

RoadHome: A Model of Partnerships Special Needs Housing: Housing for Persons with Special Needs

Summary

Recognizing that any solution to chronic homelessness needed to include an individualized approach to the problem, Rhode Island Housing created RoadHome in 2007. A key component of RoadHome is its rental subsidy which integrates housing and supportive services through tenant based vouchers for populations who are homeless. The program has at its core, the belief that given appropriate support through community based services, permanent housing can be a reality for many who are currently struggling to find or sustain housing.

The immediate goal is to have people spend less time in shelter and the program is designed with a ‘housing first’ paradigm to ensure that housing includes the necessary support services for participants to gain the skills that will make permanent housing possible. Through increased employment and life skills training, appropriate medical and mental health services, and if appropriate, access to entitlement benefits, individuals and families obtain the support they need to stabilize both their housing situations and their lives.

When it became clear that existing resources were not enough to adequately handle the number of homeless seeking assistance, and that housing was only one component of an effective solution, Rhode Island Housing developed its RoadHome program.

Program Details

RoadHome is funded and administered by Rhode Island Housing and implemented through our partnerships with community-based organizations. These partnerships include our existing Supportive Housing Agencies, but also mental health centers and grassroots homeless programs which have collaborated with the CDCs and private landlords. These partnerships have increased the amount of supportive housing quickly and with little cost.

As part of the program, each participant must agree to develop a case management plan and work towards its implementation. Sustained permanent housing is the one goal that must be in each plan. Additional goals and benchmarks are individualized for each household, to not only reflect their existing circumstances, but their goals and aspirations as well.

To participate in the RoadHome, units must first be certified. Certification is a process which establishes the rent (to help contain costs and stay within budget) and ensures that a service agency will provide the services at that unit. A service agency can be certified and work with landlords to have their units certified. Certification does not guarantee that a voucher will be available, but provides a pool of addresses available to participants to choose from when they enroll in the program.

Participants are enrolled into the program at the homeless shelters. The program is explained and if the person agrees to participate in case management (from outreach and engagement to full wrap around services), they look through the various certified units and the service agencies attached to the units and decide where to put their name on a waiting list. The flexibility of the program allows participants to work with the certified list of units and certified service agencies to create a unit which more closely matches their needs. When their name ‘comes up’ on the waiting list, a call is made to see if funds are available to provide a ‘voucher’ and if so, the person moves in.

Funded through the proceeds of the HFA operations and not encumbered by State or Federal regulations, the program is *flexible* enough to meet the unique needs of local homeless populations.

Leveraging of Resources for Optimum Success

The success of the RoadHome program is the partnerships we have created to leverage existing resources, marrying them with RoadHome funds in order to achieve the greatest impact. The 'Housing First' pilot project was begun in 2006, utilizing a services grant from the United Way and the State of Rhode Island and 15 Shelter Plus Care Vouchers. Throughout the country, pairing Shelter Plus Care vouchers with the Housing First model has successfully permanently housed the chronically homeless. However, despite the combination of resources for services, finding additional vacant project-based subsidized units, supportive housing units and 'affordable' units for those with very low or no incomes proved to be a challenge.

With no available Section 8 vouchers, long waiting lists for project-based Section 8 units and supportive housing units, and a very limited supply of Shelter Plus Care vouchers, the success of the pilot was limited. The pilot did supply the seeds of knowledge for a new approach to combating homelessness which proved to save money in addressing the needs of the chronically homeless. Rhode Island Housing rolled out its RoadHome program in July 2007 with \$1.5 million in funding and with 67 persons enrolled before the program even began (to accommodate tenants whose project based units' contracts were expiring). Immediately the Housing First Rhode Island program realized the potential for the program, housing 48 people, all they could accommodate with the service dollars available.

Creative Partnerships

RoadHome has become a critical element in our state's Housing First Initiative, which includes as partners the United Way, the Office of Housing and Community Development, and Corporation for Supportive Housing. These agencies gave initial, time limited funds for services. Without the RoadHome rental vouchers, the dollars supplied to pay for services provided through Riverwood Mental Health Services (Housing First Rhode Island) would go unused. Once a readily available source for housing was secured, Housing First Rhode Island was successful in receiving additional funds through SAMSHA and PATH grants to provide the required wrap around services. These grants represent \$700,000 a year and the Housing First Rhode Island was able to leverage \$135,000 in Medicaid billing, tripling the service budget for the program with RoadHome providing 75% of the housing.

Control over their Housing Choices = Control over their Lives

Rhode Island took a unique direction by creating a *tenant* based voucher program which required that the participant agree to engage in the development of case management and work on attaining their goals. Housing developers were at first non-supportive, believing that the subsidy should be project based, and service agencies wanted to hold the voucher (as in sponsor-based Shelter Plus Care) so that they could sign a master lease, fearful that participants would 'take the voucher' and leave for another unit. The idea of having the client truly control their housing decisions was a new and unproven approach for them.

Certification embraced both market and subsidized units to move people out of shelter quickly through private apartments and then to a subsidized unit when the tenant is stable and able to assume a significant portion of the rent. Money is saved for services in that the cost of permanent supportive housing, using existing community based services, is less expensive than institutional care and shelters. The majority of participants in the program leave the shelter for market rate apartments, stabilize their lives through supportive services and then move to a subsidized unit they can sustain without subsidy. In some cases, employment and stable relationships allow the family to stay in the private apartment.

The tenant-based voucher program worked to get people housed more quickly, at the time the pilot was being institutionalized. Homeless individuals and families were able to achieve stable housing while supportive housing units were being developed through more traditional financing tools.

Success to Date:

Since its inception in July 2007, the RoadHome program has:

- Provided rental assistance to 351 persons
- 39% of those who have left their unit moved to another permanent housing situation
- 12% have moved to another unit within the program
- Provided rental assistance for 96 chronically homeless individuals in the Housing First program, more than doubling their census.

In total, the program has helped over 83 Housing First clients to find their “road home.”

It Works for a Number of Reasons

The goal is housing stability. To eventually find the most suitable housing, participants have to agree to work towards achieving this goal. Success often requires sobriety, stable medication and the development of positive social skills. The participant has choices: who provides the services for them and where they live. If the original decision is impeding the success of their work plan, they can transfer services, housing location or both through a planned, rational process. Leaving in the middle of the night does not allow one to ‘keep’ the voucher. Often a move requires finding a new service agency, finding a suitable apartment with a landlord willing to participate and providing a good reason for the move. This feature of choice is an attractive component for those in shelter even though few opt for a change.

How does it respond to the judging criteria:

Innovative: Few supportive housing programs give housing and supportive service choices to participants.

Replicable: This program requires flexible funds that cannot be encumbered with federal regulations. However, funds do exist for pilot projects from private foundations and should be explored for those interested in replicating the program.

Responds to an important state housing need: Our overcrowded and under-funded shelters are bursting at the seams, with more and more individuals and families entering them as the number of foreclosures and unemployment figures rise. This program allows for a quick resolution to many housing crises of our families and individuals.

Demonstrates measurable benefits to HFA targeted customers: Of the original 26 Housing First participants (all chronically homeless) 19 remain in their housing through this program, for a stay of 19 months.

Has a proven track record of success in the marketplace: Housing First programs have had success in states throughout the nation, with Rhode Island being no different. The Housing First Report funded by the United Way of Rhode Island states that even with housing and support services funds included: “This is \$8,839 per person less than the institutional costs of \$31,617 per person while these individuals were homeless for a year. For these 48 clients as a whole, the costs while in this Housing First program are approximately \$424,272 less than the institutional costs of one year of homelessness.” The turnover of participants in the first year was 22%. In subsequent years those who have been housed or were housed for a minimum of 6 months is 80 or 83%.

Provides benefits that outweigh costs: The benefits of having someone finally feel secure that they will have a place to call home cannot be measured in dollars. The United Way report clearly identifies the benefit to costs of caring for this population through a more effective and humane model.

Demonstrates effective use of resources: While saving costs to institutions, program costs have also decreased on a per participant basis. Between 2008 and 2009 the cost to house participants fell from \$573.87 to \$537.55 per month, while increasing participation from 182 to 230.

Effectively employs partnerships: Our partnership with the United Way, Corporation for Supportive Housing, Riverwood Mental Health, and the Office of Housing and Community Development has enabled the program to benefit from shared resources, funding and expertise. Additionally, new partnerships between CDCs and service agencies are finding that by partnering, service agencies can be sure of stable housing for their clients, and property managers are ensured that necessary services are available for their tenants. Once the partnerships began to show success, the relationships grew more quickly.

Achieves strategic objectives: The strategic objective was to End Homelessness. RoadHome fills a gap to pull people and families from shelter while development of subsidized and supportive housing continues. In this year of unavailable financing it has been a tremendous resource for those working to find the RoadHome for their clients.