

BERKS COUNTY MH/MR PROGRAM

HOUSING PROGRAMS SUMMARY & OPERATIONS UPDATE

Administered by the Berks County MH/MR Program and Service Access & Management, Inc.



As part of our overall commitment to serving the citizens of Berks County, The Berks County MH/MR Program and SAM, Inc. operate four (4) separate and distinct programs which can assist people to find safe, decent and affordable housing.

These programs are referred to as “Tenant-Based Rental Assistance.” The term “Tenant-Based Rental Assistance” (or “TBRA,” also sometimes referred to as “CRA” for “Continued Rental Assistance”) always means that individuals and/or families are residing in apartments for which they hold the lease – the individual and/or family is the responsible lease-holder, obligated to uphold all the terms and conditions of the lease.

In all TBRA programs, some sort of funding source is paying a portion of the rent directly to the landlord for a specific period of time, with the individual and/or family being responsible for the remaining portion of the rent. Like all such programs, the TBRA programs operated by Berks County MH/MR and SAM, Inc. use HUD income guidelines to both determine who is eligible to receive assistance, as well as to factor the amount of assistance received by each individual/family participant/unit.

The Berks County MH/MR Program and SAM, Inc. are just two (2) of several organizations in Berks County which operate TBRA programs.

The following summarizes each of the four (4) specific programs and includes a brief operational update on each. They are listed in the order of program implementation beginning with the longest-running program through to the present.

PROGRAM: The Fast Track Program

- **What is the history of this program?** SAM, Inc., upon incorporating as a private non-profit in July 1997, applied for funding to operate a TBRA program through the Federal HOME Program.
- **How is it funded?** Federal HOME Program
- **What TBRA does the program provide?** Security Deposits and First Month's Rent Payments – up to a total of \$425.00 for each, and Continuing Rental Assistance (CRA) for up to a total of 11 months (for a total period of assistance of 12 months overall).
- **How is the TBRA calculated?** HUD income guidelines are used (the program must serve individuals who are at, or below, 50% of area median income) and a HUD calculation is used to determine the CRA.
- **Who is eligible?** Individuals who are either eligible and involved in SAM, Inc. services, or who have a family member (for example, a child) who is eligible and involved in SAM, Inc. services. The program is available to all c'mgt units within SAM, Inc.
- **How is a person referred?** Through SAM, Inc. case management
- **Program Update:** The Fast Track Program has been refunded for each of the past twelve (12) years. Currently, the program is wrapping up its funding cycle for the current year. At this time, it is no longer open to accept new referrals as all the funding has been exhausted. SAM, Inc. will reapply for further HOME funding when the grant application process is re-opened by the federal government. Over its twelve (12) years of operation, The Fast Track Program has served well over 500 individuals and family units! When first begun, the program served mainly individuals, but in the proceeding years the growing financial and housing burdens of families became increasingly apparent as the program saw a noticeable rise in the number of family units being served, to where, at present, the ratio is about even between individuals and families.

PROGRAM: Shelter + Care

- **What is the history of this program?** The Berks County MH/MR Program and the Reading Housing Authority coordinated in writing a grant to HUD to develop and administer a Shelter+Care Program. This is the first program of its type in Berks County. It began operations in October 2007. In a Shelter+Care Program, a participant receives a Housing Choice Voucher (formally known as a Section 8 Voucher) directly from the Reading Housing Authority; then, the housing dollars being expended by the Reading Housing Authority must be matched in kind by “care” dollars administered and expended by a local service agency. SAM, Inc., on behalf of the Berks County MH/MR Program, works with the Reading Housing Authority to administer/forecast/ensure the “+ Care” dollar match aspect of this program. Participants, therefore, in this program must be willing to engage in continued c'mgt and active treatment services.
- **How is it funded?** HUD
- **What TBRA does the program provide?** The funding received from HUD is for twenty-four (24) one-bedroom units. Each participant receives a Housing

- Choice Voucher directly from the Reading Housing Authority. SAM, Inc. can assist with a Security Deposit, if needed, through one of its own TBRA programs.
- **How is the TBRA calculated?** HUD income guidelines are used and a HUD calculation is used to determine the Housing Choice Voucher assistance. This is done by the Reading Housing Authority.
 - **Who is eligible?** Individuals with SMI and/or D&A who meet the HUD definition of Chronic Homelessness. This definition is very strict and narrow. Individuals are defined as being chronically homeless if (and only if) documentation exists to support that the individual has either been – continually homeless for at least a year or more, or if there have been four (4) or more episodes of homelessness within the past three (3) years. Homelessness is narrowly defined as either being on the street or at a shelter, or living somewhere not meant for human habitation (such as a car). HUD does not consider “couch hopping” (as an example) to be included in the definition of chronic homelessness. For individuals leaving an institutional setting (such as a prison or hospital) the documentation must exist to support the chronic homelessness status *prior to admission* to the institution in order to qualify to apply for this program. HUD does not consider the person to meet the category of eligibility to apply if the discharge is to a homeless status, but the homelessness did not exist prior to admission. Individuals involved in c’gmt services through either SAM, Inc., Milestones or TASC may apply to this program.
 - **How is a person referred?** Application packets are available through SAM, Inc.
 - **Program Update:** To date, the program has served ten (10) individuals. Two (2) of these individuals have left the program (against advice). Three (3) new individuals are about to begin receiving assistance, which brings the total served to thirteen (13), or just about half of the total for the funding received. There have been, so far, a total of thirty-seven (37) individuals referred to the program. Not counting the thirteen (13) accepted into the program, of the remaining twenty-four (24) applications, several of these did not meet criteria (for various reasons), several chose other housing options and the remainder chose to not continue with their application. Quite honestly, finding individuals who meet the chronic homeless definition (as well as the documentation to support it) has been a struggle. In order to address this issue, SAM, Inc., TASC, the Reading Housing Authority, Opportunity House and the Hope Rescue Mission (a new and encouraging development with the recent change of administration there) now meet regularly to discuss possible referrals, arrange intake appointments and coordinate the referral process in an effort to identify and refer eligible candidates for the program. This has been a very worthwhile endeavor and has resulted in an increase in referrals over the past three (3) months, in particular. SAM, Inc. has ensured, through documentation, authorization and coordination with CCBH that the housing dollars expended by the Reading Housing Authority are matched by care dollars, and to date, the care dollars have exceeded the housing dollars. As an additional note, the Reading Housing Authority and SAM, Inc. just completed a HUD audit of the program, which was held over two (2) days in August. The HUD auditor was extremely impressed with the files, record keeping and documentation of both the Reading Housing Authority and SAM, Inc. – even

going so far as to state that the organization apparent within both agencies is “unusual.” The formal/final report of the audit will be received from HUD within thirty (30) days of the audit – and so expected sometime in mid to late September.

PROGRAM: HealthChoices Reinvestment Housing Plan

- **What is the history of this program?** The Berks County MH/MR Program was required to submit to OMHSAS a County Housing Plan. The plan was formally approved by OMHSAS in July 2008. Various policies and procedures, as well as minor revisions to the plan, were worked on and negotiated with OMHSAS in the months following July 2008, with the first consumers beginning to receive TBRA in April 2009. SAM, Inc. administers the day-to-day operations of this program on behalf of the Berks County MH/MR Program.
 - **How is it funded?** HealthChoices Reinvestment Dollars
 - **What TBRA does the program provide?** Security Deposit and First Month’s Rent payments – up to the entire amount for each – and a CRA payment for up to a total of twenty-three (23) months – for an overall period of assistance of two (2) years. (All participating individuals/families are initially set-up with one (1) year of assistance, with re-evaluation of need determined for the second year.) The program can also assist with utility hook-up/security deposit payments – as well as assistance with arrear payments - for electric and/or gas.
- The Berks County MH/MR Housing Plan also incorporates other aspects of housing assistance in addition to TBRA. These include:
- ✓ Capital Funding – The Berks County MH/MR Program is working with the Berks County Community Development Office in identifying and developing capital projects that will increase the availability of decent, safe and affordable housing for mental health consumers. The Berks County Community Development Office has been a valuable resource and asset for this part of the plan.
 - ✓ Master Leasing – This aspect of the plan will provide for a set-aside of a certain number of units, leased by either SAM, Inc. or a provider entity, and then sub-leased by individual consumers/families. Again, this is meant to increase the availability of safe, decent and affordable housing and will also be a tool in providing for a capacity to meet immediate/emergency housing needs.
 - ✓ Clearinghouse – This aspect of the plan looks at some broader issues of housing management within the Berks County community. For example – developing tenant/landlord trainings and landlord/apartment referral lists for consumers, to name just two (2) examples. On behalf of the Berks County MH/MR Program, SAM, Inc. is a member of the Berks County Homeless Coalition. The Homeless Coalition recently incorporated itself as a private non-profit and is seen by HUD as the local entity to oversee all local housing assistance programs. As such, the Homeless Coalition is currently working with all member agencies to develop a landlord/tenant training curriculum, budget counseling services for anyone in Berks

County receiving TBRA, the ability for the coalition to undertake apartment and landlord inspections, and a viable and usable landlord/apartment referral listing – one which is readily available, updated regularly and able to address immediate/emergency housing needs. SAM, Inc. is working within the capacity of its membership in the Berks County Homeless Coalition to address, develop and implement the Clearinghouse aspects of the Housing Plan.

- **How is the TBRA calculated?** HUD income guidelines are used to determine eligibility. CRA is based upon the consumer paying 30% of his/her income toward the rent. The program pays the remainder. Rents must be at or below Fair Market, as defined by HUD for the Reading/Berks County area.
- **Who is eligible?** Any Medicaid eligible, HealthChoices enrolled adult (18 years and older) receiving HealthChoices behavioral health services in Berks County. The individual must have a diagnosis of a SMI and/or be involved in the D/A system. The HealthChoices enrolled adult must be the individual named on the lease and may be a part of a family unit.
- **How is a person referred?** Application packets available through SAM, Inc. **Program Update:** The focus here will be on the TBRA aspect of the Housing Plan. To date, the program is serving thirty-five (35) individual/family units, with an additional forty-nine (49) individual/family units currently accepted into the program and in the apartment search/set-up/inspection phase. 208 additional applications are currently being processed and prioritized. Due to this large number of applications requiring processing and the desire to most effectively expend the available funding over the five (5) total years of the Housing Plan, the decision was made to temporarily close the TBRA aspect of the Housing Plan to new applications, effective August 24th, 2009. The priority now is to assist the forty-nine accepted individuals into their housing as quickly as possible and to prioritize the new 208 applications according to need and priority category in the Housing Plan. The Group Orientation Process by which accepted individuals/families for TBRA are required to attend a training session at SAM, Inc. to learn “next steps” as they prepare for their apartment search has been very effective. Conversely, however, the initial procedure developed with the Berks County Homeless Coalition to check potential landlords and properties through MidPenn Legal Services and the City of Reading Codes Department took far too long from the point of the consumer finding a potential unit to the point of receiving the “all clear” back from the check. In several cases, consumers lost potential apartments due to the time lag and had to renew their search. SAM, Inc. addressed this concern with the Homeless Coalition and is currently an active participant addressing this specific issue. There is a definite need to verify “red-flag” status with potential landlords and units. SAM, Inc. and the Homeless Coalition wish to move forward with developing a workable procedure with MidPenn Legal and City Codes to address such issues. Both MidPenn Legal and City Codes are represented on the Homeless Coalition. The Coalition’s desire to look at a viable option within the coalition itself to check potential landlords and properties, and to do required inspections, is being looked at as a very practical and feasible solution to this issue. SAM, Inc. is also addressing how to best

monitor participants who are receiving TBRA but who do not have active c'mgt services. This has been problematic in a few cases and discussions are being held with the Berks County MH/MR Program on how to best address these scenarios.

PROGRAM: Homelessness Prevention Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP)

- **What is the history of this program?** It's brand-new! Both the City of Reading and Berks County each received federal stimulus money through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Berks County (Berks County Commissioners) has divided the county stimulus dollars between SAM, Inc. and the Berks County Prison Society/Berks Connections. The City of Reading is working with Opportunity House in utilization of their stimulus dollars. SAM, Inc. and the BCPS/BC are working with the Berks County Community Development Office to incorporate their shares of the stimulus dollars – known as “HPRP” to increase (in the case of the BCPS/BC – begin!) their TBRA programs. HPRP became effective/operational on September 1st, 2009, although all the agencies are currently awaiting their contractual paperwork in order to begin operations.
- **How is it funded?** Federal stimulus dollars, through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act – the TBRA aspect of the program is called the Homelessness Prevention Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP).
- **What TBRA does the program provide?** Security Deposit and First Month's Rent payments – up to the entire amount for each – and a CRA payment for up to a total of seventeen (17) months – for an overall period of assistance of eighteen (18) months. The program can also help with rent arrears, although the total amount of assistance can never, in any circumstance, exceed the eighteen (18) month total. The program can also assist with utility hook-up/security deposit payments, assistance with arrear payments and on-going utility monthly payments for utility services (excluding telephone and cable) for the length of time of TBRA. New aspects include help with moving costs, storage costs and hotel/motel vouchers.
- **How is the TBRA calculated?** HUD income guidelines will again be used to determine eligibility. CRA is based upon the consumer paying 30% of his/her income toward the rent. The program pays the remainder. Rents must be at or below Fair Market, as defined by HUD for the Reading/Berks County area and must meet a Rent Reasonableness Standard Test as developed and monitored by HUD. Both SAM, Inc. and the BCPS/BC have already been trained in this tool.
- **Who is eligible?** Individuals who are either eligible or involved in SAM, Inc. services, or who have a family member (for example, a child) who is eligible and involved in SAM, Inc. services. The program is available to all c'mgt units within SAM, Inc. SAM, Inc. and the BCPS/BC are meeting to develop P&P around the special needs presented by the forensic population and the coordination of services/funding through HPRP for “shared” consumers between the two (2) agencies.
- **How is a person referred?** Through SAM, Inc. case management

- **Program Update:** SAM, Inc. is currently awaiting its contractual paperwork from Berks County. In the meantime, meetings are being held with the Berks County Community Development Office, BCPS/BC, Opportunity House and the Berks County Homeless Coalition to develop and implement all requirements of HPRP. It should be emphasized that aspects of this program are brand-new and have never been encountered before by any local agency participating in TBRA programs. We are all in a “learning mode” with HPRP right now. SAM, Inc. will operate this program in a manner very similar to the Fast Track Program. We are encouraged to once again have the ability to serve all consumers within SAM, Inc. with a TBRA program. Individuals/families served within the Childrens’ Unit of SAM, Inc. and the Mental Retardation c’ mgt Unit have really felt the loss of the Fast Track Program. They will now be able to once again refer and participate in TBRA resources. Additionally, the forensic population will now have two (2) avenues of TBRA – those presented through their inclusion as a priority category within the HealthChoices Reinvestment Housing Plan and now through HPRP.