



# SOUTHERN NEVADA HOMELESSNESS CONTINUUM OF CARE HOUSING PROBLEM SOLVING PROTOCOL

FEBRUARY 2, 2023

Version 1.0

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## Housing Problem Solving Policy – Why do we use this strategy?

Housing Problem Solving (HPS) is a person-centered, strengths-based approach to support households in identifying choices and solutions to quickly end their housing crisis. HPS is housing-focused and is explored with all households accessing the Southern Nevada Homelessness Continuum of Care (also known as SNH CoC) response system who are at imminent risk of homelessness or those experiencing literal homelessness. HPS supports people through empathetic, strength-based conversations and resource connections to quickly secure temporary or permanent housing by encouraging creative, safe housing options that meet the household's unique needs. It is a short-term intervention focused on identifying immediate, safe housing arrangements, often utilizing conflict resolution and mediation skills to reconnect households to their support systems. HPS offers flexible services that may be coupled with minimal financial assistance when needed.

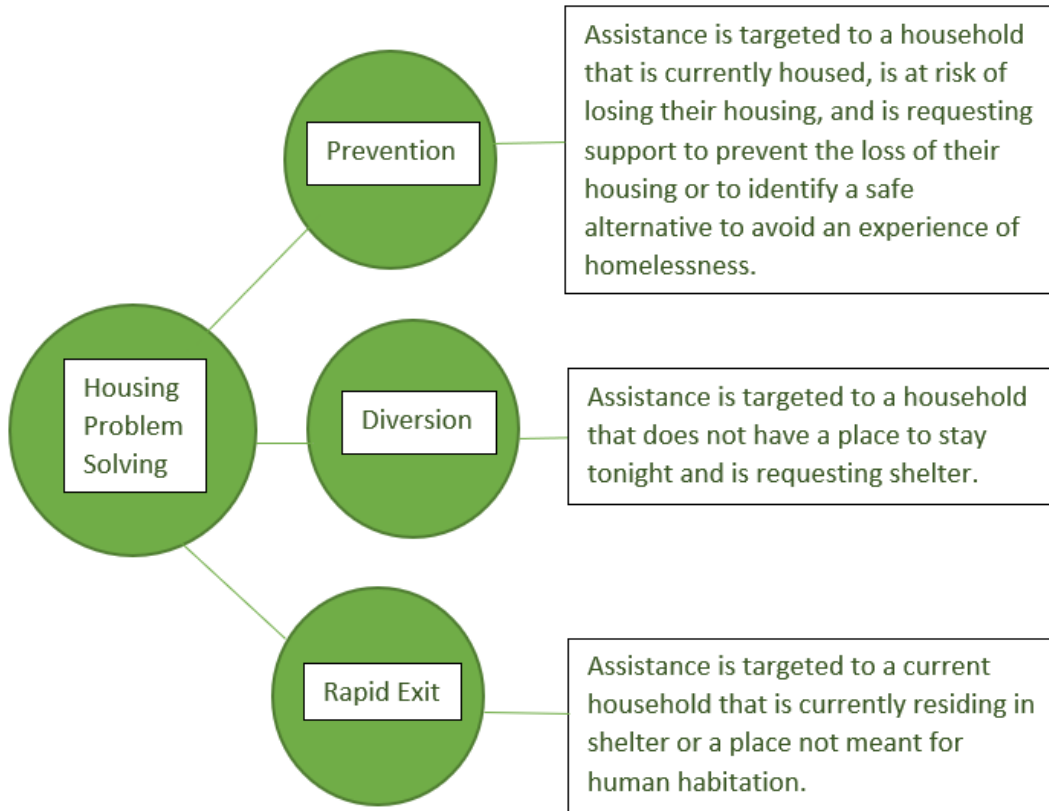
HPS techniques are a critical strategy for building and strengthening a diverse array of resources needed to prevent housing loss and help people exit homelessness quickly. HPS can reduce trauma from entering the homeless system and supports Southern Nevada Homelessness Continuum of Care's efforts to end homelessness while ensuring housing assistance is prioritized for the most vulnerable. HPS can also help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 by reducing the amount of people entering the homeless system.

HPS plays a critical role in the Southern Nevada Homelessness Coordinated Entry System by:

- Assisting households in identifying safe, alternative options to shelter, reducing the trauma of an experience with homelessness.
- Exploring solutions that are often creative and can be implemented quickly – real-time support can make housing instability brief and reduce the number of people entering the homeless system.
- Preserving emergency shelter beds and supportive housing resources for households who have no safe alternative options.
- Supporting creative and cost-effective solutions to meet each household's needs by recognizing their unique strengths.
- Decreasing a household's length of time homeless (and the system's average length of time homeless).
- Leveraging service principles through staff at drop-in centers, emergency shelters, street and encampment outreach, other access points, and any other points of contact within the crisis response system.
- Supporting a household's attainment of long-term or temporary housing options outside the crisis response system.

It is important to understand the differences between Homelessness Prevention, Diversion and Rapid Exit which are all HPS strategies. While similar service strategies are often utilized within each of these

approaches, the time at which the HPS intervention occurs is different and important for the purposes of measuring the success of these interventions.



## Housing Problem Solving Quality Practices - What are the minimum requirements?

HPS engages households early in their housing crisis. A HPS Specialist trained in HPS techniques initiates an exploratory conversation to brainstorm practical solutions for households to resolve their homelessness quickly and safely, as a first step within the Southern Nevada Homelessness Continuum of Care Coordinated Entry System. The specialist supports households in seeing beyond their current crisis by encouraging them to generate creative ideas and identify realistic options for safe housing based on their own available resources rather than those of the crisis response system. HPS is a systemwide approach utilized to support people in real time, acknowledging that far more people request housing assistance than can be referred to supportive housing through the Coordinated Entry System.

It's important to note the following components of HPS:

- HPS is available for all household types including individuals, families, and unaccompanied youth (18-24)
  - Households at imminent risk of homelessness (within 14 days) and households experiencing literal homelessness that have not identified a safe housing option for the immediate upcoming night are eligible for HPS. When evaluating eligibility, consider where the household anticipates staying in the upcoming evening (rather than where they stayed last night). Households may either qualify as at-imminent-risk of homelessness or literally homeless for the upcoming night.
  - HPS is available 24/7 at any entry point of the crisis response system, including drop-in centers, emergency shelters, outreach programs, and other access points. Even if a household has accessed HPS services previously, they are eligible to re-engage and receive assistance if they meet the eligibility requirements outlined in this section. Financial assistance requests that exceed a total of \$2,500 must be consulted with and approved by the agency program supervisor and lead to long term housing stability.
    - Staff shall confer with supervisors when they meet with clients who have received HPS assistance in the past 24 months to determine if additional supports may be needed to house them again.
- Households at Imminent Risk of Homelessness are Eligible for Homelessness Prevention:
  - The household is currently housed and is at risk of losing their housing. "At risk" is defined as being within 14 days of losing housing or missing a rent payment. Households against whom eviction proceedings have been initiated, including those that have received a Three-Day Notice to Pay Rent or Quit or a Notice to Vacate, are also considered "at risk." This may include persons who identify as currently homeless, but in the conversation, it is revealed that they have been staying with friends or family over the past few nights. These households therefore meet this eligibility requirement, as long as they are still residing in the unit, even if eviction proceedings are ongoing or have concluded.
  - Households residing in garages converted into places intended for human habitation are considered housed, regardless of the legality of the conversion. A converted unit is defined as one that has access to a bathroom, running water, and electricity. Staff

- should inquire about all three of these elements to determine whether a garage unit meets conversion criteria to determine whether the household is housed or unhoused.
- After exiting an institutional setting, an individual is considered housed if they were housed prior to institutionalization. Institutions are defined as hospitals, jails, psychiatric wards, and substance abuse treatment facilities.
  - Households that do not have a place to stay tonight and are requesting shelter, are Eligible for Homelessness Diversion.
    - Diversion occurs before a household spends a night at a shelter, in a motel with a voucher, in a place not meant for human habitation, or unsheltered.
  - Literally Homeless Households are Eligible for Rapid Exit:
    - The household lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, which includes a primary nighttime residence of:
      - A place not meant for human habitation, e.g., a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground;
      - An emergency shelter, safe haven, or hotel or motel paid by a charitable organization or a government program for low-income individuals; or
      - A hospital or other institution if:
        - Their stay was 90 days or fewer **and**
        - They resided in an emergency shelter or in a place not meant for human habitation within 14 days prior to admission.
  - HPS can be used to divert clients from homelessness or to rapidly exit households from homelessness.
  - Agencies should ensure program staff have the time available to have conversations with households to divert them from entering the homeless system or to quickly transition clients to safe, stable housing.
  - Staff should ensure that households play an active role in determining what resources they have and need.
  - All HPS conversations must be fully documented in HMIS within 24 hours of the contact.
  - Service providers accessing flexible financial assistance funds must have a valid HPS contract with the United Way of Southern Nevada, and each staff person requesting assistance for a household must first complete the 2-day HPS training and review the Housing Flex Funds policy which outlines how flexible funds will be dispersed. **(Appendix C)**
  - To promote the expertise of local Housing Program Solving Specialists as well as flexibility and efficiency in service delivery, SNH CoC does not have a maximum or cap on the amount of flexible financial assistance one household can receive. Flexible financial assistance requests that exceed \$2,500 must be consulted with and approved by the agency program supervisor and lead to long term housing stability.

# Housing Problem Solving System Performance Standards

Prevention, Diversion and Rapid Exit performance standards have been defined by the HPS Working Group:

- 10% of all enrolled family households with children, adults without children and young adult households are successfully diverted from emergency shelters
- 30% of all enrolled family households with children, adults without children and young adult households are successfully rapidly exited from emergency shelters
- 10% of all enrolled adult households without children are successfully rapidly exited from unsheltered situations

## HMIS and Data Collection Requirements

- All HPS conversations and services must be documented in HMIS. Training will be provided for all providers.
- Comprehensive HPS dashboards will be made available upon the HPS launch. The dashboards will reflect HPS outcomes for drop-in centers, emergency shelters, outreach programs, other access points, and any other initial points of contact within the crisis response system. Outcome data will be separated by multiple data points to help assess how well HPS meets the needs of communities of color, as well as separated by gender, age, veteran status and when the client accessed HPS during the life of their case.

## Housing Problem Solving Guidance – What are the recommended practices?

HPS is ideally attempted during the first conversation with every household making contact with the crisis response system, and it should be held early in a person's experience of homelessness to possibly minimize their experience of homelessness.

HPS conversations are not limited to one-time occurrences. If a viable option is not discovered initially or a household is not interested in having the conversation, a HPS Specialist should continue to attempt the conversation whenever the household is willing throughout their engagement with the specialist.

If intake staff (non-HPS Specialist) determine that the initial HPS conversation needs further exploring, the intake staff should refer the case to a dedicated HPS Specialist to continue the conversation to either help divert or rapidly exit the household from homelessness.

HPS starts with a conversation grounded in a household's current housing situation, available resources, and identification of safe housing options outside of the supportive housing system that they are willing to explore. The role of a HPS Specialist (anyone trained in and engaging in problem-solving conversations) is to partner with the household to identify viable alternatives for permanent or temporary housing and facilitate connections for the household.

Services and best practices include:

- HPS should be offered during the first interaction with access point staff (unless client safety precludes so) and offered continuously (during future interactions) to the extent a person or household is interested in having the conversation.

- Having conversations that support participants in identifying and leveraging household strengths, support networks, and other resources in overcoming barriers to housing stability and identifying potential solutions to their housing crisis. These conversations include open-ended questions utilizing motivational interviewing skills.
- Following the lead of the household to support personal control over one's own problem-solving and empowerment to actively overcome obstacles. Focus on the person's goals, choices, and preferences; respect their strengths; and reinforce their progress. Do not inhibit the household from pursuing a viable and safe housing option, even if it is only a short-term solution.
- Partnering with households as advocates to work with landlords and debt collectors if advocacy directly links to a housing solution.
- Serving as a mediator to assist households in having difficult conversations with individuals in their support network, such as friends and family, employers, debt collectors, and landlords. Conversations focus on solutions to securing safe housing options.
- Connecting households to short and long-term supports and resources, including mainstream services that can address ongoing needs as well as housing search resources.
- Facilitating financial assistance for solutions that require financial support.

#### Flexible Financial Assistance

Flexible financial assistance also known as Housing Flex Funds is available for households who identify it as a need for resolving their housing crisis through Housing Program Solving conversations. Flexible dollars can be used to assist the client in becoming or remaining housed and may be used in coordination with direct housing assistance like rent and deposits and also for other necessary items with a direct connection to a housing outcome.

When financial assistance is necessary to obtain safe housing, Housing Flex Funds can be used in a variety of ways **provided they directly result in a housing solution, whether temporary or permanent.**

These funds are for agencies within the SNH CoC that assist clients with finding and/or maintaining housing. While the exact expenditures may be unique and creative, staff and organizations should make sure it fits these criteria:

1. The expense is directly tied to the client's housing,
2. Without it they would not be housed in a reasonable time, and
3. No other assistance funds can be used for this expense.

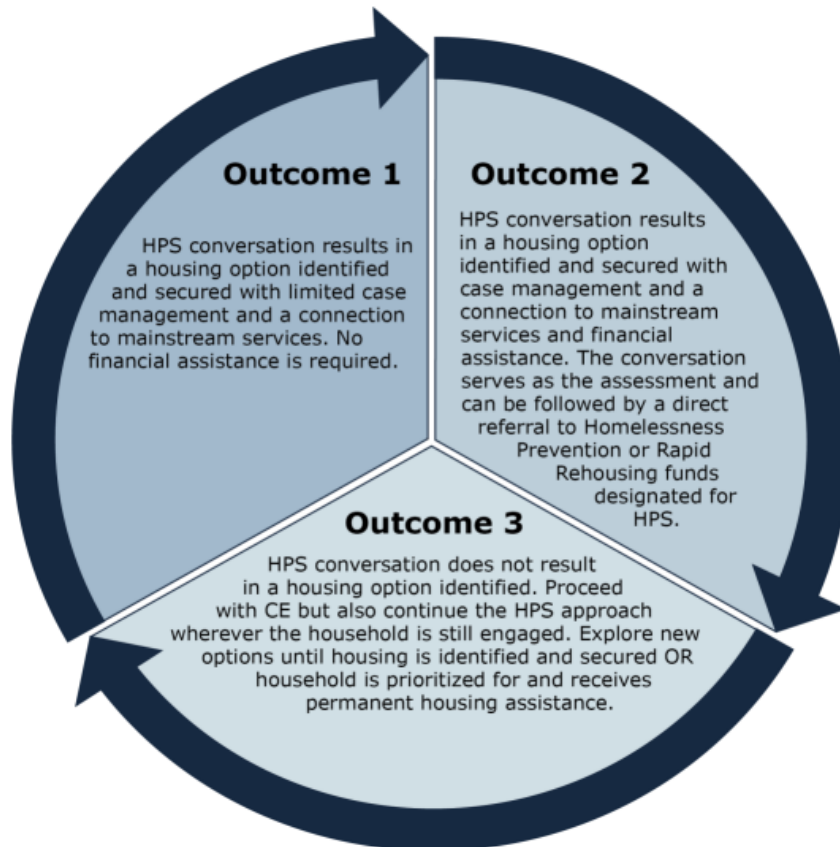
There are many expenses that may be eligible for Housing Flex Funds if the expense can be directly connected to a housing outcome. The specific categories are listed in **Appendix C** in the Housing Flex Funds Program Policy.

Households have unique needs, and each situation will require different strategies. A progressive engagement framework should be used to determine the number of resources needed to end the housing crisis of each impacted household.



## Defining a Successful Outcome

There are three primary outcomes from a HPS conversation:



Successful HPS occurs when a household remains in or moves to safe temporary or permanent housing. The household may be in their own home, living with family or friends, relocating to safe housing, or living in shared housing. HPS might support a household returning to their recent home (*e.g.*, via mediation and/or food assistance); moving to a safe housing option (*e.g.*, via financial assistance to cover move-in costs and/or bus fare to a safe housing option); or moving into a new housing situation (*e.g.*, via landlord advocacy, deposit assistance, and/or financial assistance to cover their first month of rent).

It can be difficult to estimate how long temporary housing will be available, and the household's options should not be limited due to the fear of not meeting outcomes. **All self-reported housing options to an eligible exit destination are considered a positive HPS outcome, regardless of the length of time an option is projected to last.** It is the role of the HPS Specialist to support a safe temporary option and establish a service plan with a household that ensures a permanent housing solution has also been identified. For the purposes of tracking quality data in HMIS, a "temporary" HPS solution includes living with family or friends on a time-limited basis, and a "permanent" solution is an option a household reports that does not have a time limit.

Eligible exit destinations include the following:

- Rental by client, no ongoing housing subsidy
- Rental by client, with other ongoing housing subsidy
- Staying or living with friends or family, permanent tenure
- Owned by client, no ongoing housing subsidy
- Owned by client, with ongoing housing subsidy
- Long-term care facility or nursing home
- Staying or living with friends or family, temporary tenure
- Living in an RV with water and electricity hook ups and no risk of being ticketed/towed due to illegal parking
- Other housing programs

## Appendix A: Frequently Asked Questions

The services and resources offered through each intervention all align with the HPS approach – including creative problem-solving conversations, connection to community resources, and when needed, flexible financial assistance. We differentiate between these three terms for the sake of outcome tracking and understanding what’s effective and what may need improvement.

- Homelessness Prevention targets households who are still housed but at imminent risk of homelessness; typically, within 14 days. Households who are at risk of homelessness may include people who are facing eviction from their own or rented home, couch-surfing, doubled up with friends or family, or paying for a motel with their own resources. It also includes those who at first present as currently homeless, but upon further conversation staff learn they were housed until today.
- Homelessness Diversion occurs at the front door of the homelessness service system (e.g., coordinated entry access point, services center, emergency shelter) but before the household spends a night at a shelter, in a motel with a voucher, in a place not meant for human habitation, or unsheltered.
- Rapid Exit targets households who are already experiencing homelessness and do not have a place to stay the night they request assistance; they are past the imminent risk of homelessness and anticipate needing emergency shelter that night. Rapid exit also includes clients who were not able to be diverted, so staff continued to work with them while they were in shelter.

### **How is HPS different from traditional case management services?**

*HPS is often a lighter touch than traditional case management, meaning the length of service and the amount of assistance is often less than in more intensive housing programs.* Providers have been engaging in creative housing-focused conversations with people every day, for many years.

The focus of HPS services is to quickly support a household to find a safe temporary or permanent housing solution. HPS services are flexible, short-term interventions with limited follow-up. If the household needs more intensive support, they may be referred to appropriate case management or other longer-term supportive services embedded within provider agencies.

### **If someone explores a safe housing option through HPS, should they still complete a housing assessment?**

No. Not every household will need to enter the homeless system so only those that do enter the homeless system will need to complete a housing assessment.

### **Can I use HPS flexible financial assistance for households to access a supportive housing program (e.g., deposit for transitional housing)?**

No. HPS flexible financial assistance is meant to support individuals and families in connecting with safe housing options outside of the homeless system, which means emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid rehousing, and permanent supportive housing are not exit destinations for which HPS flexible

funding is available. Those housing programs should be providing support with deposits through their funds when needed.

### **What if a household has previously accessed HPS and requests HPS assistance again?**

If a household has accessed HPS services previously, they are eligible to re-engage and receive assistance if they meet the eligibility requirement outlined in these guidelines.

## **Appendix B: Housing Problem Solving Case Example**

A couple and their two children came to a HPS Specialist for help. Through the assessment process, the Specialist learned they were evicted from their apartment a week earlier because they used their rent money to pay a child's medical bills. Embarrassed by their situation, the family decided to stay in their car and put their belongings in storage. Their former apartment was conveniently located near the father's job and the children's school, but the family feared their relationship with their former landlord was damaged beyond repair and they could not return.

The mother said she might have a co-worker who would be willing to put them up for a week or so but felt too ashamed to ask and did not want people at work to think she was a bad mother. The HPS Specialist helped the family strategize about how to ask the co-worker for assistance and provided a referral to a low-cost health care clinic nearby where the family can take their sick child for continuing care. The Specialist also provided information about affordable health insurance options.

Once the family confirmed they could stay with the mother's co-worker, the HPS Specialist focused on the family's longer-term housing plan. Together, they called the former landlord to discuss the family's situation. During the call they found out that the family had a positive rental history and was previously well-regarded by the landlord, but when the rent did not come and they lost contact, the landlord did not know what else to do and moved forward in the eviction process. With HPS financial assistance, the household was able to pay the rental arrears and return to their unit. After a few days of staying with their co-worker, the family moved back into their previous unit.

## Appendix C: Housing Flex Funds Program Policy

Southern Nevada Regional Homeless Trust Fund

HTF Point of Contact:

[helphopehome@clarkcountynv.gov](mailto:helphopehome@clarkcountynv.gov)

Subject: HTF

### OVERVIEW

The Housing Flex Funds Program is an initiative of the Southern Nevada Homelessness Continuum of Care, funded by the Southern Nevada Regional Homeless Trust Fund.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development, US Interagency Council on Homelessness, and the US Department of Veterans Affairs recommend using a Housing Problem-Solving approach,<sup>1</sup> which can be effective at preventing homelessness and can help people exit homelessness more quickly.

Housing Flex Funds are a vital tool for implementing HPS in direct collaboration with people experiencing or facing homelessness. During a HPS conversation, staff help those facing homelessness describe what housing looks like for them, identify their own strengths and resources, and map out a plan to regain housing. Gaps are identified and funds like TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and ESG (Emergency Solutions Grants) are often available for rental assistance, in addition to connecting clients to mainstream benefits like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

Even after utilizing these other supports, barriers to housing may remain, and small amounts of flexible dollars can be used to assist the client in becoming or remaining housed.

These *Housing Flex Funds* may be used not only in coordination with direct housing assistance like rent and deposits but also for other necessary items with a direct connection to a housing outcome.

### Eligible Expenses

These funds are for agencies within the CoC that assist clients with finding and/or maintaining housing. While the exact expenditures may be unique and creative, staff and organizations should make sure it fits these criteria:

1. The expense is directly tied to the client's housing,
2. Without it they would not be housed in a reasonable time, and
3. No other assistance funds can be used for this expense.

### Examples of How Housing Flex Funds Have Been Used

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<sup>1</sup> Adopting Housing Problem-Solving Approaches with Prevention, Diversion, and Rapid Exit Strategies. <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/adopting-housing-problem-solving-approaches-with-prevention-diversion-and-rapid-exit-strategies>

An evaluation of a pilot Housing Flex Fund program in Pierce County, Washington, found that people can find viable alternatives to homelessness with relatively small amounts of financial assistance (median of \$1,200 per household).<sup>2</sup> Nearly two-thirds of those supported by a diversion and flex funds program in Pierce County were households led by a single adult.

There are many expenses that may be eligible for the Housing Flex Funds Program if the expense can be directly connected to a housing outcome. The following categories are non-exhaustive examples of expenses that could potentially be eligible:

- **Assistance for non-lease holders** (e.g. shared housing, host family, etc.) in the form of rental payments, purchase of a bed (and/or bedding) that makes it possible for a person to stay in a host family's house, or utility assistance for a host family to house clients experiencing homelessness
- **Assistance for employment-related expenses** that otherwise would result in the loss of housing (e.g. uniforms, safety equipment, tools, public transportation, gas cards, job certifications, and/or car repairs) until the client receives their next check
- **Assistance for fees required by landlords** (e.g. credit checks, criminal background checks, rental application fees)
- **Assistance for other items not listed**, as long as the expense can be directly connected to a housing outcome

## Success Stories with Flex Funds

*First Case, Washington State:* A recent survivor of domestic abuse came for help with housing as well as Domestic Violence. She left the home because of the abuser and believed she would be able to pay for her housing on her own in the future as she was a seamstress. The challenge was that her sewing machine was in the home of the abuser, so Flex Funds were used to replace it.

It was easy for staff to demonstrate how buying her new work equipment was directly tied to her ability to maintain future rent payments. Note that economic abuse is one type of power abusers hold over victims, and that supporting survivors in achieving financial independence assists in their recovery as well as their physical safety.

*Second Case, Cleveland, OH:* A young Black male came to the men's shelter seeking a bed. In hearing his story, we learned that he was a student at the local university who had walked away from his apartment because he was unable to renew his student loans, which he used for living expenses. He couldn't get loans for the upcoming term because he couldn't register for classes, due to a balance of a couple hundred dollars from the prior semester. Staff confirmed that his schooling and housing were all put at risk by this back balance. So, the student logged in and the staff used a work credit card to pay the back tuition. The student did not need any other services and he was able to register for classes, apply for the loans, and work things out with the property manager. We mentioned his age, gender and race to highlight the role HPS can play in equity. Poverty, the lack of personal and family resources within the context of the high cost of higher education, almost sabotaged this man's effort for education and a career.

*Third Case, Cleveland, OH:* A father came to the family shelter for the first time, having never faced homelessness before. He was an auto mechanic who was unable to continue working, so he feared

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<sup>2</sup> Homeless to Housed in a Hurry: Pierce County Case Study. [https://buildingchanges.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/04/2018\\_DiversionCaseStudy\\_FINAL.pdf](https://buildingchanges.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/04/2018_DiversionCaseStudy_FINAL.pdf)

imminent loss of his rental unit. After hearing all of his story, staff understood that the main issue was a conflict between him and the owner of the garage, where he worked as an independent contractor. The garage owner had locked him out of the bay he used to repair cars over a disputed amount of rent the owner said he owed. The client was most upset that all of his expensive tools were locked in the garage, and the owner would only release them if he paid the disputed amount. Staff mediated between the owner and client, and they agreed on a lesser amount, which the agency was able to pay with Flex Funds. The client stated that he did not need any more assistance, as he had another garage lined up to begin working, and that he was able to negotiate a payment plan to the property owner of where he and his family rented.

It's impossible to guess all the possible barriers to housing that our clients may face – flexible dollars mean we don't have to.

## **How Funds Will Be Distributed**

United Way of Southern Nevada (UWSN) will be the agency responsible for allocating the Southern Nevada Regional Homeless Trust Fund monies to agencies.

UWSN will make grants in a lump sum to agencies. Agencies receiving Housing Flex Funds from the Homeless Trust Fund will be responsible for monthly reporting on the use of funds.

To promote the expertise of local Housing Program Solving Specialists as well as flexibility and efficiency in service delivery, our CoC does not have a maximum or cap on the amount of financial assistance one household can receive. Financial assistance that exceeds a cumulative total of \$2,500 must be approved by the agency program supervisor.

Qualified CoC partner agencies participating in the Housing Problem-Solving initiative will be invited to participate in the program. Agencies willing to participate and distribute funds will receive a grant of \$5,000.

Agencies participating in the Housing Flex Funds Pilot will be required to submit monthly reports detailing how funds were spent.

At the conclusion of the pilot, UWSN will prepare a report detailing the results and use of the Housing Flex Funds.

## **HOUSING FLEX FUNDS REPORTING FORM**

The Housing Flex Funds Reporting Form will be in HMIS for case workers to complete when requesting Flex Funds and step by step instructions will be included once it is built out.

### **Housing Flex Fund Approval Checklist (All three should be checked).**

The checklist is not all inclusive. The main idea is that the caseworker has exhausted all options to use other funds before using the HTF Housing Flex Funds.

- Do the funds relate to housing, or the ability to acquire or maintain housing?
- Without these funds, would the client remain unhoused for an unnecessarily long time?  
Are Flex Funds the only source of assistance for this expense?
- Please explain how these funds will be used for a successful housing outcome:

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### **Additional Information to be Reported by Agency Staff to UWSN in the HMIS Reporting Form:**

- Agency Name
- Staff Contact (Name / Title / Phone / Email)
- Type and size of household receiving Housing Flex Funds
- Expense Type and Reason
- Proof of Payment
- Participant demographic and outcomes (report from HMIS)