



## Guide for Effectively Engaging Persons Experiencing Homelessness to Consider Shared Housing as a Viable Housing Option

**Overview of Guide:** The purpose of this guide is to assist staff members providing homelessness or housing assistance to engage individuals to understand, message, and consider shared housing as a viable permanent housing option. Immediately below are the key messaging points that staff members should consider when engaging individuals around having a roommate. Pages 2 through 6 provide more instruction and details on using this guidance and conveying the key message points.

### Key Shared Housing Messaging Points:

1. **Embed Within the Housing Planning Conversation**
  - The idea of shared housing should be brought up within the context of the housing planning conversation that focuses on housing goals, barriers, and action steps.
2. **Explore Idea of Having Roommates and Past Experiences**
  - Staff members should explore the idea of having a roommate to understand initial interest. This may include discussing past experiences the person may have had with roommate situations.
3. **Discuss Shared Housing as a Step Towards Long-Term Housing Goal**
  - Staff members need to explain that shared housing can be a great starting place and in-time they can work towards living on their own.
  - Identify with them what they do not like about their current living situation and note the differences if they entered into a roommate situation.
4. **Discuss Choice in Roommate(s) and Housing**
  - It is critical to ensure they understand that they will have choice in the person(s) they live with and where they live
5. **Discuss the Reality of San Diego's Housing Market**
  - San Diego's rental market is expensive and vacancy rates are low. Staff members need to convey the realities of the rental market and what is available that is affordable given the persons situation.
6. **Walk Through Potential Budget with and without Roommate(s)**
  - Doing an initial budgeting activity with the person that shows the difference in living with a roommate vs living on their own may be helpful.
7. **Return to the Initial Housing Vision Identified**
  - Once staff members have gone through the key messaging points its important to connect the shared housing conversation back to their original identified housing goals.

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### Guidance Overview and Directions

**Purpose of this Guide:** One of the most challenging aspects of expanding the concept of shared housing is effectively talking to persons experiencing homelessness about having roommates and getting individuals to opt in to enter a shared housing environment. The purpose of this guide is to help staff members providing homelessness or housing assistance throughout San Diego county to engage individuals in their programs to understand, message, and consider shared housing as a viable permanent housing option. For the sake of this guide, shared housing is defined as two or more people choosing to live together in permanent housing and share housing costs. Simply defined as choosing to live with a roommate(s).

This guide was created based on input received from San Diego's homeless services providers as well as individuals with recent lived experience in homelessness. This guidance is not a specific script, assessment tool, or questionnaire but rather a guide with key points for staff to use to embed within the natural housing planning conversations. It is the hope that it can also continue to shift the culture in the homeless response system that having a roommate is a very normal thing that most San Diegans do, and that shared housing needs to be a tool in our toolbelt for ending homelessness in the region, while recognizing that it may not be a fit for everyone.

**General Engagement Tips:** This guide should be used in alignment with other best practice strategies for engaging individuals including a Trauma-Informed Care approach, Housing First/Housing Focused orientation, Motivational Interviewing techniques, and a person-centered framework that acknowledges each person has unique needs and strengths and allows for their choice. Additionally, engagement techniques and body language that promotes relationships and rapport such as maintaining eye contact, demonstrating a genuine interest in each person's story and needs, and using active listening is critical.

**When to use this Guidance:** This guidance should be incorporated into the housing planning conversation between staff providing homeless/housing assistance and individuals in their programs. Each organization may have assessment tools, housing planning tools, or housing planning processes that assists staff with identifying housing goals, barriers, and crafting individualized housing plans. This guidance does not replace those but rather recommends that the concepts, messaging points, and example questions within this guidance be incorporated into those existing practices as appropriate. This guidance can be used by staff of street outreach programs, day shelters, diversion assistance, housing navigation and transition staff, shelter and transitional housing programs, safe parking programs, rapid re-housing programs, permanent supportive housing programs; essentially for any staff that are engaging individuals in a housing planning conversation.

It is important to note that the guidance below may need to be catered for discussions depending on the setting and resources that the staff have available. For example, the conversation may look different if staff at an emergency shelter are

talking with a person about a roommate situation as part of diversion strategy where there may not be the availability on ongoing rental assistance and supportive services once in housing versus a conversation with a staff member who is part of a rapid re-housing program where they are offering both rental assistance and services once in housing.

### **Shared Housing Messaging Points and Guidance**

The following are messaging points and guidance to help engage individuals in dialogue for opting into shared housing. Although in numerical order they are not necessarily meant to be delivered as a linear conversation. Rather staff members can use these messaging points in whatever ways makes sense and feels natural within the housing planning conversation. The details of each of these points should be customized for each person's needs and strengths.

It is extremely important that staff members using this guidance genuinely believe that shared housing is a viable housing option for most individuals experiencing homelessness and that people regardless of their challenges can be successful with a roommate. If staff members do not believe this, the likelihood of successfully conveying the following messaging points and engaging people to have a roommate, will be low.

- 1. Embed within the Housing Planning Conversation:** As noted above, the messaging on shared housing needs to be embedded in the existing housing planning conversation. As a starting place, all housing planning conversations should include basic questions that seek to identify each person's goals for housing – what type of housing do they want, what is important to them, where geographically do they want to live, what supports do they need to realize this vision, how can we support you to get a place of your own where you feel safe and secure as soon as possible, and others?
- 2. Explore Idea of Having Roommates and Past Experiences:** As part of the housing planning conversation, staff members should ask questions that explore the idea of having a roommate. Questions should focus on if they are interested in having a roommate and if not, why? Staff members can bring up the fact that living with roommates is a very normal thing. In fact, recent figures show that nearly 40% of all adults in San Diego County live with a roommate.

#### **Example Questions:**

- “Have you considered living with a roommate?”
  - If yes - What support do you need to take the next step? (If person initially opts into having a roommate it is up to the staff member if they want to continue with using the messaging points in this guidance)
  - If no – “Tell me about your hesitations with having a roommate?”
- “Have you had a roommate(s) in the past? Tell me a little about that experience? What were some positives about that experience? Were there any challenges? Tell me about those?”

3. **Discuss Shared Housing as a Step Towards Long-Term Housing Goal:** As part of the housing planning conversation, staff should message that having roommates can be a first step towards a longer-term goal of having their own place. Shared housing does not need to be a final destination but can be a realistic starting place for many individuals currently living on the streets or in shelters. Staff members may choose to show the person pictures of the shared housing unit or see the unit in person to identify that they will have their own room that is theirs while most likely sharing common areas such as the kitchen and bathroom. Additionally, staff may have flexibility depending on their programs to support the individual in entering into shorter lease terms such as a month-to-month lease to promote the idea of shared housing as initial step.

Equally important, many individuals do not realize that their current homeless living situation is most likely shared living. For example, shelters, treatment programs, and other congregate settings are essentially shared living so it may be helpful for individuals to consider that in a shared housing setting they may only have one or two other roommates, whereas their current situation may have many more. Staff may want to highlight this idea as appropriate.

Lastly, if not done so already it may be important to get the individual to identify what they do not like about their current living situation. If in shelter, they may indicate rules, curfew, sharing restrooms and showers with other residents, not being able to cook their own dinner, limited privacy, and others. If living on the streets, they may indicate the danger they face day in and day out, weather, difficulty sleeping, and regular access to basic needs such as showers, restrooms, and a kitchen. Identifying these things may help them see shared housing a solution to these items, and while having a roommate might not be their ideal, it can be a first step out of their current situation.

4. **Discuss that the Person has Choice in Roommate(s) and Housing:** As mentioned above, choice in housing is a fundamental underpinning in supporting individuals experiencing homelessness. However, given people's situation, the level of choice they truly have is limited. But it is critical for people to understand that with shared housing they have choice in who they live with and ultimately the housing they enter.

**Example Questions:**

- “Do you know someone who you would feel comfortable living with?”
- “Do you have someone in mind that you trust and get along with?”
- “What are things that you would like in a roommate? What would make a good roommate?”

If the person does not identify a potential roommate that they know, it is absolutely acceptable for staff to ask further questions to identify roommate preferences on specific items. Staff can support the person with finding a roommate using various processes – either in their program or connecting with other organizations – but

again ultimately the person needs to be the one choosing and agreeing to live with the roommate(s) not staff.

Individuals should choose a roommate that have similar living preferences, cleanliness habits, and routines. Staff can help individuals think through their roommate preferences or “deal breakers.” Staff members can also support persons with creating strategies or roommate agreements once a roommate is identified to minimize potential conflict once in housing.

Staff members can help support the person with making a good housing choice. As noted earlier, having a roommate may not be the ideal situation, however may be more realistic given the persons circumstances. Staff should use good engagement skills to support the person with making their choice in their housing while at the same time using techniques such as Motivational Interviewing to ensure the person makes a good decision on their housing and who they choose to live with.

- 5. Discuss the Reality of San Diego's Housing Market:** As part of the housing planning discussion, staff members should discuss the current rental market in San Diego. This will need to be done in a delicate manor as the cost of housing may be new information for those who may not have paid rent in several years. Discussing the realities of the housing market should both include the cost of the rental market as well as messaging the scarcity in available resources such as a Housing Choice Voucher (Commonly known as Section 8) and that waiting for a “voucher” may take years.

The following average figures below can be used to help guide the discussion on rents in San Diego. It should be noted that these are averages and rents will vary by unit sizes, year built, and geography in the county.

Studio = \$1,500  
1 – Bedroom = \$1,800  
2 – Bedroom = \$2,250  
3 – Bedroom = \$3,300

The important thing to illuminate with the person is that by having a roommate – in in a 2 bedroom or 3 bedroom - the total rent per person is going to be less than living by themselves in a studio or 1 bedroom. It is important to note that if they are willing to have a roommate, it potentially opens up the housing options for them and they may be able to get a place in a nicer neighborhood and/or with better amenities.

Additionally, a core tenet in the housing planning process is that each individual should have choice in their housing. While choice in housing is absolutely critical and needs to be honored, staff members also need to convey that housing choice and options are limited and it is important to set realistic expectations (More on promoting choice in shared housing below).

6. **Walk Through Potential Budget with and without Roommate(s):** Building on the conversation above regarding San Diego's rental market, staff members may choose to walk through a budget scenario with the person with first having them identify their current monthly income or projected income. The following budget example below can be used to help identify the difference in expenses with having a roommate vs. living on their own, and then identifying their income that will be left over each month once they pay their expenses. Feel free to adjust the example below as needed to meet your program's needs.

**Basic Monthly Budget**

Expense	Without Roommate	With Roommate
Rent		
Utilities		
Transportation		
Food		
Medical		
Phone		
Entertainment (cable, internet, etc...)		
Debt Payments		
Other (personal care, tobacco, hobbies)		
<b>Total Expenses</b>		

7. **Return to the Initial Housing Vision Identified:** Once you have walked through some of the shared housing messaging points above, it is important to try and connect the conversation back to the original housing vision and goals that the person identified, even if that vision was to have their own place. Generally, there is always a way to connect the realities of having a roommate and being in a shared living environment to the original housing goals discussed. Remember, shared housing means having your own space/room that is safe and secure and allows for privacy, having a place that is affordable, and ensures greater access to basic needs – shower, restroom, and a kitchen. These aspects are most likely a part of all individuals vision of what they want in housing.