES** and the client is currently safe and able to engage in the prevention/diversion session, a script such as the sample below would assist:

Great, I'm glad you are feeling safe. So now I'm hoping we can talk for a bit so that I can understand your housing situation and work with you to figure out a solution that is safe and appropriate for you/your family.

Does that sound okay with you?

CHAPTER TWO: HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION SERVICES

Targeting Prevention Services

As identified previously, diversion has the greatest impact on community efforts to reduce the inflow into literal homelessness since it focuses on supporting people who have already lost access to their current housing option. Within the realm of prevention however, research has demonstrated that much of what we believed about homelessness prevention historically is not accurate. Many researchers have examined the connection between eviction prevention activities and admissions to the homelessness response system. Research by Shinn et. al. (1999, 2001, 2013) provided some of the most important insights however that caused communities to second-guess how prevention investments were used in the past. These insights included the realities that the majority of investments went to households that never would have become homeless, even if prevention supports were not provided; that no household should be deemed “too high risk” to be supported in preventing literal homelessness; and that a focus on reducing homelessness demanded a shift to targeted prevention services for highly vulnerable households⁷.

Eviction prevention programs, historically, were designed to help people under threat of eviction to retain their housing. Thankfully, the issuance of eviction notices does not result in admissions to literal homelessness for most people. Typically, activities continue to serve households that are behind in their rent due to external challenges such as job loss or other unexpected circumstances. These programs typically require households to have an official eviction notice, be below certain income thresholds, demonstrate the ability to sustain housing independently after receiving financial assistance and/or demonstrate that the reason for “falling behind” was “no fault of their own”. Since eligibility criteria for eviction prevention programs tended to be broad and the number of eligible households was huge, such eviction prevention programs often established limits on financial assistance and how often the assistance could be used for all eligible

⁷ Shinn, M., & Baumohl, J. (1999). Rethinking the prevention of homelessness. Paper presented at the 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research, Arlington, Virginia.

Shinn, M., Baumohl, J., & Hopper, K. (2001). The prevention of homelessness revisited. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 1, 95–127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1530-2415.00006>.

Shinn, M. B., Greer, A. L., Bainbridge, J., Kwon, J., & Zuiderveen, S. (2013). Efficient targeting of homelessness prevention services for families. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(S2), S324–S330. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301468>.

Pankratz, C., & Nelson, G. (2017). An evaluation of rent assistance for individuals experiencing persistent homelessness in Waterloo Region. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21911>.

households, to maximize the number of households - regardless of need - that could be served.

Such a focus on low-income households certainly assisted those recipients in resolving their current (and never to be repeated) housing crisis but research is clear that most of these households rarely would have entered sheltered and/or unsheltered homelessness regardless of the prevention supports accessed. Traditional eviction prevention programs therefore align more with a poverty alleviation strategy than a targeted homelessness prevention strategy.

Acknowledging that many people on the cusp of entering the homelessness response system have likely relied on family or friends historically for support, prevention services must not just work with households that are legal leaseholders. Working with households that have a formal connection to safe housing options - even temporary in nature - will prove to be essential in future homelessness prevention programs.

Capitalizing on the lessons learned from homelessness prevention work, there are several modifications that will assist prevention services to achieve reductions into the homelessness response system and truly prevent literal homelessness:

- align eligibility criteria to better reflect the characteristics of people experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness in your community;
- prioritize people that have already experienced homelessness at least once before, recognizing that they are at greater risk of experiencing it again in the future;
- target eviction prevention services to highly vulnerable leaseholders that spend 50% or more of their monthly income on rent;
- ensure that your program also serves people that may not be protected by the Michigan Landlord Tenant Laws, including those identified as “secondary tenants”, sub-letting tenants, boarding room residents, etc. Such homelessness - not just eviction - prevention will have a positive impact on reducing inflow into homelessness;
- target prevention services to highly vulnerable households that are facing eviction from specialized housing such as Section 8, subsidized or supportive housing;

- incorporate universal screening for highly housing insecure households in specialized groups that historically have experienced systemic and structural discrimination such as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), single parent households, households fleeing violence, families with multiple children, households residing in low-income communities that have high eviction rates, people with disabilities and those with extremely low income⁸.

Such targeting of resources will ensure that households with the greatest risk of becoming homeless can be spared the costly trauma of literal homelessness and reduce inflow into the homelessness response system.

Initial Screening

Homelessness Prevention services are often delivered by community-based, multi-service agencies. To ensure that households with the greatest risk for housing loss and entry into homelessness within the next 3-7 days are prioritized for service, many agencies use a simple screening tool to assist with referrals and scheduling. The below screening questions have been implemented in communities using online questionnaires⁹ via agency websites (this takes about 4 minutes), over the telephone or in person, often as part of an agency's initial intake process.

Are you a leaseholder who is behind on rental payments and have income less than (identify income eligibility criteria here)? Yes or No

If Yes...Can you demonstrate a risk of experiencing homelessness or housing instability evidenced by a past due utility or rent notice? Yes or No

In the last 30 days, have you experienced homelessness - stayed in an emergency shelter, stayed outside or somewhere not meant for human habitation? Yes or No

What is your housing situation for tonight?

I'm staying in my own place

I'm staying with family or friends

⁸ Desmond, M., Gershenson, C., Who gets evicted? Assessing individual, neighborhood, and network factors, Social Science Research (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.08.017>

⁹ Adapted from Community Housing Connect website, Kent County. <https://www.communityhousingconnect.org>

I'm staying in a local shelter or in a motel paid for by a community program

I'm staying outside or in my vehicle or some other place unsheltered

If staying in their own place or with family/friends...Can you stay there for the next 3-7 days? Yes or No

Regardless of where you/your family is staying right now, how many separate occasions have you stayed outdoors, in a vehicle, in an emergency shelter or a motel paid for by a community agency?

- *One time, this is my first time*
- *Two times*
- *Three or more times*

Please tell us a little more about your situation. (Select as many options as needed)

- *I/my family are fleeing or attempting to flee intimate partner/family violence*
- *My child/ren are temporarily staying with family or friends*
- *My family is under threat of having children removed from the home or they have already been removed from the home.*
- *I/we are residing in an unhealthy physical environment (i.e. bugs, mold, leaks, broken locks, etc.)*
- *I/we are unable to stay at our current location during the day*
- *I/we lack the financial resources and supports to obtain housing on our own*
- *I/we have been told that we can not stay in our current location*

Identification of Referrals to Other Services: Based on the priorities established for prevention services for your community, responses to the above screening questions will guide the referral of households to the other, potentially more appropriate community resource - including legal services for eviction notices, emergency shelter or diversion services for those that have no place to stay tonight and DV shelters for households fleeing violence - and/or prioritize the scheduling of appointments for prevention workers. Households that can not stay in their current safe location, will be prioritized for “immediate” access to prevention workers. Such screening processes allow agencies to determine

eligibility for and prioritization of support delivery based on set of legislated eviction process, determination of level of risk for literal homelessness and safety concerns.

Confirmation of and Scheduling for Prevention Clients: For households that are screened in to meet with a prevention specialist, identify an appointment time, provide them with an overview of the meeting and a list of documents that they should bring with them for the meeting. For households that are actively involved in legal eviction process and are being referred to legal services for assistance in the Residential Tenancy Board process, providing an overview of the information and documentation required will be important. Ideally, prevention agencies will have formalized relationships with legal, VAW and homelessness response agencies so that referrals can occur smoothly, quickly and potentially provide an opportunity for information sharing, with client consent.

Moving to Focused Prevention Conversations

As identified previously, creating an emotionally and physically safe space for engagement with households experiencing a housing crisis will be paramount to crisis intervention and problem-solving success. Having engaged with the household seeking assistance to build rapport, the problem-solving intervention is, in essence, the focusing part of the engagement. The prospect of losing access to current housing - via legal eviction processes or inability to stay in a place where you have a formal connection is a crisis for people. Crises result in people being less able to clearly think through their problems, consider all the potential solutions and advocate for themselves. Prevention service therefore creates an opportunity for you to assist in reducing immediate stress with a focus on tangible issues and all potential options to resolve the housing crisis.

The below steps and prompts are provided to assist in intervening effectively even when faced with elevated emotional states. As with any crisis intervention, prevention specialists focus on assisting people recognize where they can regain some level of control over the chaos (and their reactions and responses to the crisis) in order to positively influence their current housing options. As you walk through the workflow presented below, remember that the steps and prompts are provided as a guide. The steps are not absolute, nor is it a script. There is a natural flow to the workflow, however, and it is intentional that inquiries like why the person/couple/family is struggling to maintain permanent housing come well after it is understood where they are currently

staying and whether or not that is safe. In addition, not every step will occur with each household engaged. In a nutshell, some answers to early steps of the prevention process eliminate the need of asking later questions.

Workflow of the Prevention Engagement

Step One: Safety screen

If safety screening did not occur as part of the initial contact with the household, this should always be done prior to launching into the other aspects of prevention interventions. As stated in the Chapter One – Overview of Prevention and Diversion Services section of this document, you are encouraged to establish a consistent approach across at least your organization, if not your entire community, to safety screening and a course of action if safety issues are uncovered in the screening.

Step Two: Explain the process

Transparency is key in the delivery of person-centred services so it will be important to identify what your role is as a prevention specialist and outline the process that has worked for other people experiencing a similar housing issue. Consider developing a consistent script or key messages to introduce the goal of your engagement. The below is a suggested explanation:

The goal for today is to better understand your housing situation and work with you to figure out a solution that is safe and appropriate for you/your family. For most people that means helping you stay where you are (if it's safe and appropriate), sometimes that might include helping you find another place to stay or person to stay with, even temporarily, and for some people that might mean helping you connect with other community resources to assist in having a safe housing option. Together, we'll work to identify the most appropriate actions to prevent housing loss, whenever possible.

Step Three: Determining the current housing situation

This is an opportunity for prevention specialists to confirm information gathered during screening process and for people to share their story. As households describe what their current housing situation is and why they are connecting for support today, the worker can identify what has already been attempted to solve the problem as well as some insights into the primary people involved in this

housing crisis. It will be important for prevention specialists to listen and validate the household's experiences while also ensuring that the facts of the housing situation - not just the opinions and fears - are ascertained. Some important facts to gather include:

If this housing tied to a legal tenancy agreement/lease...

Has an official eviction notice been issued to the household or has a verbal warning been issued?

Any contact with Residential Tenancy Board? Any final decisions by that Board?

Any contact with legal services for representation at the Residential Tenancies Board?

Any documentation from or upcoming dates with Board or legal services?

How long has the household lived at this location? any other eviction notices from this landlord in the past?

What is the reason(s) identified for lease termination on the eviction notice?

If the household is not in a valid leasing arrangement...

- What is the relationship with the roommates, leaseholders and landlord?*
- Is this a safe place for you/your family?*
- How long have you lived there?*
- Is this the address that you use for receiving mail, identification cards, etc.?*
- What caused the current housing issue?*

Step Four: Exploring Options to Resolve Current Housing Crisis

Remaining client-centred and strength-based during this exploration process ensures that prevention specialists can assist households articulate what they need in order to resolve their current housing crisis as well as identify their strengths, successes and resources they've used in the past to help them today. Recognizing that in the midst of crisis people tend to be protective, defensive and not always open to brainstorming options to resolve the current situation, prevention specialists rely on their motivational interviewing and creativity. Workers strive to increase people's openness to investigate solutions by capitalizing on their abilities to listen, consider different perspectives and negotiate with others, including landlords, friends, family, neighbours, etc.

The following activities to resolve a housing crisis tend to be most commonly used by prevention specialists to explore problem resolution options, especially when supporting households demonstrating higher risk of entering literal homelessness if prevention efforts are unsuccessful:

Creative Brainstorming: Start this solution focused brainstorming engagement by identifying that collectively the goal is to identify potential strategies, activities, tasks and communications that can assist in resolving the current issue and allow the household to stay in their current safe housing option or identify another safe option. Encourage the household to be as creative as possible as they consider what they or other people facing a similar situation could do to positively address the housing situation. It may be helpful for the prevention specialist to write down the suggested solutions, activities or tasks in order to keep track of all the options and to use open ended questions that explore what strategies used in the past that could resolve the current issue.

The prevention specialist will stay committed to “leaning into” uncomfortable silences, providing summaries to discussions and affirming moments of self-awareness, while carefully resisting distractions and attempts to focus on problems instead of solutions. Postpone evaluating the options identified until the brainstorming has been exhausted. Once a list of potential solutions and/or helpful approaches are identified, each option can then be examined in terms of appropriateness, validity and likelihood of success in solving the current housing crisis. Sometimes, other family members, roommates or friends can participate as strategic partners in this brainstorming and solution focused discussion.

Reality Testing for Identified Solutions/Options: Once potential options have been identified to resolve the current housing crisis, many prevention specialists find it helpful to reality-test the preferred activities, strategies, engagements. The following questions have proven helpful for reality testing suggested solutions:

What would this look like for you?

What words would you use to start that discussion?

Have you done something like this before? Was that a positive experience for you?

What resources do you have to carry this out?

Are there things you could do or say to your landlord/neighbour/friend/family member that could demonstrate your willingness and desire to resolve this issue?

What would assist you in staying focused on solving this current issue and how things can be different in the future, instead of focusing on past challenges (with this person/in this housing unit)?

What is the timeline for when this could happen?

In case this does not work out as well as you would like, would you like to explore a back-up plan?

Step Five: Create Action Plan for Next Steps and Initiate Implementation

Depending on the needs of the household and the resources available for the prevention program, the financial assistance and the support services will be delivered for and with the approved and prioritized households. For eviction prevention programs that operate with a poverty alleviation mandate, set limits for financial assistance may currently be dictated based on the size of the household. For households that demonstrate higher risk of homelessness, flexible financial assistance amounts, and follow-up stability supports will likely be required. The following services are most common for homelessness prevention programming.

Provision of Financial Assistance, when appropriate: the delivery of flexible financial assistance (for rental arrears, payment of damages, grocery cards to offset costs for host households, etc.) is an important resource for homelessness prevention services. It is recommended that the minimum assistance necessary for the shortest time possible is provided to eligible and prioritized households in ensuring housing retention and reduced inflow into the homelessness response system, when possible. Depending on the household's level of vulnerability to enter/re-enter homelessness, prevention specialists will determine the amount of financial assistance provided and how often such financial resources can be accessed. The greater the risk to experience literal homelessness, the greater the assistance - both financial and supports - provided.

For households referred to traditional eviction prevention services, where an unexpected circumstance resulted in rental arrears and/or other overdue housing costs but the housing is indeed sustainable within the current rent and income realities, the allocation of financial assistance will likely be the primary

support option to resolve the current housing crisis. Generally, agencies may have a case plan template that identifies how the arrears will be paid and any follow-up actions required for the household.

Facilitation of Mediation Services, when appropriate: as an impartial and competent mediator, the prevention specialist works to move the conversation between two consenting and un-coerced parties (i.e. tenant and landlord, roommate and leaseholder, visitor and head of host household, etc.) forward by:

- ensuring that both parties have an opportunity to be heard, understood and validated - this includes the sharing of facts, emotions and goals for this discussion
- focusing on common ground between the two parties (i.e. importance of helping friends and family, meeting commitments and following through on promises/obligations, having responsible tenants while also having safe space to spend time with family/friends, etc.)
- not entering into an argument of who is right or wrong but state the core issue(s)/problem(s) explicitly
- respecting the emotional toll experienced by both parties
- steering the conversation towards “what is next?” more than “what happened?”
- summarizing identified options for moving forward

Provision of Follow-Up Supports to Household and Landlord/Host Family:

Providing services to keep current housing or find more appropriate housing is one of the best ways to reduce inflows into or returns to homelessness.

Alignment with progressive engagement demands that prevention specialists provide households with an opportunity to demonstrate their resilience and identify solutions to their housing crisis with the practitioner adding more supports as required. For households that require and consent to housing focused follow-up supports, practitioners are encouraged to leverage community-based supports to enhance responsible tenancy skills, social integration, and economic well-being to support successful tenancies. The following section highlights follow-up supports, including case management, within homelessness prevention programs.

Frequently Asked Questions About Homelessness Prevention

Is there any household that is too high risk to be served by Prevention Services?

No. If your program is committed to preventing homelessness, research has demonstrated that there is no household that is too high risk to be served. In fact, it is evident that targeted prevention of entry into and/or return to homelessness for highly vulnerable households will actually have the greater impact on reducing the inflow into the homelessness response system. It must be recognized, however, that such a prioritization of households demonstrate high risk of homelessness demands that agencies provide deeper, flexible financial assistance and follow-up housing location and case management supports.

Should households that have already participated in dedicated re-housing programs in the community be eligible to receive prevention services?

Yes. If your program is committed to preventing entry to the homelessness response system, prioritizing households that have experienced homelessness before with prevention resources can be identified as an insurance policy on your community's previous re-housing investment. Contact with the previous re-housing program is encouraged to identify the potential for aftercare supports and guidance on future homelessness proofing activities for the household.

Should traditional eviction prevention programs be eliminated in our community?

That depends on the goals of your community. Traditional eviction prevention programs certainly assist low-income households but rarely serve those households with the greatest risk of experiencing homelessness. Eviction prevention programs that align with poverty alleviation approaches will benefit low-income households but your impact on reducing inflow into the homelessness response system will be minimal. Investments to prevent homelessness must focus on targeting flexible and appropriate follow-up supports to households demonstrating the highest risk to enter/re-enter homelessness.

What if you think you can only prevent the individual/couple/family's housing loss for a short period of time?

Take whatever time you get! While it may be ideal to have permanent solutions, every day that is safely and appropriately spent outside of the homelessness response system is a good thing and can create space and opportunity to engage in dedicated housing focused supports that will increase the likelihood of successful tenancies.

What if the person is unwell, drunk or high at the time of the prevention attempt?

Engage and assess the ability to participate rather than starting from a position that if a person seems unwell or is drunk or high than diversion is impossible. Yes, there will be instances where prevention is impossible in the moment, but you may be pleasantly surprised at how much can be accomplished with homelessness prevention even if the person does not seem to be sober or well.

Are there times when prevention turns into diversion turns into rapid resolution?

Yes! And that's okay! If prevention is unsuccessful, we transition to diversion. If diversion is unsuccessful, we embrace rapid resolution. None of these are failures per se, but rather the workflow in trying to assist the household avoid homelessness, or to decrease their length of time experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness Prevention Practice - Case Studies

For each case study, you may find it beneficial to focus on three questions to prepare for or improve your practice of prevention:

- 1. How would you engage?*
- 2. What might you ask?*
- 3. In which ways might you assist?*

Case Study 1

Carrie and her 3 children have been living in a Rent Geared to Income (RGI) community housing unit for the past 15 months. She has received notice of non-

payment of rent and currently owes \$3000 in rent arrears and re-payment of past damages to the unit.

Case Study 2

Jorge has received an official eviction notice for the apartment that he has lived in for 12 years. Concerns of hoarding and non-payment of rent are driving the landlord's case for eviction.

Case Study 3

Josie is 18. After an argument with her parents about her substance use and violence. She was told to leave the house until she "gets her life figured out and her temper under control".

Case Study 4

Luke has been issued an eviction notice for disrupting the reasonable enjoyment of other tenants in the building. He denies he has done anything that warrants this action. Luke was previously supported by a local Rapid Re-housing program in your community.

Case Study 5

Michael had his relatives move in with him. Prior to other relatives moving in, the place was spotless and there were no complaints from the landlord or neighbours. Since relatives moved in, there have been a series of complaints and the landlord is threatening eviction.

CHAPTER THREE: SHELTER DIVERSION

Diversion – Final Opportunity for Prevention

The diversion steps are, in essence, the focusing part of the housing problem solving and crisis intervention discussion. As you walk through the steps, remember the steps as written are a guide. The steps are not absolute, nor is it a script. There is a natural flow to the steps, however, and it is intentional that inquiries like why the person/couple/family is struggling to find permanent housing come well after it is understood where they are currently staying and whether that is safe. In addition, not every step will occur with each household engaged. In a nutshell, some answers to early steps of the diversion process prevent the need of asking later questions.

STEP ONE: Screen for Safety

Safety screening, if it did not occur as part of the initial engagement with the household, should always be done prior to launching into the other steps of diversion. You are encouraged to establish a consistent approach across at least your organization, if not your entire community, to safety screening and a course of action if safety issues are uncovered in the screening.

STEP TWO: Explain the Process

Whether through a common script or consistent key messages, transparency is key from the beginning in explaining diversion. Consider something like:

Our goal is to learn more about your specific housing situation right now and what you need so that together we can identify the best possible way to get you a place to stay tonight and to find safe, permanent housing as quickly as possible. That might mean staying in shelter tonight, but we want to avoid that if at all possible. We will work with you to find a more stable alternative if we can.

What is being established in the opening script or key messages is a transparent explanation of what is about to happen for the person who is seeking shelter or other services, understanding this may not be what they wanted to hear. First, we are interested in their housing situation *right now*—not the entire housing history. Second, it emphasizes that the work moving forward is something that will happen *together*. Third, it focuses on safe, permanent housing, while being clear that if it is possible to avoid a shelter stay to achieve that, then doing so would be most desirable.

STEP THREE: Today's Urgency and Untested Options

The second step has three parts:

Why are you seeking services today?

What are all the other things you tried before you sought shelter today?

What are all the other things you have thought about trying but have not attempted yet in order to avoid needing assistance today?

The key element of the first question is emphasis on *today*. Another way of looking at this, and even probing for more information, is why they were not seeking shelter yesterday, and why they are not here tomorrow. In most instances, the diversion worker will learn of a specific conflict or event that has occurred that has brought them to a place of seeking services today. If it is possible to resolve the conflict or address the event before progressing any further, that should be done.

The two other questions are exploratory in nature. In learning what they have already tried, there is an opportunity for the diversion worker to learn what worked and did not work. The more important of the questions by way of diverting people from shelter is that which they have thought about doing but have not tried yet. In most instances this results in concrete actions that can be attempted at that moment, though taking those actions may require assistance with accessing a phone, counselling/briefing on what they are thinking of attempting, accessing transportation, etc. Walk the people you are training how to seize this opportunity in the delivery of focused diversion conversation. It is entirely possible - even encouraged - that the staff doing diversion pause to explore the “other things they have thought about trying” prior to moving forward with next steps. It is possible that the exploration of other options leads to a course of action such that the other steps of diversion are not even necessary.

STEP FOUR: Last Night’s Safety

The engaging part of the conversation may have already illuminated this information. But if not, it is important to know where the household stayed the previous night. To engage in this question is to focus on more recent locations where they stayed, not the entire housing history of the individual/couple/family.

Where did you stay last night?

- *i. If staying with someone else, what is the relationship between them and you*
- *ii. How long have you been staying there?*
- *iii. Where did you stay before that?*

- *iv. Would it be safe for you to stay there again for the next 3 to 7 days?*
- *v. (If a couple and/or household with children under 18) Would your whole household be able to return and stay there safely for the next 3 to 7 days?*
- *vi. If indicate that the place where they stayed is unsafe, ask why it is unsafe.*
- *vii. If cannot stay there safely, or if were staying in a place unfit for human habitation, move to Step Six.*

You are trying to ascertain whether the place the household is coming from is safe to return to while the household works on a more permanent housing solution. There are discernible differences in the diversion process when the person seeking services has been in a safe, appropriate place for some time versus the person who is bouncing around from one location to another without safety and security.

STEP FIVE: Story Behind the Story (At Last Night's Safe Place)

This step is about creating a space to get more information...the story behind the story or information that is supplemental to, but important for understanding, the whole picture.

What is the primary/main reason that you had to leave the place where you stayed last night?

Are there additional reasons why you can't stay there any longer?

An enriched context of what is going on can provide important information to the person that is delivering diversion. Take your time with this question, and even ask additional open-ended questions when appropriate to gather more information on context.

STEP SIX: What Would It Take to Stay (At Last Night's Safe Place)

This is an entry into progressive engagement with diversion. Instead of going “all in” with a solution or even a range of resources, the fundamental question is “What would it take to be able to stay there temporarily?” In other words, you are asking the service-seeker what they feel the solution would be rather than, perhaps, providing more resources than are required or more intervention that what would be necessary. Importantly, you must be able to act on the types of “asks” the service-seeker may have, to divert them from shelter. For example, if the person identifies that helping with groceries would make it possible to go back temporarily, you must have the immediate ability to support that, as opposed to having many layers of approval or passage of time to reach accessing the resource.

Do you think that you/you and your family could stay there again temporarily if we provide you with some help or referrals to find permanent housing or connect with other services?

If no, why not? What would it take to be able to stay there temporarily?

STEP SEVEN: New Place to Stay Temporarily

Again, step six is progressive engagement in action. It empowers the service-seeker to identify both other people and the resources that would be necessary to achieve the outcome rather than having finite resource options to suggest or trying to solve the problem for the service-seeker.

If no, is there somewhere else where you/you and your family could stay temporarily if we provide you with some help or referrals to find permanent housing and access other supports? For example, what about other family members? Friends? Co-workers?

What would it take for you to be able to stay there temporarily?

STEP EIGHT: Identifying Barriers and Assistance Required

The fact that this step comes later in the diversion process is also progressive engagement in action. Rather than leading with barriers or history in the diversion engagement, we are focused first on action. It is entirely likely that many of the people seeking shelter services can be diverted before ever reaching this step. Rather than trying to prescribe a program or service response, the ball is put into the court of the service-seeker to name the barriers and assistance required.

What is making it hard for you to find permanent housing for you/you and your family—or connect to other resources that could help you do that? What do you feel are your barriers? What assistance do you feel you need?

STEP NINE: Current Resources

The intention of this step is to focus on what the individual or family has rather than what they do not have, in order to progress further into finding a solution that does not rely on the service provider or system of care to solely be the solution to their housing instability. While additional questions can probe for information, this step intentionally does not rely on a series of forms or a particular decision-making matrix in order to dictate how to proceed.

What resources do you have right now that could help you and your family find a place to stay temporarily or find permanent housing?

STEP TEN: Housing Planning

If the household has a plan in place, terrific. If not, there is an opportunity to engage in solution creation without provision of a one-size-fits-all solution. It is better that, from the front door of the system of care, there is a focus on having people plan their own exit prior to entry rather than having people come into service and then find the way out. This also is critical for setting up opportunities for self-resolution within shelter.

If admitted to shelter there is still an expectation that you will be attempting to secure permanent housing for you (and your family). Let's talk about some first steps you can take if admitted to shelter you can take to start the exit from shelter.

Frequently Asked Questions About Diversion

Here are some questions that are frequently asked:

Are we still going to try diversion if there is space in the shelter?

Yes! Diversion is an activity that is attempted, whenever possible, with every person, couple or family seeking shelter services when it is safe and appropriate to do so. The practice of diversion is not only done when there is little to no room in shelter. Given many shelter operators already do some form of diversion when they are full, these key contacts in your community can provide some helpful insights in terms of the solutions they are able to come up with and implement when they are full.

What if you only think you can divert the individual/couple/family for a night or two?

Take whatever time you get! While it may be ideal to have solutions last longer than one or two nights, every day that is safely and appropriately spent outside of the homelessness response system is a good thing and can create space and opportunity to engage in problem-solving and solution generating to assist the household beyond a night or two.

What if the person is unwell, drunk or high at the time of the diversion attempt?

Engage and assess the ability to participate rather than starting from a position that if a person seems unwell or is drunk or high that diversion is impossible. Yes, there will be instances where diversion is impossible in the moment, but you may be pleasantly surprised at how much can be accomplished with diversion even if the person does not seem to be sober or well.

What if it is late at night when the household comes looking for service?

Every person and situation is different. That said, most of the time if a person, couple or family is seeking shelter services late in the evening or overnight, there are limited attempts at diversion or no attempts at diversion in the moment. Instead, helping the household feel safe and addressing their immediate needs like a bed, food and clothing is appropriate. If the conversation moves into the realm of rapid resolution in the following days, that is fine.

If we are already really busy, how are we supposed to work diversion into our day?

If/when there are staff dedicated to diversion, it can be easier than having existing intake or shelter floor staff trying to engage in diversion on top of everything else in the shelter. Consider, however, that it can be of the best interest to the household and to your shelter operation to invest time at the “front door” rather than is likely measured in minutes or hours rather than focusing on outflow from shelter later that is likely measured in days, weeks or months. More time invested up front can save time later, and is likely to reduce the trauma that often comes with experiencing homelessness and staying in a shelter for the first time.

Are there times when prevention turns into diversion turns into rapid resolution?

Yes! And that’s okay! If prevention is unsuccessful, we transition to diversion. If diversion is unsuccessful, we embrace rapid resolution. None of these are failures per se, but rather the workflow in trying to assist the household avoid homelessness, or to decrease their length of time experiencing homelessness.

Diversion Practice - Case Studies

For each case study, you may find it beneficial to focus on three questions to prepare for or improve your practice of diversion:

- How would you engage?
- What might you ask?
- In which ways might you assist?

CASE STUDY 1

Cathy and Bill, and their two dogs, were staying with Cathy's aunt. The aunt, who is elderly, no longer wants them at her place because of Bill's heavy drinking.

CASE STUDY 2

Anton was renting a small apartment. His landlord evicted him for noise/guest issues. Today is his first day without a place to live in his entire life. You encounter him on the street, as Anton knows nothing about shelters or the shelter system.

CASE STUDY 3

Charlie had a screaming match with his landlord. Charlie says his landlord told him he had to leave immediately, could never come back, and that all of his stuff will be tossed.

CASE STUDY 4

Monique came to the shelter looking for a bed. It has been several years since Monique experienced housing instability. She was staying at her brother's place, but the brother and Monique got into an argument about Monique's alleged lack of cleanliness and poor hygiene. She left her brother's place and came immediately to the shelter she stayed at years before.

CASE STUDY 5

Archer is 17. After an argument with his parents about his pot smoking, he was told he had to leave the house and "never come back". A friend of a friend tells Archer to call the shelter to ask for a bed. You answer the phone at the shelter.

CHAPTER 4: FOLLOW-UP SUPPORTS FOR ENHANCED HOUSING STABILITY

When and How to Provide Follow-Up Supports

A focus on supporting highly vulnerable households in a prevention program naturally results in the need to revise the type, intensity and frequency of follow-up support provision to ensure homelessness prevention via increased housing stability. For this reason, a tiered approach to prevention service delivery makes sense for many agencies dedicated to reducing inflow into the homelessness response system.

Tier One Prevention involves low intensity supports to low-income households facing immediate/imminent eviction due to unpaid rent and/or housing costs that meet the eligibility criteria (income, eviction notices, unexpected circumstances, etc.) for eviction prevention services. This service more often follows the traditional eviction prevention approach that aligns with a poverty alleviation strategy than a homelessness prevention strategy. In some communities, access to Tier One prevention services is triggered by community legal services that have identified that the current eviction process can be successfully resolved with one-time financial assistance to offset arrears. Follow-up supports for these households are generally limited to a phone or in-person check-in during the 30-60 days following the eviction prevention service to ensure that the tenancy is progressing without any additional problems.

Tier Two Prevention services involve moderate intensity services for moderate risk households targeted for prevention supports in the community due to such prioritization criteria as low income and spending more than 50% or more on housing costs; one previous experience of hidden homelessness and/or demonstrating some of the life circumstances experienced by your local sheltered and unsheltered population. For households that identified for Tier Two prevention supports, households will likely receive financial assistance to offset arrears plus ongoing housing stability and/or tenancy management supports for 6-8 weeks. These support services can be delivered office-based, home-based and/or within community.

Tier Three Prevention services involve specialized, high intensity supports for households with multiple, co-occurring conditions impacting their ability to gain/maintain housing, have experienced homelessness before (and may have been previously supported by a dedicated re-housing program) and therefore are at the highest risk of entering/re-entering literal homelessness. Tier Three supports provide the most flexible and deepest level of financial assistance (including referrals for direct payment mechanisms or trustee supports) plus follow-up case management supports and/or housing location supports that are provided to the household for 3-5 months to ensure a return to housing stability, without re/entry into literal homelessness.

Ideally, Tier Two and Three follow-up supports will be delivered in the clients current housing as well as other natural, community-based settings. For households that are staying with family and friends - permanently or temporarily - prevention specialists are encouraged to provide housing-based supports to ensure that the needs of both the client and the host household can be addressed in real-time. Higher intensity, higher frequency and longer duration supports provided to households demonstrating high vulnerability to enter/return to homelessness will align with Housing First approaches and will ensure that crisis planning, money management, risk assessments and guest management issues are addressed within a strength-based approach. When possible, other community agencies supporting Tier Two and Three households will be involved in case planning, provision of wrap-a-round supports and potential re-activation of participation in dedicated re-housing programs, when possible.

Differing Levels of Follow-Up Supports

As is expected, the needs of each household are unique and therefore an efficient assessment of their housing and supports needs will prove to be important as service providers explore crisis intervention and housing focused problem solving to prevent literal homelessness. The below description of household acuity levels and corresponding support focus for support workers is provided to assist communities in ensuring that P, D and RR activities are effectively targeting those households who need them the most.

Description of High and Moderate Support Provision

Individuals & Families Demonstrating the Greatest Risk for Homelessness

Likely Characteristics of these Households

- Economic poverty & greater time since sustainable, formal employment
- Confusion and frustration by state of housing precarity
- Some more acute disturbances and demands of staff time
- Goals and priorities may shift
- Contemplation may be more likely regarding housing stability issues
- May feel sense of panic to be “normal”
- Learning strategies to deal with adversity
- Likely to follow through and attend appointments, though can need assistance in establishing appointments
- Routines starting to set in, though some of those routines can work against long term housing stability
- Increased awareness of triggers and situations that lead to housing instability

Support Focus for Workers:

- **Expect longer interactions about once per week for the first 2 months**
- Be prepared to address clients who disengage in the support process because of frustration
- Present new ideas for housing stability frequently until you find a pathway that sticks
- Be explicit on what they are expected to do on their own and what they will be aided with while moving toward housing stability
- Develop strategies to deal with conflict and adversity
- Have client engage in their own research about options relative to the service plan
- Begin to use visual tools more to show progress
- Use active listening & motivational interviewing, with some assertive engagement as necessary

In this group of homelessness prevention clients, **top priority** is established for households receiving financial and follow-up assistance: If any of these households experienced homelessness in their past, it is recommended that financial supports are used to remove imminent eviction concern and then connect once every 2 weeks with lower intensity supports for the next couple of

months to ensure stability has been regained. See description of low intensive supports below.

It must be acknowledged that for households with multiple co-occurring risks to their housing stability, follow-up support services will be more intensive, frequent and will likely continue for approximately 3-4 months. Where appropriate and feasible, these households would reactivate their connection to Rapid Re-Housing Programs if they participated in these dedicated supports previously (exited within the last 6 months and dependent on caseload vacancies). If no such program attachment existed previously, housing stabilization supports should resemble intensive support programming for high acuity households (detailed below). Ideally, these housing stability supports will be delivered by dedicated prevention/diversion workers that will customize individual service plans based on insights gleaned through ongoing reassessments that monitor housing and support needs.

Description of Low Intensity Support Provision Individuals & Families Demonstrating Lower Risk of Homelessness

Likely Characteristics of these Households:

- Economic poverty, but usually with some connection to income supports and adaptive history of maintaining life stability despite poverty
- Laments gap between income and available affordable housing
- Less likely to be demanding of staff time or to be involved in incidents, which makes it easier to fall between the cracks
- More prone to enter preparation and action stages of change to ensure long term housing stability
- Can navigate both government and non-profit systems of support with little support
- Has strategies for dealing with adversity and conflict
- Has knowledge and skills to independently manage tenancy independently if the tenancy can be secured

Support Focus for Workers:

- **Expect longer interactions once every two weeks, with shorter engagement in between possible**
- Be explicit on what they are expected to do on their own and what they will be aided with while moving toward housing

- Motivational interviewing will be key to evoke change
- Maintain/increase use of mainstream resources to resolve situation
- Review challenging situations and barriers and ask client to develop strategies to overcome these
- Expect client to engage in their own housing research, when motivated to do so

CHAPTER FOUR: IMPACT METRICS & QUALITY ASSURANCE

Measuring Your Positive Impact

Prevention and Diversion activities reduce the trauma and the cost of literal homelessness when they are effective, efficient and the impacts are enduring. The following questions should guide agency efforts to improve local activities:

Are We Effective?

Service providers know that their housing problem solving has been effective when households that are at high risk of experiencing homelessness find safe, appropriate housing without entering and emergency shelter or having to stay outside. Effectiveness is about understanding how many people are exiting prevention and diversion services for positive housing destinations like housing or reunification with friends or family when it is safe and appropriate to do so. The intention is to help as many households as possible in achieving the aim of avoiding literal homelessness for a positive, safe destination within community.

Are We Efficient?

Service providers know that their housing problem solving has been efficient when the households at the greatest risk of entering sheltered or unsheltered homelessness are assisted to avoid literal homelessness with the least amount of resources required to assist them in finding a safe and appropriate housing option in community. Efficiency examines resources allocated and the length of follow-up services that ensure that highly vulnerable households are supported to stabilize. Examining the mean and median of support times compared to household needs, the overall intention is to get housing precarity time as short as possible, with people exiting prevention and diversion for positive destinations.

Are We Enduring?

Prevention and Diversion Specialists strive for lasting positive housing outcomes for households served. Understanding how many people supported via prevention and diversion activities stay housed and do not enter literal homelessness in the future provides an important program and system performance measure. For evidence informed prevention and diversion programs, the priority is also to ensure that as many formerly homeless people

served previously by the re-housing programs locally remain housed in the community (enhance the homelessness proofing activities for this highly vulnerable households) and do not re-enter the homelessness response system. The higher the percentage of households retaining housing, the better.

Data Metrics

A strong outcome focus on preventing literal homelessness (including a re-entry into homelessness for households previously supported by dedicated re-housing programs forms the foundation for a robust and reliable Homelessness Management Information System to measure both current progress in stemming the inflow into the homelessness response system and the challenges to prevention and diversion service delivery. Beyond demographic data quality, a high-functioning HMIS maximizes the potential for easily accessible, dynamic performance measurement toward increasing permanent housing destinations, reducing future experiences of homelessness, and reducing the length of time people experience severe housing precarity throughout the State.

HMIS reporting to better meet prevention and diversion reporting and analysis needs would benefit from customized Prevention and Diversion reports for the State-wide partners. Ideally, this will include a foundational “persons/households served” report with each of the following sections. Additional data fields can be added in the future to improve strategic analysis and planning for enhancements:

Who is currently experiencing imminent risk of entering literal homelessness and therefore accessing Prevention and Diversion services

- HMIS ID Number (“Client ID”)
- Household ID Number (“Household ID” which will be blank if representing a single individual, but could be from previous stays not associated with current/recent entries/exits, and necessary for comparing past results)
- Group ID Number (“Group ID” which will be blank for single individuals but link households to the specific provider entries)

Where they currently access prevention and diversion services (allowing for multiple or single providers to be included)

- Entry/Exit Provider (“Entry Provider ID”) for

When they engage with Prevention and Diversion Services (allowing for multiple or single interactions)

- Entry Date
- Exit Date (if applicable)
- Destination at Exit (if applicable)

Demographics

- Age at Entry
- HUD Primary Race
- HUD Secondary Race
- HUD Ethnicity

Prevention & Prevention Dashboard Can Be Added Here If Permission Provided by Family Promise

Prevention and Diversion Logic Models

Clients Served in Prevention Program	<p>Individuals/families that are assessed as being at imminent/high risk of becoming homeless, are provided with assistance and supports to maintain housing.</p> <p>Households that have previous homelessness experiences will be prioritized for service and support.</p>
Service Model Minimums	<p>Prevention activities encompass the following key components:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Homelessness Prevention opportunities are examined for all individuals/families seeking assistance due to a current housing crisis. 2. Service aligns with Housing First approach by incorporating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ No housing readiness requirements: no assumptions/judgements made regarding who can be assisted in finding/maintaining safe housing location. ✓ Self-determination and participant choice. ✓ Recovery (from housing crisis) orientation. ✓ Individualized and creative problem solving and planning. ✓ Promotion of social and community integration 3. Any support provision, file documentation and case planning activities and approaches will align with professional standards of care 4. Service demonstrates low barrier, recovery oriented, trauma informed and harm reducing approaches (including overdose prevention and response strategies) in service delivery and client engagement 5. Safety determination occurs, as part of standardized intake/assessment 6. Delivery of financial and/or service supports are provided, when available and appropriate, based on the results of a standardized risk and needs assessment.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. After initial contact, brief follow-up supports are provided to maintain housing stability, when appropriate. 8. Where appropriate, brief housing stability supports are delivered in vivo (home and community based, not office based)
Performance Indicators	<p>Minimum Performance:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 90% of caseload capacity is optimized 2. # and % clients presenting for service 3. # of clients where homelessness prevention supports/resources are implemented 4. 85% of clients maintain housing for 1 year after intervention 5. 85% of clients exiting prevention go/maintain positive housing destinations 6. Less than 15% of clients receiving prevention interventions enter homeless serving system
Outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 80% of clients receiving prevention services avoid literal homelessness (do not enter/re-enter homeless response system) 2. Enhanced recovery domains of health, safety, financial stability (including income, education and/or employment) and community connection.

Clients Served in Diversion Services	<p>Individuals/families that have safe and appropriate alternatives to homeless services, including shelters, should be supported in achieving those alternatives. The goal of avoiding the trauma of literal homelessness, when safe and appropriate to do so, governs the work completed by staff.</p>
Service Model Minimums	<p>Diversion activities encompass the following key components:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Shelter diversion process is completed prior to shelter admission or within 24 hours of shelter admission 2. Service aligns with Housing First approach by incorporating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ No housing readiness requirements: not assumptions/judgements made regarding who can be assisted in finding safe housing location. ✓ Self-determination and participant choice. ✓ Recovery (from housing crisis) orientation. ✓ Individualized and creative problem solving and planning. ✓ Promotion of natural supports when safe and appropriate to foster social and community integration 3. Service demonstrates low barrier, recovery oriented, trauma informed and harm reducing approaches (including overdose prevention and response strategies) in service delivery and client engagement 4. Safety determination occurs, as part of standardized intake/assessment 5. Understanding of previous night's location and ability to return if safe and appropriate to do so 6. Exploration of alternative locations that may be safer or more appropriate <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. If safe, appropriate option available in community, brief follow-up supports are provided to maintain housing stability, when appropriate. b. Where appropriate, brief housing stability supports are delivered in vivo (home and community based, not office based)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7. If no safe, appropriate location alternatives identified, briefly explore underlying presenting issues 8. Housing plan initiated if diversion is unsuccessful and/or shelter admission occurs 9. Refer to shelter options, when available and appropriate
Performance Indicators	<p><i>Minimum Performance:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. # and % clients presenting for service 2. # of clients where diversion is implemented 3. # and % of clients safely diverted from shelter admission 4. # and % of clients initially diverted from shelter admission that subsequently return for subsequent diversion 5. # and % of clients initially diverted that subsequently return and enter homeless services
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 30% of clients seeking admission to shelter/homeless services can have their needs met safely and appropriately without entering shelter/ homeless services system 2. Enhanced recovery domains of health, safety, financial stability (including income, education and/or employment) and community connection.

APPENDIX A

Homelessness Prevention Activities Sample of Tools and Resources

Michigan-Based Resources + Samples from Other Communities

APPENDIX B

Shelter Diversion Activities Sample of Tools and Resources

Michigan-Based Resources + Samples from Other Communities

APPENDIX C

Housing Problem Solving & Relevant Information

Sample of Tools and Resources

Michigan-Based Resources + Samples from Other Communities