The Intersection of Families, Housing, and Child Welfare Systems

A point-in-time estimate conducted on September 30, 2010 concluded that more than 408,000 U.S. children were in foster care and 254,000 children entered the system at some point in 2010. That same year, an estimated 1.6 million children experienced homelessness — an increase of 448,000 (38%) in only 3 years.[1] Research indicates that housing instability and involvement in child welfare systems are connected, with some estimates suggesting that up to 30 percent of child welfare cases could be prevented if families had adequate housing.[2] In addition, research suggests a correlation between involvement in child welfare services and extended and recurrent periods in shelters and out-of-home placements. Despite the apparent relationship between these factors, little qualitative or quantitative research exists on the connection between housing instability and child safety/ well-being or the role that housing access plays in family preservation.

In August 2012, HUD, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and with support from Casey Family Programs, hosted a meeting on the intersection of families, housing, and child welfare systems. The event brought together federal officials and staff, leading researchers, and philanthropic partners to discuss existing and ongoing research, current programs and emerging service models, and ideas on how research can inform efforts to better coordinate housing, family, and child welfare services. The event included two panel sessions and an informal discussion of existing research gaps.

Research on "Front End" of Child Welfare and Homeless Systems

Understanding the extent of the relationship between housing instability and involvement in the child welfare system is an important step in developing effective policies and implementing programs that can leverage housing to promote child well-being and family stability. Recent research by Patrick J. Fowler, associate professor of clinical psychology at DePaul University, examined the prevalence of housing problems among families involved in the child welfare system and the effect of housing services on their housing stability. Using a nationally representative sample derived from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, Fowler and colleagues used "housing problem indicators" to measure the prevalence of inadequate housing as a contributing factor for involvement in the child welfare system. The findings suggest that approximately 16 percent of families in the sample population experienced a housing problem. In a separate study that used the same dataset, Fowler examined the effect of housing services on housing stability for two groups of families involved in the child welfare system: those who received housing services and those who did not. Results indicate that housing instability increases among families who receive housing services compared with those who do not. This finding suggests that providing general housing services is not enough to promote housing stability and that, to ensure positive child and family outcomes, more must be done to integrate the provision of housing and child welfare services.

Recognizing the need to more proactively address housing instability as a contributing factor in placement in the child welfare system, Dennis Culhane, professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a leading researcher in homelessness and assisted housing, discussed how an integrated model for homeless and child welfare services could potentially serve families. Because homelessness often precedes family separation, Culhane noted that initial involvement in the homeless system is an opportune time to provide housing assistance and other preventative and treatment services to promote family preservation. This initial intake point could also be used to implement progressive engagement strategies to more efficiently target resources. Progressive engagement provides customized levels of need-based homelessness assistance as a means of better targeting resources and improving service delivery.

Building on the concept of progressive engagement, Anne F. Farrell, associate professor at the University of Connecticut's Department of Human Development and Family Studies, discussed the development of

the Risk Assessment for Family Triage (RAFT) measure as a means of enhancing intake procedures and ultimately improving case management and service delivery in supportive housing for families in the child welfare system. A collaborative effort between the University of Connecticut's Center for Applied Research; The Connection, Inc.; and the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, RAFT is being administered (together with other intake measures) as a means of assessing strengths and weaknesses related to housing stability and child safety and well-being.

RAFT's ability to take the population of families involved in the child welfare system and segment it into subpopulations based on risk factors and family strengths is currently being tested alongside clinical measures of substance abuse, parenting stress, and family functioning. Preliminary findings on a small sample of families (n = 80) suggest population segmentation into "low" and "medium to high" risk groups. Forthcoming research on a larger sample of families is expected to provide more evidence regarding the efficacy of RAFT and the degree of population segmentation among families. This research could help promote more customized and targeted service delivery among families involved in The Connection's supportive housing program.

Research on Housing Models, Supports, and Services

While the scale and the nature of the relationship between housing instability and involvement in the child welfare system is still being understood, programs that promote family stability through housing assistance exist in limited capacities throughout the country. Since 1992, HUD has issued more than 45,000 housing choice vouchers as part of its Family Unification Program (FUP). FUP provides housing choice vouchers to 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 or the delay in the discharge of the child or children to the family from out-of-home care.

Initial research into outcomes related to FUP indicates the program's potential for promoting family preservation and creating a pathway for family unification. Debra J. Rog, associate director at Westat, discussed findings from the first evaluation of HUD's Family Unification Program (FUP). Rog's descriptive study examined program implementation and outcomes of more than 1,600 families across 31 sites. The findings suggest that program participants achieved high levels of both housing stability and rates of family preservation and reunification; 85 percent of families were stably housed 12 months after the program, 90 percent of at-risk families were preserved, and 62 percent of families in need of reunification were together.

Although Rog's research highlights the promise of FUP in promoting family preservation and housing stability, questions remain about how outcomes are affected by varying degrees of service-level quality and intensity. Two ongoing FUP research projects seek to address these gaps. Fowler and colleagues at DePaul University are using a randomized controlled trial to measure FUP outcomes in Chicago. The research examines the effect of FUP on family stability and childhood development outcomes in participating families, compared with families who receive standard child services that do not include a housing choice voucher. Complementary research by Mary Cunningham and Mike Pargamit at the Urban Institute involves a qualitative assessment of FUP implementation in eight cities to better understand the opportunities and challenges associated with administering the program and coordinating services among housing and child welfare agencies.

The event concluded with a discussion of remaining research gaps and how future research could inform program design and policy development. Understanding the cost-effectiveness of both integrated service provision and progressive engagement strategies was seen as vital to developing evidence-based policies, as was conducting qualitative assessments of housing and child welfare service providers. The event demonstrates HUD's commitment to exploring partnerships that address the intersection of housing and child welfare policy; it also reinforces the important role of empirical evidence in future policy development.