

### **Why do people need help remaining in housing?**

The Alaska Mental Health Trust provides services to people with mental illness, chronic alcohol addictions, developmental disabilities and Alzheimer's disease and related dementia conditions, including conditions like traumatic brain injury. Oftentimes, a disabling condition limits a person's ability to perform everyday tasks that most people take for granted. Creating order and habits that lead to stability can be a challenge if one's thinking is not clear or impacted by substances. Areas such as time management, shopping, cleaning, self care, hygiene, social connections and money management can be impacted and disorganized. If any of these skills are not sufficiently taught or maintained, a person can fall into homelessness, break social rules and end up in jail or become so mentally ill he/she may require hospitalization to become stable.

**Supported housing** is a method of assisting Trust beneficiaries in maintaining stable housing through careful design of the building to promote visibility of staff and residents and also through the availability of on-site staff members able to instruct residents in those tasks required to maintain a healthy, stable home. A staff member or 'residential support' person may assist by developing daily schedules, creating methods to track appointments and help establish routines leading to time management for self care, housekeeping and responsible follow up on appointments and work opportunities.

### **What is *Housing First*?**

Some models of supported housing focus on individuals who are the most challenging to provide services for and who have not been able to maintain housing. *Housing first* is a model aimed at the most vulnerable homeless individuals (i.e. those with mental illness; or those with multiple mental, physical disabilities or health conditions; and often times co-occurring addictions). In this model, people are first housed and then problems and barriers to successful housing are identified and plans are implemented to ensure tenancy and to address a person's goals for healthier living and success in the community.

The major components of a *housing first* approach that have been demonstrated in successful programs<sup>1</sup>:

1. Direct, or nearly direct placement in housing with the program's commitment to ensure that the participant is **housed permanently**
2. Tenancy is not connected to use of supportive services, although robust services are readily available and offered frequently through **assertive engagement**;
3. Use of a harm reduction model for substance use: addressing the harm caused by elevated substance use while not forcing elimination of the use completely.
4. Pairing of the housing with **intensive (oftentimes around the clock) case management** services, even in circumstances where participants leave the housing temporarily. Case management follows the person.

## **Are there projects that utilize *housing first* in Alaska?**

Over the past four years the Alaska Mental Health Trust's *Affordable Housing Focus Area* has demonstrated several projects that have shown effectiveness for people with intensive needs with the result of greatly increased tenure in safe, stable housing.

The greatest impact of the housing focus area's efforts has been in implementing a *housing first model* for mentally ill individuals with high incarceration and inpatient psychiatric hospitalization rates, those with chronic addictions and the most challenging of individuals with multiple diagnoses. These groups include people with long standing alcohol/drug addictions and/or multiple mental health diagnoses in addition to addictions. Highlights from the project includes:

- A 47% reduction in admissions to Dept of Corrections over the study period (2007-20010)for the 47 participants
- An 82% reduction in days spent in Dept of Corrections from 2546 down to 461 after one year of participation in the program (Trust Bridge Home program Status report FY09)
- During the same period, admissions to API were also reduced by 52%
- Participants remained in service over the program period and in fiscal year 2009; only 3% of the participants were evicted from stable housing.

## **What are the necessary components of a *housing first* program?**

Housing first is a voluntary program and builds on a philosophy that believes in housing as a right that all of us enjoy rather than a condition of participating in a social service program or treatment.

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<sup>i</sup> Pearson, C, Montgomery, A.E., Locke, G (2009) Housing Stability Among Homeless Individuals with Serious Mental Illness Participating in Housing First Programs, Journal of Community Psychology 37(3) 404-417. Online: Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com)