

What is a Low-Barrier Shelter and Why is it Important?

*This content was adapted from the US Interagency Council on Homelessness' "[Key Considerations for Implementing Emergency Shelter Within an Effective Crisis Response System](#)" document.

Responding effectively to homelessness requires a combination of strategies at the local level: preventing or diverting people from experiencing homelessness whenever possible; ensuring people transition rapidly from homelessness to housing and services; and providing immediate low-barrier shelter options for people experiencing homelessness who cannot immediately access permanent housing.

Emergency shelter should support flow from a housing crisis to housing stability, in which the aim of the system is to produce the most rapid and effective permanent housing connections for individuals and families facing crises. Unfortunately, many communities are facing high numbers of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness— sometimes in the form of encampments—as well as the need to address long stays in emergency shelter. This can result in limited capacity to provide immediate emergency shelter access to everyone who needs it.

Additionally, high barriers to entering emergency shelter, like the "no pets allowed" culture, too many rules within emergency shelter, curfews that make it difficult to maintain a job, and a lack of focus or capacity to rapidly connect people to permanent housing are a few other factors that contribute to a lack of flow within a community's crisis response system. Addressing flow into and out of shelter is critical to having an effective crisis response system and for ensuring that emergency shelters can improve their capacity and to play their role in connecting people to housing quickly.

If guests perceive that an emergency shelter stay requires conforming to rules or expectations that seem unreasonable, punitive, or that divide them from their defined family, they may decline the support they need. For an emergency shelter to achieve its intended purposes, the expectations placed on guests should be minimal, transparent, and reasonable.

For emergency shelters, creating a low barrier environment means removing as many pre-conditions to entry as possible and responding to the needs and concerns of people seeking shelter. Historically, concerns about safety, allergies, and cleanliness have prompted many shelters to limit access to people's animals, and therefore precluding the entire family from accessing shelter.

But a number of innovative shelter programs across the country have been able to design their approach to accommodate people regardless of accompanying animals. Low-barrier shelters emphasize welcoming guests in as they are, while having clear and simple behavioral expectations that apply to anyone residing in the shelter. These expectations are narrowly focused on maintaining a safe environment for all.