

THE WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Pathways to Housing Security in Washington State

FACILITATED DISCUSSION: Meeting Needs Along the Housing Continuum

August 9, 2023

12:30PM-4:30PM (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, draft 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 THE HOUSING CONTINUUM

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

Effective programs or policies anywhere on this continuum ultimately depend on the state of the rest of the continuum. The level of complexity everywhere on the continuum necessitates investment in multiple coordinated and cooperative approaches, some with short term and some with long term returns.

EMERGENT OPTIONS FOR MEETING NEEDS ALONG THE HOUSING CONTINUUM

MITIGATE ACUTE HOMELESSNESS

Option 1-1 (Temporary Shelter): Expand the quality, variety, and volume of supported options for immediate, temporary shelter in response to the acute homelessness crisis while linking those options as directly as possible to longer term housing options.

The scale and urgency of the homelessness crisis necessitates difficult choices across equally important factors that can sometimes be in conflict, especially scale, speed, and quality. Perspectives differ widely about what achieves sufficient quality, and careful and transparent consideration is needed for choices that will inevitably be necessary but not adequate. Variety and flexibility in what can be funded helps better match local investments to individual and community perspectives on quality and helps expand the possibilities in navigating tradeoffs between quality on the one hand and speed and scale on the other.

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

Examples of the variety desired to temporarily shelter those experiencing homelessness include 24/7 and continuous stay facilities in various configurations; day shelters; overnight shelters; safer encampments with more services; coordinated placements for families and other socially linked people; and support to mitigate the burden on friends and family who temporarily house people.

Supporting explicit and transparent cooperation between the acute response and progress on longer term options will help ensure that acute solutions are not being developed in lieu of long-term ones and also that long term aspirations do not inadvertently get in the way of acute needs.

Option 1-2 (Housing Placement): 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 to their preferences.

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 and temporary transitional support into stable housing; 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.

An effective housing response necessitates that well-implemented low barrier options be available as entry points for those who, in their current circumstances, would otherwise have no option.

STABILIZE CURRENT HOUSING

Option 1-3 (At-Risk Households): Support individuals or households in meeting unanticipated or excessive expenses that destabilize their housing and contribute to risk of entering or returning to homelessness.

Reducing acute homelessness garners a lot of warranted attention in the response to housing needs, yet for the comprehensive goal of advancing housing security, there is also a need to expand investments that stabilize people whose current housing is at risk. This stabilization is its own key outcome for housing security; it has a mutual benefit as an intervention to prevent homelessness in some cases.

One desired approach to stabilize current housing is to create or expand bridging grants or loans for circumstances that temporarily make it difficult for individuals or households to make rent or mortgage payments on time, such as unexpected home or auto repairs, medical expenses, job loss or reduction, parking and other fines and fees, and pending utility disconnection. Another approach is to provide education and coaching on financial planning skills, home maintenance, and navigating access to available supports and resources.

Option 1-4 (Eviction and Defaults): Shift from policies that merely prohibit eviction to add comprehensive eviction prevention strategies that mitigate the reasons for and impacts of impending eviction for tenants, neighbors, and landlords.

Stabilizing current housing requires access, stability, and safety for renters and homeowners; safety for neighboring tenants or owners; and stability for landlords and lenders of subsidized and affordable housing.

A desired strategy for housing security is to increase the availability of a first line response that does not treat these multiple needs as inherently in conflict. This strategy could include for example, ensuring access to educational and support services that promote both responsible tenants and responsible landlords, relationship building between tenants and landlords, mediation services, subsidizing lost rent and damage costs that can occur during mediation or eviction proceedings, and providing bridge loans or grants that help prevent evictions due to lack of payment (see option 1-3).

This shift does not preclude the ongoing need for formal eviction processes for landlords nor for legal protections for tenants, to be used in cases that cannot be resolved through prevention strategies or in which power imbalances are leveraged to exploit people who are vulnerable.

Option 1-5 (Preserve Housing Stock): Allocate more funds to be used for operations and maintenance to preserve the current stock of subsidized and affordable housing.

Option 1-6 (Local Landlords): Support local landlords with risk mitigation and tailored incentives to participate in sustaining a robust stock of high-quality local affordable housing.

INCREASE SUPPLY OF AND ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Option 1-7 (Alignment with AHAB Advisory Plan): Adopt cooperative strategies that align housing assistance with increasing the supply of affordable housing for renting and ownership.

For options related to affordable housing, the report of this work will cross-reference the Affordable Housing Advisory Board's forthcoming updated plan and encourage alignment and coordination between the approach to affordable housing and the other parts of the housing continuum. It is anticipated that the AHAB plan will include policy recommendations related to identified housing barriers, developed through an extensive information gathering and deliberative process. The issue areas covered include, for example, funding, land, local approvals, regulation, infrastructure, construction cost, expiring affordability, lack of affordable homeownership, financing options, and manufactured home community vulnerability.

Additional desired areas of emphasis that would complement the advisory plan include:

Option 1-7a: In addition to alternatives to traditional housing such as accessory dwelling units, manufactured, and modular homes, support infrastructure and policies to add and improve spaces and services for those who reside permanently in recreational vehicles.

Option 1-7b: Increase diversity and cooperation among builders and developers in the public, nonprofit and private sector with the potential to contribute to growth in affordable housing.

The scale of the need for affordable housing necessitates an all-hands-on-deck approach, which will be more readily achieved by shifting from restrictive funding competitions to approaches that leverage all available capacity and capital in recruiting builders, developers, and housing providers.

This does not preclude the important goal of diversity and rebalancing historic disparities in the recipients of funding. It encourages a shift to achieve this through additive rather than exclusionary strategies such as expanding funding opportunities, explicitly facilitating inclusion, building technical capacity, and matching partners with complementary capacities.

Option 1-8 (Equitable Access): Ensure equitable access to affordable housing for those transitioning from homelessness and most at risk of housing instability.

Increasing the supply of affordable housing is its own key outcome for housing security, and there is widespread agreement that it is also critical to mitigating homelessness – yet there is concern that it is not sufficient. Increasing affordable housing supply needs to be paired with explicit strategies for equitable access. Examples of desired approaches to facilitate access include providing navigators who work across the housing continuum (see option 1-10); covering up-front housing application and deposit expenses; credit repair services; financial planning and education; subsidizing, insuring or providing no or low-interest loans; supporting alternatives to traditional lending, and reducing barriers—such as criminal history—to access.

Strategies to facilitate access designed for those currently and historically least well served, most marginalized, and most excluded from current housing options is often likely to ultimately facilitate access universally for those in need of housing assistance. Conversely, designing access mostly around the

circumstances of the majority of cases of housing insecurity can perpetuate current inequities and exclusion.² While many hold the perspective that some exclusionary policies are warranted for some circumstances, in practice these policies — without alternate strategies for housing options that include those circumstances — are directly counterproductive to the goal of advancing housing security.

CONNECTIONS ALONG THE CONTINUUM

Option 1-9 (Coordinated Entry): Clarify policies, practices, and criteria for the coordinated entry system, with improved communication and engagement from the state and increased support for facilitated cooperation among participating organizations.

Option 1-10 (Coordinated Pathway): Create a coordinated pathway system that follows individuals and households from entry through placement and stability in long term housing.

Advancing housing security requires not only housing options along the continuum but also support for people to successfully move along that continuum. Currently people experience a great deal of difficulty getting from step to step across different providers and disparate systems. Desired features of such a pathway system include, for example, extending the allowable duration of transitional housing and supports, sliding scale eligibility to enable gradual transitions, assigning long term culturally sensitive and trauma-informed navigators who work across systems and services, avoiding repeated enrollment processes, including peer support, increased flexibility around logistical barriers people face in getting assistance, and completing referrals with direct handoffs between providers.

In addition to improving navigation for people experiencing homelessness and housing instability, a coordinated pathway system would foster connections across different aspects of the housing response. Support from the state could come as investments in relationship building among local implementing organizations and increasing engagement across the state and local levels. For example, dedicated “housing security 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 providers and with people experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

Option 1-11 (Cooperation Across Jurisdictions): Incentivize greater cooperation across geographic and political jurisdictions.

A widely recognized barrier to statewide progress is the potential for a local response to displace rather than resolve local housing challenges. That pattern could be interrupted by requiring cooperation across jurisdictions, which could take various forms from improved communication to coordination to collaboration.

Option 1-12 (Geographic Equity): Support the response in diverse geographies equitably.

Localities with widely variable population sizes, densities and housing markets all currently struggle with housing challenges. Equitably supporting them does not necessarily mean support that is proportionate to the number or percentage of population experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

For example, some issues manifest differently in different places and therefore require different strategies that may be more or less costly. Some comparable strategies cost more on a smaller scale or in different contexts. Some places experience overflow effects from rising housing costs and increasing rates of housing insecurity in other localities.

To be effective statewide, the housing response needs to transparently assess, track and accommodate these variations and avoid moving housing challenges from place to place.

² This aligns with the most recent federal strategic plan’s adoption of a “[targeted universalism](https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism)”² framework (<https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism>).