

HOUSING PROBLEM SOLVING PRACTICE & PROCESS GUIDE

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I. BACKGROUND

A. Introduction to Housing Problem Solving

Housing Problem Solving (HPS) is a conversation-based strategy aimed at helping persons experiencing homelessness find safe housing solutions with minimal or no housing crisis response system resources. HPS services are offered when people experiencing or at risk of immediate homelessness first reach out for assistance to resolve their housing crisis. Its strategies are also applied throughout a person's path to housing, with HPS continually offered while people are receiving CES Connector services or staying in shelter or transitional housing programs. HPS uses creative, interactive conversations to understand factors that contributed to a person's housing crisis, explore possible solutions that may be available through personal or community resource networks, and develop an action plan to make identified housing options possible.

B. Reasons for a HPS Process Guide

Santa Cruz County's Housing for Health Division (H4H) serves as the lead agency of the Santa Cruz County Continuum of Care (CoC) and its Coordinated Entry System (CES). The division has undertaken significant efforts to refine and enhance the efficacy of the Coordinated Entry process. Among these efforts, H4H launched a redesigned CES model in the spring of 2023, replacing the previously used Smart Path system. This redesign included a transition away from the VI-SPDAT assessment tool to better align with participant-centered practices.

The need for these changes became evident due to the mismatch between the number of assessments conducted and the limited availability of housing resources. While assessments often provide valuable insight into participants' needs, they rarely lead to immediate housing referrals. Given the disparity between system capacity and demand, Housing Problem Solving (HPS) emerged as a critical tool to help participants explore alternative housing options outside the homelessness response system.

HPS offers a strategy for providing people with immediate, ongoing support towards housing solutions outside the limited resources available through the system. HPS helps to ensure that the system's scarce resources, especially the most intensive housing supports like permanent supportive housing, are made available for people with the greatest need.

In the Spring of 2023, H4H launched its redesigned CES model, intentionally embedding the practice of HPS throughout the process. This HPS Practice and Process Guide is meant to

serve as a supplement to the H4H Housing Problem Solving training offered to Connectors and an addendum to the CES Policies and Procedures document. It includes an overview of the new CE flow, HPS strategies and talking points at each stage in the CE process and covers additional tips and tools to help facilitate effective HPS practices.

C. HPS Principles

HPS uses a strengths-based approach to brainstorm with participants and provide concrete support towards housing solutions available within their personal or community networks. HPS actively and intentionally engages people in identifying potential housing solutions that will work best for them. By using exploratory conversation and transitioning away from the check box approach of typical intakes and assessments, HPS can tap into participants' resiliency, ingenuity, and natural connections. HPS is most successful when informed by the core approaches and skills outlined below:

Trauma-Informed Care

Engaging in HPS through the framework of Trauma-Informed Care includes the recognition that trauma often impacts cognitive functioning related to planning and decision-making: as a result, Connectors use creative conversation and active listening skills to assist a person in uncovering additional housing options that they may not have yet elicited on their own. The role of Connectors is not to direct participants towards a specific pathway but to provide support in exploring all available options and removing barriers where possible.

Strengths-Based Approaches

HPS begins from the recognition that participants are the best judges of their own situation and have shown courage and resilience in coping with crisis. Acknowledging and building on participants' strengths allows for a more creative exploration of what has worked in the past and could potentially work in the future. For example, HPS conversations elicit options from the participant through inquiring about past successes: "How have you previously handled this kind of situation?" and "What kind of support do you think would be most useful to you to make this work?"

Motivational Interviewing

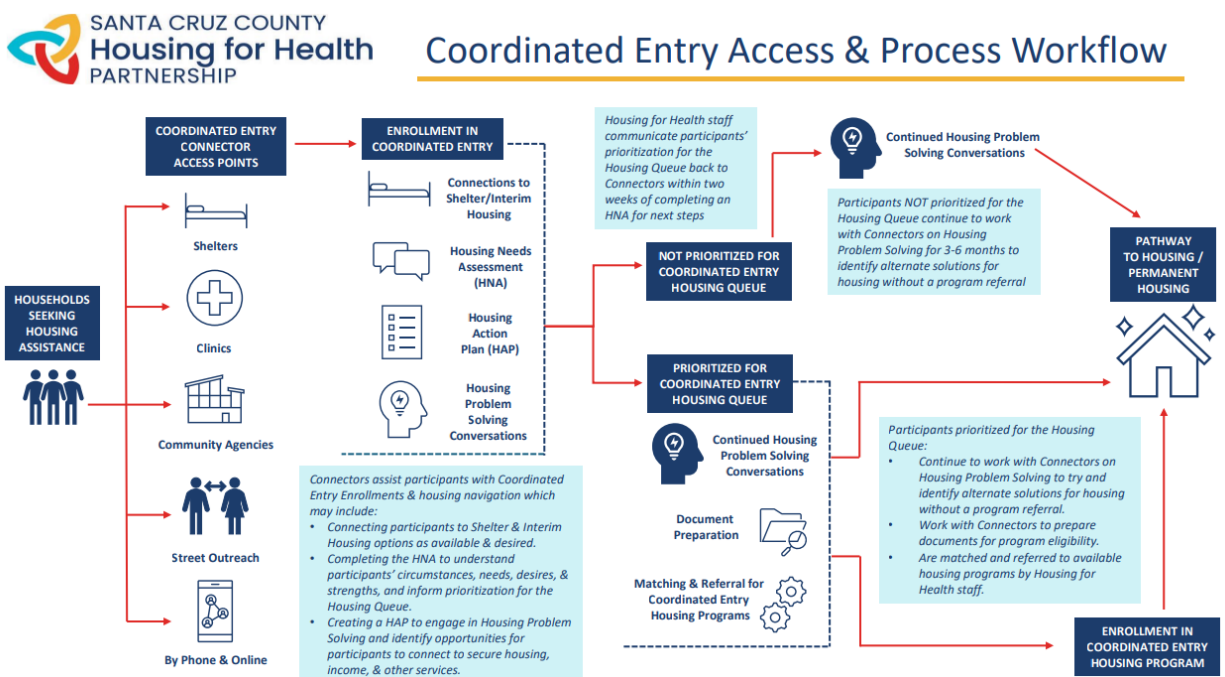
One key conversation technique within Motivational Interviewing that applies to HPS is the use of open-ended questions, which promote the exploration of potential solutions, as well as the identification of concerns or ambivalence the person seeking assistance may feel

about some or all their options. For example, the Connector does not ask, “Is there any place you can stay tonight?” but rather, “What are some places you can think of that you could perhaps stay?,” and “What concerns do you have about potentially staying at this new place?”. Affirmations, reflections, and summaries are also helpful in supporting the decisions made by the participant, reflecting what they have said they want to achieve, and ensuring the HPS documentation (for Connectors, this is the Housing Action Plan) clearly defines the action items each party will take to make progress towards the housing outcome.

Housing First Approach

The focus in HPS on finding a safe place to stay, temporarily or permanently, without first requiring service participation or “compliance” for assistance, reflects the fundamental tenets of Housing First. HPS using Housing First principals serve to reduce the harm of being unsheltered or in an unsafe environment, even if a permanent destination is not immediately identified. Housing Problem Solving techniques also may come into play in thinking about how to obtain or sustain a housing situation – for example, reducing drug or alcohol use may be part of a strategy to repair relations with family or friends or may make contributing to household costs possible. Ensuring clients have access to a range of supports they identify would enable them to nurture and maintain social, educational, occupational and vocational activities, is a Housing First Housing Problem practice.

II. COORDINATED ENTRY PROCESS OVERVIEW



The Santa Cruz CoC's new CES incorporates and includes HPS along every step in the process. From Access and Engagement to Match and Referral, Connectors will problem solve with participants to develop and work toward viable, stable housing solutions.

When Connectors first engage with a household, the Connector will initiate a HPS conversation. While housing solutions may be identified in the initial conversation, Connectors may meet with a participant on multiple occasions over a period of time (typically up to six months) and continue to explore a range of possible solutions that can support a positive housing exit.

Through these conversations, if a potential housing resolution is explored and identified, the Connector will support the household in actualizing their plan.

III. HOUSING PROBLEM SOLVING FLOW

As HPS is an essential strategy and tool deployed at each phase in the CE process, Connectors will adjust HPS conversations as needed to best communicate updates and process changes to participants.

A. Conversation Location and Timing

Connectors should choose locations for the HPS conversation that help participants feel comfortable sharing about their situation. For example, when meeting with participants at program sites, such as drop-in centers or emergency shelters, Connectors should find a space that allows for privacy and promotes safety and comfort. Whenever possible, Connectors should avoid sitting behind their computers when talking with participants. If resources allow, Connectors may offer coffee, water, or refreshments to promote a welcoming and comfortable experience. For phone based HPS services, Connectors should periodically check in with the participant about their comfort and ability to continue with the conversation and to see if it would be beneficial to schedule a follow-up conversation.

When meeting with participants outdoors, such as while on street outreach, Connectors should consider and/or ask the participant where they are most comfortable having a conversation. For example, one participant may prefer to stay near their belongings, while another participant may prefer to walk and talk or to move to an area away from where staff first engaged them in dialogue. Though other people are often around, given the public nature of street outreach, it is important that Connectors aim to create as much privacy for the

participant as possible in alignment with the participant's comfort. If new people approach and/or Connectors notice a shift in the participant's level of comfort or engagement with the conversation, Connectors should check in with the participant before continuing. It may be that a conversation should pause and resume at a different time or in a different location.

Conversations can take place in one sitting or over the course of multiple encounters - Connectors should use their discretion to figure out when to pause conversations for continuance later. For example, if a person is experiencing a mental health crisis or is heavily intoxicated or if a person expresses refusal to participate in the conversation, other support may need to be offered in that moment and HPS can be tried again during the next meeting.

B. Conversation Framework and Sample Questions

The first time at which a participant has an HPS conversation can be as soon as an individual seeks out or encounters an outreach worker, access point staff, or a Connector. There is no set script or form to use within HPS conversations, however the CE Housing Needs Assessment includes conversation prompts and example questions for each domain of the assessment. The steps below walk through the typical flow of HPS conversations, noting that each conversation will vary in the specific topics covered.

1. Introduce the Conversation

Whether in-person or over the phone, Connectors should typically begin engagements by introducing their role and sharing about the intent of the HPS conversation. Such messaging may include:

- *There may be ways to help you gain housing without coming into shelter. May we explore alternative options?*
- *I'd like to try to help you find an immediate solution that will resolve your housing situation now.*
- *Since there are not enough housing resources for everyone experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz County, we also want to see if we can find other options you may have to move to a more stable, safe option. Can we explore options you might have?*

2. Assess for Safety

HPS conversations should always ensure that participant safety is a foremost concern. It is important to include a safety screening early in the HPS conversation. Connectors should see if participants are currently navigating unsafe situations: this includes persons currently in or trying to flee domestic violence situations or experiencing urgent health issues. Sample questions may include:

- *Are you currently fleeing or attempting to flee a domestic violence situation?*
 - *If yes: Would you prefer to stop this conversation and connect to a domestic violence agency?*
- *Do you have any pressing medical, health, or other safety concerns that we should address before discussing your housing situation?*

If emergency medical care or immediate safety-related aid are needed, Connectors should help participants in connecting with the appropriate services for immediate support (e.g., domestic violence services, emergency medical care, etc.). Any other HPS services can be scheduled for a later time, if and as necessary.

The following are crisis resources that may be helpful to utilize during a safety assessment:

Medical emergencies or immediate safety needs: 911

Assistance for persons in domestic violence situations:

- Monarch Services 24 Hour Bilingual Crisis Line: 1-888-900-4232 / <https://www.monarchsc.org/get-help/>
- Walnut Avenue Family & Women's Center 24 Hour Bilingual Crisis line: 1-866-269-2559 / <http://www.wafwc.org/domestic-violence>

County of Santa Cruz Behavioral Health Crisis Line:

- 24-hour coverage: (800) 952-2335 / Normal business hour coverage: (831) 454-4170

3. Explore the Participant's Situation

The conversation should begin organically, asking a little bit about what is going on, what the person is seeking and where they are staying now. This often begins with a simple opening question like: *How are you doing today?* Slowly moving to more substantial questions such as, *Can you tell me what's going on in your life and what you need help with right now?*

For those who are currently staying indoors, such as with friends or family temporarily, the conversation will explore what it may take for that person to be able to continue staying on a short- or long-term basis and/or to identify alternative potential places to stay. Sample questions include:

- *How long have you been staying at the place you stayed last night?*
- *Have you been told you couldn't stay at this place in the past? [If yes] What shifted that you were able to stay/return there when it happened before?*

For those who are currently staying outdoors, in vehicles, or in other unsheltered locations, the conversation will shift towards exploring potential options, including discussing earlier places the participant has stayed or places they have considered staying but need support arranging. For example, Connectors may ask:

- *What options have you already explored?*
- *What did it look like when you last had your own housing?*
- *Are there places you have stayed before (temporarily or long-term) where you may be able to stay now?*

4. Use Active Listening to Identify Potential Alternative Housing Options

This part of the discussion is exploratory to help participants tap into options they may be able to pursue. The focus is on providing space and support to help participants identify options they may not have previously explored. Sample questions include:

- *Can you tell me about skills you've used to navigate your housing crisis?*
- *[If participant has experienced prior housing crises that were resolved] What strategies and skills did you use to gain housing when you were in this situation before?*
- *Are there housing situations you've lived in before that were positive? [If yes] What were they, and what did you like about them?*

- *Do you currently have income you can use to gain housing?*
- *Who in your life would you consider a support, or someone you would contact for help in difficult situations?*
- *Where do you currently keep your personal belongings?*
- *What kind of support would be most useful to you to make [a potential housing option] work?*
- *Are there specific things that you think are making it harder for you to get or be considered for housing (like debt, lack of documents, etc.)*

Through the conversation, explore safety considerations with the participant to ensure participants feel the housing options they name are safe for them. Safety is broad and may be related to violence, exploitation in exchange for a place to stay, substance use/recovery, physical health or disability, emotional well-being, or any other area a participant identifies as a safety consideration.

5. Engagement and Follow-Up Questions

Connectors should go into each conversation without preconceived notions on where the conversation will lead or what solutions will or will not be possible. Instead, observe and listen closely to what participants are offering through the conversation and, based on each new piece of information shared, identify the next question that can help continue to open the exploration of housing possibilities. This means holding onto information about solutions that have worked for the person previously, strengths they possess that may be able to help them through this crisis, people or resources that are a support to them, and solutions they have pondered for themselves, and - when it is appropriate, using their verbal and non-verbal cues as indicators - helping them more deeply or tangibly explore where there may be possible solutions. Periods of silence can also be useful to provide participants with time to think about and process their response to a question or their openness to possible solutions.

6. Ongoing Conversations

As Connectors continue to work with participants, there are ways to move forward with Problem Solving strategies, especially for clients who are not placed on a housing queue or who are on the housing queue but housing program referrals are not surfacing. Participants may ask questions, such as:

1. *Why am I not placed on a housing list?*

- *There's a limited number of housing referrals, and unfortunately, they are only available to people who meet certain criteria. But let's can talk about other opportunities and resources that might help you.*
- 2. *How long until I get matched?*
 - *There's a limited number of housing referrals, and unfortunately, they are only available when programs have openings and for people who meet certain criteria. But let's can talk about other opportunities and resources that can help you.*
- 3. *What else can I do to find housing?*
 - *There are a lot of other resources we can work on, like ways to increase your income or connect to health or mental health resources that can help you. What kind of resources would you like to talk about?*

C. Beyond the Referral - It's Not about the Queue

The new Coordinated Entry System process represents a significant shift from past approaches—there is no VI-SPDAT, and not everyone will be placed on the housing queue. Instead, Connectors will work closely with a wide range of individuals, supporting them until they secure housing, are matched to an opportunity, or are at least on a clear pathway toward housing stability.

Since housing resources are limited, not all participants will receive a housing placement through Coordinated Entry. In these cases, Connectors play a crucial role in helping individuals resolve their homelessness through alternative means, leveraging personal, social, and community-based resources rather than solely relying on the system's limited housing inventory.

A prolonged stay on the housing queue increases the risk of remaining unhoused, which in turn elevates the likelihood of serious health complications and mortality.

To mitigate this risk, some areas Connectors may consider focusing on:

- Applying to all relevant open housing waitlists.
- Reconnecting participants with family and social supports.
- Helping participants access entitlement benefits and supportive services (e.g., SSI, Medicaid, General Assistance).
- Assisting in income generation to increase housing affordability.

- Reactivating housing vouchers and guiding participants in navigating the rental market.

Importantly, 23% of Coordinated Entry exits to permanent housing in 2024 were achieved without participants being placed referred to a housing program from the Housing Queue. This highlights the importance of proactive problem-solving strategies that extend beyond waiting for system-based solutions.

D. Timelines and Case Closure

Connectors practice housing problem-solving work with participants for up to six months. Extensions are possible after consultation with Housing for Health staff in small-group Connector meetings. However, it is also important to recognize when it is time to close a case. The average length of time (LOT) for engagement is six months. If a Connector has worked consistently with a participant and explored all possible avenues without achieving housing success, they should not be afraid to close the case.

Key considerations for case closure:

- Not every participant will achieve housing success within the Connector's timeline. They may have better success with another provider or at a different time in their journey.
- Connector roles are short-term and not designed for long-term support. The goal is to assist in problem-solving, not to maintain an indefinite support relationship.

It can be difficult to stop working with a participant that doesn't result in housing, but it's okay to step back and close the case after all possible options have been explored. Sometimes, the process reaches a standstill, and there is nothing more that can be done within the Connector's scope.

IV. COMMUNITY-BASED RESOURCES & FLEXIBLE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

A. Helping Participants Access Community-Based Resources

Connectors will use resource guides and other information to identify potential resources available to participants. Some of the most common services include:

- Assistance overcoming housing barriers such as help getting documentation and addressing past conditions (evictions, credit issues) that can be barriers to rehousing
- Linkages to benefits such as MediCal, CalWORKs, GA or CalFresh.
- Referrals for food banks or food pantries
- Linkages to health or mental health services
- Assistance navigating and accessing local childcare resources
- Referrals for legal services
- Support to connect with mainstream employment workforce services
- Assistance with getting connected to other services for persons who have difficulty with the Activities of Daily Living (ADL's) needed to keep housing

It's important to note that many participants need support navigating the application procedures for accessing community resources. Simply providing them a contact number is not considered quality or effective problem-solving assistance, especially for those that need additional support. Connectors should always inquire with the participant whether they would benefit from assistance in making calls or applying for benefits or services on their behalf.

Transportation is often a major barrier for participants, and providing support in this area can significantly improve their ability to attend essential appointments. Connectors should check whether their agency has a vehicle available for participant transport. If not, monthly bus passes can be purchased through the Housing Assistance Fund. However, simply providing a bus pass may not be sufficient - some participants may need guidance on navigating public transportation. Connectors should take the time to review route maps, assist with trip planning, and even ride the bus with participants to help them feel comfortable and confident using public transit independently.

In addition to community resource linkages, the HPS conversation may reveal that a participant can move into a new housing situation if they are provided mediation supports; for example, to help resolve a conflict with a prior roommate or family member with whom they may be able to move in. In these situations, and with explicit permission from the participant, Connectors can speak with a property owner, family member, or friend to discuss the viability of housing options. This may include helping both parties in identifying resources or agreements that would make the housing arrangement possible. Agencies should follow their internal protocol regarding obtaining Releases of Information (ROI) from participants to

speak to third parties: at minimum, agencies should request a ROI if the participant will not be present for the conversation with a third party.

B. Housing Assistance Fund - Flexible Financial Assistance

In many cases, a successful HPS resolution is possible without financial resources. At other times, financial assistance may be needed to move the plan from an idea to a workable solution. For example, if a household has identified they may be able to stay with a family member but that the family member is concerned about the financial impacts of having more people in their home, funding to help supplement grocery or utility costs may alleviate the family member's concern. Or, if a person has talked with their coworker about renting a room from them but they don't have funds for a security deposit, financial assistance can help the person cover that cost. The most applied uses of flexible financial assistance within HPS are:

- **Expenses to secure rental housing** such as deposit assistance, move-in costs, and/or utility payments
- **Transportation funds for relocation** to another city or state where an available housing option has been identified and secured (aka - Homeward Bound)
- **Funds to make a shared housing situation possible** such as grocery gift cards to help cover household expenses or the purchase of furniture such as a bed or room divider.

When funds are needed to make a housing solution possible, Connectors should first identify if any community or mainstream resources are available to meet the need. Information regarding applicable community resources can be found by calling 211 or visiting United Way's website.

If after exploring all available potential options, funding is still needed, Connectors can utilize the Housing Assistance Fund (HAF) program. For the most up-to-date information, policy details, training video, request form, and a list of eligible expenses, visit the H4HP website dedicated to the HAF:

<https://homelessactionpartnership.org/ForProviders/HousingAssistanceFund.aspx>

V. DATA AND PERFORMANCE

A. Data Collection and Entry

All HPS data will be entered in the CoC's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Connectors will document their work with participants in the H4HP Coordinated Entry program pursuant to HMIS and CE policy. For Connector HMIS information, visit the CE Program HMIS User Manual, available on Bitfocus's website here:

<https://santacruz.bitfocus.com/santa-cruz-coordinated-entry>

B. Housing Action Plans

The Housing Action Plan (HAP) is a key tool Connectors use to document and track Housing Problem Solving efforts. It serves as a structured guide to outline specific housing-related goals, the participant's strengths in achieving those goals, required resources, agreed-upon action steps for both the Connector and the participant, the anticipated timeline, and progress status.

In HMIS, the HAP integrates with the Housing Needs Assessment, allowing information from the assessment to generate a structured action plan. At the end of each domain in the assessment, a prompt asks whether any discussed topics should be prioritized. Selecting this option automatically transfers relevant notes into the HAP, creating an actionable roadmap.

While the HAP has digital functionality within HMIS, it can also be used as a standalone document. It should be updated after every Housing Problem Solving conversation to ensure decisions and next steps are clearly documented. Providing a copy to the participant helps reinforce their responsibilities and keeps them engaged in their housing journey.

For more details on using the HAP within HMIS, refer to the CE HMIS User Manual.

VI. CONCLUSION - MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

H4H hopes this guide serves as a valuable resource for Connectors in their Housing Problem Solving work. The work Connectors do is both challenging and deeply impactful, providing critical support to individuals experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz County. We recognize the dedication, resilience, and compassion required for this role and commend Connectors for their commitment to making a difference.

Remember, you are not alone in this process. The Connection Services team is here to support you. If you have any questions or need additional guidance, please reach out to the Connection Services Team.

H4H Connection Services Contact Information

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Thank you for your hard work and commitment to helping your participants through Housing Problem-Solving!