

Supportive Housing: Lifeline for Families Who Are Homeless and Involved with Child Welfare

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The federal *Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System* is a \$35 million five-year, five-site demonstration initiative facilitated by the U.S. Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF). It provides an opportunity to “examine and further efforts of the child protective services system to reduce family separation due to a lack of adequate housing” (United State Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2012).

To be considered for funding through the demonstration, each applicant had to be able to provide housing for at least 50 families through local resources. The grantees in Broward County, FL; Cedar Rapids, IA; Memphis, TN; San Francisco, and the state of Connecticut are now collectively providing housing and services to more than 300 families with children at risk of, or already in, foster care.

These five demonstration sites are in the midst of testing a resource-rich approach that uses the provision of affordable housing as a platform for stability for families involved in child welfare systems so that they can pursue intensive services and supports to safely stay together or be reunified.

Child welfare agencies have long recognized that families they work with often need housing assistance and where resources have permitted, they have been in the housing business. Many local child welfare offices have small pools of flexible funding to help families pay for temporary shelter, utilities, security deposits, and even a month or two of rent. Frontline staff also can help families access federal

Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers for housing when they complete their court-ordered requirements.

As these housing needs have been addressed in conjunction with child welfare cases, child welfare staff have generated a greater understanding of the role that housing plays in family stability and well-being. These families face severe and multiple challenges including recurring homelessness, frequent encounters with child welfare and mental health systems, domestic violence, and substance abuse issues (United State Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2012).

Supportive housing is a newer option for child welfare systems serving families with complex needs. These programs emphasize permanent housing and support regardless of the individual’s service or treatment participation. In the national effort to reduce individual, chronic homelessness, steady research concludes that this approach has been very effective (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2017).

While families who can benefit from supportive housing do not represent a large portion of the overall child welfare population, they can be the most challenging and costly families to child welfare and homelessness systems. Supportive housing in this context is a very specific service intended to meet the specialized needs of a small number of families. For example, the demonstration sites target families with complex challenges as early as is possible in the family’s current episode of involvement with the child welfare system.

Supportive housing case managers work side by side with other professionals intervening with families to provide intensive wraparound services and act as system navigators and neutral advocates for parents and their children.

The demonstration sites are learning that successfully embedding supportive housing into the service array available to families requires strong systems-level partnerships between child welfare agencies, health care providers, and housing providers. Key partners for child welfare agencies are the organizations that control the housing resources, such as public housing authorities or executive-level housing departments, and those that provide the supportive case management services to families.

Independent evaluations of the demonstration, to be released in 2019, will provide policymakers with data on whether the provision of supportive housing services can indeed help families stay together in an environment that remains safe for everyone. But, what we are seeing thus far suggests that supportive housing can be used as a family preservation strategy, helping to stabilize the family’s circumstances and enhance child safety by offering housing and supportive services before child protective services would need to intervene. Internal demonstration evaluation reports tracking enrollment indicate that nearly 60 percent of the enrolled families have “family preservation” as their child welfare case goal at the time of enrollment. Once housed, their child welfare case was closed or the child welfare agency continued to provide services to preserve the family and avoid out-of-home placement. Unpublished internal evaluation updates with family profiles compiled from family interviews describe how families achieve stability and enhance safety with housing and supportive services. In addition, it appears that offering supportive housing to parents shortly after their children have been removed can pave the way for accelerated reunification while still keeping a child welfare case open and expecting parents to complete court-ordered services.

In the end, our goal is to show that supportive housing, if targeted to the right families, can be a smart public policy investment. Our five demonstration projects are beginning to see outcomes that may prove just that.

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Strategies from the demonstrations that work especially well:

- **Using data to target families most in need.** The sites have been proactive in creating and using data from different public agencies to develop a profile of those who are most in need of supportive housing. San Francisco and Connecticut have started screening practices to collect information on the housing needs of all families involved with the child welfare system.
- **Establishing multi-agency teams to coordinate services.** Vulnerable families need access to many different services, and it can be difficult to align goals and resources among providers. The sites are coordinating with multiple partners including landlords, behavioral health counselors, and the families’ own support networks to help keep children and parents safe.
- **Creating stronger partnerships between housing and child welfare.** Partnerships between state and local housing agencies and local child welfare organizations have been essential to progress so far. The demonstration site in Memphis, with support from the local Continuum of Care collaborative, has prioritized units for parents with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness and child welfare intervention.
- **Using a Housing First philosophy.** This approach connects families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing quickly and successfully, without any preconditions or barriers.