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Housing First Issue Brief

Services + Housing and a Housing First approach is an effective solution to address chronic homelessness.

Colorado Springs' population is approximately 493,554 (July 2024) and according to the State of CO Dept. of Local Affairs we had approximately 6,846 individuals (children, youth and adults) experiencing homelessness. Of these, 1,631 were identified as chronically homeless. Chronic homelessness is defined by the US Dept. of Housing and Urban Development as twelve months of continuous homelessness or twelve months over three years. This data has been assembled by the entities participating in a unified database called Colorado Homeless Management Information System. It is the best tool that we have that aggregates data in the same manner across our state. This is important to help us define the problem. This means in El Paso County we are striving to address the needs of 13% of the individuals experiencing homelessness in our state. This is a manageable goal for us to address. Solutions to address homelessness are diverse and have different levels of effectiveness for different populations. These solutions include street outreach, emergency shelter transitional housing, rapid rehousing, Services + Housing (formerly called permanent supportive housing), and diversion. Transitional housing can also take many forms using high barrier, low barrier, or recovery-based approaches. This issue brief will attempt to define, provide evidence and promote the continuation of one approach to mitigate homelessness: Housing + Services.

Definition:

Services + Housing (formerly called permanent supportive housing)

Services + Housing (SH) is a housing solution generally reserved for individuals who have a disability which can either be a severe mental illness, an addiction, or a cognitive or physical disability. SH also uses an income eligibility test. All participants have to verify annual income and disclose any form of income whether it is a cash benefit like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance, Aid to the Needy Disabled, a pension, Supplemental Security Income, or earned income from an employer. Only individuals or households that *earn less than 30% of Annual Median Income* are eligible. For Colorado Springs in

December 2024 that was: \$21,840 for a single adult, \$28,080 for a three-member household.

It can be delivered in two generally accepted methods: scattered site or single site. Usually, SH is also paired with a “housing first approach.” Services + Housing households who enroll in this program acquire housing and sign a lease with a property in their own name and pay for it through a combination of their own income and a rental subsidy issued by HUD, the State of CO, or a local housing authority (also usually funded by HUD). The services are case management, resource and referral and wrap around services delivered by a combination of professional staff from the host organization or the grantee from HUD and usually combine with additional supportive services from community-based organizations in deep collaboration with the lead service provider.

Housing First: a method to engage individuals experiencing homelessness and provide housing without preconditions and a low barrier to entry with the offer of supportive services through continuous engagement and direct contact with clients. Case Managers build relationships with their clients during the housing navigation phase and lease up and then maintain a relationship with their clients using a progressive engagement model to maintain the relationship. The pair develop goals and work overtime together to increase the client’s stability, income and health.

Low-Barrier: Service providers do not require sobriety, treatment for mental illness, or employment prior to being entered into an SH program. However, service providers do work to acquire government issued identification, birth certificates and proof of identity which are generally required by the voucher administrator agency and a property management company.

DATA:

This issue brief will use local data from Colorado Springs to demonstrate that a SH model of programming utilizing a housing first approach has lifted over xx of our local citizens out of homelessness. To recap, In December 2024, El Paso County counted

6,846 people experiencing homelessness.

Of this number,

4915 (72%) were single adult households

449 (7%) were family households

568 (8%) were youth households

710 (10%) were Veterans

821 (12%) were under the age of 18 years

410 (6%) are over the age of 65 years

3,376 (49%) reported a disability

1,268 (19%) were newly homeless that year

Of the 6,846 people,

4,107 (60%) were white/Caucasian

1,273 (19%) were Black/African American

1,362 (20%) were Hispanic

5,367 (78%) were Non-Hispanic

Narrative:

There are many contributing factors to a person becoming unhoused: financial, social/emotional, and health related. These need to be further unpacked to understand the intersectionality of all of these factors.

Financial: a person's ability to earn an annual income that keeps pace with the cost of housing in a community is directly tied to education and workforce participation. Education and training is also tied to the person's ability to graduate high school, become employed, participate in vocational training or post-secondary education to earn an hourly wage that sustains housing. According to the 2024 report from The National Low Income Housing Coalition, a person would need to earn \$33.35/hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment that costs on average \$1,734 per month. This is determined through the lens that a person should not pay over 30% of their annual income on housing. If the person only earned minimum wage job (\$14.42/hr) then they would have to work 2.3 jobs to afford the rent. According to the Pikes Peak Housing Network, 52% of rented households in El Paso County are spending over 30% of their income on housing.

Social/Emotional: a person's ability to maintain a job and social and family relationships can be frayed by peer mental health and frayed family relationships. Housing instability, erratic work history, and a lack of personal safety net of friends and family are compounded if a person experiences poor mental health or suffers from an addiction to alcohol, prescription drugs or illicit drugs. According to the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, over 20% of people experiencing homelessness have a "serious mental illness" although the true prevalence may be closer to 30% or even higher. (pg 5 Expanding Access to and Use of Behavioral Health Services for people Experiencing

Homelessness). Substance use is also common; an estimated 17 to 33 percent of people experiencing homelessness received treatment for alcohol or drug use. (Page 5) Between 20 and 50 percent of individuals experiencing homelessness are estimated to have co-occurring mental health disorder and SUD. Mental health and substance use are often intertwined with peoples' lived experiences; a history of trauma can be associated with increased substance use. (Page 5)

Health related: Individuals who experience homelessness have a greater chance of inconsistent access to healthcare. In addition, people experiencing homelessness are at an increased risk for infectious diseases and non-infectious diseases. Homelessness is known to increase risk for Viral Hepatitis, Tuberculosis, HIV and COVID19. Lack of routine healthcare as a child or adult can contribute to greater rates of asthma, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension. Structural and social barriers to health care and other social services can lead to worse health outcomes, such as severe illness or death.

About the organizations (HPP, SRM and VOA)

Examples of Solutions:

The following three programs have all been opened within the last six years utilizing a low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) provided through the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority. The development of Housing + Services style of housing requires investment from multiple sources: private investment, state funds through CO Division of Local Affairs, the City of Colorado Springs and often a grant from the Federal Home Loan Bank partners. In addition, each development team seeks additional support from philanthropic sources such as private foundations, corporations and individual donations. Each example below is providing a pathway out of homelessness to individuals in our community who earn less than 30% of Area Median Income. For Colorado Springs in December 2024 that was: \$21,840 for a single adult, \$28,080 for a three-member household.

Greenway Flats – a Housing + Services building that provides 65 studio apartments to mostly single adult households located near the Springs Rescue Mission. Greenway Flats opened in July 2019. The Springs Rescue Mission provides onsite services and utilizes community partners as well as leveraging resources on the campus of SRM for their residents. Like other models of housing +services, there are amenities on site such as computers, a library, gardens, food pantry, and access to job skills training classes.

Freedom Springs – a Housing + Services building that opened in 2020 through the Vecino Group provides 50 units of one-bedroom apartments. This unique property is dedicated to housing Veterans exiting homelessness. Referrals to this program come through the Veteran Specific Coordinated Entry system that is a collaborative effort of the Veterans Affairs Department and Pikes Peak Continuum of Care. Like other models of housing like GF, there are amenities on site such as computers, a library, gardens, food pantry, and access to job skills training classes.

The Commons – a Housing + Services apartment building that provides 50 units of one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments for individuals, families and Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Commons is a collaboration between Homeward Pikes Peak and Rocky Mountain Communities and opened in April 2023. Eligibility for housing is determined based upon household and a referral from the Pikes Peak Continuum of Care’s Coordinated Entry system. Services are provided on site through professional case managers, peer recovery coaches and community partners in health care and other human service needs. The services are provided through a housing first approach which means they are voluntary and not required.

A shared goal of these programs is not only to provide housing but to support each person to become a healthier version of themselves, increase personal income, and other long-term outcomes. Utilizing the “housing first” approach, these programs can work with each person to address the underlying factors that may have contributed to housing instability. The low barrier and voluntary approach honor the dignity and autonomy of each individual while emphasizing the community and social inclusion.

Below is a table that highlights data from each program to demonstrate the impact of these programs in our community. In an attempt to capture a long window to review, we opted to look at **1/1/202-12/31/24**, although The Commons only opened in April 2023.

	Greenway Flats	Freedom Springs	The Commons
Total number served	120	78	119
Total number of children	0	6	60
Percentage with 3+ disabling condition		26%	23%
Income upon entry		63%	54%
Income maintenance while in program		NA	71%
Utilization of Services	96%		

Housing Stability (percentage who have remained in the program)	41%	68%	74%
Exit to positive living destinations	15%	33%	11%

The comparison of the cost of Unhoused person vs. the cost of a person in an Housing + Services program

In 2023, the Pikes Peak Continuum of Care worked with the City of Colorado Springs and local service providers to aggregate data and come up with the cost of serving an adult experiencing homelessness per year. Through evaluating all the potential activities that they might encounter in a year such as multiple calls for assistance from police and fire and EMS and a possible hospital stay the cost is estimated to be approximately \$37,000. When an agency like Homeward Pikes Peak can provide that person with permanent supportive housing the cost to serve them dramatically decreases. Service and housing providers leverage public and private funding. The estimated cost to provide a person with housing per year in our HUD Continuum of Care housing program is \$17,000 which is roughly half of that amount. This is a dramatic savings for our community.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that Housing + Services makes sense. It dramatically provides stability through housing and the provision of access to health care. These are the two leading interventions that change lives for the better and can permanently resolve a cyclical problem. Everyone can agree that showing up as a child in school to be ready to learn that a child needs a place to sleep, eat, study and connect with family. The same goes for an adult. The ability to show up for work, to parent, and be an engaged community member, that a person needs to have a home, the ability to eat and take care of daily needs and connect with friends and family.

How we get there as a community is important. Housing and supportive services is not merely an act of charity but a recognition of inherent human dignity and a strategic approach to improve our communal wellbeing. It takes a commitment to a belief that all people need and deserve a roof over their heads. In our community we have less than 400 Housing + Services units of housing and we have right now we have nearly 7000 individuals who need housing. We must be creative to increase our housing options and utilize all forms of housing types. We can do this when we all work together.

Call to Action

A healthier community starts with housing. When our neighbors have a safe, stable place to live, it improves public health for everyone, reduces visible homelessness, and lessens the burden on our public services. Housing + Services is a proven strategy that creates safer, more predictable neighborhoods and addresses the root causes of our challenges. As a community, we need our neighbors to welcome the creation and construction of apartment buildings that provide housing for individuals, youth, family and Veterans. As a City we need the investment into the construction and services that provide housing and stability for their residents. And as a state and nation we need continued public investment into the creation of affordable housing for our very low-income and low-income citizens.

Success Story

Disney's life was once a whirlwind of challenges, leaving her homeless, struggling with substance abuse, and separated from her two children. Recognizing she had reached a personal low point, Disney understood the necessity for change. She applied for housing at The Commons. Once there, she connected with a compassionate mentor and case manager who provided one-on-one support and unwavering encouragement, offering Disney a vital glimmer of hope.

With newfound strength, Disney committed to turning her life around. She entered a recovery program and worked tirelessly to overcome her addiction, eventually consistently passing her drug tests. This dedication led to securing stable housing and beginning the path toward reunification with her children. The joy of holding her kids again was immense, though she felt anxious about providing essentials.

Disney continues to face challenges, including intrusive thoughts, anger, and anxiety. Case managers continue to provide consistent, immediate support during vulnerable nighttime hours, serving as a listening ear. Disney's story is a powerful testament to resilience and the crucial importance of having someone who believes in you. She is now a role model to others, proving that with determination and the right support, transformation is possible.

About the Participating Organizations in this Brief:

"At Springs Rescue Mission, we represent a full spectrum of care across 15 acres, designed to help individuals experiencing homelessness find stability and hope. We offer a wide range of opportunities — from low-barrier shelter and transitional housing to addiction recovery, permanent supportive housing, and workforce development — because we believe the best outcomes happen when we provide the right care to the right person at the right time, in a way they can truly embrace. One part of that spectrum is Greenway Flats, our Permanent Supportive Housing program (the State of Colorado's first PSH dedicated to chronically homeless individuals), which served 120 individuals between 2020 and 2024.

Of those, 18 residents transitioned into other housing, 19 exited due to behavioral, safety, or financial challenges, and 13 passed away. Notably, 116 of the 120 engaged in over 140 different supportive services across SRM's campus — a testament to the depth and accessibility of care offered in one location. For some, PSH was the right path. For others, different options fit better. These numbers help illustrate the picture of care — but they only make sense when grounded in the lives and stories of people who need support that is both compassionate and tailored.”

— Travis Williams, CEO, Springs Rescue Mission

Homeward Pikes Peak provides a continuum of services for our community that has been growing over the last 23 years. HPP has ten programs under three main service lines: housing, street outreach and clinical services. HPP meets each client where they are and attempts to provide an opportunity to meet the challenges they may be experiencing, whether it is mental illness, addictions, trauma, housing instability, chronic homelessness, erratic work history and limited or fractured safety net of family and friends. Throughout our array of services and our collaborative relationships with other services providers, we commit ourselves to finding a place for everyone to call home and receive support.

The Vecino Group is headquartered in Springfield, MO and is operating in ten states. The Vecino Group is a national supportive housing developer, with 29 supportive housing communities in 10 states (Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, New York, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah). In 2024, Vecino Group ended homelessness for 588 households. Ending homelessness is providing permanent housing to people who are exiting homelessness. When a person who has exited homelessness stays permanently housed for more than 2 years, the chances of them entering back into homelessness is only 5 percent. In 2024, 588 households remained permanently housed in a Vecino community for more than 24 months. Vecino Group partners with service providers at each project to provide onsite services for their residents. Vecino Group utilizes three main HUD programs: HOME, CDBG and Project-Based Vouchers to accomplish their work.