



Low-Barrier Shelters

Downtown Madison, Inc.
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Overview

The phrase “low-barrier” shelter refers to a type of shelter that seeks to reduce barriers to entry for those seeking emergency housing assistance. Most often, this means relaxing rules and screening processes to the minimal levels necessary for maintaining health and safety. This report samples low-barrier shelters across the county, and highlights their associated rules and structures.

Background

In the United States, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, an estimated 553,000 people experience homelessness on any given night. Given this, thousands of temporary shelters serve an essential function in the fight against homelessness, providing a short-term residence for those who would otherwise be unhoused. Shelters are organized according to many different structuring systems, dictating who is allowed to stay and under what conditions. Shelters are commonly divided by gender, age, or family status. Often organized by a tiered system, single men, for example, may be housed separately from single women or families. Similarly, youth may be housed in facilities separate from adults. Beyond these initial divisions, there often exist secondary criteria that a client must meet in order to get help. Such requirements often include sobriety, a clean criminal history, and photo I.D. Finally, once an individual has been deemed eligible based on these criteria, they must agree to alter their lifestyles to match an organization's policies. This commonly includes a curfew, mandatory attendance at meals or workshops, limited personal possessions, and separation from pets.

Policies like those mentioned above are sometimes referred to as "barriers." Although these barriers exist to maintain safety, they may also preclude vulnerable people from accessing help, and disincentivize help-seeking. Curfews, for example, can make it challenging to maintain a job, gender divisions may separate some from loved ones, and storage limitations require some to leave their belongings unsecured. In response, there has been a wide-spread movement for "low-barrier" shelters. These shelter systems focus on eliminating the barriers that prevent people from accessing homeless services, establishing rules that are transparent and reasonable, and doing so only when necessary to maintain safety. A national leader in the move to low-barrier service, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, has produced five keys to effective emergency shelters. These recommendations not only provide a lens through which to better understand the low-barrier model, but also provide practitioners a baseline from which to begin. The five recommendations are: a housing-first approach, safe & appropriate diversion, immediate & low-barrier access, housing-focused rapid exit services, and data to measure performance. Each is explained in greater detail below.

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- 1. Housing-First Approach:** Shelter eligibility criteria, policies, and practices should take a housing-first approach to remove prerequisites for accessing shelters. Services should be made voluntary, and people should be assisted with permanent housing as quickly as possible.
- 2. Safe & Appropriate Diversion:** Diversion services should be made available to find safe and appropriate housing alternatives to entering the shelter by utilizing community supports and lighter-touch solutions. Rather than immediate intake at the shelter, shelters should practice safe and appropriate diversion, engaging guests in a problem-solving conversation to identify safe alternatives.
- 3. Immediate & Low-Barrier Access:** Barriers to entry should be lowered to allow easy and immediate access to shelters, eliminating sobriety and income requirements as well as other policies that make it difficult to access housing. Referrals should be made through a coordinated entry and not a waitlist. Access must be 24/7, and rules should only pertain to safety. Immediate access includes no requirements for people to leave during the day, connections to street outreach, no lining up for beds, no drug or alcohol testing, no criminal background checks, and no "housing-readiness" requirement. Additional considerations should be made for the inclusion of people, pets, and possessions.
- 4. Housing-Focused Rapid Exit Services:** Shelter services should be oriented towards identifying permanent housing options as quickly as possible. The outlook should be that everyone is ready to be housed immediately, and conversations must focus on an exit to housing. Every in-person meeting should be focused on a quick move to permanent housing, and a clear housing message should be present throughout the shelter.
- 5. Data to Measure Performance:** Data must be collected on exit percentages concerning housing, the average length of stay in the shelter, and returns to homelessness to evaluate and improve. Data collection can help determine which populations are using

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the shelter, average length of stay, exit destinations after the shelter, frequent users, and longer stayers.ⁱ

A shelter does not need to be created as a low-barrier shelter to transition into one. Many resources exist to aid shelters in this transition, including from national leaders like those mentioned above. Further, a plethora of case studies offer insights into how shelters can successfully adopt a low-barrier approach. Ten such examples have been provided below, including four shelters that have transitioned to allow pets, a frequent concern for individuals seeking housing assistance.

Examples of Low-Barrier Shelters

Next Step Shelter | Waikiki, Hawaii

After shifting to a low-barrier model in 2016, Next Step maintains a philosophy of meeting people where they are without holding guests to an array of shelter rules. The shelter's only criteria for eligibility are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Upon admission, guests are not required to have income, a valid photo I.D., a completed TB test, or a clean criminal record. Everyone is accepted from all backgrounds, including sex offenders, and guests can stay in the shelter 24/7 with their belongings. Before 2016, the rule book for shelter guests was 13 pages long and included dozens of rules. Now, only four basic rules remain: tenants must pay rent ranging from \$60/month to \$80/month, there can be no public disturbances, no destruction, and no violence. If residents do fight, rather than be terminated immediately, shelter staff have been trained to work with the respective individuals to reach a reconciliation. Next Step guests are allowed to stay in the shelter for up to two years; however, the goal is to transition guests into permanent housing within 90 days.

More information: <https://waikikihc.org/>

HOPE Shelter | Pontiac, Michigan

HOPE Shelter in Pontiac, Michigan does not require sobriety, identity documentation, or adherence to a program or religious affiliation to participate in their services. In an effort to eliminate transportation barriers, service providers are invited to provide services onsite at the shelter. This includes housing services, a triage health clinic, community mental health services, and more. Upon intake, every guest at HOPE is immediately screened to assess what resources might best help move them from homelessness. Besides the ongoing provision of basic needs, HOPE ensures guest access to health care and supportive service coordination. The HOPE Shelter philosophy believes the integration of healthcare, mental healthcare, and housing for shelter guests helps improve quality of life and a pathway out of homelessness.

More information: <http://www.hopewarmingpontiac.org/>

Homefull | Dayton, Ohio

Homefull provides a comprehensive continuum of care and services to persons in the Dayton, Ohio area who are currently experiencing homelessness, who have previously experienced homelessness, or are at risk of becoming homeless. The organization provides advocacy, education, and technical assistance programs in the western Ohio region, including comprehensive assessments, housing-focused case management, and programming. Case managers work one-on-one with guests to move them into permanent and appropriate housing as quickly as possible. This site also serves as a coordinated entry assessment site in Dayton, where assessors are also trained in diversion. Families meet with assessors immediately upon intake, including during weekends. Gateway is one shelter operated by Homefull. Of homeless exits from Gateway in 2015, 75 percent were positively housed, including 93.3 percent of families. In the same year, the average length of stay was 43 days for a family, 71 days for single women, and 88 days for single men. As of the end of 2015, only 2.6% of those who entered the Gateway diversion program have entered shelter since being diverted.

More information: <https://www.homefull.org/>

Salvation Army of Greater Charlotte - Center of Hope | Charlotte, North Carolina

In a transition to a low-barrier, housing-focused shelter, the Center of Hope removed entry requirements such as sobriety and a minimum income. Now, rather than hold a weekly staff meeting to discuss rules and expectations, the shelter director meets with residents weekly to discuss the national goal of ending homelessness, rapid re-housing, and ways to start looking for housing right away. The meeting serves as an opportunity to empower guests to take ownership of their housing without bogging them down with long conversations about rules. When the shelter lowered barriers to entry, implemented shelter diversion, changed their communication with clients to focus on housing, and invested in rapid re-housing by reallocating \$315,000 from transitional housing to rapid re-housing, the average stay in the shelter went from 6 months to 39 days. In 2015 the Urban Institute conducted an assessment of the shelter's rapid re-housing program and found that of 102 clients served in 2012-2013, 91 percent did not return to the shelter. On average financial assistance lasted three months totaling \$4,800.ⁱⁱ

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More information: <https://www.salvationarmycarolinas.org/>

Crossroads Rhode Island | Providence, Rhode Island

Crossroads Rhode Island is the state's largest homeless service organization, and in 2012 underwent a shift from a philosophy of homeless management to homeless elimination. The transformation included: re-focusing the community and reception area on providing access to housing, implementing shelter diversion, making rapid re-housing and case management home-based, converting existing transitional housing into permanent supportive housing, and evaluating the total time spent in a shelter before exiting to housing. From 2013 to 2014, there was a 26% increase in housing placements and a 20% decrease in the shelter's average length of stay. During the transition, Crossroads conducted a focus group with shelter guests to reduce behavior-controlling rules, and encourage decision making based on safety, respect, and effectiveness. Staff were trained to align their actions to these core values.

In 2016 Crossroads took over a 112-bed shelter for individual men with an unsuccessful history with permanent housing. Many long-term guests were registered sex offenders who had difficulty finding housing given a criminal record and restrictions on where they were allowed to live. Crossroads dedicated all four Housing Navigators to work on housing identification for hard to house populations. This resulted in an increase from five men exiting the shelter in 2015, to 37 exits to permanent shelter between July and December of 2016. Of the 37 men housed, 10 were registered sex offenders, and 17 were individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.ⁱⁱⁱ

More information: <https://www.crossroadsri.org/>

Paul Lee Loft | Santa Cruz, California

The Paul Lee Loft is one of four emergency and transitional housing shelters operated by the Homeless Services Center of Santa Cruz (HSC). In 2012 the HSC shifted its focus away from managing homelessness, and toward the elimination of homelessness through permanent housing. Each of the four shelters operated by HSC is designed to serve a different population. With a capacity for up to 40 people at a time, Paul Lee Loft is open to adults experiencing

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homelessness. Previously, program policies required guests to obtain a referral from a social service agency or nonprofit. However, the shelter has opened to both referrals and walk-in guests.

More information: <https://housingmatterssc.org/>

Pet-friendly Shelters

Catholic Charities Santa Rosa | Santa Rosa, California

As part of the transition to a low-barrier shelter, Catholic Charities Santa Rosa (CCSR) has begun to allow service and emotional support animals into the shelter. Before the change, staff were trained to work with animals, and veterinarians were consulted regarding accommodation services. CCSR has established written protocols for how animals should be handled within the shelter. Only dogs are accepted. However, there are no limits on the size or breed of the dog. The only restrictions on dogs are behavior-based: If a dog is aggressive or violent on the street, they are not allowed into the shelter. Instead, the outreach team works with the owner to facilitate the animal's move into fostering while the person enters the shelter. Animals are only allowed into the shelter if they have a rabies certification, are spayed/neutered, and are not otherwise a threat to public health and safety. Pets are not allowed to roam freely throughout the space. It is the owner's responsibility to clean up after their animal and keep it on a leash when it is out of its crate or kennel. If an animal and its owner fail to meet the requirements or the animal is a threat to safety or health, staff engages the owner to fix the issue. If the animal must leave, the staff help to facilitate a fostering process. The shelter provides physical accommodations through bedside crates or outdoor kennels for the animals to sleep in. There are also designated areas for owners to walk their dogs. Shelter staff intentionally assign individuals to specific dorms based on several factors, including ownership of an animal. This helps to separate animals from those who have animal allergies or fears. CCSR has many partners that aid in the successful facilitation of this program. A local mobile veterinarian clinic travels with the outreach team to spay/neuter and give animals rabies shots so that the animals are eligible to enter the shelter. The local animal control agency also performs wellness checks on animals staying with their owners on the streets.

More information: <https://www.srcharities.org/>

STAIR Center | Berkeley, California

Funded by \$2.4 million approved by the city council, Berkeley's Pathways Home Project has placed 20 people into permanent living since opening in 2018. The STAIR Center was opened as part of the larger Pathway project. The shelter has a 45-person capacity and was designed to draw people who have previously been resistant to shelters. There is no curfew at STAIR, and people do not need to be sober to remain at the shelter. Dorms are co-ed, meaning couples can sleep together, and pets are allowed. There are no strict rise times, and casual seating places with trees and landscaping are scattered throughout the shelter. The Pathways project rest on four fundamental principles: regional collaboration, maximization of outside funding, strong partnerships, and a Berkeley focus. The project's goals are to prevent homelessness, increase access to affordable housing and services, and provide shelter, services, and a path to housing for those currently experiencing homelessness. Three full-time navigators work at the center to help clients identify housing by running credit and utilizing a \$540,000 "flexible funding" balance to help guests with security deposits and other fees. The center works with more than 250 landlords to help guests find housing.

More information: <https://www.bayareacs.org/>

Downtown Emergency Service Center | Seattle, Washington

Founded in 1979, the Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC) admits guests without demonstrating sobriety or compliance with a treatment plan. There are no rules regarding entering high from drug use or intoxication. The only rules imposed by the shelter are what they call "common-sense rules of behavior." The DESC network has expanded to manage more than 1,400 units of supportive housing through downtown Seattle. The Navigation Center is the City of Seattle's newest low-barrier shelter, welcoming people with partners, pets, and possessions. DESC partners with relevant external providers to engage and work with clients onsite. Staff work with clients on safety, reducing the harm associated with substance use, building motivation, and offering practical support, including recovery activities. Substance use is seen as an opportunity for engagement rather than a reason for termination of services. Clients are expected to be

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working on housing acquisition, but other than that, services are focused on determining with clients what they want and believe they need. Violence, weapons, open use of substances, or disruptive behavior are not allowed, but further rules are minimal. Staff monitor the immediate areas, discourage loitering by guests and respond promptly to any concerns. Only enrolled guests are permitted to enter the program spaces, and the entry is staffed at all times. Separate areas for sleeping, eating, and meeting with staff accommodate clients' differing schedules and needs. *More information: <https://www.desc.org/>*

Path of Life Ministries | Riverside, California

In 2011, the city of Riverside opened a pet kennel at the Path of Life Ministries Shelter. The shelter includes longer-term housing and a drop-in center for people experiencing homelessness and mental illness. The kennel is 400-square feet and houses 18 kennels for both dogs and cats. The kennel cost roughly \$50,000 and was paid for with federal grant funding and donated labor and materials. Volunteers wholly staff the kennel with support from Riverside County Animal Services. People staying at the shelter are fully responsible for the care of their own pets.

More information: <https://www.thepathoflife.com/>

ⁱ National Alliance to End Homelessness. "The Five Keys to Effective Emergency Shelter." <https://endhomelessness.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/06/keys-to-emergency-shelter-naeh.png>

ⁱⁱ "Salvation Army Center of Hope: Transitioning to a Low-Barrier Shelter Model With the Primary Goal of Rapidly Exiting People to Permanent Housing." National Alliance to End Homelessness, endhomelessness.org/resource/salvation-army-center-hopetransitioning-low-barrier-shelter-model-primary-goal-rapidly-exiting-people-permanent-housing/.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Crossroads Rhode Island: Transitioning to a Low-Barrier Shelter That Focuses on Rapid Exits to Permanent Housing." National Alliance to End Homelessness, endhomelessness.org/resource/crossroads-rhode-island-transitioning-low-barrier-shelterfocuses-rapid-exits-permanent-housing/.

**Authored by Hannah Stewart, Policy Researcher
Questions Contact: Jason Ilstrup, DMI President 608.512.1330**