

# Housing First

How does Housing First make a difference? Through the **caring and daring** involvement of very dedicated and motivated Front Line Workers (FLWs)! With Housing First, there are no care-workers, just workers who care. And that makes a real difference. Shedding their “care-worker” persona allows the service user to also shake off their “client” persona, thus normalizing a mutual, trust-based relationship and laying the foundation for healthy communication, behaviour and recovery. Housing First is based on unconditional acceptance and trust. More than ten years of experience have proven that it pays off.

## The relationship is the heart of Housing First

The FLWs act from within a **person-centred relationship**. Housing First is eminently suited for this kind of relation-based approach. Research has shown that it’s not just the methodology, but also the human interaction between FLWs and service users that are instrumental for success. That is why at Housing First, FLWs and service users are carefully matched from the word go. But people and their needs may change, so that match is monitored throughout the process.

A Housing First FLW is a **free spirit**. The core principles of Housing First will help the FLW consider their options but don’t offer an off-the-shelf solution. Working for Housing First means searching and deliberating. You don’t know beforehand what you are going to use and what steps you are going to take. It’s a tailor-made approach, not a straitjacket. Housing First adapts to its service users, not the other way around. The do’s and don’ts for the FLW spring from the person-centred relationship.

A Housing First FLW is a **professional**; training, methodology and regulations are not discarded, but the relationship is always the starting point. As a Housing First service user once aptly said: *“you’re neither a care-worker nor a friend; you’re something in-between”*.

As a FLW you know the importance of making the service user feel welcome right from the start. Housing First radiates warmth towards the person’s presence and dedication towards looking after him or her. There is room for mutual openness and curiosity. Moreover, the FLW demonstrates both **accessibility and availability**.

## Recovery and hope

Housing First is mainly about giving hope instead of just help. As an FLW you truly believe that every human being has the potential to recover, no matter how long the road. Traditionally, care work is about controlling and protecting - minimizing risk. Housing First however, doesn’t focus on fear but on **hope, trust and positivity**. It aims to achieve what is possible, finding a direction and creating something new together. Taking risks is part of this; it provides opportunities to grow. According to one participant: *“The belief my Front Line Worker showed in me was such that after some time I started to believe in me too.”*

*Even after relapses and setbacks this warm and compassionate care made me believe in a different life for myself”.*

The credo is: **nobody deserves a last chance**. Housing First always offers a hopeful perspective. You don't judge but offer possibilities, based on a stern belief in the good of the people using the service and in a happy ending.

## **You and I**

The classic care worker-client relationship is all about the client and their needs, whereby the care-worker works to serve these needs and does not let their own personality get in the way of the client. Even more so, they are taught not to, to maintain professional distance. The Housing First approach shifts the focus from the individual to the relationship, building a relationship that will work for both parties, and strive for an ongoing, honest dialogue. It is all about **professional proximity**.

**Authenticity** is an important requirement in selecting a Housing First Front Line Worker. As an FLW you have the necessary (life) experience and you are aware of your own history, patterns and fears and how they can affect your work. It is only natural for FLWs to have anxieties and biases - we all do. The skill lies in how you choose your actions, in the subtle use of your own experiences. The awareness of your own perceptions comes with realizing that the other person regards the world based on their experiences. The focus is on *“what happened to you?”* instead of *“what is wrong with you?”*.

As a Housing First FLW you accept your fallibility and the notion that you might be wrong. By taking your responsibility, you challenge the participant to do the same.

## **Respect and strengthening autonomy**

Housing First supposes that it doesn't have to fix people; it teaches them to help themselves. It also discards the assumption that a service worker has a better understanding of someone's needs than that person does. The Housing First FLW gives up the role of expert. The service user is recognized as the main character in their own life and Housing First empowers them to feel in control of their choices. The process is based on the notion that **autonomy is the start of recovery**. It is the conviction that people are able to find the answers to their own questions and that the support should enable them to do so.

Housing First is more highly regarded by participants than other schemes because FLWs genuinely listen and offer full attention and acceptance. Housing First workers know **it is all about connecting**; meeting people where they are, not where we think they should be. FLWs don't interpret, diagnose or make quick assumptions. They observe, so the service user can show who he/she really is, which gives the FLW the chance to provide individually-tailored support. That way, the options are back where they belong – with the person using the service. A Housing First FLW enables the service user to dictate the agenda and forget about their own. The instrumental questions are: how do you want to live your life? And what kind of support do you need to do so? They even decide *what* support will be accepted, *who* from and *when*.

Housing First proposes that it is not up to the professionals to decide how people should behave and live their lives. Hierarchical relationships are therefore frowned upon. There is no control, there are no sanctions. In doing so, the focus shifts **from helping to learning together**. People using Housing First services are regarded as capable and responsible human beings and the Housing First FLW will not take on the role of advisor or troubleshooter unsolicited.

### **Human rights approach**

The Housing First FLW realizes the role of **human rights** in their work. An FLW doesn't expect gratitude from a service user; they acknowledge that people have a right to housing, care, participation and self-determination. And moreover, that human rights are not just something to fight for in obscure faraway countries but in the Netherlands as well, on a daily basis. Promoting social justice has been one of the most important reasons to establish "social work" some 100 years ago. In doing so as an FLW, not only do you contribute to a service user's personal life, but also to the improvement of society as a whole.

And that is a **complex task**. On the one hand you are working from an ideology whilst on the other hand dealing with a predominantly conflicting reality. That however creates the talent to connect the service user's life with the systemic world of organizations, corporations and councils. The Housing First professional detects where practical improvements are needed and can, together with vulnerable citizens, and as their advocate, address those issues to the other partners in the chain.

This reveals the slightly activist aspect of Housing First, whilst acknowledging that investing in the professional relationship with all stakeholders is equally important as investing in the relationship with the consumer.

### **Warm and sincere communication**

The mutual communication is respectful, warm and compassionate. A Housing First FLW can certainly be assertive because as in every good relationship, the communication is sincere. But never compelling. When a Housing First professional talks, it is constructive and direct. No longer do they use the problem-based jargon originally used by social workers, which focuses on what people don't want, on problems, on risks, failures and impossible goals. A Housing First FLW knows the power of **solution-based phrasings**, which focus on the future one wishes for oneself, on the things they do want to do, on exceptions, on strong points and on resources, possibilities and success. This may result in the Housing First FLW being considered a nuisance by other stakeholders.

Working according to the Housing First method offers many dilemmas. The FLW is not alone in solving them; they are shared with colleagues. But they are also shared with the service user. We don't merely talk *about* the people using our services, we always talk *with* them as well. When things are not going according to plan, the dilemmas and deliberations are shared with the service user and FLW and service user evaluate the situation constructively and name the obstacles ahead that prevent an end of the person's homelessness. This will help the person to recognize their own behavioral patterns that stand in their way and to subsequently commit to the necessary help. To do this properly, the team needs a strong focus on reflection. There needs to be a working environment in which professionals dare to look at themselves and the situation.

Within Housing First there is the assumption that people have good reasons to do what they do. Every type of behaviour is the best solution for something. The FLW knows that there is often an unrecognized underlying trauma and that knowledge mellows the mood, giving the FLW a more curious mindset, to **observe, listen and wonder**.

### **Doing what works**

The Housing First FLW is pragmatic; testing different options and doing the things that work. If not this way, than that way, always believing there is an alternative. And showing a considerable amount of **flexibility and creativity** in the process. Thinking outside of the box, being a bit rebellious when needed. A Housing First FLW tries to find the limits of the system and stretch them somewhat. Within Housing First you don't look at 'who is supposed to do it' but at 'what is needed to get the job done'. If this means that when a service user prefers another professional to deal with a specific need, we comply and switch. We have also discarded the notion that we can predict a person's progress; a Housing First FLW has a tolerance for uncertainty. There is a deeply felt notion that there is no such thing as absolute truth in the world; today's truth is tomorrow's utter nonsense. The Housing First FLW is not invested in diagnoses, they are interested in human beings, their lives and how they view the world.

Equally important is the FLW's ability to notice when a consumer is able to keep himself going with a less intensive regime or even better, when they can live independently without needing any support at all.

Until that day, the Housing First Front Line Worker will be there even when there are no problems to solve. Being there, for better and for worse, not just in times of trouble. Being there when it counts, as often and as long as needed.

### **Sources**

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