



## **Keeping Families Together Matters:** An Introduction to Creating Supportive Housing for Child Welfare-Involved Families



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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## Dear Colleague:

I am pleased to provide you with our new guide to creating supportive housing for child welfare-involved families. The guide is based on lessons learned from our *Keeping Families Together* program and related efforts to help communities knit together local, state, and federal resources to develop similar initiatives.

*Keeping Families Together* is a three-year pilot program of the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) designed to address the needs of New York City's most vulnerable families. The initiative yielded impressive results, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF); and four private foundations recently made an unprecedented investment to fund supportive housing demonstration projects, like *Keeping Families Together*, around the country.

This new funding opportunity will allow ACYF to test the impact of supportive housing for child welfare-involved families on a large scale. We are hopeful that the results will provide resounding evidence that supportive housing is a tool for improving child and family well-being while reducing unnecessary family separation and foster care among vulnerable families experiencing homelessness.

I believe that, together with our allies, we can create a new policy response for at-risk families that includes supportive housing. CSH hopes to help communities achieve this vision and we believe this guidebook is the first step.

I look forward to working with you to adapt supportive housing for a new and invaluable purpose—giving fragile families the services and help they need to stay together and be stronger, and giving kids a chance to live healthier, more productive lives.

If you have any questions, please email [childwelfare@csh.org](mailto:childwelfare@csh.org).

Sincerely,



Deborah De Santis  
President and CEO

# Keeping Families Together

## Introduction and Core Components

Although foster care placement in many instances is appropriate to ensure the safety and well-being of children, child removal is the option of last resort for the child welfare agency. Research indicates that keeping families together is generally better for children, parents, and the community.

What leads to the dissolution of families and how can it be prevented? How can highly vulnerable families that have children in danger of neglect and abuse be strengthened and create safe and healthy environments for children?

These were among the questions that the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) considered as it sought to address the negative effects on families' health and well-being when circumstances result in a child being placed into foster care. To that end, RWJF partnered with CSH in 2007 under a common vision: When we focus on the care of the family as a whole, providing them with essential intervention services and support, we can keep children with their families in a safer, healthier, more stable home. From that vision, *Keeping Families Together* was born.

### **KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER CORE COMPONENTS**

*Keeping Families Together* was designed to address the needs of the most vulnerable families. The model shows real promise in preventing child welfare involvement and reuniting children with their families in a safe, stable environment.

The *Keeping Families Together* innovative supportive housing approach combines affordable housing with customized case management services. By leveraging the collaboration of a number of city agencies, the program helps families overcome the bureaucratic hurdles that can arise when trying to navigate these services on their own.

The *Keeping Families Together* pilot achieved promising outcomes for high-need families (see the Metis Evaluation report found at [www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Report\\_KFTFindingsreport.pdf](http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Report_KFTFindingsreport.pdf)). Although the model is not yet considered evidence-based, CSH attributes much of the success of the pilot to its five core components and recommends that any community wishing to initiate a similar project incorporate the following:

- **Supportive Housing:** Subsidized housing with customized support services should be tailored to the individual needs of families. Services should be trauma-informed and evidence-based and should focus on the needs of both the parent and child.
- **Targeted Recruitment:** *Keeping Families Together* identifies families most in need of housing and support by applying a set of criteria designed to identify children most at risk of recurring neglect and homelessness.
- **Multisystem Collaboration:** Caregivers with multiple challenges like substance abuse, mental health issues, low educational attainment, etc., need more than one public service system to meet their needs. *Keeping Families Together* coordinates these services and systems at the family level through the *Keeping Families Together* case manager, and at the systems level by convening agency leaders to integrate resources and work more efficiently for families.

- **Clinical Consultation:** The job of a supportive housing case manager is extremely difficult. The *Keeping Families Together* approach ensures that case managers are appropriately trained and supported and that they use best practices and evidence-based services for families.
- **Evaluation:** *Keeping Families Together* must measure outcomes among families and children to ensure that families are benefitting and meeting the goals of the initiative. *Keeping Families Together* uses interviews with families, children, and service providers and administrative data to determine results. These results are used to continue to adjust the model to ensure that it meets the needs of families and integrates public agency resources to improve the long-term policy response to high-need parents and children.



# Keeping Families Together

## Guiding Principles

Supportive housing typically varies widely, depending on resources and even geographic location. However, in order to implement an effective model of supportive housing for child welfare-involved families, several core features should be part of any *Keeping Families Together* model. Further, child welfare-focused supportive housing requires unique service considerations. Below are CSH's recommendations based on lessons learned from *Keeping Families Together*.

### ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

Supportive housing, a combined package of affordable housing coupled with coordinated support, is designed to help vulnerable, formerly homeless families remain in housing, live with maximum independence, connect to needed services, and attain their goals and aspirations. Supportive housing has several subcomponents:

- 1. Quality permanent and affordable housing**—Supportive housing is affordable rental housing with no time limits on residency. Tenants in supportive housing have leases and rights and responsibilities of tenancy. Rent is adequately subsidized such that extremely low-income tenants can pay no more than 30 percent of their gross monthly income for rent. The design, construction, appearance, physical integrity, and maintenance of the housing units provide an environment that is attractive, safe, sustainable, functional, appropriate for the surrounding community, and conducive to tenants' stability and community integration.
- 2. Housing stability services**—Tenants are assertively engaged and offered services to maximize their tenure in housing; increase their ability to maintain their household and finances; independently perform activities of daily living and uphold the terms of their lease; prevent lease violations; intervene in and mitigate crisis situations; maximize tenant safety and security; build community among tenants; and prevent evictions.
- 3. Informed property or landlord management**—In the case of developed apartment buildings operated as supportive or affordable housing, property management effectively maintains a balance between ensuring the effective operation and management of the physical facility and asset (including the maintenance and safety of the building) and fostering tenants' housing stability and independence. Property management policies and procedures will reflect this dual orientation, including emphasizing tenant education around rights and responsibilities, rent payment contingency arrangements, and procedures for ensuring clear communications with tenants on due process. In the case of scattered-site supportive housing models where apartments are leased on the private rental market and subsidized using a rental assistance voucher, programs actively communicate, engage, advocate on behalf of tenants, and mediate conflicts with landlords.
- 4. Care management and service coordination**—In addition to services focused on helping tenants maximize housing stability, services in supportive housing help tenants connect to, navigate, and coordinate needed health and social services. Services engage tenants to identify and define their own service goals and needs, and then assist with obtaining and coordinating services related to health, behavioral health, vocational/educational training, transportation, medication management, nutrition education, assistance with activities of daily living, and other services. Services may also include assistance with enrollment in entitlements, benefits, and health insurance; assistance with navigating public systems; advocating on behalf of tenants with service providers; and coordination of services.

## **KEY SERVICE PRINCIPLES IN SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR CHILD WELFARE-INVOLVED FAMILIES**

The services model for child welfare-involved families will be more comprehensive, with a greater focus on child well-being compared with typical family supportive housing. The services should address the trauma experienced by both parents and children and be tailored to achieve child welfare-specific outcomes. CSH has found the use of innovative and creative service strategies to be essential to serving these very vulnerable families effectively.

CSH recommends that child welfare-focused supportive housing programs incorporate the following set of principles in order to achieve desired programmatic outcomes like increasing child safety and well-being, preserving intact families, and building the capacity of caregivers to support their children and create stable homes. Further, consistency is essential to ensure that outcomes can be measured and that program evaluation results are reliable.

### **1. Housing stability is a precursor to the preservation, stability, and well-being of families and children.**

Lack of stable housing negatively impacts child safety and well-being, and also contributes to the inability of families to engage with and benefit from a system or network of care. Frequent moves or homelessness affect children's ability to attend and perform well in school, and to feel secure and stable. Moreover, homelessness and housing crises exacerbate health conditions for caregivers and children, while preventing participation in services that can help address symptoms of trauma and other mental health and substance use conditions. On the other hand, safe, stable, and affordable housing can serve as a way to engage families in care while providing a protective benefit in and of itself. Therefore, as a core principle underlying these programs, services must be linked to safe and affordable housing. Services must include assistance that maximizes families' tenure in housing, such as helping to manage the household and its finances; supporting performance of activities of daily living; ensuring that tenants uphold the terms of their lease; preventing lease violations; intervening in and mitigating crisis situations; maximizing tenant safety and security; building community among families; and preventing evictions. In addition, services must be provided within and around families' homes, including through regular (agreed-upon) visits to a family's home.

### **2. Trusting relationships promote positive change and growth in families.**

A core assumption of these programs is that a small subset of families need long-term support to build their capacity to provide an adequate level of care to their children. Supportive housing, unlike more traditional services offered by the child welfare system, is not a time-limited intervention but a long-term investment in families. Program staff need to encourage open communication and cultivate trust and relationships with families. Services providers must be seen by families as a source of support and assistance for routine services and in moments of crisis. Such relationships are critical to both develop a deeper understanding of the complex service needs that contribute to child neglect and to anticipate and readily respond in situations of crisis. Every interaction with families should be seen as an opportunity to engage families and strengthen the alliance with them. Program staff should have training and competence around non-judgmental communication and engagement skills that can help cultivate strong alliances and relationships with families. Furthermore, effective supervision can help reinforce skills and practices that promote relationship-building, and can guard against judgmental attitudes and communication patterns that decrease families' trust and engagement with service providers.

Staff can promote recovery and family stability while improving the capacity of caregivers to provide a safe and permanent home for their children by:

- Ensuring housing retention and improving housing stability among families as a platform for ongoing engagement and family stability.
- Working with families to devise and implement a comprehensive, family-based program that focuses on child safety, positive family functioning, and wellness.

- Building a network of support within the program and among tenants that focuses on trust, well-being, and social/community integration.
- Advocating on behalf of parents and children to ensure that they understand the requirements of the social services in which they are engaged. Staff should facilitate access to public benefits available to families. In addition, they should act as a liaison between parent and service provider when necessary while building the capacity of the caregiver and child to communicate effectively and advocate for themselves.

### **3. Services staff must be viewed as “system-neutral” advocates for families.**

Related to the principle of building trust and relationships with families, effective services approaches must also be viewed as “system-neutral” with respect to the child welfare system. If service staff are viewed by families as an extension of the child welfare system, families may not be willing to share or disclose information that could be essential to effective services delivery. In order to maintain neutral, non-threatening relationship with tenants, it is essential that “protective” job functions remain in the child welfare field office. Supportive housing staff will communicate and coordinate with child protective staff as needed but functions should be separate.

### **4. Services are voluntary.**

To support families’ engagement with services and their perception that these services are a source of support rather than punishment, services should not offered in a coercive manner or through mandates. Instead, assertive and creative engagement practices must make services attractive to families and reinforce a culture of open communication and trust. Motivational interviewing and other evidence-based engagement strategies have been effective in helping families voluntarily engage in services. In addition, peer supports and peer-based services can be built into the program structure.

### **5. A team-based approach to staffing produces positive outcomes for families.**

Ensuring the safety, stability, and well-being of vulnerable children and families is a complicated job, requiring wide-ranging information and practice knowledge. One worker practicing alone cannot know and do everything that needs to be done. Thus it is suggested that interdisciplinary teams are developed to work with families. The team is a source for information, understanding, consultation, joint practice, and accountability. Each member of the team should bring a variety of skills, life experiences, and perspectives. The team could include a legal advocate and/or peer advocate for the family.

### **6. Supportive housing provides an opportunity to build a community of support and safety.**

Stress and isolation undermine health and parenting. Staff should build a culture of support and interaction among tenants. However, there will be many families who have learned not to trust their neighbors and would rather engage in activities outside the immediate community. Opportunities to connect to other families both in the program and in the community should be provided on an ongoing basis.

### **7. Adopt a “whatever it takes” approach.**

The supportive housing model provides unique opportunities to work with and directly observe family circumstances in real time and on a daily basis. This ability to deliver services “in vivo” makes it possible to attend to the wide range of needs experienced by families with complex needs. Service program staff must be prepared to work beyond the purview of an ordinary 9–5 work day, providing a wide range of assistance and “troubleshooting” around issues not typically viewed as part of social service practice. This kind of holistic service further reinforces families’ positive perceptions and experiences of programs as a true source of help. To meet this expectation, staff must have appropriate resources and support, including cell phones, laptop computers, and cars or other access to transportation.

# Building Effective Child Welfare-Supportive Housing Partnerships

In order to effectively serve families that are both in supportive housing and involved with or of at risk of becoming involved with child welfare, housing providers and social service programs will need to learn more about their local child welfare system—how it works and what being involved in the child welfare system means for families. At the same time, child welfare partners will want to learn more about supportive housing and what housing resources exist in their community.

The child welfare system has complicated policies and procedures. These policies typically vary from state to state and sometimes county by county. Learn the basics by going online. The Administration for Children & Families sponsors the Child Welfare Information Gateway, [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov), which provides comprehensive information and materials on child welfare.

The housing and homeless systems are different but related entities. These systems also vary widely depending on the community. To learn more about supportive housing, go to [csh.org](http://csh.org). To identify housing resources in your community, please see the housing resource section of this guide.

The child welfare system has an overwhelming mandate to ensure the safety and well-being of children. This makes it subject to much more scrutiny than most other public systems. The agency is typically stretched thin and can be overburdened by new initiatives. However, supportive housing has the potential to lighten caseloads and reduce the number of children in foster care. Use these shared goals and mutual interests to build effective partnerships.

**Please see below for a few tips on building effective collaboration around a child welfare supportive housing initiative.**

- **Ask about needs.**

Housing and child welfare work with a very similar set of people but approach them in different ways. Working in partnership through supportive housing allows each system to see families in a holistic way—not just as a set of problems related to a particular expertise. Supportive housing is part of the solution to both homelessness and child neglect. So start conversations with this in mind. Determine how the *Keeping Families Together* model or supportive housing can solve each system’s most stubborn challenge. Which families are of most concern to each system? How can supportive housing for child welfare-involved families meet the needs of those families?

- **Learn the basics.**

Housing and child welfare professionals may use the same words to describe the same things. When establishing a local collaboration, bring housing and child welfare partners together and give them the opportunity to teach each other the basics. What does it mean to have an “open” case? What is a rental subsidy? What is the role of a case manager?

- **Accommodate resource challenges.**

The child welfare system is under extreme pressure from growing caseloads, decreasing funding, and ongoing public scrutiny. It typically does not have staff to free up for a new project, so develop work plans with this in mind. Be sure to be clear about who’s responsible for what.

# Strategies for Identifying High-Need Families for Supportive Housing

*Keeping Families Together* served families who have persistent challenges and multiple problems that compromise their ability to provide a safe and stable home for their children. Poverty, mental illness, substance abuse issues, low educational attainment and little work history are common. For families that are also homeless or unstably housed, these multiple challenges often manifest in multiple contacts with the child welfare system.

Parents in these families tend to receive multiple referrals for services and touch many public systems, and yet fail to provide a sufficient level of care to their children.

CSH believes from our work on *Keeping Families Together* that the children in these families could benefit most from supportive housing.

## INDICATORS OF NEED

Below is a list of indicators that, in conjunction with one another, describe families in need of supportive housing. The list is intended to help communities identify appropriate families.

- 1. Family is extremely low-income (30% of Area Median Income or below).**
- 2. Family has history of persistent and repeated contacts with child welfare system as indicated by any of the following:**
  - Multiple prior reports (more than four total or two in the last six months) of maltreatment (either indicated or not). Reports include various types of neglect allegations.
  - Family is under family court supervision (expensive and indicates more intense supervision needed).
  - At least one child has had more than one removal from caregiver custody.
  - More than one minor child has been removed from caregiver custody in the past five years.
- 3. Caregiver has persistent challenges and little social support, including:**
  - One or more chronic conditions, including but not limited to mental illness, substance use disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, or chronic physical health conditions;
  - Other characteristics that place caregiver at high risk of child welfare system involvement, including recent history of domestic violence, caregiver is a young adult (18–25), caregiver has left or been emancipated from foster care in last three years, family has one or more children diagnosed with special needs, or family has more than three children.
- 4. Family has long-term or repeat pattern of homelessness and/or housing instability as evidenced by any of the following:**
  - Family has been homeless (in shelter, street, or place not meant for human habitation) two or more times in the last two years or for the past six months.
  - Family has had two or more moves in the last 12 months.
  - Family is currently doubled-up living with family/friends.
  - Caregiver has been in an institutional setting in the past year.

## STRATEGIES FOR IDENTIFYING FAMILIES

Communities have employed many strategies for identifying at-risk families. Data matches, vulnerability assessments and/or case conferences are among the most common of these strategies.

### Data Matching

Most public agencies have data collection systems and can identify families that have had contact with child welfare and homeless systems. However, these systems are largely uncoordinated. Although large administrative data matches may identify the number of families who overlap both systems, in order to narrow the search for families that meet the other criteria (e.g., multiple stays in shelter or multiple child welfare reports, substance abuse, domestic violence, etc.) public agency staff may have to go through case records manually to know what has been happening with individual families.

In the most sophisticated data systems, a human services agency may be able to track families across multiple departments of the agency (e.g., child welfare, homeless, TANF, mental health, etc.). In this scenario, public agencies or departments have Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) that allow staff from any of the partnering agencies to look at all of the data pertaining to a family. This is rare, and even with this complex data matching process, additional screening may be required.

### Vulnerability Assessments

Regardless of whether a data match is possible, a vulnerability assessment tool or survey can help identify and prioritize families for supportive housing. CSH, along with a group of housing stakeholders in Chicago, developed a Family Vulnerability Index to prioritize families living in homeless shelters who were currently involved or at risk of becoming involved with the child welfare system. The tool was piloted in several shelters and will soon be applied to Chicago's centralized supportive housing wait list.

### Case Conferencing

In some smaller jurisdictions, it may be possible to identify families meeting the target criteria through a case conference. Service providers already working together with common families may be able to sit down together and identify families based on their collective knowledge of the families' needs. Information can be verified through public agency partners if necessary.



# Keeping Families Together Readiness Checklist: Assess Your Community

CSH has developed a list of indicators to assess community “readiness” to implement a child welfare-focused supportive housing initiative like *Keeping Families Together*.

Use the questions below to assess whether your community has five essential components:

1. **Housing Resources**
2. **Child Welfare Partners**
3. **Service Capacity**
4. **Willingness to Collaborate**
5. **Leadership**

## 1. Housing Resources

*Keeping Families Together* is predicated on the fact that permanent housing is the platform for effective service use and positive outcomes for families. In *Keeping Families Together*, families have leases and rights and responsibilities of tenancy. Tenure in housing is not contingent upon families’ participation in services. In addition, rent must be adequately subsidized such that extremely low-income tenants pay no more than 30 percent of their gross monthly income for rent.

### Questions to Consider:

1. Does the community have family supportive housing units in development? Or are there available/vacant units within the existing supportive housing inventory?
2. Does the community have access to 20 to 50 rental subsidies or vouchers through federal, state, or local resources? The local public housing authority can tell you if your community has any of the following:
  - **Tenant-Based Family Unification Program (FUP)/Section 8 Vouchers.** Tenants pay 30 percent of their income; vouchers are administered by the local public housing authority).
  - **Sponsor-Based Rental Subsidies.** Nonprofit organizations secure subsidies, rent apartments in the community and sublease apartments to families.
  - **HUD Shelter Plus Care.** Federal program provides a Section 8-level subsidy and requires organizations to provide a service match so that services and housing subsidy are integrated. Nonprofit organizations administer.
  - **State/Local Rental Subsidies.** These include permanent and/or transitional subsidies. Families may have to pay 30 percent or more of their income.

## 2. Child Welfare System Partners

The mandate of the child welfare system is unlike any other system. Although the paradigm is changing, most public child welfare agencies are safety-focused and crisis-oriented. A successful *Keeping Families Together* must engage with the child welfare system, so that the system recognizes the program's value to families as well as the relief it provides to overburdened child welfare staff (see page 9 for tips for working with child welfare agencies).

### Questions to Consider:

1. Does the child welfare agency already collaborate with the public housing authority? With supportive housing providers?
2. Does the child welfare agency see housing as critical to the families it serves?
3. Is there a high-ranking staff person in the child welfare system who sees the need and wants to collaborate?

## 3. Service Capacity

Improving the safety, stability, and well-being of vulnerable children and families is complicated work, requiring wide-ranging information and practice knowledge.

### Questions to Consider:

1. Does your community have social service providers that are focused on the health, growth and development of children?
2. Are these providers willing to serve families in housing? Do they have capacity to serve additional families or are they willing rearrange their infrastructure to pilot their services in housing?
3. Are the providers willing to adopt a "whatever it takes" approach?

## 4. Collaboration/Partnerships

The needs of vulnerable families cannot be met by one public service system. Successful programs take into account the holistic needs of families and collaborate with multiple services professionals and systems to knit together services that are flexible and responsive. Communities with established partnerships and experience working collaboratively to serve families will be well-positioned to take on a complex approach like *Keeping Families Together*.

### Questions to Consider:

1. Is there an effective collaboration of public agencies and nonprofit social service providers already organized and working well together? Can this collaboration be built upon?
2. Is the collaboration willing to adopt the basic principles of *Keeping Families Together*?

## 5. Leadership

Any new initiative needs a champion to build momentum for the project, make connections, and build partnerships. *Keeping Families Together* needs a leader in the community to move the project forward.

### Questions to Consider:

1. Is there a local CSH office?
2. Is there a champion of the initiative within a community nonprofit or government agency?
3. Does this individual/organization have access to fundraising or ability to fundraise? Develop funding proposals?

## Tips for Identifying Local Housing Resources

While supportive housing is the central component of a child welfare-focused supportive housing initiative, resources for supportive housing may be among the most difficult for communities to identify.

Supportive housing involves a combination of resources, including rental assistance or subsidies that ensure that housing is affordable to very low-income families, funding for services, and, in some instances, capital funding to develop affordable or supportive housing buildings. To create supportive housing, communities not only need access to these often scarce resources, but also a means of linking and coordinating them so that affordable housing and supportive services can be combined into a single package.

So how can communities identify housing resources?

CSH suggests three potential approaches:

1. Identify supportive units currently in the development pipeline.
2. Secure rental subsidy commitments or unit set-asides from public housing authorities.
3. Identify affordable housing units currently in the development pipeline.

### **IDENTIFY EXISTING SUPPORTIVE HOUSING UNITS AND/OR THOSE IN THE DEVELOPMENT PIPELINE.**

Some communities may already have supportive housing buildings with family units under development and even in construction (in housing lingo, “in the pipeline”). These buildings may be developed by nonprofit or even for-profit housing developers who have obtained capital funding from a variety of federal, state, and local sources designed to serve homeless or special-needs tenancies. These buildings may also have special features that make them ideally suited for vulnerable families, including on-site services staff, 24-hour front desk security, and space for children and youth activities (e.g. libraries, computer labs, playgrounds). In some instances, these buildings may have begun development without a specific tenant population identified and without adequate funding for supportive services. If these pipeline units are scheduled to be open and available at roughly the same time that services funding is available, many family-sized units available in these buildings may be ideal for use as part of a child welfare-focused supportive housing initiative.

To learn whether pipeline units exist, communities should first approach their local or state [housing finance agencies](#). Most of these local and state housing finance and development agencies track supportive housing units that are at different phases of development and construction. These agencies should be able to provide information on which buildings will have units available and when (although timing estimates are contingent upon the construction timetable, which can be affected by complications, weather, etc.).

Another approach is to contact the local [continuum of care](#), the collaborative planning committee that manages the use of federal funding for homeless programs. The individuals or agencies that chair the continuum of care committees may be able determine whether new or existing supportive housing units funded through homeless-specific rental assistance programs like [Shelter Plus Care](#) units are available. Communities are also encouraged to contact [CSH](#), which may know of specific family supportive housing projects in the pipeline.

Once communities have identified potential pipeline supportive housing developments and units, they can approach the developers (project sponsors) about whether they would be willing to partner and contribute all or some of their family units toward the child welfare-focused supportive housing initiative. Many would welcome the opportunity to get additional services funding, and some may be sympathetic to the idea of using their developments to preserve vulnerable families. If possible, the parties approaching these developers should include the public and nonprofit agencies that will be the designated services providers, since the housing developers (and their property managers) ultimately will enter into a formal partnership with these providers.

Communities that can identify such pipeline supportive housing units can secure them with developers and, if needed, with housing finance agencies through Memoranda of Understanding.

### **SECURE RENTAL SUBSIDY COMMITMENTS OR UNIT SET-ASIDES FROM PUBLIC HOUSING AUTHORITIES**

Another method of identifying housing units is to approach [public housing authorities](#) about making commitments or set-asides of either rental subsidies or public housing units. In addition, through their administrative plans, public housing authorities can create a preference for child welfare-involved families that would grant them priority on the wait list without a specific set-aside.

Public housing authorities are quasi-public entities that create affordable housing opportunities for low-income families and individuals. In most communities, public housing authorities are the largest source of affordable and low-income housing. They provide affordable housing in two forms: a) public housing, typically comprising low-income or mixed-income housing developments that are directly managed by the housing authority, and b) a variety of federal rental assistance programs, the most well-known and significant of which is the [Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers \(Section 8 or HCV\)](#) program. Some HCVs carry special requirements to serve specific populations or provide services. One type of HCV that is especially relevant to child welfare supportive housing is the [Family Unification Program \(FUP\) Vouchers](#) program. More than 7,000 of these vouchers are in use by public housing authorities in 30 states.

Communities seeking to implement child welfare-focused supportive housing initiatives should approach their local public housing authorities to engage them in a discussion about how they can partner to support families in need. There is often a connection between a program's needs for affordable housing and a housing authority's needs for supportive services. Each county, city, or metropolitan area may have one or more housing authority, and, in some instances, a city or municipal housing department that functions as a public housing authority to administer Section 8 and other vouchers. In addition, some state housing finance agencies also function as public housing authorities or administer Section 8 and other vouchers at the state level.

It is important to keep in mind that public housing authorities are often approached from many directions to provide special set-asides or commitments of public housing units or vouchers for new initiatives, including from programs that serve homeless populations. In addition, many authorities have long waiting lists with little to no new units or rental assistance vouchers to provide.

When engaging with public housing authorities, communities should acknowledge resource limitations and high demand. Every unit or voucher set-aside for a new initiative is one less unit or voucher available for the general waiting list. Appeal to housing authority officials' concern for the vulnerable families to be served, their interest in ensuring good voucher utilization rates and housing stability, and the resources that community partners can bring to the table. Together, public housing authorities and their partners can (consistent with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's strategic plan) use [housing as a platform for improved quality of life](#).



### IDENTIFY AFFORDABLE HOUSING UNITS IN THE PIPELINE

Another approach is to secure units for child welfare supportive housing within affordable housing developments that are in development. This is somewhat less straightforward than securing supportive housing units because affordable housing units are not intended to serve special needs families, may not be easily integrated with services (e.g. no space for on-site services), and may even have policies that screen tenants out based on criminal or poor credit history.

Moreover, [rents in affordable housing buildings](#) may not actually be low enough to be affordable to the lowest-income families. (The term 'affordable' may simply mean that the rent is below market and may be set at levels intended for moderate-income families as opposed to low- or very-low income families.)

Using units within affordable housing developments may be more viable if pursued in conjunction with rental subsidies like Section 8 Vouchers or Family Unification Program Vouchers from housing authorities. Public housing authorities can issue [project-based Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers](#) that tie vouchers to the specific affordable housing buildings and a building-based subsidy. This creates incentives for affordable housing owners to set aside units for child welfare-involved families.

To identify potential affordable housing units in the pipeline, communities should contact their local or state [housing finance agencies](#).

# Measuring Impact: Key Program Evaluation Criteria of Supportive Housing for Child Welfare-Involved Families:

In *Keeping Families Together*, success is measured not only by housing stability but also by improved child well-being and family functioning. Below is a list of key evaluation criteria that sites can use to measure impact.

1. Decreased involvement with the child welfare system, as indicated by:
  - Fewer number/decreased frequency of reports
  - Case plan with child welfare agency/order from family court has been satisfied
  - Separated families are reunified/no re-entry in care
  - Foster care placements avoided (which can be quantified through an experimental/quasi-experimental evaluation)
2. Increased housing stability, as indicated by:
  - No returns to homelessness
  - Family remains in stable housing situation (i.e., in own housing with a lease and not in temporary situations)
  - Decrease in frequency of moves
3. Improvements in caregiver outcomes, as indicated by:
  - Improved health and mental health
  - Decreased substance use
  - Increased access to needed health, behavioral health, and supportive services
  - Increased education/employment/earnings and/or access to income supports/benefits (SSI, TANF, etc.)
  - Increased parental functioning and decreased parental stress
  - Increased social support system
4. Child well-being improves, as indicated by:
  - Improved health and behavioral health
  - Increased access to needed health, behavioral health, educational services
  - School attendance and achievement improves (school-age kids)
  - Decreased involvement with juvenile justice system (if applicable for older kids in household)
5. System improvements:
  - Shared mandate to improve child well-being among vulnerable families across public systems and community-based service providers (long-term)
  - Integration of services/funding streams across public systems to improve outcomes for vulnerable families
  - Cost offsets associated with decreased use of child welfare and homeless services systems

# Summary

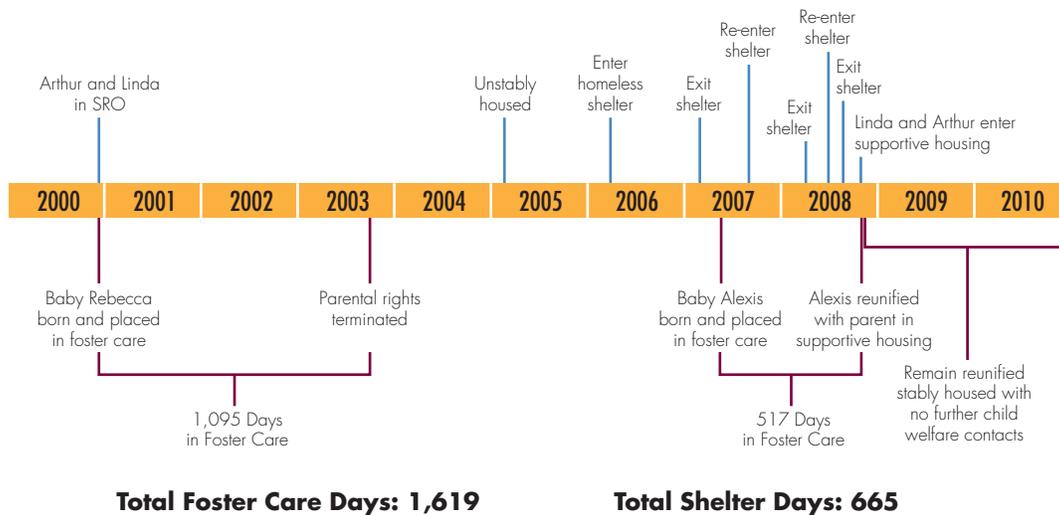
## WHY DO THIS?

Developing quality supportive housing for child welfare-involved families is difficult and complicated work, requiring the resources and knowledge of many individuals and organizations. However, it is worth the effort to create a system of support for the most vulnerable children and families in our society. If done well, the family experiences the program as a single, coherent approach that addresses their needs and builds on their strengths. Children can be with their parents and their parents have what they need to care for them.

## ONE FAMILY'S STORY

Below is a timeline that depicts the story of a family affected by serious and persistent mental health issues, repeated homelessness, and repeated involvement with the child welfare system. It illustrates that, prior to supportive housing, the parents cycled through homelessness and unstable housing situations and lost their parental rights to their first child. The couple stayed together and had another child who also was removed by the child welfare system. The parents were determined to raise this child, fought hard, did what was required of them by the child welfare system, but could not pull everything together until they had a safe and stable place to be reunited with their daughter.

## Linda, Arthur, Rebecca, and Alexis



Luckily, the couple was placed in the *Keeping Families Together* pilot and their daughter was returned to them. Today, this family is doing well and the child, now pre-school age, continues to live in the same nice apartment and attends school with her peers while enjoying a childhood with her family, surrounded by a community of support. Her parents are getting the help they so desperately need to manage their daily life and are wonderful caregivers to their daughter. Without supportive housing, this child may never have known the experience of living in a safe and stable home with her parents, and her parents would have never known the joy of raising their daughter. For additional information about CSH, supportive housing, and *Keeping Families Together*, go to [csh.org/KeepingFamiliesTogether](http://csh.org/KeepingFamiliesTogether) or email us at [info@csh.org](mailto:info@csh.org).



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