

Child Welfare & Supportive Housing

RESOURCE CENTER

Notes from the Field

Series 1, Issue 1

Data collection strategies for identifying families facing child welfare involvement & homelessness

Challenge

Limited data exists regarding the links between family homelessness and involvement with the child welfare system. This lack of data severely limits policymakers' understanding and hinders their ability to make informed decisions about scarce resources. In addition, this gap in information impedes service providers from fully understanding the needs of the families, hinders collaboration among systems, and obstructs effective planning of holistic interventions.

Importance

Since family circumstances change over time, collection of formal data from families about their concrete needs, such as housing and involvement with other systems (e.g., child welfare) should be done periodically by multiple child and family-serving systems, including child protection, education, health, housing/homeless, mental health, etc.

Information should be collected from families in a respectful manner. To avoid any misunderstandings, parents and other caretakers must be informed immediately when approached that these data gathering efforts are for the purposes of better understanding and meeting the needs of the family.

What we are learning

Sites participating in the *Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families with Child Welfare Involvement* have found creative ways, at times building upon existing processes and strengthening partnerships, to gather information about a family's housing needs and involvement with the child protection system in order to:

- Identify child welfare-involved families for whom supportive housing is best suited;
- Inform selection of evidence-based programs; and
- Develop quality-improvement practices.

The following are examples of how two demonstration sites collect data – one with access only to homelessness system data and the other with access to child welfare system administrative data.

Memphis, TN – Memphis Strong Families Initiative

Memphis Strong Families Initiative (MSFI) is operated by The Community Alliance for the Homeless. MSFI was challenged to understand who their highest-need families are and who was involved in the child welfare system. By closely attending to an applicant's responses on a universal intake form for housing and other concrete services and relying on referrals directly from their child welfare agency partner, MSFI has been able to successfully identify and target families for supportive housing.

During Central Intake for a range of financial and housing services, applicants are asked whether they have children in their "home". Those who are homeless are later asked about their involvement with the child welfare system. Memphis also uses the Structured Decision Making (SDM®) Risk Assessment tool designed to assess risk of harm to a child and identify issues with which a parent or primary caretaker is struggling, such as substance abuse and mental illness. The data collected is accessible for reporting and sharing with other entities.

In order to maximize the number of appropriate referrals, share data, and coordinate ongoing care for families in supportive housing, MSFI developed a partnership with the child welfare agency. Their partnership is bound by the Housing Liaison. The Housing Liaison position is funded through the demonstration grant via the supportive services agency but this person is physically located within the child welfare agency. The Housing Liaison accepts and/or generates referrals of child welfare-involved families and helps in determining eligibility criteria for MSFI. She also administers the Housing Barrier Screen to understand families' barriers to accessing and maintaining housing.

San Francisco, CA – Families Moving Forward

The San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) is implementing Families Moving Forward (FMF) in conjunction with its program partners. Committed to casting a wide net to comprehensively identify housing instability, FMF concentrates on close cooperation and collaboration among systems as well as enhancing existing tools to maximize their collection of vital information.

During an investigation of child abuse and/or neglect allegations, child welfare caseworkers with HSA complete California's Structured Decision Making (SDM®) risk assessment tool. Responses on the SDM® tool identify families who are experiencing housing crises/homelessness. The form asks whether the family's current housing is physically safe and stable.¹ This allows for quick identification of homeless families, and also permits San Francisco to assess the full needs of those families as a subset of the child welfare population.

¹ The California's Structured Decision Making (SDM®) risk assessment tool asks whether the family's current housing situation is physically safe or does not meet the health or safety needs of the child (e.g., exposed wiring, inoperable heat or plumbing, roach/rat infestations, human/animal waste on floors, rotting food). The form also asks whether a family is homeless or was about to be evicted at the time the investigation began and directs caseworkers to consider as "homeless" people who are living in a shelter and those living on a short-term basis with relatives or friends.

Since FMF could not modify the SDM® tool to make sure all eligible families were considered for referral, HSA added direction to the child welfare investigative narrative, asking the caseworker to go beyond their SDM® training and use the City and County of San Francisco’s definition of homelessness² to ensure consistency and greater accuracy. For quality assurance purposes, cases where there are indications of housing issues are reviewed by HSA on a regular basis to ensure caseworkers are referring all eligible families to FMF.

Recommendations

The more we know about families experiencing homelessness and child welfare system involvement, the better. Not only for purposes of accurate reporting, but to formulate meaningful policies and the best use of resources. A primary goal is to help community leaders, armed with relevant data, evaluate and establish effective solutions, including supportive housing, for families in crisis.

As such, it is vital that:

- Multiple systems take concrete steps to comprehensively identify all families who are homeless or at high-risk of homelessness, particularly those families also involved with the child welfare system.
- All systems serving families should look for ways to work collaboratively to collect, share and incorporate data for meeting the basic needs of families – housing, income, child care, transportation –by using universal processes and forms.

In some instances systems may not be screening to understand child welfare involvement and housing needs. We strongly recommend that:

- Rather than create new and additional processes, burdening frontline staff, systems should look for ways to incorporate questions about child welfare involvement and housing needs into existing forms and processes. Some child and family assessment instruments or intake forms may already include questions or domains addressing housing needs and child welfare involvement.
- If information about a family’s housing needs and child welfare involvement is already incorporated, additional steps should be taken to ensure processes are robust enough and the data collected is reliable. With reliability established, systems should use these data and other information gathered to “tell the story” of the experiences of families and/or help families tell their own story. In efforts to end homelessness, reduce child welfare system involvement and contribute to better outcomes for families, both personal stories and hard numbers count.

² The City and County of San Francisco also defines as homeless those who are “doubled-up” in the homes of family or friends, staying in jails, hospitals and rehabilitation facilities, families living in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units, and in sub-standard or inadequate living conditions including overcrowded spaces.

About the [Child Welfare and Supportive Housing Resource Center](#)

The Child Welfare and Supportive Housing Resource Center provides technical assistance to the five sites taking part in [Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System](#). This federal initiative is based on previous efforts deemed successful, specifically [Keeping Families Together](#), which is supportive housing designed to meet the needs of families experiencing housing instability and involved with the child welfare system.

Led by [CSH](#) and the [Center for the Study of Social Policy \(CSSP\)](#), the Resource Center provides one-on-one expertise and coordinates tailored assistance for each site. In addition, the Resource Center encourages and supports peer-learning, building on local capacity and experiences of people working in the field.

These periodic notes from the field are designed to explore and promote ideas, and share snapshots with innovative leaders in the public and private sectors involved with the delivery of services to children and families.