

# Recovery Housing: Expanding Access and Supporting Choice

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When people experience or are at risk of experiencing homelessness, many look for safe, stable, and affordable housing within their communities. Some people benefit from housing that can also support them in working toward personal goals such as recovery from substance use or mental health conditions. Recovery housing, sometimes known as recovery residences, sober homes, or sober living, can help people who want to work toward substance use recovery within a supportive, homelike environment.<sup>1</sup>

To help people seeking housing, different agencies and systems collaborate to inventory and create access to available housing options, often within a HUD Continuum of Care (CoC). People in housing and homeless services roles then work with individuals to find housing within and beyond the CoC. Recovery housing is an important resource to learn about and consider as part of a homelessness response system.

This brief explains what recovery housing is, why it is an important resource within a CoC, and how housing and homeless service providers can help people find this type of housing.

## Why is recovery housing an important housing option?

The nationwide homeless response system has emphasized housing first and harm reduction approaches to housing. This is helpful to many individuals who may not be interested in stopping substance use completely or who want the freedom to make day-to-day decisions on whether to use alcohol or drugs in their own homes.

Recovery housing is associated with decreased substance use, reduced likelihood of return to use, lower rates of incarceration, higher income, increased employment, and improved family relationships.<sup>2</sup>

However, some people prefer the safety and security of a recovery home that is abstinence-focused, meaning it does not allow active substance use. In addition to this focus, residents share a home with and

receive support from fellow residents who are working on their recovery. This environment helps residents reduce their exposure to substance use and related triggers while building up recovery support resources. This type of housing may be especially helpful to people in the early stages of their recovery journeys.

Recovery housing is not treatment with housing. Recovery housing focuses on providing a supportive environment for individuals with substance use disorder who are seeking to not use illicit drugs or substances. Often, this means connecting the individual to an appropriate provider for treatment, but individuals can and do live in recovery housing without engagement in specific treatment services.

Both approaches to housing are important and necessary. Giving people a clear choice in finding housing is a critical part of a homeless response system.

## What is recovery housing?

Recovery housing has been around for almost one hundred years as an important resource for people to achieve sustainable recovery from substance use. It is unknown how many recovery houses there are nationwide. In 2020, one research group estimated that there were a little under 18,000 recovery housing projects, but with houses opening and closing continuously, there is no definitive number.<sup>3</sup>

Although recovery housing may look different across communities, the most common type is a single-family home where residents share living space. Some recovery housing looks more like a group of apartments within a block or on a campus with some centralized peer and other recovery support resources.

## Social Model of Recovery

Recovery housing promotes a culture of peer support and social connections in recovery from substance use. This social model of recovery is fundamental to recovery housing.<sup>4</sup> It emphasizes the setting's supportive and therapeutic role in a person's recovery, the connections and culture among residents, and the integrated peer support.<sup>5</sup> In many ways, people consider "the setting to be the service" for residents in a recovery home.

### Definitions:

The Substance Abuse and Medical Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines recovery houses as "safe, healthy, family-like, substance-free living environments that support individuals in recovery from addiction. While recovery residences vary widely in structure, all are centered on peer support [and] connection to services that promote long-term recovery."<sup>6</sup>

According to the National Alliance for Recovery Residences (NARR), "Recovery residences provide safe and healthy community-oriented home environments where skills vital for sustaining recovery are practiced within a community-oriented setting. The group experience within the home fosters a culture of recovery based on shared lived experience, support, and structure."<sup>7</sup>



Within the social model, residents share their experiences with daily living and personal growth as they relate to recovery from substance use. Many recovery housing models now employ staff as well—most often people in recovery themselves. Such staff often act as role models and mentors, helping residents manage their recovery, maintain their living spaces, and connect with other recovery support and services.

## Other Key Features

Within recovery homes, substance use is viewed as a health issue, and there is an emphasis on holistic approaches to recovery. Most recovery homes will help people connect with the services and support they need to be healthy. This includes valuing culturally relevant support groups and social networks as central to the recovery process.

Recovery housing includes structure (e.g., house guidelines and support groups), and residents have a say in house decisions while being responsible for the health and safety of their environment. Residents typically determine how long they stay in a recovery home, as long as they abide by house rules. Recovery homes also encourage residents to engage with the wider recovery community for ongoing support and connection.

Though recovery homes may vary in size, structure, and culture, they have common features aimed at supporting people as they work toward long-term recovery, for example:

- Residents commit to not using or possessing alcohol and illicit drug use while living in the house.
- Everyone receives and gives support to their fellow residents who are also in recovery, creating a sense of community and reciprocity.
- Residents are responsible for their actions and agree to follow house rules.
- Recovery housing often serves as a step between intensive treatment programs, offering a safe and supportive place as people adjust to life outside of treatment, although some residents do attend outpatient treatment programs while living in recovery housing.
- Many recovery houses have links to community resources such as counseling services, job training programs, and support groups.
- More experienced residents can serve as role models and mentors, offering guidance and support based on their experiences.<sup>8</sup>

## What are the levels of recovery housing?

Recovery homes typically fall into one of four levels, which are informed by NARR standards and definitions.<sup>9</sup>

**Level I (Peer-run)** is usually a single-family residence where people choose to live together. The house is democratically run, with agreed rules or policies that residents create and enforce. Level I does not usually have compensated or paid staff members living within the residence. Although Level I residences usually have house meetings, they do not generally provide services or support within the house. Residents are

encouraged to seek support, such as local recovery meetings in the community. A common example of a Level I residence is an Oxford House.<sup>10</sup>

**Level II (Managed)** homes usually have policies and house rules similar to those of Level 1. However, a senior resident or house manager typically lives in the house and acts as a point of contact in case any issues arise. Level II's more structured environment includes house meetings and peer-run recovery support meetings, life skills support, and sometimes a more formalized case management structure that focuses on recovery support.

**Level III (Supervised)** has a more formalized structure within the house. Although the program still focuses on peer support, there are other mandatory services that usually include recovery support, life skills, budgeting and financial skills, and job readiness. The project is typically run by an experienced and credentialed team of staff. Its members often come from a recovery housing background and provide more intensive support than a Level II home does. Level III recovery residences are often designed for individuals new to recovery and with more intensive needs.

**Level IV (Clinical)** combines a more clinical and therapeutic focus with the recovery supports available at other levels. These are frequently found in institutional or residential settings and include credentialed and licensed staff. Although peer support is encouraged and Level IV structures usually involve peer recovery groups, this type of recovery residence differs in a few key ways. Level IV residences are not democratically run, staffing is typically 24/7, and the length of stay will frequently be limited, with individuals encouraged to further their recovery journey in one of the other levels of housing.

## Who is recovery housing meant to serve?

Recovery housing is a good fit for anyone who wants support to live a life free from substance use, including alcohol, illicit drugs, and the use of non-prescribed medications. This includes individuals who have recently stopped using substances through either a treatment program or other means and want to continue abstinence-based recovery. Some communities have family recovery housing where children can reside with parents who are working on their recovery; however, this type of resource is limited. Some recovery homes may aim to serve specific populations, such as LGBTQIA+ communities.

Individuals must usually be willing to live in shared housing and actively participate in the home by providing and receiving recovery support to and from other residents. They may be asked to attend mandatory meetings and other recovery sessions and take turns in the upkeep of the house.

## What challenges might potential residents face?

### Fit with Recovery Housing Cultures

When supporting someone considering recovery housing, it is important to explore some of the features that make it unique. For example, recovery homes are likely to mandate attendance at a certain number of meetings and expect active participation in the home's day-to-day activities. That culture differs from other housing types within a CoC, which may offer private apartments and make services available purely voluntarily.



Additionally, residents are expected to spend time together because recovery housing relies on active peer engagement. This includes sharing their experiences and challenges around recovery and supporting one another in recovery meetings and informal settings within the house. This culture also fosters accountability among residents, particularly during house meetings where residents may discuss issues that arise in the house and need to find compromises and solutions.

Active engagement with other residents and house activities may be challenging for people who are not used to living in a shared housing setting.

Some individuals may also have questions about the safety of a group environment. For example, LGBTQIA+ individuals may worry whether they will be accepted and affirmed within a home that is not LGBTQIA+ specific, and someone following a medication-assisted recovery pathway may worry whether other residents will understand and accept their use of prescribed medication to support their recovery.

To enable true choice, it is important to have a clear orientation to the culture of recovery housing overall and to specific recovery homes of interest.

## The Social Model Process for resident entry takes time

The social model of recovery empowers residents to take ownership of their environment. This means that recovery homes often have an application process where the potential new resident will meet, be interviewed, or submit an application to be discussed by others in the home.

Similar to any other process where individuals are considering a new roommate or housemate, the residents of the home often have a voice in this process, where they can ensure that the person moving into their home is aware and respectful of the illicit drug and alcohol-free living environment, is ready to give and get support from others, and is ready to participate in programming and activities.

This process may take time, which is understandably frustrating for individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Many recovery housing operators will ensure that this process is conducted quickly if they are aware that the person seeking housing is experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

## Access within the Homelessness System

Over the last decade, recovery housing has not been easily accessible within CoCs. Many CoCs do not partner with recovery housing projects and do not include them in their membership, resulting in fewer housing choices for people experiencing homelessness to consider.

Many recovery housing projects are not integrated into the coordinated entry system (CES) within the CoC. A CES aims to provide standard, equitable means of assessing and referring people to the housing and services they need. Although CES coordinators usually discuss substance use with households during the assessment, many tend to take a harm-reduction approach rather than an abstinence-based approach to exploring a

“The CES starts with a self-report assessment with two questions: ‘1) Do you identify as having a substance use disorder or a problematic relationship with substances? Either drugs and or alcohol. 2) Are you interested in shared temporary housing for individuals seeking recovery where you could stay until a permanent housing opportunity is available?’ Once somebody says yes and yes to that they get pinged in our CES prioritization for follow up.”

Interview with South Carolina CoC lead agency

person’s need for services. This automatically limits a person’s choice if coordinators do not ask people about their interest in abstinence-based recovery and housing pathways. However, expanding these types of questions about recovery pathways is relatively straightforward to accomplish.

It is important for CoCs to partner with recovery housing operators in the event that a person needs to leave their recovery housing. Quality recovery homes will support residents in finding an alternative housing option if they are no longer able to stay in the home. Without a clear partnership with CoCs, there is no process for reintegrating a person back into the CES, leaving them feeling potentially isolated and reentering homelessness.

CoCs may need to proactively reach out to behavioral health agencies and recovery support programs within the community to connect with recovery homes.

## How do I find recovery housing in my community?

Some recovery homes may be part of an established local or statewide network. Many also operate independently and are not connected with any broader recovery housing or homeless services networks. However, other behavioral health agencies within the community are frequently aware of them. Below are some suggestions for finding local recovery housing resources.

- Behavioral health staff at the local, county, or regional level may have contacts at recovery homes across the community.
- Some states have affiliate groups that list certified recovery housing residences. You can find a [list of the state affiliates](#) on the NARR website.<sup>11</sup> Not every state has an affiliate. Oxford House provides a [directory of houses](#) on its website.<sup>12</sup>



- Recovery Community Organizations (i.e., local nonprofits started by and for people with lived experience of substance use conditions and recovery) can be helpful. Other community groups, such as twelve-step groups and other peer support programs, often provide links to recovery housing. Overall, community groups tend to know about good recovery housing resources. People often find a recovery residence through word of mouth.
- Treatment agencies often partner with recovery residences to ensure that people have places to live once they finish a residential program or have a supportive place while receiving community treatment options.

## How do I do my due diligence before recommending a recovery home to someone?

When looking for a recovery house, it is important to remember the following:

- Not all recovery homes are suitable for all people. Some residences serve specific populations.
- The house may have a greater or lesser level of support than an applicant needs. Finding the right level of support is a critical part of searching for a recovery housing project.
- Recovery is a very personal journey. What seems right and appropriate to one person may not be the same for the next. Respecting a person's right to say yes or no to living in a specific home is important.
- Some states have agencies that certify recovery residences. Certified residences have demonstrated that they adhere to quality standards. However, even if a home is certified, it is important to ask questions about recovery housing standards. NARR publishes the most common standards.<sup>13</sup>

NARR's [website](#) publishes standards that outline how a certified recovery residence should be run [here](#).

- Make a list of questions for a potential applicant to ask, such as:
  - Is this a privately funded recovery home, or does it accept people who have no income?
  - How much must I pay in rent? Do I need to pay for my food?
  - What level of support will I receive when I move in?
  - How long can I stay?
  - What are the requirements for my stay? Do I have to attend certain meetings?
  - Where is the home located? Will I be able to get to work or school? What are the local transportation options?
  - Where are the local recovery supports? Do the residents go to community meetings? Do they see any other agencies in the community?



- Is there a staff member or house manager at the house? Will they be able to help orient me to the community and help me settle in?
- Can I visit and talk to staff and current residents to ask questions before moving in?
- Do you have a list of house rules and a resident welcome packet that I can review?
- Do you accept people who may have been prescribed medications for opioid use disorder or other controlled substances? If so, what are the processes and policies around medication administration?
- What is your policy for residents who return to substance use?
- What are some possible reasons for eviction? What is the process?

## Conclusion

Recovery housing can be a great option for people who fit the eligibility requirements and need a supportive, recovery-oriented environment. CoCs and housing providers can take steps to include recovery housing as a choice for people who seek housing.





## Learn More about the Homeless and Housing Resource Center

Providing high-quality, no-cost training for health and housing professionals in evidence-based practices that contributes to housing stability, recovery, and an end to homelessness.

### Contact Us:

- [hhrctraining.org](https://hhrctraining.org)
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## Endnotes

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