Implementation of a health department-led transitional housing program for people with HIV experiencing housing instability: mixed-methods findings from Arms Around You

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Intro: An estimated 4,000 people with HIV (PWH) in Philadelphia experience housing instability, a driver of poor HIV outcomes. In 6/2024, the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) launched Arms Around You (AAY), a Housing First transitional housing program providing housing counseling, housing medical case management (MCM), and rent support for up to 48 months for PWH. We report a mixed-methods implementation evaluation of AAY's first two years guided by CFIR and Proctor's implementation outcomes.

Methods: We triangulated six sources: interviews with referring MCMs (application and referral experience); implementing staff (delivery, fidelity, and sustainability); and housed participants (entry and service experience), via CFIR-guided thematic analysis; a waitlist survey quantifying demographic and housing-instability characteristics; quality process committee (QPC) meeting records; and PDPH program data.

Results: From 2/2025-8/2026, we interviewed referring MCMs (n=18, six agencies), implementing staff (n=7, two agencies), and housed participants (n=10); surveyed waitlist applicants; (n=45) and reviewed three QPC meetings. Overall, 265 PWH applied, 227 were eligible (75% Black, 58% sheltered/unsheltered, median 5 months in current housing, 42% never having held a lease), 83 were referred for housing (median 84 days from approval to lease), and 144 remained waitlisted. Surveyed waitlist applicants (median age 45) reported deep poverty (78% below poverty level among those reporting income). All groups reported high acceptability: staff and participants described gains in employment, medication adherence, and stability, crediting the wraparound model. However, a funding shortfall cancelled scale-up, forced retroactive rent-cap renegotiations, delayed furnishings, and eroded trust alongside staff turnover; monthly applications fell from a 2025 peak of 37 to ≤6 after December 2025. QPC records documented 45 operational issues; 20 (44%) had mitigation plans. Referral experiences varied: MCM concerns arose from eligibility confusion and mandatory case-management transfers; participants described rapid entry driven by their MCM. Housing First fidelity drifted under strain: some staff independently initiated client screening and conditional-housing requirements absent from program design.

Conclusion: A “big push” municipal housing program for PWH was implementable and highly valued, underscoring the importance of such programs, but financing instability reshaped delivery within two years. Findings highlight the need for stable multi-year financing, workforce protection, referral-pathway attention, and client support to preserve fidelity and trust under strain.