

# Housing Works’ Onboarding Orientation for Case Managers

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## *Background*

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In supportive housing settings, case managers must be prepared to assist the most vulnerable unhoused clients in crisis management, resource coordination, goal setting, and other related skills. Individuals entering supportive housing programs are often at a high risk of returning to homelessness, making consistent, skilled, and trauma-informed case management essential. While case management draws on defined technical skill sets, including conducting assessments, navigating complex housing regulations, and proficiency in case management software, it also requires immense interpersonal work, mission-oriented service, and emotional labor that goes far beyond any service plan.

Thus, the “Housing First” model was developed in 1992, aimed at advancing the principle that housing is a basic and universal right to be granted first, regardless of an individual's “housing readiness”, which refers to their ability to quickly assimilate into the norms of a permanent supportive housing system.

Case workers who understand the Housing First model, receive thorough training and are adequately resourced, are more likely to succeed. A well-thought-out onboarding checklist, centered on Housing First principles, includes courses on behavioral health, personal and professional boundaries, burnout prevention, trauma-informed care and de-escalation, harm

reduction, crisis navigation, cultural competency, domestic violence intervention, overdose prevention, and motivational interviewing.<sup>1</sup> Onboarding and post-orientation employee retention are also vital to consistent care, especially for at-risk clients who rely on dependable providers to prevent re-entry into homelessness. Retaining high-performing staff is also an integral step to creating a culture of successful service provision. The homeless services agency Housing Works LA has made strides in developing this unique approach to case manager onboarding to pursue these goals.

## ***Skill Building***

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Housing Works' onboarding model expands beyond standard technical training, pairing introductory training with an in-person orientation to prepare case managers to navigate the interpersonal and structural demands of permanent supportive housing. Thanks to funding from LA Care, the centerpiece of their onboarding is a two-week, in-person orientation. This orientation goes beyond training case managers on systems and processes - around half of the orientation focuses on self-care, trauma-informed work, and ways to handle stress and secondary trauma. These sessions during the orientation are designed to help staff develop a sense of resilience that will be expected from high-intensity service work and to sustain long-term engagement with participants. Wellness activities, like meditation or yoga, help staff reinforce emotional grounding.

Housing Works leadership designed this orientation to train two of the most common archetypes of new employees: 1) people who are completely new to this kind of work and 2) people who previously worked at other agencies and might be discouraged or cautious based on challenging past experiences. Housing Works' process has shown clear benefits, with pre- and post-orientation assessments showing 30% improvement in self-care knowledge and practices. Another key goal of this orientation is to strengthen understanding and buy-in for Housing Works' values and guiding principles. During the two-week orientation, new staff also meet with executive leadership to learn about the organization's history, values, and culture. This face-to-face time with leaders, such as the Director and CFO, is essential for helping new staff understand Housing Works' deep commitment to its values and for demonstrating that those values are upheld from the highest office to the frontline.

The Housing Works onboarding model differs from the common training approaches used by many other supportive housing entities. Most agencies use large, generalized training, often

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<sup>1</sup> Homeless Health Care Los Angeles. (2025). Request a Training Catalog. <https://www.hhcla.org/request-a-training-catalogorientation-are-designed-to-help-staff-develop-a-sense-of-resilience-that-is-expected-in>

designed by external training organizations that are not aligned with their organizational values. Housing Works developed its own approach after observing rapid growth in both areas of operation and in case management caseloads. In the past, new staff could learn through one-on-one shadowing, but this proved unrealistic at scale. Staff did not have enough time to train new hires individually, and relying on shadowing would not provide enough hands-on experience. This pushed leadership to create a structured orientation that could provide a similar level of hands-on support, but in a format that could train larger groups of new hires. Housing Works found that even new employees with experience in service provision were often underprepared for the deep and demanding work of intensive case management in PSH. The organization has found that the orientation is effective at providing a foundation of knowledge and ability across all incoming staff.

### ***Fostering Supportive and Successful Culture***

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Housing Works’s leadership also hoped that this two-week orientation could help address one of the largest challenges faced by homeless service providers: staff turnover. Turnover rates nationally have risen as high as 79% in 2024, due to high levels of burnout, emotional fatigue caused by large caseloads, and stressful work environments, often compounded by a lack of support.<sup>2</sup> Case manager turnover can cost organizations up to \$24,000 per year. Fostering a values-oriented and collaborative culture and working environment is essential to combating these threats to staff retention and wellbeing. Housing Works’ orientation provides an early demonstration of the organization’s commitment to treating staff with the same care and positivity expected in client-facing work. In addition to instilling a culture of respect and holistic well-being, the orientation also pushes case managers to embrace productive discomfort. Learning often requires being uncomfortable, and this is particularly true in PSH environments where clients and staff alike are pushing themselves to set and achieve goals that transform lives. Leadership describes this place of productive discomfort and growth as the place “where the magic happens.”

While these emotional intelligence and culture-building exercises have been refined over the history of the in-person orientation, sometimes these learnings do not immediately “stick” for new staff. This is not abnormal for large onboarding training, but Housing Works management notes that the two-week orientation makes it easier to identify staff who may be struggling to understand and implement what they have learned. This makes it easier to provide additional hands-on support and on-the-job mentoring for staff who may need it.

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<sup>2</sup> Shollack, C. (2025). The Caregiver Crisis: How Case Managers Can Prepare Families for High Turnover. Case Management Society of America. <http://cmsa.org/the-caregiver-crisis-how-case-managers-can-prepare-families-for-high-turnover-in-home-care/>