Pathways to Housing Security in Washington State
FACILITATED DISCUSSION 3: Connecting Housing Security and Economic Security
August 15, 2023   9:00AM-1:00PM (online)

The Washington State Legislature has tasked the Ruckelshaus Center to facilitate discussions to inform principles, options, and recommendations for a long-term statewide strategy for housing security. This is part of a project described in Section 6 of House Bill 1277 and on the project page.

In August 2023, the Center is bringing together a broad range of participants in guided discussions about options that have emerged from previous interviews and small group discussions. The purpose of these workshops is to react to and refine **options for how state policies, resources, and other supports can best contribute to sustained progress toward housing security.** Each workshop is focused on a theme, while holding the whole picture of housing security in mind. For a list of themes and to register for other workshops, go to this link.[1]

After these discussions, a draft of guiding principles and recommendations will be developed. Feedback will then be gathered through virtual and in-person workshops in September. A final report is due on December 1, 2023.

UNDERLYING PREMISE FOR RESPONDING HOLISTICALLY TO PEOPLE'S NEEDS

Housing security is advanced when there is availability and affordability of housing for low- and middle-income individuals and households, housing is stabilized when it becomes precarious, homelessness is prevented when possible, and experiences of homelessness are mitigated as quickly as possible.

A holistic view of homelessness and housing instability recognizes that multiple interacting factors contribute to produce both statewide patterns and individual experiences of housing insecurity. Strategies to change structural, economic, and social factors will be key to a long-term response to housing insecurity. These include the shortage of affordable housing; local land use and planning policies; income and wealth inequality; overreliance on the criminal justice system to address homelessness; and structural racism and other forms of historic and current systemic disadvantage.

The narrative that individual failings are a cause of housing instability and homelessness is outdated and unsubstantiated. It is structural, economic, and social factors that create and exacerbate individual circumstances to make some people more susceptible to housing insecurity than others. Thus, in parallel with structural change it remains necessary to directly address and mitigate those individual circumstances, such as lack of access to adequate wage jobs; lack of access to care for those experiencing behavioral health needs, substance use disorders, chronic illness, or disability; experiences of domestic instability, conflict or violence; or transitions between systems such as foster care, hospitalization, or incarceration.

A person's ability to access and sustain housing necessitates attention to the availability of and their access to the support called for based on their specific circumstances. Therefore, a strategy needs to connect actions and resources related to multiple factors beyond housing in mutually beneficial ways.

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[1] https://ruckelshauscenter.wsu.edu/projects/current-projects/pathways-to-housing-security/2023-housing-security-workshops/

EMERGING OPTIONS FOR RESPONDING HOLISTICALLY TO PEOPLE'S NEEDS

SUPPORT A PERSON-CENTERED RESPONSE TO HOUSING INSECURITY

Option 3-1 (Matching Housing to People): Support and encourage varied housing placement options and pathways for those who are experiencing homelessness, and better match residents to their types and level of need and their preferences.[2]

A variety of facilities, structures, and types of requirements and supports are necessary to make it possible to stabilize people based on their circumstances, needs, and preferences — therefore facilitating their pathway to housing security.

Examples of desired variety include having both low barrier and conditional models; both permanent supportive housing for those with complex needs and temporary transitional housing for those awaiting longer term housing options; both individual placements and joint placements for those who are socially connected; both individual housing and shared living alternatives; and both renting and home ownership. Other examples of identified needs for housing options include recovery housing; medical respite and recuperative care facilities; housing responsive to specific needs such as those who are pregnant or caring for infants, youth, older adults, people living with disabilities, or people affected by domestic violence; and residential care facilities for those whose complexity of need is more than can be met in permanent supportive housing.

Option 3-2 (Person-Centered Coordination): Evolve current case management and care navigation efforts into a cross-sector navigation system that responds to the specific needs of individuals and households and follows them longitudinally as those needs evolve.

Currently people and providers experience a great deal of difficulty connecting across different services and disparate systems for health, behavioral health, social, economic, and other kinds of support. A more person-centered approach would strive to align the system to people's lived experiences rather than expecting people to organize their engagement according to the way the system is structured.

Desired features of coordination include, for example, assigning long term culturally sensitive and trauma-informed navigators, avoiding repeated eligibility and enrollment paperwork, redesigning administrative processes to minimize burden and maximize relationship building, funding organizations for the time it takes to build relationships across different parts of the system, providing some funds that follow a person across systems and services, expanding peer support programs, increasing flexibility around logistical and other systems barriers people face in getting assistance, and completing referrals with direct handoffs between providers.

A potential approach is to create a navigator role whose funding, infrastructure, and entry point are not tied to any one service, program, or government agency. The scope and relationships of such navigators would facilitate understanding of and access to eligible services, referrals; integrate support for multiple needs over time; help coordinate teams of providers; and provide continuous follow-up that is inclusive of and tailored to what each client on their roster specifically needs.

Option 3-3 (Holistic Eligibility): Reconfigure eligibility criteria using a cross-sector, multifactorial, periodic assessment designed to help people access the supports they need over time to synergistically stabilize their housing, health, behavioral health, and socioeconomic circumstances.

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[2] This is the same as Option 1-2 discussed on August 9 under the theme of *Meeting Needs Along the Housing Continuum*.

Option 3-4 (Stabilize Precarious Housing): Support individuals or households when circumstances destabilize their current housing and contribute to risk of entering or returning to homelessness.[3]

> *To achieve the comprehensive goal of advancing housing security, there needs to be expanded investments that stabilize people who currently have housing. This stabilization is its own key outcome for housing security; it has a mutual benefit as an intervention to prevent homelessness in some cases, whether for those whose acute experience of homelessness has been mitigated with a transition into longer term housing or for those whose housing is precarious and insecure.*
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> *One desired approach to stabilize precarious housing is to support people in accessing available services and resources related to the specific ongoing factors that make it difficult for them to sustain stable housing in the context of their circumstances. Suggested examples of this include employment support; income assistance; child care; education opportunities; life skills coaching; health insurance and access to health and behavioral health care; financial services; and legal representation. Another desired approach is to provide bridging grants or loans for unanticipated expenses that may supersede making rent or mortgage payments on time, such as unexpected home maintenance or auto repairs, medical expenses, job loss or reduction, parking and other fines and fees, and pending utility disconnection.*

Option 3-5 (Availability of Services): Expand the availability and accessibility of appropriate services to match people's needs.

> *Better navigation, holistic eligibility, and stabilization of precarious housing can only contribute to housing security if resources, services and supports are available in proportion to the need.*

FOSTER A HOLISTICALLY CAPABLE WORKFORCE

Option 3-6 (Working Conditions): Improve working conditions and supports for the workforce who directly provide homeless services and housing assistance.

> *Addressing concerns about the wellbeing of the workforce who implement the response to homelessness and housing instability is critical to achieving the goal of advancing housing security.*
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> *For strategies to support the workforce, the report of this work will cross-reference the recent report "Supporting homeless service provider workers experiencing workplace trauma in Washington state". Focused on direct service staff who work in homeless shelters, homeless outreach, and permanent supportive housing, the report offers recommendations to help ensure that the people who provide assistance to some of the most vulnerable residents in Washington can do so in an environment that supports their wellbeing.*

Option 3-7 (Core Competencies): Establish universal core competencies in culturally responsive, anti-racism, and trauma-informed principles for providers, administrators, and leaders across sectors, and regularly provide the training needed to put those competencies into practice.

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[3] This is a version of Option 1-3 discussed on August 9 under the theme of *Meeting Needs Along the Housing Continuum* and Option 2-3 discussed on August 10 under the theme of *Connecting Housing Security and Economic Security*.

Option 3-8 (Hire for Experiential Expertise): Employ people in the housing response who have experienced homelessness or housing instability.[4]

> *People who have experienced homelessness and housing instability have significant relevant experience and expertise to contribute to implementing the response to housing insecurity, and they are also more likely to be able to connect with people currently experiencing homelessness or housing instability. That shared connection and empathy is important to effectively reach and engage people authentically and to build the trust needed to foster stability.*

> *There are particular challenges in implementing this option. One is wages that are not adequate to afford their housing but may put their eligibility for services at risk. Another is when a history with the criminal justice system excludes people from employment. A process for facilitating exemptions to hiring restrictions on jobs in housing assistance would help to advance housing security by being able to consider an untapped pool of job candidates with valuable experiential and peer support expertise.*

CULTIVATE COOPERATION AMONG SYSTEMS

Option 3-9 (Cooperation among Services and Sectors): Support closer cooperation at all levels of the response among agencies, programs, and services that provide interdependent forms of assistance.[5]

> *At the level of state and local governments, closer coordination could help ensure mutually beneficial strategy, planning, policy, and funding allocations. It would also improve clarity and consistency about terminology, rules, regulations, implementation of new initiatives, and systems for performance management and accountability. At the level of service provision, examples of desired approaches include bolstering support for navigators who work across sectors and over time and reducing duplicative eligibility determination processes.*

> *Other forms of support from the state could come as investments in relationship building among local implementing organizations, including in neighboring jurisdictions when needed, and increasing engagement across the state and local levels. For example, dedicated "field officers" could work as liaisons to help with alignment across state agencies whose work relates to housing security, with a focus on engaging and exchanging information with local service provides and with people experiencing homelessness and housing instability.*

Option 3-10 (Align Policymaking): Assess laws and policies in all areas of government for the potential to affect housing security, and assess housing laws and policies for their potential to affect interrelated goals in other areas.

> *The interdependencies between housing security and many other policy goals, such as economic security, health and wellbeing, and safety, means that policies in these areas do not operate in isolation from each other. A strategy for housing security will rely on cooperative assessments in other policy areas, and those who make housing policy need to be as willing to assess for alignment with the needs of other domains.*

> *Assessing laws and policies for their potential to leverage mutual benefits would include, for example, Identifying, tracking, and mitigating potential unintended or counterproductive consequences and estimating how investments in one sector or domain contribute to cost savings in other sectors or domains.*

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[4] This is the same as Option 2-5 discussed on August 10 under the theme of *Connecting Housing Security and Economic Security*.
[5] This is a version of Option 2-6 discussed on August 10 under the theme of *Connecting Housing Security and Economic Security*.