



A REFERENCE GUIDE

Homelessness Interventions: Program Types

Every intervention rests on a theory of change. Whether it works depends on where, and for whom, it operates.

The homelessness response system isn't one program — it's a set of distinct interventions, each built on a **theory of change**: a specific idea about how it turns effort into outcomes. This guide maps what each intervention is for, the mechanism it relies on, and who it's meant to serve. But a theory of change is a hypothesis, not a guarantee — which is why the same intervention can succeed in one place and stall in another.

When a Model Underperforms, the Model Usually Isn't the Problem

Every intervention rests on assumptions — and the models here are largely sound, with real evidence behind them. So when outcomes fall short, the instinct to blame the model is usually misplaced: more often, an assumption quietly broke. The failure is contextual, not intrinsic. Assumptions that have to hold include, for example:

Right need. The intervention is aimed at the problem the person actually has — a housing barrier gets a housing response, not a services one.

Fidelity. The intervention is delivered the way the theory specifies — not a thinned-out version of it.

Right population. The people served are those the model was designed for and whose situation its mechanism assumes.

A supporting system. The surrounding system supplies what the mechanism needs — outreach assumes there is real housing to connect people to.

QUICK REFERENCE — THE CONTINUUM AT A GLANCE

INTERVENTION	WHAT IT'S FOR	WHO IT'S MEANT TO SERVE
Homelessness Prevention	Keeping people housed who are about to lose housing	Households at imminent risk, not yet homeless
Diversion / Problem Solving	Resolving a crisis at the front door, before system entry	People with a safe option that support can activate
Coordinated Entry	Assessing need and routing people to the right resource	Everyone entering — it's the routing layer
Street Outreach	Reaching and engaging people living unsheltered	People in places not meant for habitation
Emergency Shelter	Immediate, temporary safe lodging	Anyone in housing crisis needing shelter now
Supportive Services Only	Stand-alone services, delivered apart from housing	People whose barrier is a specific service gap
Transitional Housing	Time-limited housing (up to 24 mo.) with services	People who benefit from a structured, supported step
Rapid Re-Housing	Short/medium rental help to exit homelessness fast	People who can stabilize with time-limited support
Permanent Supportive Housing	Permanent housing + ongoing services, no time limit	People with disabilities and the highest ongoing needs

The Interventions in Detail

Each entry gives what the intervention is, the problem it addresses, its **mechanism** (the theory of change, as an if-then), who it fits, and a brief pointer to what the research broadly finds. Read the evidence pointers as direction and strength — not as a verdict on whether the model will work in your context.

Homelessness Prevention

WHAT IT IS Services and/or short-to-medium-term financial help to keep someone from entering shelter or a place not meant for habitation.

PROBLEM A housing crisis that hasn't happened yet but is imminent.

MECHANISM

If we reach people before they lose housing and remove the specific barrier, then we avert a homeless episode entirely — at lower cost and harm than recovery.

FITS Households at genuine, imminent risk who can stay stable with a targeted assist.

Evidence pointer: the crux is targeting — the hard part is identifying who would truly have become homeless. Well-targeted prevention is cost-effective; poorly targeted spends on people who'd have stayed housed anyway.

Diversion / Problem Solving

WHAT IT IS A conversation-based approach at the point of entry that helps people find safe, immediate alternatives to entering the system.

PROBLEM Not everyone at the front door needs a program bed; some have options that can be safely activated.

MECHANISM

If we help someone identify and activate a safe existing option at the moment of crisis, then they resolve it without entering the system, preserving capacity for those who need it.

FITS People arriving in crisis who have a viable, safe option support can make workable.

Evidence pointer: a growing, promising practice increasingly adopted across systems; rigorous outcome evidence is still developing, and results depend heavily on skilled implementation.

Coordinated Entry **CE**

WHAT IT IS The system-wide process for access, assessment, and referral — the standardized front door that prioritizes and routes people.

PROBLEM Without coordination, access depends on which door someone happens to find.

MECHANISM

If need is assessed consistently and people are routed to the right resource by priority, then scarce housing reaches those who need it most, fairly.

FITS Everyone entering — it's not a program but the routing layer beneath them all.

Evidence pointer: a required structural process, not a treatment — so it's evaluated on equity, consistency, and match quality rather than housing outcomes of its own.

Street Outreach so

WHAT IT IS Going to people living unsheltered to build trust, meet urgent needs, and connect them to shelter, housing, and services.

PROBLEM The highest-need people are often least likely to walk into an office.

MECHANISM

If we meet people where they are and build trust over time, then they engage with services and move toward housing they'd otherwise not reach.

FITS People sleeping in places not meant for habitation, especially those disconnected from services.

Evidence pointer: well-established as the engagement front end; its recognized outcome is successful connection and placement to a positive destination. Depends on having real housing and services to connect people to.

Emergency Shelter es

WHAT IT IS Immediate, temporary lodging for people in housing crisis — general or population-specific.

PROBLEM People need somewhere safe tonight while longer-term solutions are arranged.

MECHANISM

If we meet the immediate survival need safely, then people are stable enough to engage the next step toward housing.

FITS Anyone facing a housing crisis who needs a safe place now.

Evidence pointer: essential crisis response, but a stop rather than a destination — outcomes improve when shelter is a fast bridge to housing rather than an endpoint.

Supportive Services Only sso

WHAT IT IS Stand-alone supportive services — employment, benefits, childcare, health, case management — provided by an organization that isn't also housing those same people.

PROBLEM Sometimes the barrier is a specific service gap the right services can directly address.

MECHANISM

If we close a specific service gap — income, benefits, health access — then the person can obtain or maintain housing that the gap was blocking.

FITS People whose need is a services gap, or who are connected to services alongside a separate housing path.

Evidence pointer: a recognized, funded intervention within the system. The mechanism is strongest when services are targeted to a clear need and connected to housing; services in isolation address the gap but aren't, by themselves, designed to resolve the housing problem.

Transitional Housing th

WHAT IT IS Time-limited housing (up to 24 months) paired with supportive services, as a structured step toward permanent housing.

PROBLEM Some people benefit from a supported, structured period before independent housing.

MECHANISM

If we pair housing with intensive, time-bound support, then people build the stability or skills to sustain permanent housing afterward.

FITS People whose situation genuinely calls for a structured interim step — e.g. some youth, survivors, or those in recovery.

Evidence pointer: for the general population, rigorous studies find permanent housing subsidies tend to outperform time-limited transitional models — but TH shows stronger value for specific populations where the structure itself is central.

Rapid Re-Housing **RRH**

WHAT IT IS Short/medium-term rental assistance plus housing search and stabilization services to move a household out of homelessness quickly.

PROBLEM Many people don't need permanent subsidy — they need a bridge back into housing.

MECHANISM

If we remove the immediate financial barrier and help someone into a unit fast, then they stabilize and sustain the housing once assistance tapers off.

FITS People who can regain stability with time-limited support rather than lifelong assistance.

Evidence pointer: strong evidence for ending a homeless episode quickly and at lower cost than shelter or transitional housing; the open question is durability after assistance ends, which varies with depth of need — so targeting matters.

Permanent Supportive Housing **PSH**

WHAT IT IS Permanent housing with no time limit, paired with ongoing voluntary supportive services — the Housing First model in its fullest form.

PROBLEM Some people, especially those with disabilities and long homelessness histories, need permanent housing plus ongoing support to stay stable.

MECHANISM

If we provide permanent housing first, without preconditions, plus voluntary support, then people stabilize and sustain housing that treatment-first approaches couldn't achieve.

FITS People with disabilities and the highest, most persistent needs — chronic homelessness.

Evidence pointer: the most robust base of any intervention here — multiple randomized trials show strong housing-retention gains for high-need populations. (Housing outcomes are well-established; some earlier cost-savings claims are more mixed under rigorous designs.)

Where the Assumptions Break

When an intervention underperforms, the missing piece is rarely the model — it's one of the three things underneath every model that determine whether its assumptions hold:

Design. Was the intervention set up to reach the right need and population in the first place? A model aimed at the wrong problem was never going to fire, no matter how well it's run.

Implementation fidelity. Is it being delivered the way the theory specifies, or a thinned-out version? Faithful delivery is the difference between a model and a name on a grant.

Measurement infrastructure. Can you actually tell whether the assumptions are holding? Without it, a program can drift for years while looking fine on paper — because no one can see where it's breaking.

***On the funding landscape (as of the FY2025 CoC NOFO):** which interventions get prioritized shifts with each federal competition — the FY2025 NOFO, for instance, adjusted the balance between permanent housing and other project types. Funding priorities move faster than the interventions themselves; always check the current NOFO before treating any prioritization as settled.*

The interventions are largely sound. What most systems are missing isn't a better model — it's the design, the fidelity, and the measurement to know whether the one they have is actually working, for their people, as delivered.

Building that clarity — and finding where the assumptions break — is the work we do. Start at homelessresponselab.com.