

SPECIAL TOPIC

Low-Barrier Approaches

A low-barrier approach is a way to “meet people where they are,” meaning providing an environment where they can be who they are culturally and emotionally.

- > Low-barrier approaches are non-punitive.
- > Low-barrier shelters serve as a point of access to housing resources and other services.
- > Low-barrier programs feature a standard set of attributes that typically allow a person to maintain a sense of autonomy while offering safety, material assistance, and community.

LOW-BARRIER PROGRAM FEATURES

The features outlined below function as parameters for low-barrier approaches. Programs—including crisis shelter and housing—address barriers to different degrees, but typically have some configuration of the following features:

- > Operations that use alternatives to extensive rules and an overbearing security presence
- > Relaxed sobriety and curfew measures
- > Accommodations provided during the day
- > Accommodations allow companions, including partners and pets
- > Personal belongings can be stored, so they are safe and readily accessible
- > Housing assistance and case management services are available
- > Accommodations are safe, geographically convenient, and reasonably sized
- > Community-building activities are encouraged (but not mandated) through such measures as group activities, therapeutic services, participation in facility governance, and emphasis on mutual respect, among other means

LOW-BARRIER APPROACHES BUILD ON EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

A Housing First approach, which provides homeless households with the most direct route to permanent housing, necessitates that there are no barriers to admission beyond experiencing homelessness, no mandated program participation, service compliance, or “housing readiness” requirements that impede receiving a housing placement, and no requirement for achieving or maintaining sobriety/abstinence.

- > Trauma-informed practices and cultural responsiveness promote a culture of safety, empowerment, and healing.
- > Harm reduction approaches seek to reduce negative consequences associated with substance use; all persons are treated with respect and provided with equal access to services.

See [Glossary](#) for more information about these practices and approaches.

Low-barrier approaches make shelters more accessible

Some low-barrier features may be resisted by organizations that operate longstanding institutional systems of shelter and services that are contingent upon conformity to rigid rules and services structures. Many people who are homeless either cannot or will not comply with these expectations, as they might separate family members, interfere with their work schedules, require religious participation, or won’t accommodate pets. With a strict institutional shelter approach, those who do not adhere to the structure are relegated to unsheltered settings; in contrast, low-barrier strategies seek to change this dynamic, providing a more flexible environment to make shelters and subsequent rehousing available to a broader segment of the homeless population.

HOUSING FIRST
is based on the premise that everyone is able to be housed.



Entrance to the City of New Orleans Shelter and Engagement Center, referred to locally as “the low-barrier shelter”

City of New Orleans Shelter and Engagement Center

An example of a shelter that contains many low-barrier features is the City of New Orleans Shelter and Engagement Center, known as “the low-barrier shelter.” The 100-bed facility in a renovated wing of a large, disused VA hospital building opened in 2018. Stays are open-ended, with case management services to help guests obtain permanent housing.

The shelter works to maintain a low-barrier approach by accommodating pets, couples staying together, easy access to possessions, and all-day access to the facility for those staying there. Uniformed security receive training in working in a low-barrier setting. The shelter is full nightly. Its opening is widely credited with reducing the size of the unsheltered homeless population from the 2018 Point-in-Time (PIT) count of 594 persons to the 2019 PIT count of 430 persons.

Approximately one-third of its funding comes from the City of New Orleans; the balance comes from private business interests that embrace the low-barrier approach.



Inside the Philadelphia’s Prevention Point navigation center, a low-barrier shelter

TEMPORARY FACILITIES WITH LOW-BARRIER FEATURES OFFER POSITIVE ALTERNATIVES TO ENCAMPMENTS

Temporary housing with low-barrier features is a critical component in efforts to close encampments. Philadelphia and the Twin Cities metro area offer examples.

Prevention Point Philadelphia

In Philadelphia, the nonprofit agency Prevention Point Philadelphia (PPP) made beds available in a navigation center and a separate shelter, both within easy walking distance of two large encampments, to those facing imminent displacement from the encampment.

PPP provides a range of substance use services, including syringe exchange, in a committed harm reduction approach. Consistent with harm reduction, there were no requirements for sobriety, mental health treatment, or service participation, and there were no curfews or restrictions to leaving. Partners and possessions could accompany those in facilities, while other items such as pets and drugs were prohibited. Among a population marked by opioid use, PPP engaged residents to participate in community-building activities and case management and eschewed uniformed security in favor of approaching challenging behaviors and problematic incidents on a more case-by-case basis. While people who regularly use opioids typically avoid shelters, both PPP facilities were often at capacity.

Minneapolis navigation center built by Red Lake Nation

In Minneapolis, the Red Lake Nation worked with the City of Minneapolis to build a temporary interim navigation center of large heated tents on land owned and planned for housing development by Red Lake Nation near a large encampment. The land was slated for development of an affordable housing community so was ideal to bridge the time required to identify longer-term housing for residents of the encampment. The time from concept to full operation was just over two months. Designed to sleep 120 people and to accommodate as many as 200, the navigation center was a service-rich, low-barrier shelter that practiced harm reduction.

Two non-native community-based nonprofits administered the navigation center. Simpson Housing served as the site operator, and Avivo provided the housing placement services to help navigation center residents exit to stable housing. Both organizations had the expertise, capacity, and organizational approaches that were respected by the Red Lake Nation and the city officials. Staff provided meals as well as tools to manage chemical dependency and around-the-clock mental-health services.



Red Lake Tribal Secretary Sam Strong welcomes opening of navigation center.

JESSICA LEE, MINNPOST DEC. 2018

STANDARDIZING LOW-BARRIER APPROACHES SYSTEM-WIDE

Low-barrier standards can be aligned system-wide to present more consistent, accessible accommodations across a jurisdiction. Portland has redesigned practices for its emergency shelter system to adopt more low-barrier characteristics as part of its recent expansion of temporary housing capacity.

Shelter exits for non-compliance are minimized and, when absolutely necessary, are handled in a dignified manner, using trauma-informed practices to work to ‘keep the door open’ for a return to services engagement.

Low-barrier Standard Practices

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| Operate 24/7 to meet basic needs | Uses non-punitive approaches | Provide housing-focused supportive services | Provide safe storage for resident belongings | Permit residents to bring pets |
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RESOURCES

- > **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.** <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Housing-First-Permanent-Supportive-Housing-Brief.pdf>
- > **U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness.** <https://www.usich.gov/news/resource-roundup-providing-access-to-low-barrier-shelter/>
- > **National Alliance to End Homelessness.** <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/emergency-shelter/>

SOLUTIONS BASED ON EVIDENCE

Arnold Ventures (AV) is a philanthropic organization with the mission to invest in evidence-based solutions that maximize opportunities and minimize injustice. AV supported a study to identify practices and policies that promote alternatives to using punitive and enforcement-based measures as the primary responses to unsheltered homelessness. Project investigators conducted a three-day visit in spring–summer 2019 to each of nine sites for an in-person review of community-specific initiatives. The sites represent the major regions of the U.S. and include cities of different sizes as well as rural, suburban, and tribal areas and provide an array of different socioeconomic contexts and present different local housing market configurations.