

# Exploring Harm Reduction Housing in the Greater Boston Area: A Comprehensive Overview

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## Background

- Since 2014, Boston has grappled with significant challenges related to the visibility of substance use and homelessness.
- The city created six harm reduction housing (HRH) locations, which operate under a low threshold, housing-first model where sobriety is not a barrier to entry and harm reduction supplies and services are co-located.
- Since their inception, HRH sites have worked to swiftly re-house people who use drugs (PWUD) experiencing homelessness.

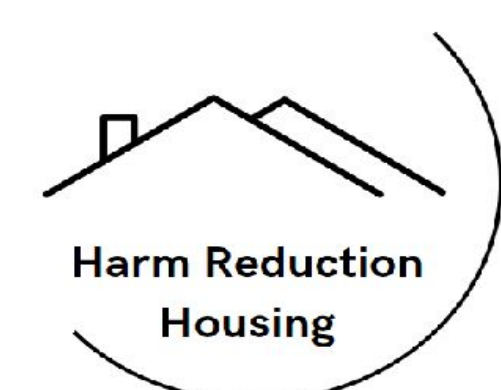
## Learning Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Identify essential components of HRH sites which support the well-being of PWUD
2. Highlight the importance of HRH models in addressing co-occurring risks and concerns of substance use and homelessness.

*“It is really awesome to see people coming in off the streets and just like that emergent, always trying to survive, a little bit of that is taken off their shoulders and they can kind of settle in and their personalities start to come out a little more because you're not defending for your life all the time. Because you have housing, you have stability you have food. And to see them move on and be housed is really incredible. Especially knowing how long some of these folks have been out on the street”*

- HRH Staff (Shattuck Cottages)



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## Results

- Sites operated a range of housing models, each of which iterated and innovated on services and policies based on harm reduction principles.
- Core programmatic components of HRH aimed to support the evolving needs of PWUD as described by staff and residents included:
  - Readily available harm reduction supplies and services
  - Co-located medical care
  - Access to medications for opioid use disorder
  - Overdose prevention protocols
  - Recovery oriented support systems
  - Nuanced security and safety policies
- Some sites struggled to align harm reduction practices with staff experiences and expectations
- Few involved peers directly in HRH operations.

*“But one thing that I don't really hear too many people talking about is like the need for more permanent supportive housing like there are some people in here that would be best served, staying in a model like this, rather than living independently or living in a shelter ... So I think, you know, there's a need for like permanent supportive housing, and more intensive resources.”*

- HRH Staff (Roundhouse)

*“All of our guests can pick up a kit, either from our counselors or downstairs when they would like to use and go outside. So, it has syringes, cookers, alcohol wipes, all of those, you know, a safe use kit. Just consistently low barriers and expectations to try and meet our guys where they're at.”*

- HRH Staff (Friend's Floor)



HRH Site: Shattuck Cottages (Source: GBH News)

Together for Hope Conference

## Methods

This research is the result of formative work that occurred as part of two rapid assessment studies conducted in 2021 and 2022 in the Mass and Cass area.

- In our study, we examined HRH sites through:

- Ethnographic observations
- Photographs
- Key informant interviews

- We used these data to identify and classify unique characteristics of each site
- We developed a comprehensive inventory of core HRH elements, which assesses residents' awareness and perceived utility of harm reduction services and supports at each site.

## Conclusions

- Cataloging the variety of HRH components is essential to understand the supports needed to safely provide housing for PWUD, while also addressing the challenges associated with homelessness.
- Staffing challenges underscore the need for harm reduction workforce investment.
- Future studies will examine the ongoing implementation of HRH to identify best practices across the HRH sites and to estimate the components of HRH that are most salient to residents.

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