



HOUSING FOCUS GROUPS: FINAL REPORT

Prepared For
New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness (NMCEH)

Survey Results Of

United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
2008 Continuum of Care (CoC) Grant Recipients

In Cooperation with Albuquerque Continuum of Care Steering Committee

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Kathy Roberts, *katlee consulting*
505.400.6048 katlee14@yahoo.com

**New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness
(NMCEH)**

Focus Group Survey Results

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness (NMCEH) was founded in the year 2000 by a group of nonprofit agencies and the New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority. The founders saw the need for a statewide coalition to coordinate the efforts of the member agencies to end homelessness.



The Coalition has both individual and agency members. Members elect the Board of Directors annually and the Board oversees the operations of the Coalition. The Coalition currently employs four full-time staff people to work with the membership in carrying out the mission, which is to assist communities in creating solutions to homelessness, from prevention through permanent housing by using action, advocacy, and awareness.

Continuum of Care

New Mexico Coalition to End Homeless has served the people of the State of New Mexico and the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) by facilitating the disbursement of grant funds for the federal Continuum of Care Program (CoC).

Nonprofits and government agencies may apply for CoC funds to develop transitional housing and permanent supportive housing and to provide supportive services to people experiencing homelessness. The grant funds can be used for acquisition of a building or site, construction, rehabilitation, operation of the project, leasing and supportive services. The funds are flexible and the operating, leasing and supportive services funding is renewable year after year. The grant application process occurs in the spring of each year.

Agencies from the State of New Mexico apply for CoC funding which is distributed through two networks supported by the NMCEH; the City of Albuquerque area and the Balance of State area (all of New Mexico excluding the City of Albuquerque). This report contains the results of focus groups conducted at four different Albuquerque agencies which receive Continuum of Care funding. See Appendix A for list of Albuquerque CoC agencies and which ones participated in the focus groups.



The Albuquerque CoC has established certain housing outcome standards for Albuquerque CoC projects. These are listed in *Appendix B; Housing Outcomes*. The outcomes described in this appendix were established by the NMCEH

2008 Albuquerque CoC Independent Review Committee (IRC).

Purpose

Outcome data is now integral to most grant evaluation programs; in other words, funders and grantees want to know “how did the clients or participants benefit from their involvement with our program; has their life improved, and did the dollars expended result in a clear and measurable benefit to the client served?”

Although HUD does not require CoC grantees to solicit feedback from the clients they serve, the NMCEH, proactively, decided to gather information from their clients in an effort to improve agency and grantee performance, to improve client outcomes and potentially to improve their ability to maintain or increase funding levels.

Focus On Housing

The NMCEH primary goal in undertaking this survey is to better serve their stakeholders and improve the quality of life for the people in their community by increasing their ability to eliminate or avoid homelessness, to secure and maintain safe and affordable housing and to receive the additional supportive services, such as case management, if needed.

METHODOLOGY

Focus Groups

The NMCEH staff and a Steering Committee considered a number of ways to obtain feed-back from their clients; they decided to utilize focus groups as the method to gather information about their programs.

For this initial effort to survey their housing clients, the NMCEH decided to encourage participation from all CoC grantees, but to make the participation voluntary. Both the agencies and their clients could choose to participate in the focus groups, but were not required to participate.

Based on the decision to make participation voluntary the information presented in this report does not meet any statistical or scientific research standards. But the clients who were surveyed represented different genders, education levels, a number of ethnicities and a ranged from 18 to approximately seventy years of age.

The clients surveyed included 60 people from 8 different housing programs located in the City of Albuquerque. Several types of programs were represented including homelessness intervention, transitional, permanent and permanent supportive housing. Group living homes, apartment complexes and independent living arrangements were all represented by this survey.



Focus Group Questions

The proposed focus group questions were submitted for consideration in April, 2009 to the NMCEH Steering Committee, their feedback was incorporated into the final questions and NMCEH staff edited and approved the final questions as shown in *Appendix C: Focus Group Questions*.

The questions were used as a general guide while conducting the focus group, but the group dynamics influenced the responses and the report section is divided into categories as indicated by those responses.

Confidentiality

The agencies and the clients participating in the focus groups were informed that all data gathered would be confidential and that this report would relate general information without identifying the agency, or any personal information. See *Appendix D: Confidentiality Statement*.

Additionally, all focus group sessions were conducted in the absence of staff members. The single exception was in the case where a Spanish speaking staff person served as an interpreter for several Spanish speaking participants. The interpreter was not their case manager or a supervisor making decisions about housing.



All focus group sessions were conducted by an independent consultant with extensive housing experience but with no previous knowledge of any of the clients surveyed or of their individual circumstances or situations.

Client Responses

The clients were assured at the start of each focus group session that their responses would not impact their housing situation or program participation negatively. Reassurances were given that the survey questions and resultant data was intended to improve the programs and that there would be no adverse effects.

In spite of the reassurances, some clients seemed anxious about the possibility that their housing or financial support could change. A number of the clients were clearly challenged by relationships with other residents, while most were clearly supported by their cohort group.

The majority of the clients participating expressed directly to the surveyor or to the staff, following the sessions that they enjoyed the focus group experience and thanked the surveyor for coming. The NMCEH also provided snacks, drinks and a five dollar restaurant gift certificate to thank the clients for their participation. These items were generally unexpected and greatly appreciated by the clients.

CLIENT RESPONSES

Question 1. Staff Knowledge

When you were going through the process of getting into this program, what worked well?

- a. Could staff answer all your questions about the program?*
- b. Did you understand what you needed to do next (after initial intake)?*
- c. Did staff keep you informed about your status?*

Without exception, 100% of the clients who commented on this question responded that the staff was very knowledgeable.

The clients believed that the staff knew the details of the different programs well and that all of their questions were answered satisfactorily.

Clients reported that program instructions and intake procedures were given to them verbally and in written form. Most housing programs also posted intake information and house rules.



Approximately 5% of the participants spoke only Spanish. They were provided staff interpreters and were exceptionally satisfied with the information and service they received. However, they required help completing all forms as none of them were translated into Spanish.

There was a consensus that the clients understood the steps they needed to take after an initial meeting with program staff. Most programs required the client to call the agency back to learn what their housing status was. Most clients were clear about this expectation and accepted that responsibility.

10% of the participants reported that they felt forgotten or lost in the system; some responded that they were promised a phone call from program staff regarding their status, but that they were never called.

Question 2: Intake Process

Was there anything hard or complicated about the process of getting into this program?

a. What, if anything, was confusing about the process confusing?

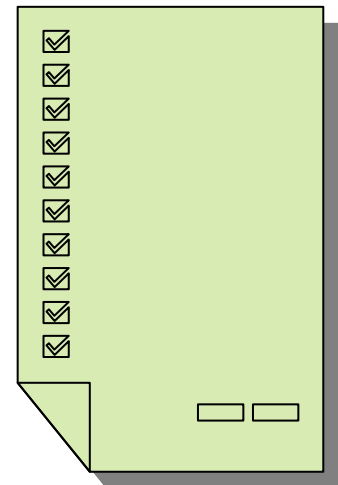
b. What would you change about the intake process?

c. How long from when you started the process until you move into your housing?

The majority of clients did not find anything too complicated or difficult about getting into their program. They did comment that the numbers of forms and documents required were cumbersome and sometimes redundant. When questioned further, the clients reported that they did get the support they needed to successfully complete the intake process.

Some programs required a multi-step intake process which was challenging for those with employment or other daytime obligations. For example, a client first meets with staff for intake, then meets with a Psychiatrist for evaluation, and finally meets with a Caseworker to develop a personal plan. No clients were aware of programs that had intake sessions outside of normal business hours.

Several clients suggested that the intake entire intake process be scheduled in one day, on the weekends or stretched over several evenings to better accommodate their schedules.



The range of time it took for clients to complete the intake process and move into their housing varied widely from two days to eight months. The average time frame for securing housing was from two weeks to two months.

Various factors affected the client's ability to secure housing including:

1. Program requirement that they have employment or are in school or training.
2. Getting a proper diagnosis and documentation of their physical, mental or emotional condition or disability.
3. Getting statements or documentation from other agencies such as the Social Security Administration.
4. An intolerance and distrust of bureaucracies and traditional establishments.
5. Lack of available suitable housing, apartments, beds or bedrooms.

Question 3. Supportive Services

What kind of services has this program provided or helped you obtain?

a. Which of those services have been most helpful?

b. Are there services that you need that you have not been able to obtain?

The majority of clients reported that they had the opportunity to participate in many kinds of day programs and supportive housing services including: Services related to employment such as resume writing, interviewing, and some training and Life Skills training including budgeting and wellness.

They also received help with transportation (agency vehicle or bus passes), resolving legal concerns and visiting their parole officers, attending to dental, physical and health issues, resolving Social Security Insurance problems, getting work permits, finding jobs and earning citizenship. A few reported getting a repair for their personal vehicles or an appliance, or with furnishing their home.

The most helpful service survey participants reported receiving was securing their housing. The safety net that housing afforded the clients was the one opportunity they were most grateful for.

Most clients did not believe that they could secure housing without the existing programs.

Most clients could not think of any service that they needed that was unavailable to them. They reported that they were given help across a wide spectrum of challenges.

A few single mothers found securing reliable day care for their children difficult, but said that staff was making every effort to help them.

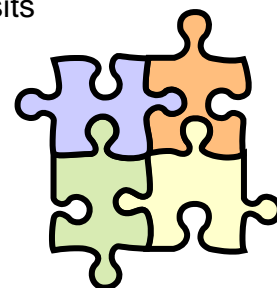


Question 4. Challenges to Staying Housed

What are your biggest challenges to obtaining your own housing and keeping your current housing?

The clients reported many challenges to obtaining and maintaining housing including:

1. Their personal struggle with addictions and difficulty changing their established life styles and circle of influence
2. Avoiding temptation to use substances while housed in areas where criminal activity, drug and alcohol use are prevalent
3. A struggle with behavioral and mental health and regulating medication levels
4. Other personal history issues and/or lack of family support
5. Their inability to follow the house rules which some believe are too restrictive (random drug testing); most programs have a three strike and you're out policy
6. Difficult relationship with other residents or employers
7. A felony conviction or legal issue which makes securing employment difficult
8. A bad credit history, or lack of funding for rent and security deposits
9. Lack of citizenship and/or the inability to speak fluent English
10. Pregnancy and/or single parent with minor children
11. Difficulty in securing/retaining employment for various reasons
12. Difficulty finding employment without adequate transportation; some ride the City buses to work and are provided passes
13. Lack of access to technology, computers and the internet



Question 5. Most Helpful

Most client give credit to their caseworkers for being the most helpful in helping them find or keep their housing. Most lacked confidence in their ability to stay on their program without the support of their caseworker.

While dealing with all of the challenges listed as the responses to question 4, the clients were given direct assistance to overcome the obstacles.

If their caseworker could not provide them with direct assistance they served as a referral source to other agencies and resources available in the community.



While most clients recognized that the workers have large caseloads, they were in contact at least once a week. A few would like more time with their caseworker.

Most clients have the personal cell phone number of their caseworker and felt that in a crisis or difficult time, they would be able to connect with their caseworker or another support person.

One client reported that their caseworker “ROCKS!”

Question 6. Program Improvements

- What could the program do better to help you get in/stay in housing?*
- a. Is there anything that would improve your chances of obtaining/staying in housing that is not available to you?*
 - b. What, if any, parts of the program make it challenging for you to find permanent housing or keep your housing?*

Question six and the responses to question 6, echoed those from question 4, but the most prevalent concern that surfaced at this point in the focus groups was that about being able to afford housing in the future.

Many clients are unemployed or working for wages that keep them in poverty, and they have few, if any, assets. They wanted help with two things: Improving their employment options and wages, and saving money.

Given the state of the national economy, many clients were concerned that they could not find jobs at all, or that paid a living wage. They suggested more training programs or help in finding jobs that they could travel to by public transportation.

Most clients have no savings account and are not able to reserve their cash to fund a move into permanent housing. They are not able to save for first and last month’s rent a security deposit or utility deposits and hook-up fees. Most also have a poor credit history that they would need to improve before they can secure housing.

While the existing programs do not make it more challenging to find or keep housing, clients do not know how to secure their financial futures and acquire savings.

Question 7. The Future

*What you believe your housing situation will be in one year (short-term)?
a. Five years? (Long term)*

The future seemed very uncertain for most clients and this question invoked some anxiety in the focus group participants. A number of clients said they did not know where they would live in one year, a few hoped to retain their current housing situation or live in assisted living facility.

Some client expected to be moving back in with family members or living in their own apartments in one year. A number of clients were on the waiting list for a HUD Section 8 voucher or apartment, or expecting to apply for the Section 8 program.

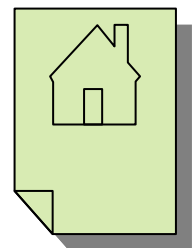
Some clients expressed an interest in supportive housing living situation, but did not know where to find them in the community.

When asked about what they believe their housing situation would be in five years, there were some hopeful and determined responses from a few participants. Several expected to be in their own home, to have completed their education and to own and operate their own business.

In summary

The clients are largely satisfied with the program staff, enthusiastic about their caseworkers, and grateful for their housing opportunity. Program improvements might include:

- Forms translated and available in Spanish.
- Intake hours in addition to traditional business hours to accommodate client schedules.
- Continuing regular or adding more time with their caseworkers.
- Helping clients find more jobs and higher paying jobs would improve their ability to fund a move into permanent housing.
- And helping the client to envision a brighter future for themselves and a place in their community.



APPENDIX A: Albuquerque CoC Agencies

Albuquerque Health Care for the Homeless

Barrett Foundation

Catholic Charities

Cuidando los Ninos

Goodwill Industries

New Life Homes

SAFE House*

St. Martin's Hospitality Center*

Susan's Legacy

Supportive Housing Coalition of New Mexico*

The Crossroads

Transitional Living Services*

*Participated in focus groups

APPENDIX B: Housing Outcomes

HOUSING OUTCOMES FOR ALBUQUERQUE COC RENEWAL PROJECTS

Established by the 2008 CoC Independent Review Committee (IRC)

Permanent Housing Projects

All permanent supportive housing projects will be evaluated on and expected to meet these housing outcomes in 2009.

At least 71% of those served during the program year must stay at least 7 months.

At least 80% of those served during the program year must remain in the permanent supportive housing program or exit into permanent housing.

Transitional Housing Projects

The IRC established the following housing outcomes for transitional housing projects.

For the 2009 application process, at least 70% of all clients exiting a transitional housing program during the program year must enter permanent housing.

Supportive Services Only Projects

Projects that are tied to a specific transitional housing program

These projects are evaluated on the same housing outcomes used for transitional housing projects (see above).

Projects tied to a specific permanent supportive housing program

These projects are evaluated on the same housing outcomes used for permanent supportive housing projects (see above).

Projects not tied to a specific transitional or permanent supportive housing program

For these projects, the following housing outcome will be assessed. Of those clients served during the project year who are homeless, 60% must obtain appropriate housing (either transitional or permanent) by the end of the project year or upon exiting the program.

APPENDIX C: Focus Group Questions

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Agency	Date and Time	Number in attendance

1. When you were going through the process of getting into this program, what worked well?
 - a. Could staff answer all your questions about the program?
 - b. Did you understand what you needed to do?
 - c. Did staff keep you informed about your status?
2. Was there anything hard or complicated about the process of getting into this program?
 - a. What, if anything, was confusing about the process confusing?
 - b. What would you change about the intake process?
 - c. How long from when you started the process until you move into your housing?
3. What kind of services has this program provided or helped you obtain?
 - a. Which of those services have been most helpful?
 - b. Are there services that you need that you have not been able to obtain?
If so, why not?
4. What are your biggest challenges to obtaining and keeping your current housing?
5. What is the most helpful part about this program in helping you find permanent housing or keep your housing?
6. What could the program do better to help you get in/stay in housing?
 - a. Is there anything that would improve your chances of obtaining/staying in housing that is not available to you?
 - b. What, if any, parts of the program make it challenging for you to find permanent housing or keep your housing?
7. What you believe your housing situation will be in one year (short-term)?
 - a. Five years? (Long term)

APPENDIX D: Confidentiality Statement

**New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness (NMCEH) Continuum of Care
HOUSING FOCUS GROUPS Confidentiality Statement/Participant Signatures**

Date: _____

Location: _____

We, the undersigned understand that all information presented or discussed during the meeting on this date is confidential and is not to be discussed at anytime with anyone not present during this meeting or not assigned specific responsibilities by the NMCEH.

The undersigned have had the opportunity to fully participate and offer opinions and input in the development of Continuum of Care Housing Focus Group, and other documents which result from this meeting.

Participant Signature

NAME

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

NMCEH Representative Signature

Santa Fe Office

Hughes, *Executive Director*

Email: Hank-H@nmceh.org

Mark Oldknow, *Communications and Development Director*

Email: Mark-O@nmceh.org

P.O. Box 865 / 802 Early Street
Santa Fe, NM 87504

Phone: (505) 982-9000

Fax: (888) 527-6480

Albuquerque Office

Lisa Huval, *Policy & Advocacy Director*

Email: Lisa-L@nmceh.org

202 Central Avenue SE, Suite 300
Albuquerque, NM 87102

Phone: (505) 217-9570

Fax: (505) 262-0997

HMIS Project Office

Julie Gallegos, *HMIS Project Manager*

Email: jgallegos@housingnm.org

Office: (505) 767-2231