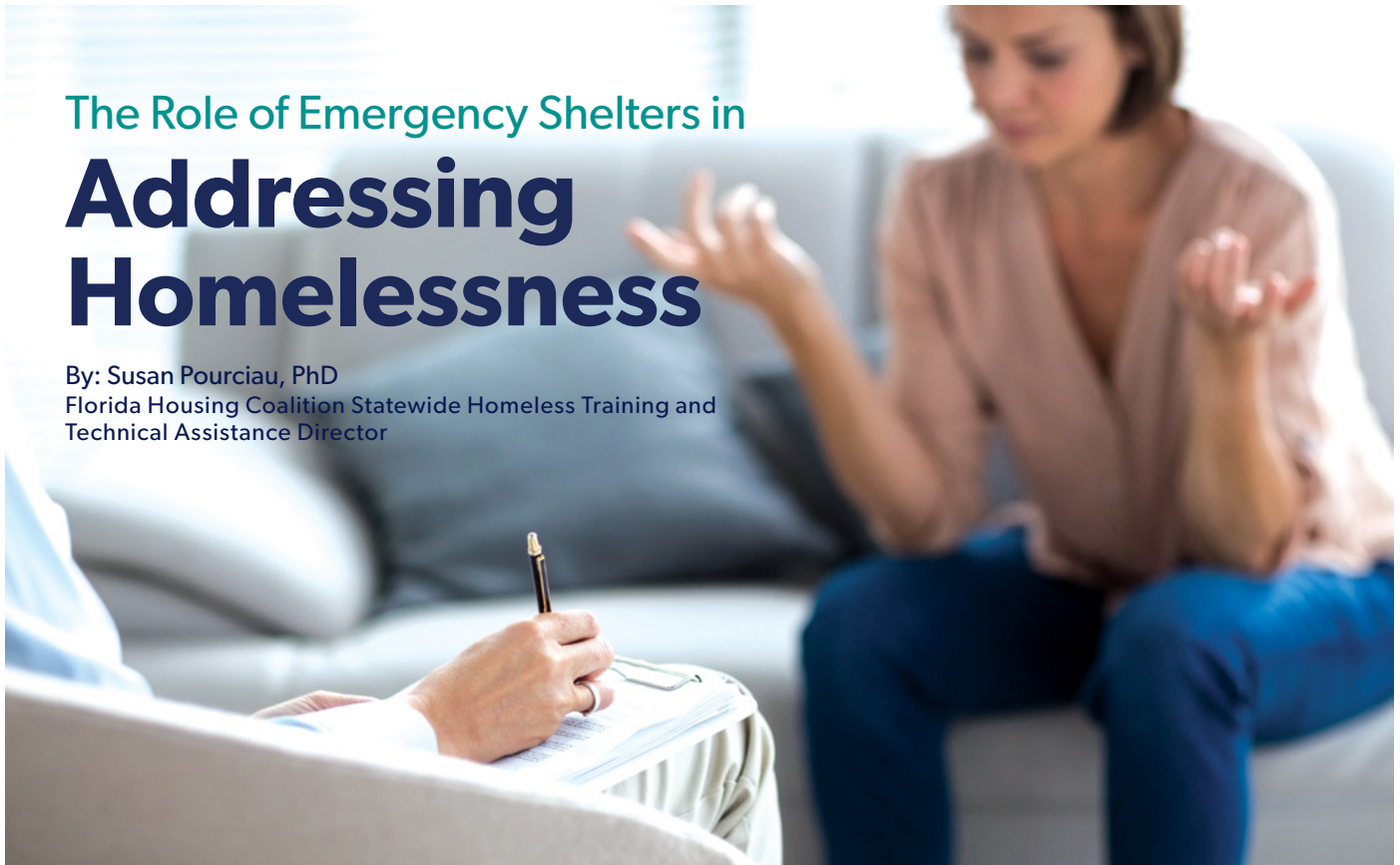


# The Role of Emergency Shelters in Addressing Homelessness

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A homeless emergency shelter is not the solution to homelessness. An apartment with a lease, not an emergency shelter, is the pivot point that ends a household's homelessness. In many cases, services provided after, not before, moving into an apartment contribute to the household's long-term housing stability. All of which begs the question: if emergency shelters do not end homelessness, why are they needed?

## **Shelters serve as an intake point to help connect people with housing options.**

The emergency shelter in an effective homeless assistance system must be an entry point for assessment and intake into the community's Coordinated Entry System. The Coordinated Entry System (CES) is simply a system by which a household's housing barriers are assessed and then, based on that assessment, the household is matched with housing options. While the shelter offers an "entry door" into the homeless assistance system, CES's housing options offer an "exit door."

This linkage between shelter and housing is critical to reducing homelessness and helping people move out of homelessness quickly. In many communities, shelters choose not to participate in CES or the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) at all. In other communities, shelters do participate, but then delay access for their clients to obtain the housing options, under the misguided theory

that many services must be provided in shelter before helping the household move into housing.

When shelters do not fully participate in Coordinated Entry and connect people with housing options immediately, this practice increases and prolongs homelessness. An important role of funders, including local government, is to ensure that all shelters participate in CES and HMIS, and that households are connected with housing options immediately upon intake so they can move into housing within an average of thirty days.

## **The best operating model for emergency shelter is the "housing-focused" shelter model.**

Over the past two decades, many emergency shelters have shifted away from providing basic shelter for those in need and shifted toward offering more exclusive programs that provide extensive service programs. This "service rich" shelter model was well-intentioned; however, there is no

research or data that supports the contention that those shelters improve recovery from homelessness or increase successful moves back into housing.

In fact, the shelter model that has proven successful outcomes is the “housing-focused” shelter model. In this approach, services in shelter are very limited and are focused specifically and intentionally on helping people move out of shelter and into housing as quickly as possible. In a housing-focused shelter, programs and policies are created to ensure that all efforts are focused on helping households move into housing quickly and with appropriate supports following exit from shelter.

A housing-focused shelter recognizes that support services are much more effective when provided after housing placement, rather than in shelter. Therefore, the services in shelter are focused on helping the household find and move into housing. Wraparound services and non-housing focused services are limited because they tend to be duplicative of community-based services, expensive, and relatively ineffective.

### Shelters address short-term basic needs such as safety, meals, showers, and beds.

To fulfill this basic purpose of meeting basic needs, a shelter must have “low-barrier” admission and retention policies. To have low-barrier policies means that the shelter provides shelter based on need alone, rather than making access to shelter conditional on meeting specific requirements (e.g., meeting with case manager, sobriety, paying program fees). By failing to provide accessible shelter to certain households, a shelter fails at this most basic function of providing safety and meeting basic needs.

When barriers to obtaining and staying in shelter are too high, those who are excluded tend to be the most vulnerable in

terms of health and safety. They are also likely to be those that require the most engagement with expensive community-based emergency response teams, such as law enforcement and emergency medical services. The community at large benefits from having a local shelter that provides access to those who have the highest needs.


In addition, to be accessible and utilized by people who are homeless, an emergency shelter should be located in a site that provides flexible and ready access to transportation. People who are homeless have jobs, make appointments, go to school, shop, and visit friends. If a shelter is sited in a location where transportation is limited, those needing shelter may decline shelter. For those who use shelter, they will find

it more difficult to stay connected with jobs, friends, school, and mainstream activities, making it less likely they will move out of homelessness quickly.

It is often assumed that a shelter must be close to “services” or even that services must be provided onsite. This practice marginalizes people and disconnects them from the very community into which they will move and reintegrate.

Therefore, it is important that shelter

be connected through ready transportation to the broader community, including jobs, schools, community-based services, and shopping.

In summary, many who are homeless need short-term housing-focused emergency shelters. A housing-focused shelter will not only help households move out of homelessness more quickly, it will do so more efficiently by connecting people with housing options and community-based services. If your community would like to learn more about how to move toward a housing-focused, effective, and efficient shelter system, contact the Florida Housing Coalition. **We can help.** 

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