The Housing First Initiative (HFI) serves people who experience chronic, long-term homelessness in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, where over 5,600 people live in homelessness each year. These individuals and families – 19 percent of whom are military veterans – have cycled in and out of homelessness for years and have numerous challenges, such as severe physical and mental issues and addiction.

HFI brings together housing and human services providers, advocates for the homeless, public sector systems and the philanthropic community, drawing on local and national expertise. Using Section 4 resources, Enterprise helped lead, coordinate and evaluate the initiative by assembling financial resources, cultivating support from local leaders and providing technical consultation and capacity building assistance.

HFI has built or rehabilitated over 500 apartments for people with histories of long-term homelessness and disabilities. The results are impressive. Most residents remain housed for years, and only two percent return to homelessness. Chronic homelessness has dropped 74 percent since the first HFI development opened in 2006.

One of the keys to HFI’s success is its strong partnership with FrontLine Service, formerly Mental Health Services, Inc. FrontLine Service provides mental health and supportive services for more than 15,000 adults and children each year. Frontline’s homeless assistance programs provide assertive outreach, homeless prevention and rapid rehousing, emergency shelter, transitional housing, residential programming, case management, psychiatric services, and alcohol and other drug programming for individuals with co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorders.

Section 4 is the only federal program that is exclusively focused on increasing the effectiveness of these organizations. Through grants, loans, training and guidance, Section 4 provides local organizations with the staffing, program development and financial resources to maximize the impact of the services they provide and ensure the long-term sustainability of their investments.

With Section 4, organizations develop core skills that strengthen their ability to implement HUD programs, raise capital for community development and affordable housing, coordinate on cross-programmatic, place-based approaches, and facilitate knowledge sharing.
Local challenge

FrontLine has been successful at obtaining funding to continue to provide services to HFI, but the future is uncertain. The HUD Continuum of Care program – the major source of funding – has fewer dollars available for new projects. Yet, at the same time, the Affordable Care Act allows FrontLine to fund services in Housing First sites through Medicaid. There is considerable emphasis in the Affordable Care Act on the provision of integrated primary and behavioral health care, including the development of Health Homes. With the expansion of Medicaid eligibility, Health Homes offer greater flexibility in services eligible for reimbursement and incentivized rates to service providers.

Meeting the Health Homes requirements set by the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services and the Ohio Department of Mental Health would require a significant shift in care models and much greater capacity. The benefits, though, could be greater health and stability for HFI residents and an ability to produce more units by making greater use of Medicaid reimbursement.

How Section 4 funds were used

Enterprise recognized the potential of the changes in health care under the Affordable Care Act and solicited innovative proposals to connect health care to housing. FrontLine Service responded to this request for proposals and was awarded $48,000 to finalize the development of a medical home model to integrate primary health and behavioral healthcare services for formerly homeless people being served by HFI in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. These resources have been used to engage the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare – national experts in integrated care – to undertake the following:

- Assess readiness and capacity to undertake Health Homes implementation.
- Design a work plan for Health Homes implementation.
- Create organizational policies and procedure for Health Homes implementation.

For more information about this project, please contact: Mark McDermott, 216.631.0280 x4117, mmcdermott@enterprisecommunity.org.

For more information about the Section 4 program, please contact: Sarah Mickelson, 202.649.3903, smickelson@enterprisecommunity.org.

How Section 4 funds enhanced capacity of organization

Through this work, FrontLine staff have gained a greater understanding of the Affordable Care Act, resulting in increased participation in advocacy efforts at the state level to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable citizens remain a priority. This equipped FrontLine to hit the ground running when Ohio expanded Medicaid in 2014, which has resulted in increased revenues for HFI services. Within the housing community, this project is advancing the goals of HFI and the homeless continuum of care. The development and implementation of a medical home model that is replicable would enhance housing providers’ capacity to meet the behavioral and primary health care needs of all clients residing in permanent supportive housing.

Already, Section 4 has resulted in significant capacity improvements that would not have been possible otherwise. This investment helped:

- Create an economic model that will allow supportive housing and homelessness service providers to receive greater reimbursement for their services.
- Purchase an Electronic Medical Record to integrate and improve quality of care for formerly chronic homeless people.
- Strengthen partnership with Care Alliance. Without a strong primary care provider, FrontLine would not be able to meet Health Homes health indicators and outcomes.
- Provide staff trainings on care management, resulting in HFI residents being better able to manage their chronic and serious health conditions.
- Implement an integrated Mobile Health Clinic with Care Alliance that serves HFI residents.