

FAMILIES AND HOMELESSNESS:

A recent analysis of national point-in-time survey data documents that 41% of homeless persons in the United States live in families with children¹. The National Alliance to End Homelessness (www.endhomelessness.org) reports that 600,000 families and 1.35 million children experience homelessness in the United States each year.

For most families, homelessness is a short, episodic event that can be addressed with a housing subsidy or other affordable housing options and a mix of some services.² Evidence is emerging, however, that there is a subset of homeless families that need the additional, more comprehensive services found in many supportive housing programs in order to end their homelessness and maintain their housing stability. These families are most often headed by a single parent or guardian, usually a woman, and many have had long histories of homelessness. In one study of 100 families in supportive housing, 93% of the mothers reported experiencing multiple episodes of homelessness, and many of the mothers were first homeless while a minor.³ The same study found that, with an average age of 36, the mothers in supportive housing were substantially older than homeless mothers in shelters, who tend to be in their late 20's.

Other studies have looked carefully at the experience of trauma, mental health disorders, and substance use among homeless or formerly homeless families. According to the National Center on Family Homelessness (www.familyhomelessness.org), a staggering 92% of homeless mothers have experienced severe physical or sexual assault during their lifetimes. Their children have also been exposed to violence at extremely high rates – 62% of formerly homeless, extremely low-income children (regardless of age) have been exposed to violence, and for children over age 12, the rate of exposure to violence is 83%⁴.

The experience of abuse and violence often contributes to serious mental health problems in adulthood - 39% of homeless women with histories of abuse have experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and 47% have a major depressive disorder.⁵ Anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia are other mental health diagnoses frequently reported by women with families living in supportive housing.⁶ Almost half the mothers have histories of substance use problems.⁷ At the same time, their children demonstrate emotional or behavioral problems that interfere with learning at almost three times the rate of other children.⁸

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR FAMILIES:

To date, research on supportive housing has focused primarily on outcomes for homeless single adults, often adults with disabling conditions, including severe mental illness or substance use disorders. Less is known about the impact of permanent supportive housing for families. Research seems to suggest, however, that supportive housing is a promising intervention for many families with long histories of homelessness who face the greatest obstacles to stability and self-sufficiency.

Four of the housing projects in the CSH-sponsored *Supportive Housing for Families* evaluation tracked outcomes data. In two of these programs, nearly all the residents (95% and 94%) were still housed in the program a year after enrollment. In the other two programs, the proportions stably housed were lower but still substantial – 71% and 67% respectively.

EFFECTIVE SERVICE AND HOUSING STRATEGIES FOR FAMILIES:

Important considerations for designing the housing and services strategies for families within permanent supportive housing include:

- **Developing a Comprehensive Services Plan:** A wide range of services may be needed by families in supportive housing, including: income support; budgeting skills training; conflict resolution skills training; education; job training, job placement, and retention; child care; case management; housing/systems advocacy; referrals to community resources to meet basic needs (such as food banks); as well as comprehensive services that address physical health, substance use, mental health, and trauma. A significant number of families living in supportive housing may be newly reunified or have current interaction with the local Child Welfare Agency – therefore, supportive housing projects must be prepared to support healthy parenting, family reunification, and family preservation efforts. Finally, many families in supportive housing can benefit from social and recreational activities intended to assist them in re-building community connections.
- **Implementing Policies and Strategies for Addressing and Stopping the Cycle of Domestic Violence:** As noted above, a significant percentage of woman and children living in family supportive housing will have histories of past and/or current family violence. Stopping the cycle of violence is one of the most challenging demands of family supportive housing, but families have a greater chance of overcoming domestic violence in a stable supportive housing community. Outreach, education, and community-building among tenants are the first steps - supportive housing programs should also be prepared to address domestic violence through services, security planning, and the design of project policies and rules which support persons experiencing domestic violence.
- **Understanding the Impact of Trauma and Violence:** When not addressed effectively, trauma symptoms arising from past violence, and the absence of a safe environment, create obstacles to services, treatment, and recovery for survivors. Given the high rates of trauma likely experienced among tenant families, supportive housing programs should take a “trauma informed” approach and treat all tenants as if they might be trauma survivors. Trauma-informed services do not directly address or treat the effects of trauma; rather, trauma-informed services provide an environment for service delivery that is sensitive to the special needs of people who have experienced trauma and are delivered by staff who are knowledgeable about the effects of trauma on survivors.
- **Developing Appropriate Services and Recreational Spaces for Children:** A primary consideration for all family supportive housing projects is ensuring that there is adequate physical space available for children to play. Children often comprise the majority of tenants in family supportive housing projects, and need developmentally appropriate and activities and services available for both genders, which are distinct from their parents’ services. Services specifically needed by children and youth may include: academic support; after-school enrichment; recreation; youth development; and counseling. Best practices when designing services for children include: developing services that counter the unpredictability and trauma of homelessness through consistent and predictable routines; engaging children and parents concurrently; connecting children and youth to activities and services in the broader community; and involving youth in making decisions about the services that are offered.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES REGARDING SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR FAMILIES:

CSH has a wide variety of resources available through our website at www.csh.org. Resources with information focused on supportive housing for homeless families include:

- **[The Role of Permanent Supportive Housing in Addressing Family Homelessness \(2007\):](#)** This policy brief, prepared by CSH and the National Center on Family Homelessness (www.familyhomelessness.org), summarizes research from the Family Permanent Supportive Housing Project, including data on 409 families in 13 supportive housing programs.
- **[Family Permanent Supportive Housing: Preliminary Research on Family Characteristics, Program Models, and Outcomes \(2006\):](#)** This comprehensive research report provides a more detailed examination of the information summarized in *The Role of Permanent Supportive Housing in Addressing Family Homelessness*. The data sets analyzed are preliminary, but are among the first to examine the effectiveness of permanent supportive housing for families.
- **[Supportive Housing for Families Evaluation: Accomplishments and Lessons Learned \(2006\):](#)** This study, conducted by Philliber Research Associates, evaluates five family permanent supportive housing programs - three in California and two in Minnesota. The report describes the program models, profiles families served, and provides information on outcomes, including housing retention, increases in employment and income, and family reunification.
- **[Home Works: Solving Family Homelessness through Permanent Supportive Housing \(2005\):](#)** This publication draws from lessons learned from family supportive housing providers around the country, offering guidance for the development and operation of family supportive housing.
- **[Family Matters: A Guide to Developing Family Supportive Housing \(2001\):](#)** This manual is designed for service providers and housing developers who are interested in developing permanent supportive housing for homeless families and provides information regarding the development process from project conception through construction and rent-up, and also addresses alternatives to new construction, such as leased housing. The manual contains a variety of practical tools to guide decision-making regarding housing models, selecting partners, and designing effective service strategies.

¹ National Alliance to End Homelessness, "Homelessness Counts," www.endhomelessness.org (accessed January 24, 2007).

² Shinn M., Weitzman, B.C., Stojanovic, D., Knickman, J.R., Jimenez, L., Duchon, L., James, S. & Krantz, D.H. "Predictors of Homelessness among Families in New York City: From Shelter Request to Housing Stability," *American Journal of Public Health* 8(11) (1998): 1651-1657. This study found that among families who had lived in a shelter, receiving a housing subsidy increased the odds of residential stability by more than 20 times.

³ Nolan, C., ten Broeke, C., Magee, M., & Burt, M.R. "The Family Permanent Supportive Housing Initiative: Family History and Experiences in Supportive Housing." (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2005). <http://www.urban.org/publications/411220.html> (accessed January 22, 2007).

⁴ National Center on Family Homelessness, "Homeless Families and Trauma -Basic Facts," www.familyhomelessness.org (accessed January 22, 2007).

⁵ National Center on Family Homelessness, "Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women," www.familyhomelessness.org (accessed January 22, 2007).

⁶ National Center on Family Homelessness for the Hearth Connection, "The Population Being Served by the Supportive Housing and Managed Care Pilot: A Quantitative Portrait," www.familyhomelessness.org (accessed January 22, 2007).

⁷ National Center on Family Homelessness. "Research on Homeless and Low-Income Housed Families," www.familyhomelessness.org (accessed January 22, 2007).

⁸ National Center on Family Homelessness. "Homeless Families and Trauma – Basic Facts," www.familyhomelessness.org (accessed January 22, 2007).