

# Homeless System Response: Five Things to Consider When Investing ESG in Homelessness Prevention

As Americans are hit by acute [job loss and economic hardship](#) resulting from the impact of COVID-19, more individuals and families may be pushed to the brink of housing loss and homelessness. Communities will want to prepare for higher demand on their homelessness system resources. One important focus is to reduce the number of people who become newly homeless through [expanding targeted prevention](#) resources.

In order to understand how to target homelessness prevention resources, it is helpful to think of the goals and benefits of [different approaches to prevention](#). This helps us think more strategically about how to design prevention programs to have the greatest impact on homelessness, to reduce the spread and impact of COVID-19, and to use resources as effectively as possible. It is critical to be as *effective and efficient* in reducing homelessness as possible. Prevention programs may look successful if no one served by them later enters shelter but, without good targeting and program design, they may primarily serve households who would have avoided shelter or street homelessness anyway.

The following five tips will help communities develop and implement a prevention strategy that effectively and efficiently utilizes resources for prevention and helps households that are most likely to have experienced a stay in shelter or in an unsheltered location to instead maintain housing stability:

- 1. Identify resources from outside the homeless system that can be used for prevention.** The pace at which individuals and families will move from job interruptions to facing literal homelessness is unknown, but the scale of economic crisis is too great to mitigate with dedicated homeless system resources alone. Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) Program recipients should collaborate with state, local, and private-sector partners—including local legal aid groups, non-profits, faith-based organizations and philanthropic organizations—to identify and braid together the full range of mainstream resources that can provide support, both financial and in-kind, to help households maintain housing stability.

In your resource inventory, think of prevention resources broadly and include the plethora of programs that can help individuals and families address both long- and short-term needs to maintain housing stability such as food, childcare, health care, mental health care, or substance abuse treatment.

- 2. Serve households who are closest to homelessness.** Most households that appear unstably housed manage to avoid shelter and the homeless system, even without services<sup>1</sup>. To increase services to households who are on the precipice of needing shelter or sleeping in unsheltered locations, communities can target some or all of their ESG resources to those who are seeking shelter or homelessness assistance to help them find alternative safe housing options<sup>2</sup>.

Prevention strategies targeted to those already at the front door of your homeless system may include households who have frequently moved or are in unstable living situations (e.g., couch surfing). There is no “peak risk level” beyond which prevention assistance is no longer effective,<sup>3</sup> so serving clients presenting at the front-door of homeless services will help ensure that households closest to residing in a shelter or unsheltered location maintain housing and will help reduce entries into homelessness. These prevention strategies require close collaboration between emergency shelters and coordinated entry access points to implement problem-solving approaches. ESG funds can be used to build out this practice to avert shelter stays and provide assistance to connect households with safe and stable alternatives to the homeless response system.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/DennisCulhane\\_PrevCentApproHomelessnessAssist.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/DennisCulhane_PrevCentApproHomelessnessAssist.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/homelessness-prevention-guide-and-companion.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.evidenceonhomelessness.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Homelessness\\_Prevention\\_Literature\\_Synthesis.pdf](http://www.evidenceonhomelessness.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Homelessness_Prevention_Literature_Synthesis.pdf)

- 3. Target ESG-funded homelessness prevention assistance based on proven risk factors and local data.** If ESG-funded prevention is offered with no requirements beyond minimum eligibility, many more households will be eligible for assistance than can be served. Communities should determine how to *prioritize* eligible households who are at highest risk and to incorporate this prioritization, including any changes to ESG-CV eligibility requirements<sup>4</sup>, into local coordinated entry systems. They should rely on evidence concerning factors that help to predict homelessness<sup>5</sup> (such as previous experiences of homelessness, living doubled up and not being a leaseholder, high levels of rent arrears, and having young children) and they should inform prevention screening tools. Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) developed a [screening tool](#) for prioritizing households and determining the intensity of homelessness prevention services that an eligible household may receive. Targeted interventions and transition planning for special populations and people leaving institutional settings are also effective. Assessments should identify both risk factors (e.g., those without social resources are more likely to need shelter) and protective factors (e.g., households who are able to live with friends or family are less likely to experience unsheltered homelessness).

In addition, communities should review local disaggregated data (e.g., by race, household type, gender, and age) to determine any common characteristics of households who enter or return to shelter that could be used to target assistance. For example, how do households who enter shelter in the community differ from those who are served in traditional prevention? Use HMIS or other data to determine typical income levels, homeless histories, ages, etc. of those that present for shelter and use these factors to “screen in” higher-need households. Using local data to determine the zip codes or neighborhoods where clients are most frequently entering the system and targeting those areas for prevention can also help direct resources to those at highest risk and reduce racial disparities. This is also an opportunity to ensure that equity is built into the program design by ensuring that targeting helps meet the needs of those who are often over-represented in the homeless system.

- 4. Provide the minimum ESG-funded homelessness prevention assistance necessary for the shortest time required by households to maintain housing.** Communities should implement models of homelessness prevention assistance that provide “just enough” ESG-funded assistance to prevent a household from having to stay in a shelter or spend the night on the streets, along with links to community-based resources to promote long-term stability. This will enable programs to serve more households in crisis. A policy that pays all past-due rent regardless of the household’s ability to contribute may provide more than is needed to an individual household and deplete resources more quickly. Consider using a progressive engagement approach where a small amount of assistance is provided first. Use a flexible design that does not prohibit households from getting more support if needed.
- 5. Plan prevention outreach and messaging.** Determine how households in need will learn of assistance while not overwhelming the system. Open call-in lines with general advertising may attract a high volume of interest with a large proportion of callers who do not meet target criteria. Partnerships with community-based services, faith-based organizations, food pantries, hospitals, correctional facilities, and other institutions and human service agencies (such as public benefits offices and child welfare agencies) may help programs identify and intervene for those who need assistance the most. Working with organizations that are led by or serve marginalized communities will help ensure that information about your prevention assistance reaches prioritized populations. The National Alliance to End Homelessness provides [examples of targeted outreach for specific populations](#). Many people who are at the highest risk of unsheltered homelessness do not seek assistance from the homeless system, so working with outside partners can help homelessness service programs reach those with the most need. Clear and transparent information will improve a prevention program’s effectiveness and efficiency. Having people with lived experience participate in the planning process, including developing program design and eligibility criteria, will also help create equitable prevention programs.

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<sup>4</sup> The CARES Act (Public Law 116-136 approved March 27, 2020) amended the definition of at risk of homelessness, and thus eligibility for homelessness prevention, to households that are very low-income (instead of below 30% of area median income), as established for HUD’s Section 8 and Public Housing programs at [www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il.html](http://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il.html).

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.evidenceonhomelessness.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Homelessness\\_Prevention\\_Literature\\_Synthesis.pdf](http://www.evidenceonhomelessness.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Homelessness_Prevention_Literature_Synthesis.pdf)

Although not every household will be eligible for or targeted for homelessness prevention assistance, these households may still be experiencing a crisis. Training staff on crisis resolution that includes a focus on personal safety, motivational approaches to encourage self-resolution, and providing concrete actions a person can take will help a great number of households even without added funding. Using resources outside of the homeless system may help families self-resolve and not need to enter shelter. Among households who do meet eligibility criteria, some may have more appropriate options outside of the crisis system. Staff engaging in appropriate screening and housing problem-solving conversations should help people identify those solutions whenever possible. The crisis system and limited prevention funding should serve households with no safe alternatives or other means of stabilization.