Influence of a Support Housing Demonstration on Child Welfare Policy & Practice

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 an approach that uses housing as a platform for providing families involved in child welfare systems who also experience housing instability and homelessness with affordable housing coupled with the intensive services and supports they need to safely stay together or be reunified.

The Demonstration is funded under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) which encourages child welfare agencies to collaborate and coordinate with other systems to prevent child maltreatment and foster care. The demonstration is rooted in the goals of CAPTA and aims to encourage collaboration and coordination across multiple systems to address the intersection of child maltreatment and housing instability.

The demonstration is piloting supportive housing as a new service option that child welfare systems can employ to support families with complex needs, whose children are at-risk of being removed from their care or having already been removed, and/or are likely to have a lengthy stay in foster care. These families face severe and multiple challenges including reoccurring homelessness, frequent encounters with child welfare and mental health, domestic violence and/or substance abuse issues.

The demonstration is currently in the fifth and last year. Sites have made tremendous strides creating partnerships, integrating triage procedures, using data, and creating and embedding new assessment tools into the child welfare system. This brief is designed to provide an overview of specific policy, procedure and resource shifts that have emerged as a result of the demonstration. These changes in the five sites of Broward County, Florida; Memphis, Tennessee; San Francisco, California; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and the State of Connecticut serve as a roadmap for other child welfare and housing partnerships to follow in the future.

Building Blocks of Change

The demonstration is a significant investment of resources by the child welfare system and as with any investment, the child welfare community is eager to learn from the demonstration and understand what changes were made as a result of the project and what lessons can be used to inform future resource allocations, policy reforms and best practice. The Urban Institute is conducting a cross-site evaluation and will have formal results related to systems change, cost, and family-level outcomes that will be available in 2019, but until then, the Resource Center is well-positioned to point to early indications that "business as usual" has changed as a result of the demonstration. This paper will cover these emerging shifts using the "Building Blocks of Change" identified by CSH in Laying a New Foundation by Grieff, Proscio, and Wilkins (2003). This framework categorizes changes and is being utilized by the Urban Institute to measure systems change in the demonstration.

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The building blocks – 1) power, 2) money, 3) habits, 4) technology or skills, and 5) ideas or values – are powerful because they can be easily looked at to assess the impact of the project on child welfare system.

Building Blocks Defined

Building blocks are defined by evidence of change in each category:

**Power**: There are designated positions people with formal authority responsible for the new activity (not just committed or skillful individuals who happen to care about it).

**Money**: Routine funding is earmarked for the new activity in a new way or, failing that, there is a pattern of recurring special funding on which most actors in the system can rely.

**Habits**: Participants in a system interact with each other to carry out the new activity as part of their normal routine not just in response to a special initiative, demonstration, or project. If top-level authorities have to command such interactions to take place, then the system has not absorbed them, and thus has not yet changed.

**Technology or skills**: There is a growing cadre of skilled practitioners at most or all levels in the delivery chain, practicing methods that were not previously common or considered desirable. These practitioners are now expert in the skills that the new system demands and have set a standard for effective delivery of the new system’s intended results.

**Ideas or values**: There is a new definition of performance or success, and often a new understanding of the people to be served and the problem to be solved. The new definition and understanding are commonly held among most or all actors in the system, such that they are no longer in great dispute. Convincing evidence of a truly changed system comes in several and, eventually, usually all of these five categories.

Achieving each of the building blocks takes years to do however each site has made promising progress in each. Below is a summary of changes that have been translated into new policies or procedures at the child welfare system.

1. **Power**

This section describes new positions that are responsible for activities related to supportive housing.

*The Housing Search Specialist*

Typically, families eligible for a rental subsidy must navigate a very complicated application process and identify housing on their own. However, many families do not have the experience or capacity to apply for a voucher without help, much less negotiate with landlords and find appropriate housing. Further, many families who have experienced homelessness have misplaced vital documents like birth certificates.

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2 Burt (2014), Affiliated Scholar, Urban Institute, Supportive Housing for Families Involved in the Child Welfare System: Integrating Services and Promoting System Change
and proof of citizenship required for the voucher and need an advocate to help them collect or reapply for these documents.

Most supportive housing developments have housing specialists. This position typically includes identifying and securing appropriate and affordable housing for families, helping families obtain required paperwork, coaching them through landlord interviews and sometimes, helping families clean up poor credit scores or past rental or criminal infractions that could make them ineligible for public housing. The Housing Specialist also facilitates cross-system collaboration by acting as a liaison with the housing authority to ensure the application moves forward and supports the applicant with voucher orientation, landlord meetings, apartment showings, etc.

The demonstration has illuminated the importance of the housing specialist to the child welfare system. These new positions sit within the child welfare agency or a contracted child welfare provider in Broward County, Connecticut and San Francisco. Sites have found these positions particularly critical in tight housing markets where even moderate income families have trouble finding housing. The housing specialist is a new designated position in these sites and is critical to ensuring that families obtain the stability of housing needed so that they can focus on getting the services they need to keep the family intact.

**The Housing and Child Welfare Liaison**

Most demonstration sites created liaison positions to help bridge the gap in knowledge between housing and child welfare and vice versa. These liaisons, funded by the federal grant, facilitate complicated bureaucratic processes, prioritize demonstration families and share necessary data on families’ housing and/or child welfare status as necessary. There are currently liaison positions in the Public Authority in San Francisco (SFPHA); in the child welfare system in Cedar Rapids and in Memphis. The liaison positions are designated staff serving as a main point of contact from one entity to the other, support real-time information sharing and more nimble responses while continuing to support partnerships and relationship building.

2. **Money**

This section will describe how routine funding is earmarked for new activities related to supportive housing.

Each site is continuing to work towards securing on-going funding for their projects; however, many have already secured agreements to continue to fund positions and programmatic features essential to family success in housing. Below is a list of examples from each site:

**San Francisco**

The child welfare agency will continue to fund the Housing Specialist position to help all families that obtain Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers. In addition, the SFPHA will continue to fund the designated liaison to help facilitate the housing placement process for these families after the demonstration period.
Connecticut

Funding for a vocational specialist position was created through the demonstration grant. Early evaluation data show that the addition of this position has had a positive impact on caregivers’ ability to obtain employment. At this time the State’s Department of Children and Families is considering shifting resources to continue to fund this position for all families in the supportive housing for families program.

Memphis

Over the course of the demonstration, the housing and child welfare collaboration determined that housing staff could benefit from additional hands-on support from the child welfare agency. Working together, the systems created a new position funded entirely by the Department of Children Services. This full-time child welfare case manager works on-site in the housing complex to facilitate Family Team Meetings, act as a liaison to DCS and as a safety consultant to the supportive housing staff. This position represents new investment by DCS to continue new activities associated with supportive housing.

Cedar Rapids

In the first year of the demonstration, the Cedar Rapids site worked with the city housing agency to create a preference for Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs) for child welfare involved families. The preference prioritizes scarce housing resources and directs them to families who are homeless and have an active case in the child welfare system. This was a change in policy that resulted in new routine funding for families in the child welfare system.

Broward County

The Broward County Housing Authority has agreed to prioritize families referred by the supportive housing service provider as long as wraparound case management services continue to be available for families. As in Cedar Rapids, this priority represents new on-going housing resources available to the child welfare system.

3. Habits

This section describes how participants in the child welfare system interact with each other to carry out new activities as part of their normal routine—not just as a part of the demonstration.

Universal Assessment

Currently Child Welfare Agencies collect little, if any data on housing instability and homelessness among the families they serve. When this information is collected, child welfare workers are often required to make a subjective decision about housing status without a clear definition of the terms. This lack of standardization makes data inconsistent and unreliable. In order to ensure families were targeted properly for the demonstration, each child welfare agency had to develop new or modify existing tools to routinely collect and report consistent information on families’ housing needs.

For example, San Francisco added the county’s definition of homelessness to their standard investigative narrative assessment. In Connecticut, evaluators from the University of Connecticut and Chapin Hall
created an abridged version of a long standing tool called the Quick Risk Assessment for Family Triage (Q-RAFT) to rapidly assess the suitability of clients for housing and child welfare intervention. The QRAFT has been adopted in two regions and DCF has plans to take the tool state-wide. For more information on the QRAFT, click here: [http://appliedresearch.uconn.edu/project-acf-grant/](http://appliedresearch.uconn.edu/project-acf-grant/)

San Francisco and Connecticut will continue to use the new assessment tool with every family that comes into contact with the child welfare system. The addition of a universal housing assessment represents a new activity that will continue to be performed by child welfare staff after the demonstration.

4. Technology or Skills

This section describes the growing cadre of skilled practitioners at most or all levels in the delivery chain, practicing methods that were not previously common or considered desirable prior to the demonstration.

**Data-Driven Decision Making.** In the first year of the demonstration sites were required to use local data to determine which families to target for supportive housing and identify evidence-based practices that would improve family functioning, child well-being and parenting skills. Child welfare entities in San Francisco and Cedar Rapids conducted case reviews to determine which families had come to their attention and had experienced homelessness. They also looked at child welfare outcomes such as foster care placement, repeat maltreatment, long stays in foster care, and re-admissions. Sites used these data to create a profile of families who would most benefit from supportive housing.

Memphis used a different method. The conducted a data match between their Homeless Information Management System (HMIS) and the TN Department of Children Services to determine the scale of the issue and used those numbers to determine target population and estimate the number of units needed to house families. Sites' local data work together with prior research and guidance from external stakeholders led to the creation of new referral and triage protocols that ensured the most vulnerable families were being targeted and consistently identified across sites.

Using child welfare data and creating new triage procedures is difficult and takes coordination and buy-in at the case, supervisory and administrative levels within the child welfare system. Each represents the development of new skills and routines within child welfare that were not present prior to the demonstration.

**Interdisciplinary and/or Family Teams Meetings** are not an uncommon practice in the child welfare system and in fact, were used in each demonstration site. However, the added skill and knowledge that developed as a result of the demonstration is that today, these meetings include housing providers and typically take place right after a family is housed to identify families' strengths and needs, develop coordinated service plans and develop a schedule for regular family team meetings. What's more is that many of the teams continue to make data-driven decisions by sharing a joint assessment of family progress toward their child-welfare and overarching family goals. In Cedar Rapids, the supportive housing assessment is attached to the traditional child welfare assessment.

5. Ideas or Values

This section will describe how child welfare agencies in the demonstration have a new definition of performance or success, and a new understanding of the people to be served and the problem to be solved.
Shift to a Housing First Approach for Vulnerable Families

Across all five demonstration sites, child welfare staff has shifted their perspective to prioritize housing resources for families with higher needs. Because safety is the child welfare system’s greatest concern, housing resources and/or referrals have historically been delayed until reunification is imminent. Housing is also perceived by many as a reward for families who have completed their case plan. However, in the demonstration, child welfare leadership has used housing resources earlier, prior to completion of services, for families with unmet needs. Demonstration sites intentionally target higher need families with multiple risk factors because research and experience indicate that families are more likely to engage in services if they have the stability of a permanent home.

Child welfare systems have institutionalized this philosophical shift through the addition of new housing assessment tools described above. These new resources make it easier for case workers to determine which families need housing the most and are most likely to experience negative child welfare outcomes.

It was not easy for most child welfare workers to change their ideas about which families should gain access to stable housing. However, the screening tools together with effective continuous quality improvement (CQI) practices created real-time training and education opportunities. For example, designated CQI staff received all the screening forms from investigative workers. When the CQI team came across a form for a family who met the eligibility criteria but was not referred, program staff used it as an opportunity to conduct further training by talking to the investigative workers directly about the intent of the project and eligibility criteria. In time, child welfare staff began to understand more deeply which families were eligible and why. More importantly, as child welfare workers started to see their families become successful, they felt more confident about the project and the targeting strategy and referred more families. Taken together the screening tool, on-going education and positive outcomes gave child welfare workers new understanding of families that need to be served and that housing could be another tool to stabilize families with active child welfare cases.

Policy Challenges and Potential Opportunities

Child welfare systems are largely led by the states and counties that administer them. Currently the federal funding structure funds mostly foster care expenses and little in the way of preventive service funding. Most prevention dollars come from local sources. However, change can be encouraged at the federal level though official guidance from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). For instance in January 2017, ACF released an Information Memorandum (IM) directed to State, Tribal and Territorial Agencies administering or supervising child welfare funding as well as agencies or organization designated to apply for a child abuse and neglect state grant, and court improvement programs, to encourage and provide examples of Efforts by child welfare agencies, local communities, and federal agencies to end family and youth homelessness: http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ACF-ACYF-CB-IM-17-03-Housing-and-Child-Welfare-COMBINED.pdf. ACF can also drive change by continuing to fund housing related demonstration projects through discretionary grant-making. This would help to build additional evidence about the impact of housing on child welfare outcomes. This demonstration and its associated policy changes are a good first step in understanding how local jurisdictions can shift policy to make larger systemic changes. In fact, the 2017 IM referenced above, could be an effective tool for child welfare to coalesce with cross-system stakeholders to determine whether the strategies in the IM can be implemented locally to increase family stability and improve outcomes for children living in poverty.
The homeless system can also be a hurdle to systemic change. Largely this is because the homeless system is responsible for finding solutions for homeless families that are experiencing literal or chronic homelessness. However, there is emerging evidence from the demonstration and from larger national studies that indicate most child welfare involved families experience a different kind of homelessness—short, repeated shelter use followed by periods of stability or by doubling up with other people (Culhane, 2006.) Thus the vast majority of the resources available through the homeless system do not prioritize families within the child welfare population. Lessons from the demonstration could assist in bridging this gap through better assessment and referral of families across systems that are in need of supportive housing resources.

A major vehicle for affordable housing across the country is through HUD’s Housing Choice Voucher Program. Voucher programs administered by a public housing authority are generally distributed to families on a waiting list and are not targeted chronic homeless populations. Voucher programs are therefore slightly more flexible for families.

Further, PHAs administer FUP vouchers, which are designated for families involved in the child welfare system. The challenge with FUP is twofold 1) there are not many FUP vouchers available nationwide and 2) unlike many homeless assistance programs, most subsidies do not include funding for services. This is problematic because observations from the demonstration suggest very vulnerable families have difficulty finding and staying housed without some combination of a housing subsidy and services.

**Conclusion**

How can the child welfare system use housing to address the needs of their most vulnerable families? How does a child welfare agency gain access to housing resources? The demonstration provided an opportunity for child welfare agencies and their partners to think differently about addressing the needs of families at highest risk of continued homelessness and child welfare involvement. The commitment of service dollars through the Children’s Bureau prompted housing entities to dedicate vouchers specifically for demonstration families. Service dollars also allowed them to be more flexible about enrolling families they would normally find ineligible.

The lessons learned from the demonstration can be applied universally to ensure high-need families have greater access to housing and services by targeting resources, collaborating with housing entities, directing service dollars toward housing case management and by adding housing assessments and designated housing-focused staff.

There is indication in each site that child welfare has benefited and will continue to benefit from changes made from the demonstration. The examples outlined in this brief showcase a range of steps child welfare can take by shifting money, power, habits, skills, technology, ideas and values to ensure that supportive housing becomes part of their service array. Emerging data from early pilots and the demonstration suggest that housing creates a stable foundation for which families can take better advantage of needed services, improve outcomes and decrease use of child welfare and homeless services.
The **CSH Child Welfare and Supportive Housing Resource Center** is supported by federal agencies and philanthropic partners to provide tailored one-on-one expertise and services to help meet the needs of grantees taking part in Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System. Learn more at: [www.csh.org/childwelfaresupportivehousingresourcecenter](http://www.csh.org/childwelfaresupportivehousingresourcecenter)

In addition, CSH has launched the **One Roof** campaign elevating the visibility of families who are at the intersection of homelessness and child welfare involvement. We are helping communities develop partnerships between housing and child welfare systems to improve outcomes for vulnerable families. Our goal is to ensure a better future for children by: breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and despair; promoting an improved, integrated policy and systems response for this population; replicating supportive housing tailored to their unique needs; and increasing investment in housing solutions for at-risk children and their families. Learn more at: [www.1RoofFamilies.org](http://www.1RoofFamilies.org)

Through our efforts to help vulnerable families at the intersection of homelessness and child welfare involvement, the CSH Child Welfare and Supportive Housing Resource Center and One Roof campaign embrace the **Keeping Families Together (KFT)** model of supportive housing. Learn more about KFT at: [www.csh.org/KeepingFamiliesTogether](http://www.csh.org/KeepingFamiliesTogether)