

HOMELESSNESS TO HOUSING

Beyond Shelter



The Challenge

Families with children now represent 40 percent of the homeless population nationwide, and their numbers continue to grow at an alarming rate. Homeless single mothers often suffer from maternal distress and have poor coping and parenting skills. Their children also suffer from severe emotional, social, developmental, educational, and health problems as a result of being homeless. Public and private solutions to homelessness have historically focused on providing homeless families with emergency shelter and/or transitional housing, which alone neither end homelessness nor prevent a recurrence of homelessness for a significant segment of the homeless population. (Definitions of emergency shelter include stays of up to 60 days, with transitional housing providing stays of 61 days to two years.) While such programs provide families with children with vital access to services, they often fail to address the long-term needs of families in crisis. They also fail to address the lack of affordable housing. In addition, these programs rarely help families to overcome the barriers they face in accessing permanent housing (i.e., poor credit, eviction histories, unemployment, lack of move-in-funds). These factors often contribute to a cycle of homelessness for families, many of whom become chronically homeless.

As described by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, "Most families become homeless because they are having a housing crisis. Their primary, immediate need is for housing. Certainly they are likely to have other needs for services and to increase their incomes. However, these needs are best met once the family is in permanent housing, not while they are temporarily housed in shelter or transitional housing."¹

Families with children now represent 40 percent of the homeless population nationwide, and their numbers continue to grow at an alarming rate.

By Tanya Tull of Beyond Shelter and Madeleine Stoner of the University of Southern California



The Invention

The Housing First approach to ending family homelessness helps homeless families relocate to permanent rental housing as quickly as possible, with the provision of the services traditionally provided in transitional housing provided instead after the family has moved into their own housing.



The Solution: Getting the Idea to Fly

The program methodology presents an alternative to the existing homeless services system for families, which tends to focus on the provision of emergency shelter and transitional housing. Perhaps more importantly, it provides a systematic, direct means for homeless families to return to independent living and stability in the community, while also providing access to longer-term support and interventions for high-risk and dysfunctional homeless families after they are relocated to permanent housing.

The Housing First approach consists of the following key components:

- **Crisis intervention and short-term stabilization**—These are often provided by the existing system of emergency shelters and transitional housing.
- **In-depth needs assessments**—Screening and needs assessments help identify family strengths and weaknesses, including those of children. Goals and objectives are then developed to build upon the strengths and meet the needs of all family members. The resulting “family plan” becomes the basis for both short-term and longer-term case management support.
- **Relocation to permanent housing**—Next, housing specialists (or housing relocation staff) assist homeless families in accessing permanent, affordable housing, including obtaining move-in funds and rental subsidies. Housing specialists also help negotiate leases with landlords on behalf of families who have multiple barriers to obtaining housing, such as poor credit, eviction histories, and lack of employment, and help to overcome discrimination based on ethnicity, income source, gender, and family make-up.
- **Home-based case management**—Once families are in their own rental housing, case managers focus on addressing their immediate and long-



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term needs, providing some direct social services support during a transitional period of time, but also connecting families to neighborhood and community resources and services, as needed.

Support services provided to families once they are relocated to permanent housing may include, but are not limited to, the following: assistance in obtaining furnishings, household management, money management, assistance in enrolling children in school and obtaining childcare, referrals for employment and/or training, tenant-landlord mediation, and parenting education and counseling. Families, including those with special needs, are connected to mainstream programs and community resources. This is particularly important for those in which an adult is in recovery from substance abuse addictions or families with histories of

ABOUT HOUSING FIRST

In 1988, the Housing First program developed by Beyond Shelter in Los Angeles, California, introduced a new response to the problem of family homelessness. Stressing the return of homeless families to permanent housing as quickly as possible, including those who are vulnerable and at risk, the focus is on helping families not only back into housing, but also back into communities. Beyond Shelter's Los Angeles program is set up to serve a large, metropolitan city. More than 60 agencies—shelters, transitional housing programs, residential drug treatment programs, domestic violence programs, and social service agencies—refer homeless families to Beyond Shelter for the “next step,” after they have provided initial emergency or interim services. Upon enrollment, families are: (1) assisted in moving into permanent, rental housing in residential neighborhoods, and (2) provided case management support for six months to one year after the move to help them rebuild their lives. To access affordable housing, Beyond Shelter maintains close working relationships with private sector property managers and local housing authorities. The fact that there exists a support system for their tenants motivates landlords to rent to families currently homeless. The Housing First methodology has been adapted throughout the country.

domestic violence or child maltreatment. Other families are able to function independently with very little support after the program assists them through the difficult first few months.

Prior to developing a Housing First program, it is vital to develop an in-depth knowledge of the homeless services system in the community; the approximate numbers of homeless families entering the system each year; root causes of their homelessness; socioeconomic indicators; the availability of affordable and/or subsidized housing in the community; and the availability and location of existing community-based resources and services.

A Housing First approach can be adopted by one agency or it can be accomplished through the collaboration of agencies, each providing specialized services. As described by the Housing First Network of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in order to implement the Housing First approach communities need to assess their existing resources.²

The questions that need to be evaluated in each community are:

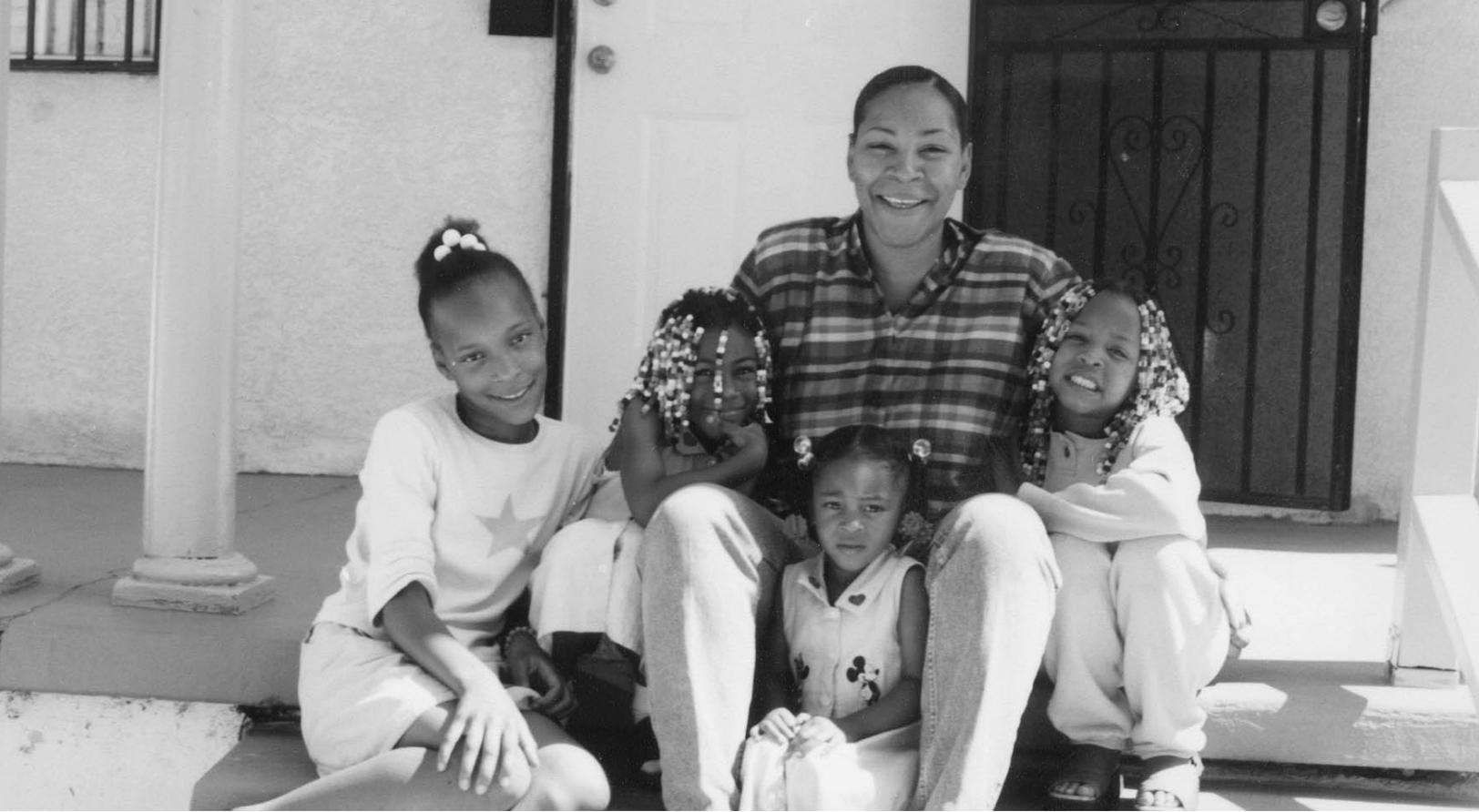
1. What criteria should be used to determine which homeless families are ready for Housing First services?

Although some organizations focus on providing Housing First services to families who are more stable and are experiencing homelessness for the first time, families with significant barriers to becoming re-housed have successfully participated in Housing First programs. While attempting to target families who are most likely to remain in the homeless service system for long periods of time without such assistance, Housing First programs generally screen out families in which the head-of-household is actively abusing drugs, referring them instead to substance abuse treatment programs. Many will then enroll homeless families in which the adult has been in a recovery program for at least six months; recognizing that relapse may occur once the family is moved into permanent housing, early intervention by a case manager can prevent the problem from escalating while recovery continues.

Families who have experienced domestic violence may benefit from longer stays in transitional housing. Experienced Housing First providers have indicated that at least four months separated from an abuser are often enough to promote successful re-entry into permanent housing. Finally, many families who become homeless due to a one-time crisis, such as increase in rent, job loss, or family break-up, have the capacity to return to permanent housing rapidly, if given assistance with move-in funds and lease negotiation, or other types of housing assistance.



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2. Who will be responsible for the referral and assessment of families?

While many localities have developed programs that provide a point-of-entry into a homeless services system, the vast majority of communities do not have an access point for families who become homeless. A single agency (such as an emergency shelter or transitional housing program) that chooses to integrate a Housing First approach into its existing services system might therefore become the access point, providing crisis intervention and emergency shelter for homeless families, while also processing families for early relocation to permanent housing. In a collaborative approach, referral and assessment might be provided by agencies currently serving families, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, domestic violence shelters, residential drug treatment programs, social services agencies, and rental assistance programs. Other Housing First programs prefer to do their own screening and assessments, recognizing that homeless services providers often keep homeless families in temporary or transitional programs for up to two years.

3. Who can provide families with housing assistance? Needed services include:

- helping overcome barriers to accessing affordable housing, including addressing poor credit, eviction histories, lack of move-in funds, and housing discrimination;

- locating subsidized or affordable units in the community and/or developing affordable housing resources through the private sector, including working with ecumenical, philanthropic, and volunteer community services organizations;
- developing greater affordable housing resources by working with landlords, management companies, and local public housing authorities;
- serving as a resource to landlords following a housing placement for housing-related problems/issues that may develop.

Agencies such as local housing authorities, housing counseling and fair housing organizations, and property management companies should be considered as possible collaborative partners.

4. Who will provide the case management services to the family?

Needed services include:

- providing time-limited and transitional case management immediately after the move;
- linking individuals/families/children with needed supports in the community;
- helping to resolve crises that may evolve immediately following a housing placement;
- monitoring families with special needs, i.e., those in recovery from substance abuse addiction, survivors of domestic violence, and those in which there is a history of child maltreatment.

In every community, resources and services differ. Homeless services agencies, nonprofit and/or governmental social services agencies, transitional housing programs, community-based recovery programs, family counseling programs, and child welfare agencies may be able to provide these services. Existing agencies are often funded to serve families in a particular community, regardless of whether or not they have been homeless, and should be considered as potential partners.

5. What funding resources are available?

Often, existing as well as new sources of funds can be used to support a Housing First approach to homelessness. For example, it may be possible to modify the use of existing funds during contract renewal processes, by changing a staff position to a housing specialist, or adding a component for housing relocation or case management. Possible sources of funds include:



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- Federal funding through the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), particularly the Supportive Housing Program (SHP), and the U.S. Department of Education
- State and local funding such as the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), or through agencies such as local departments of social services, housing authorities, or mental health centers
- Private funding from foundations, corporations, and individual donors

Private sources of funding can be particularly useful in supporting feasibility analysis and strategic planning, in order to help homeless service providers to adapt Housing First components to their existing services system. In addition, private funding might enable agencies to hire housing resources/relocation staff when no other funding exists. Likewise, private sources can serve to “fill the gap” when adequate move-in funds are not available or can serve as “incentive” funds to landlords worried about renting to a homeless family.



Measuring and Adapting: Did it Fly?

Any service for homeless families must be measured by the attainment of permanent housing and the capacity of the residents to sustain themselves and their families in that housing. These two outcome measures pose the central questions for program participants, agencies, and the community and they must be built into a program at the outset.

Good evaluation systems utilize a series of short, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. For example, for mothers, these variables might be employment, enrollment in a job training program, recovery from substance abuse where that was a problem, and overcoming domestic violence where that was a problem. Outcomes for children could be school enrollment, regular attendance, participation in an after-school program, and health and nutrition status.

These summative data need to be collected when clients enroll in a housing program, the point at which they apply to an agency for help with locating permanent housing, and when they move into permanent housing. This data collection strategy will enable agencies to measure success by comparing baseline and subsequent data.

In addition to the above outcomes, program evaluation can add reliability and validity when real and tested measurement instruments

are applied. A number of scales have been developed that can be used in programs serving homeless families. They are all in the public domain so that researchers or practitioners can easily access them. The following instruments are suggested:³

- Clinical Anxiety Scale
- CES-D Score (to measure depression)
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale
- Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory
- Scales of Perceived Social Support



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Also, the National Alliance to End Homelessness has identified a set of questions that need to be answered to understand the nature of homelessness and its solutions. These are as follows:

- With what mainstream public systems have the homeless clients interacted, and did this interaction result in homelessness (e.g., poor discharge planning, inadequate after-care, etc.)?
- For those who enter and exit the homeless assistance system fairly quickly, what assistance is most effective in facilitating their rehousing?
- What mainstream services do families need after they are rehoused so that they do not become homeless again?⁴

Although the identification of outcomes, data collection, and evaluation are central to any program, organizations encounter numerous challenges to this process. Evaluation requires careful attention to the design and completion of every agency form from intake to termination. The data on each form need to be collected in a central management information system, which requires more computer hardware and software than many agencies can afford. This endeavor also requires staff that is sufficiently competent and patient with data entry, a serious challenge in many program settings.

Agency leadership must be sufficiently committed to data collection and measurement of outcomes to support the entire enterprise. More importantly, leadership must be prepared to adjust their program when the outcome data indicate a lack of success, e.g., families move into permanent housing but lack childcare that then endangers employment. One adjustment to this finding would suggest that case managers, and the agency, focus greater attention on the identification of childcare resources. Homeless agencies are finding

that it takes longer than it did several years ago to locate permanent housing. This must be accounted for in measuring outcomes and in working longer with homeless families until they find housing. Finally, outcome data may yield findings that agency leadership does not anticipate, such as fewer successful outcomes. It is generally hard for people who are involved to accept negative findings. This needs to be regarded as an opportunity for correction rather than a failure of the program or its personnel. In the final analysis, program evaluation serves as a guide for agency policymakers and planners.



The Ripple Effect: Expect it and Encourage it

To create or sustain the ripple requires a strong commitment to the basics of organizational development and effective program operations. Areas to focus on might include: (1) the target population; (2) programmatic excellence; (3) fundraising and development; (4) leadership and organizational structure; and, (5) collaboration with other agencies and organizations.

The Target Population

The most direct component of programmatic success is whether people who are homeless attain permanent housing and achieve the outcomes identified in their individual and/or family plans.

Programmatic Excellence

Programmatic excellence means more than achieving the desired outcomes for the target population. A second type of evaluation focuses on formative, or monitoring, evaluations that are designed to measure the effectiveness of an intervention and its efficiency. Formative evaluations focus more on the process than on the outcome of an intervention. Such evaluations occur during the implementation stage and are designed to improve the change effort. Formative evaluations do not address whether the effort is worthwhile or even whether it is more worthwhile than other programs. They focus on describing what the program does and what is happening during the service delivery process.

Fundraising and Development

Most programs for homeless families, indeed most safety net programs, operate on time-limited budgets in uncertain environments vis-à-vis contracts and grants and gifts from major individual and corporate donors. The uncertainty of future funding for even the most effective

and efficient program requires that organizations develop strategic plans to sustain funding and raise money. This means that every agency must have in place a fundraising plan that attracts funding (in large and small amounts) from individual donors, foundations, corporations, and the government. When applying for program funds, agencies should be prepared to locate future funding to sustain their program after the initial funding runs out.

Leadership and Organizational Structure

Strong support from top management and leadership is critical in implementing a Housing First approach, which often goes against current practice in a community. The organizational structure can vary, but needs to be able to accommodate both the components of the Housing First approach and the needs of families.

Collaboration with Other Agencies and Organizations

Collaborative strategies assume that it is better to work with than against the existing organizational system. Collaboration also assumes that the target system is rational, open to new ideas, and of good faith. Successful interagency collaborations can address weaknesses in current service provision by partnering with the systems and building upon them. A Housing First program must sustain and build its collaborative relationships with mainstream social service agencies, and it must focus on all of the key agencies in the homeless assistance system.

Within the homeless assistance system, collaboration with emergency shelters is central. Mainstream agencies are called upon to provide vital resources for homeless families, e.g., health insurance, supplemental security income, job training programs, mental health and substance abuse services, food stamps, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).



Caution

It is important to remember that effective collaboration requires a lead agency, so that there is a designated entity to provide leadership and move the collaboration forward. This is particularly important when many different agencies are involved in developing a Housing First program. It is also important to keep in mind the different areas of expertise of each agency and/or each Housing First component. For example, in small agencies, it is possible for one person to carry out the functions of case manager and housing specialist. Ideally, however, a



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housing specialist and a case manager will work together, each in his or her area of expertise. This is because the functions of the roles are quite different. Housing specialists, for example, recruit property owners and managers willing to rent to clients and maintain relationships with them on housing-related issues. This is in contrast to case managers, who may provide such assistance as help accessing community resources, problem solving, life skills, parenting support, and help with money management. Behind the scenes, however, they work as a “team.”



Summary

The ambitious scope of a Housing First program requires a strong commitment on the part of many agencies and individuals. However, with careful planning and assessment, sound partnerships, and an ongoing focus on the strengths and weaknesses of clients, Housing First can accomplish what all families need: an affordable and permanent home.

NOTES

- ¹ National Alliance to End Homelessness (2003). *A Plan: Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*. p. 3.
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- ² National Alliance to End Homelessness Website, Housing First Network (April 2003),
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- ³ Royce, D., Thyer, B. A., Padgett, D., and, Logan, T.K. (2000). *Program Evaluation: An Introduction*, Third Edition. Ch. 12.
- ⁴ National Alliance to End Homelessness (2003). *A Plan: Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*. p. 8.
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- Center for Supportive housing:
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- National Coalition for the homeless:
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