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## THE "HOUSING FIRST" APPROACH FOR FAMILIES AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE ABUSE

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Public and private solutions to homelessness have historically focused on providing homeless families with emergency shelter and/or transitional housing, which alone neither end homelessness nor prevent a recurrence of homelessness for a significant segment of the homeless population. While many homeless families are able to move into permanent housing and maintain it after an episode of homelessness, a high percentage of families are rendered homeless again when they experience their first crisis. Once in permanent housing, many families begin experiencing the same problems that led them to become homeless in the first place, and before long they are on the streets again. In fact, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, in its study *Families on the Move, Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness*, confirmed that recently housed families possess the most severe risk of becoming homeless again in the near future (Notkin, Rosenthal & Hopper, 1990).

Families in which the head-of-household has a history of substance abuse are highly represented among homeless families and are particularly at risk of recurrent homelessness (Rog & Holupka, 1999; Homes for the Homeless, 1992; Buckner et. al, 1993; National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999). Those who are actively using drugs are usually terminated from programs that might lead to permanent housing. Further, although a parent may have success-

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fully maintained sobriety in a recovery program, relapse often occurs once they move to permanent housing (Homes for the Homeless, 1992).

### The Evolution of Housing First for Families Affected by Substance Abuse

Beyond Shelter was founded in 1988, in response to increasing numbers of homeless families in Los Angeles and the need for a more comprehensive approach to serving them. The agency's core program, *Housing First for Homeless Families*, introduced an innovation in the field, which

has since helped to transform both policy and practice on a national scale. The emphasis of the "Housing First" methodology is to move homeless families into permanent, affordable, rental housing as quickly as possible, and then provide time-limited support services after they have been relocated out of the homeless services system.

Advocates of the Housing First model believe that vulnerable and at-risk homeless families are more responsive to interventions and social services support after they are relocated to permanent and stable housing. They also believe that homeless children are served most successfully through home-visitation support for the family unit as a whole, with stable housing providing the base.

Thus, the Housing First methodology provides a systematic, direct means for vulnerable and at-risk homeless families to return to permanent, rental housing, while still receiving individualized supportive services as they develop (or redevelop) stable living patterns. It offers an individualized and structured plan of action for often alienated, dysfunctional and troubled families, while providing a responsive and caring support system. Specifically, the program facilitates the move into permanent housing for homeless families and then engages the newly housed family in a progressive set of individualized case management activities and interventions for a time-limited period, as the family attains improved social and economic

well-being. Over the past decade, this approach has proven to be particularly effective in addressing the combined housing and social services needs of families with histories of substance abuse, many of whom experience ongoing or intermittent episodes of homelessness (Morse & Gillespie, 2002).

## Adapting the Basic Components of a Housing First Approach

The Housing First methodology is easily adaptable to existing child welfare and family services programs where it can be implemented as a “next step,” particularly for families with multiple challenges. The key program components, which may be provided by either a single agency or through partnerships and collaboration, are the following:

- Crisis intervention and short-term stabilization are provided by emergency shelters, transitional housing, domestic violence programs, and substance abuse treatment or recovery programs (either residential or outpatient).
- In-depth needs assessments identify a family’s permanent housing and social services needs, including those of children to be reunified. The resulting “case management plan” becomes the basis for both short-term and longer-term case management, including during the housing search phase and after the family has been relocated to permanent housing.
- Housing resource specialists immediately assist families in accessing permanent, affordable housing. This includes obtaining move-in funds and rental subsidies, and negotiating leases on behalf of families who have multiple barriers to obtaining housing, such as poor credit, eviction histories, substance abuse histories, lack of employment, etc.
- Once families are in permanent, rental housing, case managers provide direct social services support for a transitional period of

time, focusing on household management, money management, parenting, and issues related to recovery – aware that relapse may occur, but helping the family through those episodes until the adult has exhibited the ability to maintain sobriety for extended periods of time.

- To address their longer-term needs (e.g., ongoing recovery support, family counseling, and parenting education/support), families are connected to mainstream resources and services in their new neighborhoods or communities.

## The Housing First Program in Los Angeles

Beyond Shelter’s Housing First Program in Los Angeles was designed to serve the emergency shelter/transitional housing continuum of a large, metropolitan city. More than 35 agencies throughout the Los Angeles area – shelters, transitional housing programs, residential drug treatment programs, sober living homes, domestic violence programs, and social service agencies – refer homeless families to Beyond Shelter for the “next step,” after they have provided initial emergency or interim services.

### Target Population

The program serves homeless families with dependent children at or below the federal poverty level. Families must meet the following criteria to be eligible for enrollment: a stable source of income (including TANF, the income source of 80% of families served upon referral to the program); one or two adults with legal custody of one or more children under the age of 18; sobriety of adult family members for at least six months; and, in cases of domestic violence, separation of the adult victim from the batterer for at least four months.

Approximately 90% of the 350 families enrolled each year are headed by a single female. Approximately 50% of the mothers are in recovery and approximately 40% became home-

less due to domestic violence. The average age of parents is 30 years, and the average number of children is 4. Approximately 20% of the mothers are pregnant upon enrollment, and approximately 25% of the families have histories with the L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services. Many of the mothers in recovery have had children removed from their home and are in the process of reunifying with them.

## STEP 1

### Intake, Screening, and Needs Assessments

The intake process is extensive, involving interviews with both the Social Services and Housing Resources staff of Beyond Shelter. The screening includes identification of strengths and weaknesses of the family unit, and a detailed history of health, welfare, education, employment, housing, substance abuse, family violence, and “other agency contacts.” Any current history of involvement with the child welfare system is noted, and all children are carefully screened for special needs. Together, the family and case manager develop an individualized Family Action Plan, which provides the underlying structure for the delivery of supportive services. When the Plan is acceptable to both the family and the case manager, a contract between the family and agency is signed and enrollment is complete.

## STEP 2

### Housing Resources and Relocation

After completing the screening and assessment, the case manager and family meet with Beyond Shelter’s

Housing Resources staff to begin the process of relocation to permanent housing, preferably in a neighborhood of the client's choice. Participants are assisted in overcoming barriers to obtaining rental housing, such as poor credit and eviction histories. Housing Resources staff provide participants with tenant education and assistance in obtaining Section 8 housing subsidies (when available), identifying affordable housing in the community at-large, conducting lease negotiations, and accessing move-in funds. Beyond Shelter does not own or master-lease apartments for families in the program. Therefore, to provide access to housing for families, they maintain relationships with property owners and management companies throughout Los Angeles County, many of whom are motivated to work with the program because of the advocacy and credibility provided by Beyond Shelter staff. Most participants move into their new home within three months of the initial assessment.



### Time-Limited, Home-Based Case Management

Participation in Housing First case management is completely voluntary once families are in their own rental housing. However, the majority of families respond positively to offers of support, including assistance in obtaining basic furnishings and other household needs. The case manager introduces the family to their new neighborhood and its resources and maintains frequent contact, particularly when the head-of-household is in recovery or there is a history of child maltreatment. At the same time, case managers address the long-term needs of each family, connecting them to appropriate community resources. Support services provided to families once they are in permanent housing may include, but are not limited to, the following: household management, assistance in obtaining child care, job

development and job placement, tenant-landlord mediation, child abuse intervention and prevention, parenting education and counseling, money management and budgeting. Families with a history of substance abuse or family violence are encouraged to maintain contact with the referring agency (e.g., drug treatment program) for follow-up and also may be referred for additional services in the new community.

Services are provided for six months to one year, depending upon need. During the first eight years of operation, Housing First case management was provided for a minimum of 12 months after the family moved into permanent housing, with evaluations at quarterly intervals.

Currently, Beyond Shelter's primary funding source for Housing First activities is HUD, which funds case management for six months only. Nevertheless, high-risk families are generally monitored for up to one year, with some remaining in the program for a longer period of time, particularly if an outside agency cannot be accessed to meet the family's needs.

### Graduation and Follow-Up

After participating in the Housing First Program for six months to one year, it is expected that most families have become part of a neighborhood and community, developed stable living patterns, improved the functioning of the family unit, improved family relationships, and are providing a safe, secure and nurturing environment for their children. Desired outcomes for children include good health, safety, and survival; social and emotional well-being; school readiness; and improved economic well-being of the family unit as a whole.

Because a major focus of case management in Housing First is connecting families to community-based programs and resources for longer-term support, "graduation" does not mean termination of services provided by outside agencies. Additionally, families graduating from Beyond Shelter's Housing First Program may call for assistance at any time after termination from an active caseload. Families who experience another housing crisis are

assisted immediately, sometimes receiving a one-time rent subsidy and short-term case management or assistance in moving to another apartment. For the majority of families in which relapse occurs, interventions prevent a family's eviction from their housing.

### Research, Evaluation, and Outcomes

In Los Angeles, from 1989 through 2003, approximately 2,800 primarily high-risk and multi-problem homeless families were enrolled in Beyond Shelter's Housing First Program, with more than 85% stabilizing in permanent housing within one year. Since its inception, the Housing First Program has been tested and refined through several national demonstration projects implemented by Beyond Shelter. In 1990-1993, Beyond Shelter conducted the U.S. Health and Human Services-funded *Los Angeles Early Intervention Demonstration Project for Recently Homeless and At-Risk Families*. In 1992-1995, the home-visitation model was expanded through the HHS *Family Support Center Demonstration Program*. From 1999-2001, a Department of Labor *Welfare-to-Work Demonstration Program* was implemented, in which the target population consisted of primarily Housing First participants, with poor reading and writing skills at least 30 months of welfare dependency, and histories of substance abuse.

In 1999, the Housing First Program was chosen by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change as one of 19 sites nationwide to participate in a two-year evaluation initiative, *Wanted: Solutions for America* (2000-2001). Research was conducted by the University of Southern California, in conjunction with the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University. Quantitative data was compiled on 97 families, to measure the effectiveness of the Housing First methodology for those who completed six months in permanent housing. The data was collected within the first month of the family's move and then again at the end of six months sustaining their permanent housing. Two models were utilized in the evaluation – the *Program*

*Logic Model for Homeless Mothers and Children*, and one measuring family stability and self-sufficiency. Indicators of program outcomes included: housing, finances, domestic violence, substance abuse, health, employment/training, education, and parenting. The overall findings suggest that participants in the Housing First Program achieved both improved social and economic well-being and stability in permanent housing. At least one parent in 26% of the families had a history of substance abuse; after six months in housing, 87% of them were living drug and alcohol free and 13% had relapsed since enrollment. However, all the families in which a parent relapsed were able to maintain their housing while they were reconnected to their support groups and/or previous treatment programs.

During 2003-2004, Beyond Shelter has been implementing a two-year Housing First longitudinal study, funded by the Seaver Institute, measuring the program's longer-term impact on stabilizing homeless families after supportive services have ended and the family is living completely on their own. Representing a second phase of formal inquiry into the Housing First Program, the study builds upon research conducted through the Pew Partnership Initiative. This new research project is also collecting data on an additional 100 families who participated in the Housing First Program from 1997 through 1999.

## Funding Housing First Programs

Beyond Shelter's Housing First Program was funded initially through private funds and as a demonstration program of the federal Department of Health and Human Services. Currently, major funding is provided by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Because the basic Housing First methodology builds upon existing systems, it is possible to implement the housing relocation and home-based case management components with minimal new funding. For example, upon request and within programmatic guidelines, modifications to

existing federal or state child welfare or family services contracts might be made to enable an agency to fund housing relocation services as a case management activity. Many social services agencies already provide home visitation to families. For Housing First, the case management interventions would focus on "stabilizing families in their housing" during the first few months, while at the same time identifying and quickly addressing signs of relapse in a parent. Many homeless services systems in communities currently provide move-in funding for families identified as "homeless" (based on HUD criteria). Collaboration with an already existing system of homeless resources and services can facilitate implementation of Housing First for families with substance abuse issues, many of whom are currently being served by mainstream health and human services systems.

The greatest challenge is, of course, accessing subsidized housing or accessing housing that is affordable to families with limited income. Successful Housing First programs separate this function from case management and social services. This separation may be accomplished in a variety of ways, including hiring "housing staff" (preferable) or, for example, developing a collaborative effort with an existing housing counseling agency in the community at-large. For instance, in many communities, local housing authorities prioritize the provision of Section 8 subsidies to homeless families; others may maintain project-based subsidized apartments scattered throughout the community. Some housing authorities hire "housing counseling" personnel, who assist low-income tenants in accessing subsidized housing and also provide case management after the move.

## Conclusion

The Housing First methodology provides a vital resource for the child welfare system in America. This innovative approach to housing high-risk and vulnerable families with children provides a systematic, direct means for families in which a head-of-household

is in recovery to return to independent living and stability in the community, with a time-limited relationship designed to empower, without engendering dependence. The methodology facilitates long-term stability and provides formerly homeless families with the support necessary to remain in permanent housing. Rather than grouping families with similar problems at one site, it provides for "housing choice" and allows families to integrate into new communities and be connected to new support systems – or to remain close to existing support systems, family, and friends.

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*The mission of Beyond Shelter is to combat chronic poverty, welfare dependency, and homelessness among families with children, through the provision of housing and social services and the promotion of systemic change.*

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