

commentary

What we did wrong, and how we are trying to fix it

BY TANYA TULL

During the first decade of homelessness in America, the 1980's, we thought that we were dealing with a "temporary problem" and that providing emergency shelter would solve it. However, we soon learned that we were wrong. By the 1990's, emergency shelters and transitional housing had become part of an accepted continuum of care that supposedly would lead to permanent housing at the end – with the desired outcome being, of course, an end to homelessness. And yet, as the years went by, no matter how hard we tried, nor how much we cared, we could not keep on top of the need.

In Los Angeles, we began to see families cycle in and out of shelters and transitional housing for months and often years at a time. In response, in 1988 I created Beyond Shelter, introducing an innovation in the field: Housing First. The Housing First approach to ending family homelessness has since helped to impact both public policy and practice on a national scale. The basic methodology helps homeless families and individuals relocate to rental housing as quickly as possible, with the services traditionally provided in transitional housing provided after the move into permanent housing. Today, more than 50 agencies refer homeless families to Beyond Shelter, with over 3,000 families successfully stabilizing in permanent, rental housing throughout L.A. County.

The focus of the Housing First approach is on helping homeless families and individuals not only get back into housing, but also get back into communities. The program methodology is based largely on the belief that homeless families and individuals are more responsive to interventions and support after they are in their own housing rather than while still living in emergency shelters or transitional housing. It is also firmly based on the universal human right to housing.

There is no single model for Housing First programs, and the methodology can be easily adapted into existing homeless services systems. However, all Housing First programs include four basic components: (1) crisis intervention/short-term stabilization, (2) screening/assessment/planning, (3) housing search assistance/movement into permanent housing, and (4) case management both before and after the move.

Housing First programs vary greatly, depending upon the target population being served, availability of rent subsidies and/or affordable housing, and the particular resources and interests of a community. For example, in Housing First programs for families, the family generally holds the lease to their apartment independently and participation in services is voluntary. Agencies serving the chronically homeless, however, often hold the lease (master-leasing) and are the payee for the resident's funds.



Although it took more than a decade to begin reversing the trend towards longer stays in the homeless services system, Housing First programs are now being successfully implemented for a variety of homeless populations across the country. Today we know that emergency shelters and transitional housing, while important components in a strategy that must be as multi-faceted as the various target populations we serve, are simply stepping stones. If at the end of our interventions and support, the homeless are still homeless – or at risk of another episode of homelessness – then what have we really accomplished? ♦

Tanya Tull is the President/CEO of Beyond Shelter and a Senior Fellow at the UCLA School of Public Affairs. In addition to Beyond Shelter, she founded Para Los Ninos and A Community of Friends and co-founded L.A. Family Housing Corp.