

HOW THE FAMILY UNIFICATION VOUCHER PROGRAM KEEPS FAMILIES TOGETHER THROUGH CRISIS

Public Child Welfare Agencies (PCWA) across the country are working to safely prevent the separation of children and youth from their families and keep young people from exiting care without the connections and supports needed for long-term success. Access to safe and stable housing is important for keeping families together and preparing youth to transition to adulthood. While lack of housing should not necessitate or prolong child welfare involvement, housing instability alongside additional challenges, such as substance use or mental health needs, can affect overall placement decisions. Housing vouchers are the primary housing resources for supporting families and youth with their long-term stability goals.

CSH estimates that there are approximately 90,000 families and youth in need of supportive housing, including 43,646 families with child welfare involvementⁱ. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx families and youth are disproportionately represented within this number. Black families are 5.85 times more likely to be homeless and 2.57 times more likely to be involved in the child welfare system when compared to families of other races. Indigenous families are 3.54 times more likely to be involved in the child welfare system and 2.4 times more likely to be homeless. Latinx families are 2.43 times more likely to be homeless and 1.04 times more likely to be involved in the child welfare systemⁱⁱ. LGBTQIA+ youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness. In addition, people of color represent a disproportionate percentage of youth experiencing homelessness (89%).ⁱⁱⁱ



Housing vouchers play a significant role in helping keep families safely together, reunify successfully, and reduce re-involvements with child welfare. Children and youth who have a reliable place to call home spend fewer days in foster care, experience a reduction in subsequent abuse and neglect cases, reduce their risk of subsequent homelessness, and increase their school attendance.^{iv} While child welfare agencies do not need to become experts on vouchers, the information below will help child welfare leaders gain a better understanding of vouchers available for families and youth and how the voucher program works.

OVERVIEW OF FEDERAL HOUSING VOUCHERS

Most housing vouchers available today are issued from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD administers a range of housing vouchers or rental subsidies that families can use to rent housing.

The [Housing Choice Voucher \(HCV\) program](#), historically referred to as “Section 8,” is one of the better-known HUD voucher programs. Through a competitive process, HUD allocates HCV to public housing authorities (PHA), which then provide tenants with a subsidy that covers a portion of their rent. Tenants typically contribute approximately 30% of their household income towards housing costs. HCV are often tenant based, meaning that voucher holders receive the subsidy and provide it directly to a landlord on the private rental market. HUD does allow PHAs to designate a portion of their HCV as project based, meaning that a voucher is tied to a specific housing unit and a person must meet certain criteria to live there. The unit could be in the private rental market or housing owned by the PHA.

[Special Purpose HCV programs](#) have also been created within the larger HCV program^v. Special Purpose HCVs represent just under 10% of the overall HCV program^{vi}. They are tailored to the needs of specific populations and are allocated to PHAs as separate awards with specialized criteria for eligibility and often requiring specific partnerships with other entities. Special Purpose Voucher programs designated for populations impacted by the child welfare system include the Family Unification Program and Foster Youth to Independence^{vii, viii}.

FAMILY UNIFICATION PROGRAM VOUCHERS

The [Family Unification Program](#) (FUP) is administered by PHAs in partnership with a Public Child Welfare Agency (PCWA). FUP can be used by both families and youth transitioning from care. Expectant and parenting young people may fall in either category depending on other eligibility factors present.

FUP provides a non-time limited voucher for Families for whom the lack of adequate housing is a primary factor in:

- The imminent placement of the family's child or children in out-of-home care (i.e. foster care), or
- The delay in the discharge of the child or children to the family from out-of-home care.

FUP provides an up to 36-month housing voucher for Youth ages 18 through 24 years who:

- Left foster care at age 16 or older or will leave foster care within 90 days through the formal child welfare transition plan, and
- Is experiencing or is at risk of experiencing homelessness.

Many jurisdictions have accessed and utilized FUP vouchers for child welfare populations to the benefit of families, youth, and communities. FUP vouchers have been awarded to approximately 300 PHAs across the country. through a national competition by HUD.^{ix} However, if a PHA shows an inability to fully distribute and maintain voucher utilization, HUD can recapture vouchers and reallocate them to another PHA. Further, low FUP utilization may impact eligibility to receive new voucher awards. As of November 2022, HUD reports current FUP awards effectively create 26,057 housing vouchers, of which 20,173 are currently leased (77.42% utilization). PCWA that continue to experience a lack of housing resources should see this as an opportunity to work with their local PHAs to increase voucher utilization by connecting families with child welfare involvement and youth to available vouchers.

HOW DOES FUP WORK?

The information below provides a basic overview of the FUP program. For those looking for more detailed information on the application process, program requirements, and innovative practices, please see the [Family Unification Program Vouchers: How-to Guide for Public Child Welfare Agencies.](#)

PHA and PCWA Partnerships

New FUP vouchers are made available periodically through a Notice of Funding [Opportunity](#) (NOFO) from HUD. HUD notifies PHAs as funding becomes available and posts updates on available funding on their website^x. To qualify for FUP, a PHA must have a formal partnership with a PCWA that has been established through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and signed during the application period established in the NOFO. If a PHA receives the FUP award, the partnership moves forward with each agency playing specific roles. The role of the PHA includes formally administering the program, training PCWA on the FUP program

requirements, developing tracking metrics, determining family eligibility once referred from the PCWA, providing services for families and youth that may extend beyond the life of the child welfare care, assisting families and youth in locating housing, engaging landlords, and conducting unit inspections. For their part, the PCWA plays a lead role in estimating the number of needed vouchers for a 12-month period, training the PHA and other housing partners on working with families and youth, creating a system to identify and prioritize families and youth for vouchers, certifying eligible families and youth as vouchers become available, and providing additional support services while they are still in care.

Identifying FUP Eligible Families

As noted above, the PCWA is responsible for creating a system to identify and prioritize families and youth for vouchers.

The housing status of families and youth may not always be evident, since housing is not a metric that is uniformly collected by child welfare agencies. There are several examples of PCWA and child welfare partners that have imbedded steps to [screen for housing stability](#) within existing frameworks; examples can be found in Hennepin County, MN, San Francisco, CA, and across the State of Connecticut^{xi}. This has made it significantly easier to identify and match families and youth with FUP vouchers. Linking data across the PCWA Information System and the Homeless Management Information Systems will help identify families who would benefit from housing and services support. In many cases, creating a data-sharing agreement between partners can help to set up parameters and protocols that protect participant privacy under applicable laws.

Best practices for creating a system to identify and prioritize families and youth also include working with parents and youth so that the criteria and the selection process centers the experiences of those most affected, avoids judgments on “housing readiness,” and prioritizes families as soon as they are identified rather than waiting for the completion of other aspects of their case/treatment plans.

Based on guidance from HUD^{xi}, families and youth meet the definition for “lack of housing” if they are:

- Living in substandard or dilapidated housing
- Homeless.
- In imminent danger of losing their home
- Displaced by domestic violence
- Living in an overcrowded unit
- Living in housing inaccessible to the child or children with a disability, or to youth due to the nature of the disability.

FUP and Supportive Services

For some families and youth, housing alone may not be enough. Providing supportive services paired with rental assistance can allow families and youth to access and maintain housing, as well as make progress toward their case goals and self-sufficiency. Yet, historically, many recipients of FUP have not been matched with needed services. While optional, HUD encourages partners to provide an array of supports and services. Further, in more recent NOFOs, applicants have had the potential to earn additional points when FUP partners commit to providing all FUP recipients with access to Family Self Sufficiency or similar programs and case management services for at least 6-12 months.

Several jurisdictions have shifted their view of FUP. Rather than thinking of FUP as a separate program, they are seeing it as a housing subsidy resource to pair holistically with a broader wraparound service array, or as a part of a supportive housing model.

“My children are all close to 18 years old and they have lived in the same neighborhood all the years since pre-school because of my housing voucher. They formed long-term friendships, are comfortable in their environment, and all observed me going to work daily. It was only natural for them to follow suit once they reached age 16. I can’t say that would have been the case had we not had this voucher. When all you can see around you is poverty you have low expectations for yourself and family, resorting to overreliance on public benefits and hustling to survive being modeled for my children without stable housing and community.”

- Parent

CONCLUSION

Housing stability is essential to the well-being of children, youth and families. Multiple systems and agencies have a role to play in keeping families together and reducing involvements with the child welfare system. Partnerships between PHA and PCWA are critical in equitably addressing family housing and stability needs. Once effective partnerships are established, FUP is a vital tool to achieve family housing stability and a sense of truly thriving.

What have you tried that has been successful? What lessons about child welfare and housing partnership do you have that might benefit the larger community of practitioners? What are other challenges to utilizing FUP or other housing tools? Send a note with your questions or examples to 1Roof@csh.org.

ABOUT CSH

The Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) is the national champion for supportive housing, demonstrating its potential to improve the lives of very vulnerable individuals and families by helping communities create more than 385,000 real homes for people who desperately need them. CSH funding, expertise and advocacy have provided \$1.5 billion in direct loans and grants for supportive housing across the country. Building on 30 years of success developing multiple and cross-sector partnerships, CSH engages broader systems to fully invest in solutions that drive equity, help people thrive, and harness data to generate concrete and sustainable results. By aligning affordable housing with services and other sectors, CSH helps communities move away from crisis, optimize their public resources, and ensure a better future for everyone. Visit us at www.csh.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This brief was made possible in collaboration with Casey Family Programs, whose mission is to provide, improve – and ultimately prevent the need for – foster care.

RESOURCES

- [Family Unification Program \(HUD\)](#)
- [What do we know about the impact of homelessness and housing instability on child welfare-involved families?](#)
- [How can supportive housing help improve outcomes for families in the child welfare system?](#)
- [Helping Families Involved in the Child Welfare System Achieve Housing Stability: Implementation of the Family Unification Program in Eight Sites](#)
- [Building Partnerships to Support Stable Housing for Child Welfare-Involved Families and Youth](#)
- [Cross System Collaboration](#)

ⁱ [Supportive Housing Need in the United States \(CSH\)](#)

ⁱⁱ CSH Racial Disparities and Disproportionality Index: <https://www.csh.org/supportive-housing-101/data>

ⁱⁱⁱ Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities: Phase One Study Finding, (2018). The Center for Social Innovation

^{iv} Metis Associates (2010), Keeping Families Together: An evaluation of implementation and outcomes of a pilot of supportive housing models for families involved in the child welfare system

^v An overview webinar and fact sheet on Special Purpose Vouchers can be found here: [Special Purpose Vouchers: Working Collaboratively to Achieve Community Goals to End Homelessness - HUD Exchange](#)

^{vi} [Housing Choice Voucher \(HCV\) Data Dashboard | HUD.gov / U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#)

^{vii} The [Foster Youth to Independence](#) (FYI) program is a secondary voucher program that is reserved only for youth. FYI provides time limited rental assistance of up to 36 months, with limited exceptions that may allow for up to an additional 24 months of assistance for youth engaged in a [Family Self-Sufficiency](#) or similar program.

^{viii} Additional Special Purpose HCV not covered in this brief including Veteran's Affairs Supportive Housing, Mainstream, Non-Elderly Disabled, Stability, and Emergency Housing Vouchers.

^{ix} [FUP Awards All Years-Updated September 2022 \(HUD\)](#)

^x HUD published all information on available funding at <https://www.hud.gov/grants>.

^{xi} [Screening for Family Housing Stability - CSH](#)