

Beyond the Family Unification Program (FUP):

Partnerships between Public Child Welfare Agencies and Public Housing Agencies to stably house vulnerable child welfare-involved families

Challenge

By and large, the role of Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) is to provide rental assistance and affordable public housing for families and individuals with low-incomes. The current economic climate has created greater demand for housing assistance and affordable units. At the same time, family homelessness is rising and advocates are urging more housing resources for those most in need – formerly homeless families, fragile and facing complex circumstances. PHAs, however, have limited ability to provide the supportive services that keep high-need, vulnerable families housed. Although many PHAs do their best to support families in crisis, they often lack the resources and capacity to intervene early when a family is in crisis and unable to pay their housing costs. In addition, there may be barriers preventing families from accessing housing, such as prior felony convictions, past evictions and poor credit.

PHAs are much more receptive to housing the highest need families – especially those who need supportive housing – when service providers are willing to partner with them and help ensure families obtain the intensive services they need to maintain housing over the long term.

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Importance

Evidence shows that housing stability has significant importance in a child's formative years and that homelessness or lack of stable housing is associated with negative outcomes like low educational achievement, poor health and developmental delays.¹ Further, children who are homeless have higher rates of child welfare involvement, which could lead to foster care placement.² Children who age-out of foster care have high rates of homelessness when they become adults.³

In recognition of the connection between stability and child well-being, the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), made a \$25 million investment in a demonstration project, *Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System*. The goal of this five-site, five-year demonstration is to determine if supportive housing (stable, affordable housing matched with intensive services) can end family homelessness, child welfare involvement and reduce foster care placement for the highest need families.

PHAs have played an integral role in this demonstration. This "Notes from the Field" is intended to describe how PHAs work together with child welfare agencies and service providers to stabilize families by:

- Increasing housing resources;
- Amending administrative policies and eligibility criteria to remove barriers preventing families from accessing housing;
- Coordinating with service providers to reduce the time families spend homeless before securing affordable rental housing assistance;
- Investing in supportive housing.

These intentional changes made to improve how public systems collaborate and deliver vital services are positively impacting high-need vulnerable families within the demonstration and beyond.

What We Are Learning

1. **Strong advocacy is crucial**
 - a. **Appealing directly to PHAs as well as local, state or federal officials can pay off for high-need families**
 - b. **Establishing real partnerships with PHAs can result in systems change, adjustments to administrative plans and policies, and elimination of barriers to benefit high-need families**
2. **Evidence is building PHAs are recognizing allocation of Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers for supportive housing are a cost-effective and prudent investment**

¹ Marci McCoy-Roth, Bonnie B. Mackintosh and David Murphey, Feb 2012, "When the Bough Breaks: The Effects of Homelessness on Young Children," Child Trends, Early Childhood Highlights, Volume 3, Issue 1.

<http://www.childtrends.org/?publications=when-the-bough-breaks-the-effects-of-homelessness-on-young-children>. National Center on Family Homelessness. 2011. "America's Youngest Outcasts 2010."

² <http://www.socialworkers.org/practice/children/2009/sept2009.pdf>

³ <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/inside/predictors-homelessness-during-transition-foster-care-adulthood>

Cedar Rapids, IA – Partners United for Strong Families – Cedar Rapids (PUSH-CR)

Appealing to PHAs and Other Officials Can Create New Housing Resources for Families

How do we ensure families obtain scarce subsidies?

Partners United for Supportive Housing – Cedar Rapids (PUSH-CR) is a collaborative family supportive housing program led by non-profit leader Four Oaks. The City of Cedar Rapids Housing Department (CRHD) manages the city’s allocation of Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV). Cedar Rapids’ City Council approves all changes to the HCV waitlist priorities.

Before the demonstration, Cedar Rapids’ HCV program had a preference for chronically homeless single adults. Through the PUSH-CR collaboration, CRHD established two additional HCV waitlist preferences within their administrative plan: (1) amending the chronically homeless preference to include families; (2) a new, limited preference for families with housing instability and an open case with the state child welfare agency.

In addition, CRHD and the Iowa Department of Human Services Child Welfare Division created and signed a Memorandum of Understanding, establishing a partnership and assuring that services would be provided to families who met the preference criteria.

Sarah Buck, Housing Programs Manager of CRHD found that investing housing choice vouchers for child welfare-involved families had community-wide support. According to Ms. Buck, “...the opportunity for housing allows them [families] to receive supportive services to get them back on their feet.” Ms. Buck went on to say, “...giving families a safety net keeps them together. This is the purpose of PUSH-CR. We are happy to work with this program.”

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San Francisco, CA - Families Moving Forward (FMF)

Working with PHAs to Create Systems Change Can Eliminate Barriers for Families with High-needs

How do we house homeless families in a tight, high-cost rental market?

Families Moving Forward (FMF) is a family supportive housing project led by the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) in partnership with the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA).

San Francisco is one of the most expensive rental markets in the country and affordable housing is out of reach for many families. In order to make housing affordable for demonstration families, HSA worked with the SFHA to dedicate to the project 100 FUP vouchers. Yet, in San Francisco’s market, the assistance provided with the voucher was still not enough.

Housing vouchers require a household to contribute thirty percent of their income to rent and utilities. The PHA covers the remaining cost. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) sets Fair Market Rents (FMR) and PHAs set payment standards based on the FMR. Payment standards are the maximum rent a landlord can charge when housing a tenant with a voucher. In tight rental housing markets, a low payment standard can make it difficult for families to find acceptable and quality units. In San Francisco, where there is an abundance of market rate-tenants willing to pay much higher rents than the voucher allows, high-need, vulnerable families dependent on assistance had a difficult time finding affordable apartments.

In order to address this serious obstacle, SFHA petitioned HUD to increase their payment standards. SFHA was successful and received authorization to pay up to 110% of Fair Market Rent (FMR), up from 90% of FMR. This gave demonstration families with SFHA vouchers the ability to compete for available units in the rental market.

SFHA also made an important change to their administrative plan to better serve families within the demonstration.

FMF found high-need families were being denied access to FUP vouchers due to their criminal background. HPP, the supportive housing service provider, helped families to appeal these denials. However, according to SFHA's Director of the Leased Housing Department Steven Rosario, "families were losing the housing because of the denial process." Unfortunately, even the families who managed to win appeals remained homeless, living in motels or other substandard living arrangements for months as the process dragged on.

To rectify this, SFHA looked to a model they had developed for another population with similar complex circumstances and needs—homeless veterans. After a thorough review, the SFHA modified their administrative plan for high-need families to match their screening and approval process for Veterans Assistance Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers. As a result, SFHA no longer subjects families to additional screening criteria outside of the federally mandated minimum entry requirements.

As of January 1, 2015, the new SFHA's administrative plan reads:

“Discretionary reasons for denial of assistance outlined in 24 CFR 982.552 and 24 CFR 982.553 and further defined through policy in this Plan may not be applied to families referred for targeted assistance under the Veterans Assistance and Supportive Housing (VASH) program or the Family Unification Program (FUP).”

This change in the administrative plan eliminates the denial process for many FMF families and creates long-term systems change for families enrolled in the FUP program. The adjustment in the payment standard – FMR – gives high-need families a fighting chance to find housing and the elimination of unwieldy screening and appeals helps house high-need families quickly.

Broward County, FL – H.E.A.R.T.

PHAs Collaborating Together – Pooling Investments and Prioritizing Families Needing Services – Maximizes the Investment in Supportive Housing

Will PHAs invest their resources in supportive housing and collaborate regionally to serve families with the greatest needs?

The Housing Empowerment Achievement Recovery Triumph Alliance for Sustainable Families (HEART) in Broward County, Florida is led by Kids in Distress, Inc. (KID) with five PHA partners.

The lead PHA participant, Broward County Housing Authority (BCHA) identified an opportunity for regional PHA collaboration. The PHAs united to pledge 50 vouchers to the supportive housing program.

According to Ann Deibert, Executive Director of the BCHA, “One of our major interests is that we have a large FUP program very similar to H.E.A.R.T., except the services are short-term. What we see with [FUP] families is that when services ended...there was a strong likelihood they were not going to be able to function and abide by the rules to pay rent, be a good neighbor, budget, keep lights on, etc., and many faced termination and were eventually terminated because of lack of program compliance. If they had intensive services, such as those offered through H.E.A.R.T., the likelihood of losing the FUP housing voucher decreases. This is what we want to see long-term for these families and why supportive housing is proving a good investment.”

BCHA conducted an outreach to housing agencies across the region, urging them to participate in H.E.A.R.T. In addition, BCHA drafted language to establish a limited priority for families in H.E.A.R.T. to dedicate vouchers to the project. The five PHAs then utilized the same language in their administrative plans.

Because of H.E.A.R.T., these PHAs collaborated in a consortium model to provide vital FUP housing assistance to high-need families. They worked together with a common purpose and incorporated similar language into their administrative plans, with each recognizing the value of what their investment in supportive housing has to offer.

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What More Can Be Done

PHAs play a fundamental role in the solution to reunite and preserve families. PHAs can provide a foundation for reunification and stabilization for families with complex needs when affordable housing is coupled with comprehensive supportive services as in this demonstration. To sustain existing partnerships between PHAs and providers and create new ones, we recommend:

- The US Department Health & Human Services (HHS) and HUD offer combined allocations of housing choice vouchers and support service funding to enable local PHAs and communities to serve families with the most complex needs. The successful HUD-VASH program offers a model for this kind of strategic federal allocation of resources.
- Short of new funding, HHS and HUD should provide guidance to PHAs and child welfare agencies on how best to target housing resources provided by FUP or HCVs to families in need of stability in order to benefit from support services.
- Child welfare agencies should be acquainted with public housing rules and encouraged to find ways to support their local PHAs in serving families with higher needs. They and other family-serving organizations can partner to leverage collective resources to provide services to ensure families do not return to homelessness or re-encounter the child protection system.
- PHAs want to serve complex families effectively. Child welfare agency and PHAs have a shared mission in supporting vulnerable families and ensuring their housing stability. PHAs can reach out to their local child welfare agencies to identify how to align their housing and services resources to create supportive housing for child welfare involved families. PHAs ensure families have access to public housing units by reducing HCV and FUP entry criteria to the federal minimums. By collaborating with service providers and making key administrative changes PHAs can create a sustainable portfolio of housing for vulnerable families.

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 successful efforts, such as [Keeping Families Together](#), 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 sharing 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.