

How a solution for chronic homelessness stretched from NYC to OKC

Three decades ago, a community psychologist in New York City developed a new way of housing people who had been on the street, struggling for years.

Dr. Sam Tsemberis and his concept of Housing First flipped the world of social work on its head by providing people experiencing homelessness with the most obvious thing they lacked — housing.



Back to the start

It came about through a moment of awakening and perhaps a moment of humility.

In the early 1990s, Tsemberis was working in New York City where the issue of homelessness was growing. While efforts to house people seemed to work for some, there was a large segment of the population — folks struggling with other issues in addition to homelessness — who providers couldn't get off the streets no matter what they tried.

“What experts thought was the right thing for people to do ... get sober, get into treatment, follow the programs and then we will give you housing,” Tsemberis said. “That works for some people, but for those people who that approach didn't work with, we had no other options.”

Tsemberis and his team found themselves struggling with people, asking them to keep trying or thinking they weren't trying hard enough. They would witness people continuously fall off the wagon.

They were using a model of housing now known as Housing Readiness where people must be deemed “ready” before they are



ILLUSTRATION BY ASHTON LETTON

HOUSING COMES FIRST

moved into housing. In this model, people are required to be on their mental health medications or be sober for a certain amount of time, as well as meet other requirements before they are transitioned into housing.

"It took years of banging our head against the wall, asking what are we doing wrong? And finally we said, 'Look we have to do something different. This isn't working,'" Tsemberis said.

That's when they started asking people how they wanted to do it. How did the people experiencing homelessness want to be helped? Turns out, they just wanted a place to live. So, they tried that.



Housing, first

Housing First is exactly what it sounds like. It provides housing, first. Housing without preconditions, but it doesn't stop there. Once housed, people are provided with case management and the supports they need to address the issues that might've led to their homelessness.

Case managers are there to help people with what's ailing them in their lives — it could be securing a job, reconnecting with family, getting sober or addressing their mental or physical health needs.

Tsemberis said with Housing First, it's like people are in the driver's seat and the experts are in the backseat trying to help that person navigate their journey.

"You've turned over the controls to the person whose life it's actually about," Tsemberis said. "Housing First is all about: This is your life. We're going to help you achieve what you want on your terms."

Greg Shinn, who was working in New York at the time, ran one of the shelters where Tsemberis conducted his initial Housing First study. Today, Shinn is at Mental Health Association Oklahoma working as the associate director and chief housing officer, where they have been practicing the Housing First model for more than a decade in Tulsa.

Shinn remembers working with people in his shelter trying to get them financially ready, psychiatrically stable, socially appropriate and able to meet other measures

before transitioning them into a housing program.

Many of them just couldn't do it and were without a home for years because they couldn't accomplish these things to be deemed "housing ready."

"When Sam and his team came into the shelter to do their research, some people got selected to stay in the shelter/street group and some people got selected to go right into apartments," Shinn recalled. "I can tell you some of those guys were using drugs, and they went into an apartment that day. And I thought, 'This is ludicrous. This is never going to work.'"

But it did work, repeatedly.



A working solution

The Housing First model has been studied by researchers and governments around the globe for nearly three decades now, and the results are consistent: housing retention rates of 80-90% with Housing First compared to 30-40% using Housing Readiness.

Additionally, people show improvements in mental and physical health, reduced substance use, decreased emergency room visits and involvement with law enforcement and improved quality of life. There are also qualitative results.

"When people describe what happens to them, the results are dramatic and unambiguous," Tsemberis said. "When you move into housing, you have people say, 'This is the first time I can wake up and actually remember my dreams; where I feel safe; where I can cook my own meals. I can eat at the time when I feel hungry. I can have my family visit.' The transformation is so enormous and so immediate. It is very, very gratifying."

With a front row seat to what would one day change the world of homeless services, Shinn said that first study made him a believer. But not everyone is on board.

"It's an idea that still gets pushback because it comes down to this argument of deserving versus undeserving," Shinn said. "People divide along these lines like, 'Why would you put them in housing when they haven't earned it?'"

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- Dr. Sam Tsemberis -

"You're putting the person into housing first because that's what they need in order to stabilize and be able to make these decisions about their recovery path. The evidence base is there from over 25 years now, but the paradigm shift is still in process."

For some people, the concept of Housing First is immediately obvious and simple, but others get upset about it. Tsemberis said some people see it as a threat rather than another approach for people who've failed in other programs. But that's what it is about, offering another solution.



Housing First in OKC

In 2012, the City of Oklahoma City, Homeless Alliance, Inasmuch Foundation, Oklahoma City Housing Authority and Oklahoma City VA Health Care System attended an important planning session in Kansas City and brought back the Housing First model to OKC.

For Dan Straughan, executive director of the Homeless Alliance, it wasn't just the right thing to do, it was a good financial investment.

"You can completely leave aside the moral argument of doing the right thing for really vulnerable people and just look at it as a pure business proposition," Straughan said. "With Housing First, the community avoids significant costs."

Many people who are chronically homeless spend time bouncing between shelters, jail and hospitals. Cost studies have shown it's cheaper to house and provide case management to a person who is chronically homeless than it is to leave them on the streets.

"If you have diabetes, no one is going to tell you to get control of your pancreas, and they certainly aren't going to tell you that you have to do that before you can live in housing," Straughan said. "If you have a mental illness, it's nearly impossible to get your mental illness under control when you're living under a bridge."

"Working with old models, a person would have to be mentally stable for a certain number of months before they can be allowed into housing. Many people will never accomplish that without first having a stable home environment."

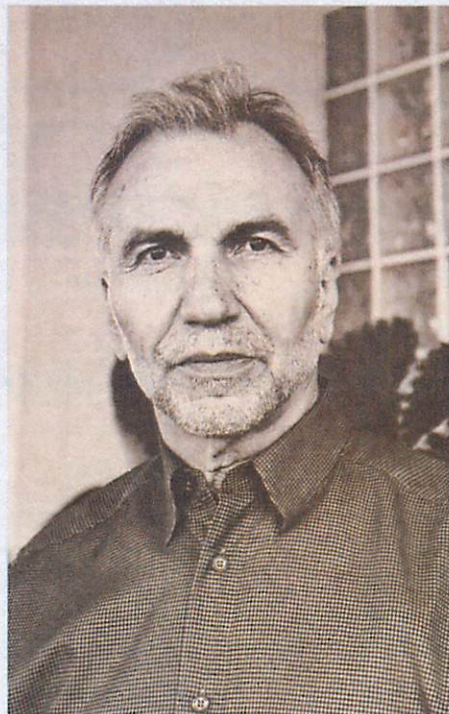
For those who are skeptical, Straughan points out that while Housing First is housing without preconditions, it has conditions. People must sign and abide by the terms of a lease and pay a portion of rent based on their income.

There are now more than 15 organizations in OKC using the Housing First model or participating in Housing First programs in a collaborative effort they call Journey Home OKC. Together, they have housed thousands of people.

In OKC, it all starts with a housing assessment that helps determine a person's vulnerability and barriers to sustaining housing. All organizations working on this effort use the same in-take tool so that they are comparing apples to apples when it comes to data and determining who is most vulnerable.

Everyone experiencing homelessness whom the agencies come in contact with are then put on a by-name list. Teams made up of multiple nonprofits and government agencies meet weekly and comb the list working to house the most vulnerable people first.

One agency might provide the funding for housing while another provides case management and another provides men-



Dr. Sam Tsemberis. [Photo provided]

tal health care or other needed services. It allows the organizations to pool their resources and help get people into permanent housing.

People housed through the Journey Home OKC initiative have about an 85% housing retention rate.

"The bottom line is that everyone has a better chance to be successful if they have a place to call home," Straughan said.



More affordable housing

Tsemberis, Shinn and Straughan all agree the answer to ending homelessness is access to more affordable housing.

"Most of the countries that talk about housing as a basic human right are the countries that are going to get it right," Tsemberis said. "In Canada, they're talking about — not homelessness — but a national affordable housing strategy. That's what we need to be talking about. We need to be talking about the structural factors that are contributing to homelessness."

Tsemberis says homelessness is just a symptom.

"It's a symptom of a broken hospital system, a symptom of a broken jail system, a broken economic system — especially around real estate for people who are poor," Tsemberis said. "There are people now who are staying in shelters because even though they have a job, they can't afford to put together the first month's rent and security deposit to get into a place."

"If you have somebody with a disability, which typically Housing First programs serve, their monthly disability check — let's say \$700-\$800 a month — is not enough in most states to buy food for yourself and have money to put down to get housing. The housing market is way out of reach compared to where poor people's income is."

Tsemberis believes it will take political will, money and a real commitment to systemic change to end homelessness. But, it can be done.