Supportive Housing as a Platform for Family Stabilization: Lessons from a National Family Supportive Housing Demonstration

Introduction

The shortage of affordable housing has become a crisis across the United States. For families with little social support and multiple challenges like poverty, mental health and substance abuse issues, lack of stable housing often leads to devastating effects on parents and children. In fact, research by Dennis Culhane indicates that families who cycle in and out of homelessness are often more likely to be involved in child welfare and have higher needs overall\(^1\). The study also revealed that most families involved in both systems, are homeless prior to entering the child welfare system, suggesting that for already fragile families, homelessness can be the tipping point—potentially leading to family separation and foster care.

Despite a well-established link between child welfare and homelessness, the two systems have yet to determine how to address this issue, though not for lack of trying. Often these systems attempt to collaborate but run into policy barriers that force them to “stay in their own lane,” thwarting innovation and maintaining the status quo.

In this issue of *Notes from the Field*, we examine how the federal initiative, *Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families involved in Child Welfare* is working to integrate these two systems and asking the child welfare system to examine housing through a new lens. The demonstration sites are working with child welfare to use housing resources more strategically and leverage the power of housing as a platform for services for high-need families who need both housing and services to stabilize and stay together.

Challenge

Homelessness often inhibits the child welfare system from meeting its goals of child safety, permanency and well-being. For instance, homeless families tend to have their children removed at higher rates compared to their non-homeless counterparts\(^2\) and once placed in foster care, children of homelessness parents tend to

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stay longer\textsuperscript{3}. However, the child welfare system has limited access to housing subsidies and supports for families and often does not see housing as an intervention that can address family’s needs beyond providing a roof over their head. Because of this, common practice has encouraged child welfare workers to offer housing as the last step in a series of action steps that parents must complete (e.g., substance abuse or mental health treatment, parenting education, etc.). Therefore, families who receive housing assistance tend to be the ones who have demonstrated the greatest likelihood for success and may not be those families that are the most in need or could benefit the most from this costly intervention. Because the number of families in need compared to the resources available has been and remains unbalanced in the homeless field, the demonstration sites are leveraging their partnerships with housing stakeholders and learning best practices for prioritizing limited housing resources to the most vulnerable families and providing wraparound supportive services alongside the housing. The demonstration is providing an opportunity to test whether or not supportive housing and concrete supports can be used effectively to stabilize high-need families and reduce traumatizing child removals.

**What We Are Learning: Housing Stability First**

*Housing First* is a proven method of ending homelessness encouraged by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that offers individuals and families experiencing homelessness immediate access to permanent affordable or supportive housing. Housing First is based on the idea that people experiencing homelessness do not need to spend long periods in shelter or transitional housing programs receiving services intended to make them “ready” to be housed. Instead, families should be offered immediate housing where they can find stability and be more likely to engage in supportive services to address their needs.

The same idea is being applied by the five sites in the federal demonstration. The logic? Safety, permanency and well-being cannot be achieved in a vacuum. For many years, the child welfare system has recognized that environmental and contextual factors that influence family functioning: substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues, poverty, etc. Similarly, housing instability and homelessness are traumatic, de-stabilizing events for families and will invariably inhibit families’ capacity to grapple with any other challenges they may be facing. Housing First is grounded in the belief that the stability of a permanent home will allow a person to successfully address serious challenges that likely contributed to their homelessness (and child welfare involvement) in the first place.

The child welfare agencies participating in the demonstration are making steady progress toward using the Housing First approach by 1) using data for decision-making and prioritization, 2) adjusting their supportive

service model to serve families who need a longer-term intervention. and 3) creating a culture shift in child welfare away from housing “ready” to one that recognizes supportive housing as a critical intervention for achieving its mandate.

1) **Using Data for Decision Making and Prioritization** As a result of the demonstration, two sites have institutionalized a Universal Housing Screen to identify families with housing instability upon entry into the child welfare system. This screening tool literally puts housing first in the minds of case workers as they assess families for other stressors and also allows them to make data-informed decisions about which families can benefit from a supportive housing intervention.

2) **Adjusting Service Models to Serve Families who need a Longer-term Intervention**

Child Welfare is an emergency, short-term intervention much like those offered by other public systems like homelessness, criminal justice, and emergency and behavioral health care. While the short-term nature of child welfare services is preferable and works for some families, for others, child welfare services may just not be enough to stabilize them. For families whose challenges are complex and who have frequent engagements with child welfare, a longer-term intervention is needed to produce better outcomes for children.

In the demonstration, cases may close with child welfare but not in supportive housing. Families continue to receive individualized services from supportive housing staff to keep them together and housed. Importantly, sites have created regular communication vehicles at both the administrative and practice levels to continue to coordinate and support families beyond the life of the child welfare case. Sites have established cross-system advisory boards, management teams and practice-oriented meetings to ensure the supportive housing provider, child welfare and the family can work together to resolve any new child protection issues early to avoid continued encounters with protective services and recidivism into foster care.

3) **Creating a Culture shift away from Housing “Ready”**

Research illustrates again and again that keeping children with their parents produces better outcomes than separating them whenever possible. Just as housing first and supportive housing has helped reduce the number of chronically homeless individuals and reduced recidivism in emergency health care and the criminal justice system, child welfare is learning that providing supportive housing before families have met all of their requirements could potentially decrease the number of children who come into or return to foster care. Supportive housing may have the greatest potential for impact among families with multiple-risk factors related to long-term systems involvement. Sites have noted that families in supportive housing benefit from the intensive case management and flexible, concrete and tailored services not always possible in a child welfare setting. Moreover, the voluntary services delivered by supportive housing case managers are more

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3 See below: Data Collection Strategies for Identifying Families Facing Child Welfare Involvement & Homelessness
conducive to building trust and engagement than the relationship with a child welfare worker carrying out court mandates.

Just as Differential Response created a shift in the way child welfare handled lower risk cases, supportive housing and Housing First offer a similarly fundamental change in the way the system intervenes with families at high risk of foster care placement and recidivism.

Recommendations

1) Child welfare agencies should incorporate screening tools that identify housing needs at the onset of a case and consider homelessness and housing instability as they would other complex issues that impact family functioning. For more information see Data Collection Strategies for Identifying Families Facing Child Welfare Involvement & Homelessness.

2) The Administration for Children Youth and Families should provide a roadmap for child welfare to address housing stability as it has for other complex issues such as substance use and domestic violence.

3) The housing and homeless system should work together with child welfare to identify common goals for their shared population and set aside housing resources targeted to the highest-need families identified by child welfare and access to wraparound supportive services. For more information see, Beyond the Family Unification Program (FUP): Partnerships between Public Child Welfare Agencies and Public Housing Agencies to stably house vulnerable child welfare-involved families.

Background

The Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System is a $25 million, five-year, five-site demonstration funded by the U.S. Administration for Children, Youth and Families (ACYF). The national demonstration is examining not just the provision of housing, but a resource-rich approach using housing as a platform for providing families involved in child welfare systems with affordable homes along with intensive services and supports to safely stay together or be reunified.

The federal demonstration is unique in that it requires a deliberate and purposeful partnership between housing agencies, service providers and child welfare organizations. The demonstration is piloting supportive housing as a service option for families with child-welfare involvement with the most complex needs. The five sites housing families under the demonstration are in Broward County, Florida; Memphis, Tennessee; San Francisco, California; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and the State of Connecticut.

Additional Resources on this topic:

- Ensuring Family Voice While Navigating Multiple Systems: The Family Team Meeting Strategy in Supportive Housing
- Welcome Home: Design and Practice Guidance for Supportive Housing for Families with Children
- A Practice Framework for Delivering Services to Families in Supportive Housing
- Tenant Manual & Welcome Packet