



Diversion is often misunderstood as turning people away or saying “no”. That is the wrong mindset. Diversion is about saying “yes” to helping them navigate a safe alternative to shelter that is appropriate to their specific circumstances through an investment of staff time (often dedicated staff) that have specific problem-solving skills and access to flexible resources to put the solution into action.

There are nine steps to an effective diversion practice, with each step progressing more deeply into resolving the current housing crisis while concurrently determining if shelter access will be required. For obvious operational reasons, it may not be practical to work through all of the steps if your shelter accepts admissions in the middle of the night. But by and large this should be the approach applied to most households presenting for shelter in most instances.

STEP ONE: Explain the Process

Explanation of the diversion conversation.

“Our goal is to learn more about your specific housing situation right now and what you need so that together we can identify the best possible way to get you a place to stay tonight and to find safe, permanent housing as quickly as possible. That might mean staying in shelter tonight, but we want to avoid that if at all possible. We will work with you to find a more stable alternative if we can.”

What is being established in the opening script is a transparent explanation of what is about to happen for the person that is seeking shelter, understanding this may not be what they wanted to hear. First, we are interested in their housing situation right now – not the entire housing history. Second, it emphasizes that the work moving forward is something that will happen together. In other words, this is not a situation where a household can drop their housing crisis onto someone else’s lap to fix. Third, it focuses on safe, permanent housing, while being clear that if it is possible to avoid a shelter stay to achieve that, then doing so would be most desirable.

STEP TWO: Today’s Urgency and Untested Options

Why are you seeking emergency shelter today?

What are all the other things you tried before you sought shelter today?

What are all the other things you have thought about trying but have not attempted yet in order to avoid needing shelter today?

The key element of the first question is emphasis on today. Another way of looking at this, and even probing for more information, is why they were not seeking shelter yesterday, and why they are not here tomorrow. In most instances, the diversion worker will learn of a specific

conflict or event that has occurred that has brought them to a place of seeking services today. If it is possible to resolve the conflict or address the event before progressing any further, that should be done.

The two other questions are exploratory in nature. In learning what they have already tried, there is an opportunity for the diversion worker to learn what worked and did not work. There is also an opportunity to not suggest things that have already been attempted. The more important of the questions by way of diverting people from shelter is that which they have thought about doing but have not tried yet. In most instances, this results in concrete actions that can be attempted at that moment, though taking those actions may require assistance with accessing a phone, counselling/briefing on what they are thinking of attempting, accessing transportation, etc.

STEP THREE: Last Night's Safety

Where did you stay last night?

- a. If staying with someone else, what is the relationship between them and you?
- b. How long have you been staying there?
- c. Where did you stay before that?
- d. Would it be safe for you to stay there again for the next 3-7 days?
- e. (If a couple and/or household with children under 18) Would your whole household be able to return and stay there safely for the next 3-7 days?
- f. If indicate that the place where they stayed is unsafe, ask why it is unsafe.
- g. If cannot stay there safely, or if were staying in a place unfit for human habitation, move to Step Six.

You are trying to ascertain whether the place they are coming from is safe to return to while the household works on a more permanent housing solution. There are discernible differences in the diversion process when the person seeking shelter services has been in a safe, appropriate place for some time versus the person that is bouncing around from one location to another without safety and security.

STEP FOUR: Story Behind the Story (At Last Night's Safe Place)

What is the primary/main reason that you had to leave the place where you stayed last night?

Are there additional reasons why you can't stay there any longer?

Another way of looking at this step is "what is the story behind the story?", which is intended to enrich the contextual understanding for the diversion worker to figure out a pathway forward.

STEP FIVE: What Would it Take to Stay (At Last Night's Safe Place)

Do you think that you/you and your family could stay there again temporarily if we provide you with some help or referrals to find permanent housing or connect with other services?

If no, why not? What would it take to be able to stay there temporarily?

This is an entry into progressive engagement with diversion. Instead of going “all in” with a solution or even a range of resources, the fundamental question is “What would it take to be able to stay there temporarily?” In other words, the diversion worker is asking the service-seeker what they feel the solution would be rather than, perhaps, providing more resources than are actually required or more intervention than what would be necessary. Importantly, the diversion worker has to be able to take action on the types of “asks” the service-seeker may have, in order to divert them from shelter. For example, if the person identifies that helping out with groceries would make it possible to go back temporarily, the diversion worker has to have the immediate ability to support that, as opposed to having many layers of approval or passage of time to reach accessing the resource.

STEP SIX: New Place to Stay Temporarily

If no, is there somewhere else where you/you and your family could stay temporarily if we provide you with some help or referrals to find permanent housing and access other supports? For example, what about other family members? Friends? Coworkers?

What would it take for you to be able to stay there temporarily?

Again step six is progressive engagement in action. It empowers the service-seeker to identify both other people and the resources that would be necessary to achieve the outcome rather than having finite resource options to suggest or trying to solve the problem for the service-seeker.

STEP SEVEN: Identifying Barriers and Assistance Required

What is making it hard for you to find permanent housing for you/you and your family - or connect to other resources that could help you do that?

What do you feel are your barriers?

What assistance do you feel you need?

STEP EIGHT: Current Resources

What resources do you have right now that could help you and your family find a place to stay temporarily or find permanent housing?

The intention of this step is to focus on what the individual or family has rather than what they do not have, in order to progress further into finding a solution that does not rely on the service provider or system of care to solely be the solution to their housing instability. While additional questions can be added to probe for information, this step intentionally does not rely on a series of forms or a particular decision-making matrix in order to dictate how to proceed.

STEP NINE: Housing Planning

If admitted to shelter there is still an expectation that you will be attempting to secure permanent housing for you (and your family).

What is your plan at this point for securing housing if you are admitted to shelter?

If the household has a plan in place, terrific. If not, there is an opportunity to engage in solution creation without provision of a one-size fits all solution. It is better that, from the front door of the shelter, there is a focus on having people plan their own exit prior to entry rather than having people come into service and then find the way out. This also is critical for setting up opportunities for self-resolution within shelter.