

NCSHA Application

New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority

Category: Housing for Persons with Special Needs

Title: Linkages Supportive Housing Voucher Pilot Program

Innovative

A unique pilot program administered by the New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority (MFA) brings state agencies, mental health service providers, local housing authorities and other housing experts together for the first time in New Mexico to address the housing needs for individuals that have mental or behavioral disorders that are homeless or precariously housed. The partnership, which includes the New Mexico Behavioral Health Purchasing Collaborative and ValueOption, the statewide entity that manages behavioral health services on behalf of the state, was funded to provide rental subsidies and on-site supportive services to individuals with mental and behavioral health needs. The program, called Linkages Supportive Housing Voucher Pilot Program, marks the first time the state has directly invested state dollars to house individuals with mental health needs.

The Linkages program targets people with serious mental illnesses, including Native Americans who are living off of their reservations. This vulnerable population is assured housing even if they refuse to accept mental health treatment. However, Linkages requires that a service provider visit each client at least once a month in their unit to assess their individual needs and any potential tenancy issues. The regular meetings allow the service provider to offer help with any behavioral issues the tenant might have.

With a stable living environment and on-site access to behavioral health services, individuals with mental health needs have a better chance of leading a more productive life. The program's comprehensive, individualized approach to mental health care provides the kind of supportive, consistent help this population requires while it ensures that their housing needs are met.

A Crucial Housing Need

In 2007, the state of New Mexico developed a Long Range Supportive Housing Plan to create supportive housing for its priority populations. The plan identified a need to develop 30,000 units of housing over the next 10 years for people with special needs. The urgency of the need resulted in a \$750,000 appropriation during the 2007 legislative session to begin implementing the plan. MFA will receive \$300,000 in recurring funding from the Department of Human Services for three years to fund thirty special needs housing vouchers. Three areas of the state will receive 10 vouchers each.

In February 2008, request for proposals were released and public hearings were conducted in several communities around the state to assess potential pilot sites for the Linkages program. Two urban and one rural site were selected based on the availability of local housing administrators and mental health providers, and the level of interest among community organizations and members.

The New Mexico MFA administers the housing component of the Linkages program on behalf of the Behavioral Health Purchasing Collaborative, the statewide entity made up of 17 state agencies that manages behavioral health services for the state. Value Options supervises and oversees the three service providers that pre-screen prospective Linkages applicants, assist applicants with pre-tenancy requirements, supply post-tenancy services and provide ongoing support services to the target population.

Measurable Benefits

The pilot program has demonstrated the significant benefit of having a service provider who interacts directly with the client acting as an advocate for the client's tenancy while recommending the necessary mental health services the client needs to successfully maintain their tenancy. The common experience of housing authorities in the past has been the termination of tenancy for individuals with behavioral health problems within six months of their occupancy for a variety of reasons related to their mental health state. With a case manager available for emergency mental health issues, landlords are assured of a monthly rental payment and they also have someone to contact immediately when problems arise.

An example of how effective this innovative program is was demonstrated in the experience of one of the first individuals to come into the Linkages program. The client was so glad to have the opportunity for stable housing that he went on a drinking binge for a week. After the binge, he became concerned that he had lost his chance to be in the program, something that would have happened if he had been accepted or participating in the Section 8 HUD voucher program. Two weeks later, he was found living in a ditch by the service provider. He was brought back into the program, and continues to maintain his housing at this time.

As part of the pilot program Linkages will require the mental health service providers to conduct a time study to determine the level and type of service activities that are being offered to clients that are not a part of the current Medicaid reimbursement schedules. Activities such as rental unit searches, negotiating rental agreements with landlords, locating furnishings, establishing utilities with landlords are some of the activities that are not part of the current Medicaid reimbursement schedules for the state and service providers.

Proven Track Record

Linkages is based on the Housing First model, which has consistently demonstrated that when consumers have access to safe, affordable housing first and then have access to community-based supportive services, they are more willing to participate in treatment and can lead a more productive life.

The voucher aspect of the program was modeled after the HUD Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program policies and procedures. This model insures that client income requirements are monitored and that housing meets Housing Quality Standards inspections and procedures. Because this program was funded by state dollars a certain amount of flexibility was built into the policies to meet the unique needs of the client target population and allow the implementation of "housing first" principles.

Committed Partnerships

As previously mentioned, the Linkages program marks the first time state agencies, non-profits and for-profit companies have come together in New Mexico to provide special-

needs housing. In addition to its partnership with the state Behavioral Health Collaborative, MFA has two local partners at each of its three Linkage project sites: a housing entity that administers rental assistance funds and a mental health service agency that provides case management and support services. Training sessions were held prior to implementation of the program to provide all the partners an opportunity to get to know each other, become familiar with their respective roles and learn the Linkages program policies and procedures.

Effective Use of Resources

The Linkages model is an exceptionally efficient way to provide special needs housing because it utilizes and coordinates the existing resources among the participating partners. Because funds are distributed within the current delivery service system, no extra costs are incurred.

Duplicating the Program

Because Linkages uses existing program infrastructure, the program could be easily duplicated in any state. Additionally, the Linkages model can be readily adapted to create housing for other special needs populations without having to develop a new service delivery system.