Homeward Policy Statement: Subsidy for direct costs and support to use HCIS in VA-500 Greater Richmond Continuum of Care

Background: The Homeward Community Information System (HCIS)[1] is a HIPAA-compliant online database used to link households experiencing homelessness to resources; to better understand client demographics, service needs, service usage, and trends; and, to facilitate community planning to reduce homelessness.

In the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care (GRCoC), there are more than 155 individual HCIS users in approximately 14 partner agencies. The GRCoC's HCIS implementation is also used by other CoCs in the Commonwealth: the Virginia Balance of State (which includes Petersburg), Western Virginia (which includes Harrisonburg and Winchester), and the Fredericksburg region.

Since 2003, Homeward has served as the HMIS Lead for the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care. The HMIS Lead is responsible for developing written policies and procedures for all agencies using HCIS, as well as executing a participation agreement and monitoring compliance. Governing policies and procedures provide for the security, confidentiality, and privacy of data. Roles and responsibilities are laid out in an annual Memorandum of Understanding between Homeward and the GRCoC Board and posted at www.endhomelessnessrva.org. Homeward supports the HCIS Committee which has oversight over the HCIS implementation.

Homeward provides implementation planning, user training, reporting, data quality support, and help desk services to our partner agencies in the GRCoC. Since the introduction of HCIS in the early 2000s, Homeward has solicited grants to subsidize the cost to provide HCIS user licenses, user support, reporting, and technical assistance for GRCoC agencies. GRCoC participating agencies cover the costs of agency personnel using HCIS, data entry, hardware acquisition and maintenance, internet access, and related agency costs needed to comply with HCIS requirements.

Each HCIS license is valued at $1,000 per year per user including direct and staffing costs as described above.

Subsidy policy and eligibility: Homeward supports a collaborative and compassionate response to homelessness through inclusive planning, coordinated service provision, and person-centered data collection and analysis. As funding is available, Homeward may cover the direct license costs and staffing support needed for eligible organizations in the GRCoC to join and participate in HCIS. A Homeward subsidy is not meant to replace designated funding for the use of HCIS by participating agencies.

In order to be eligible for this HCIS subsidy from Homeward for HCIS user licenses, user support, reporting, and technical assistance, participating agencies must meet the following requirements:

a) Meet all requirements to join HCIS and be approved to join HCIS by the GRCoC Board. See www.homewardva.org/hcis for information on the application process.

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[1] HCIS is the regional implementation of a federally-mandated Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). "HCIS" is used to refer to our regional implementation and "HMIS" refers to the general data system defined in federal regulations. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

b) Participate in the GRCoC Coordinated Entry System as defined here: https://www.endhomelessnessrva.org/policies-and-standards)

c) Demonstrate the use of a Housing First approach. See the GRCoC Housing First Checklist below.

d) Have appropriate policies related to non-discrimination as defined in the GRCoC's Coordinated Entry System Policies and Procedures available here: https://www.endhomelessnessrva.org/policies-and-standards.

e) Partner with other service providers in the community in order to solve homelessness as determined by participation in planning and service coordination efforts and as supported by Homeward staff and/or GRCoC partner input.

Homeward will not subsidize access to HCIS for agencies working outside of the locally-developed policies, practices, and program standards of the Greater Continuum of Care, including the Coordinated Entry System policies and procedures.

Determination of Eligibility: Homeward's HCIS subsidy policy is subject to the availability of funding in addition to the requirements laid out above. This subsidy may be revoked or changed at any time although Homeward will endeavor to provide advance notice in order to reduce disruptions to service coordination and reporting. Agencies interested in joining HCIS and seeking a subsidy as described in this policy are requested to contact the HMIS Lead staff at hcis@homewardva.org. Interested agencies should provide documentation with the requirements a – e described above.

Provision of the subsidy is determined by Homeward's Executive Director and Director of Research and Evaluation and is not subject to an external appeal.

GRCoC Housing First Program Compliance Checklist

Approved by GRCoC System Policy and Process Committee, 9/7/23

What is Housing First?

Housing First is an approach that prioritizes permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness. It is grounded in the belief that once someone's homelessness has ended, their quality of life can improve by then attending to their other needs. Housing First is also the understanding that participants are more likely to remain housed when they have been given a choice through housing selection and in supportive service participation.

Checklist

To assess if a program is following the Housing First approach, the following checklist has been created to help guide a compliance review.

1) Does the program have income restrictions including the requirement of income or specifications regarding income source?

2) Are participants allowed to enter the program even if they aren't "clean and sober" or "treatment compliant"?

3) Are participants allowed to enter the program even if they have criminal justice system involvement?
4) Are individual service and treatment plans voluntary, such that tenants cannot be evicted for not following through?
5) Are participants with disabilities or other accessibility needs provided with reasonable accommodations during the application and screening processes as well as throughout their program enrollment (e.g., appropriate language translation, or special physical features to accommodate disabilities where possible) in a way that enables them to fully participate in the program?
6) Are program staff familiar with fair housing, and do they utilize their understanding when working with clients and landlords? Do they advocate and negotiate with landlords for reasonable and appropriate accommodations for clients with disabilities or other accessibility needs, as allowable by fair housing law (e.g., representative payee arrangements, source of income, adaptations for physical disabilities)?
7) Is every effort made to provide a participant with the opportunity to transfer from one housing situation, program, or project to another if a tenancy is in jeopardy?
8) Do program staff work with landlords to avoid eviction? Is program termination avoided as much as possible?
9) Are individuals provided with choice throughout the housing and service plan process? Are those plans tenant driven?

Compliance Review Steps

- The Quality Improvement Leadership (QIL) committee will lead the compliance review with each GRCoC provider. The following checklist will be provided to each provider along with the coordination of a scheduled date and time for the review.
- The provider will use the Housing First Checklist to gather materials or put together a demonstration to show compliance.
- Following the meeting, QIL will score each program on compliance. If a provider has areas in need of improvement, the QIL committee will add suggestions to the score that will be shared with each program along with a new scheduled date and time for follow up.