

Project Homeless Connect: **Creating Solutions for Homeless Individuals and Families**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alameda County's Social Services Agency Department of Children and Family Services is presently part of the Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project. As part of this demonstration, the Department of Children and Family Services has sought innovative strategies for providing prevention services to families in need. Thus far, prevention strategies have focused on families that have come into contact with the child welfare system via the child abuse hotline or a child abuse investigation. It is recommended that this strategy be expanded to include providing services to families that have not had child welfare contact, to include those families that are experiencing homelessness. Recognizing that homelessness,

by itself, is not a reason for a family to come to the attention of the child welfare system, homeless families often face of myriad of related problems that can cause concern.

A national best practice model of service delivery is the City and County of San Francisco's Project Homeless Connect. This program acts as a conduit in connecting homeless individuals and families with needed services that exist within the community.

This case study reviews Project Homeless Connect program, with an emphasis on its unique service delivery, and draws practice implications for Alameda County.

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The Alameda County Department of Children and Family Services has sought innovative ways to provide preventative services to families and children in Alameda County. Thus far, prevention has focused on families that have already been touched by the child welfare system, via the child abuse hotline or an actual child abuse investigation. The premise of this paper is to explore broadening prevention services to include those families who are homeless and are in need of services. Specifically, this paper will examine San Francisco's Project Homeless Connect program as a service delivery model that acts as a conduit in connecting homeless individuals and families to needed services that exist within the community. It will provide an opportunity to draw implications for how Alameda County Social Services Agency may promote greater collaboration between departments (Children and Family Services, Adult and Aging, Economic Benefits, Employment Services) to provide a far-reaching safety net for Alameda County's most vulnerable populations.

Project Homeless Connect (PHC) began in 2004 at the behest of San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, who sought better options for the growing homeless populations in the city. Since then it has become a "national best practice," model of service delivery to homeless populations and has been replicated in over 170 sites across the country, as well as Canada, Puerto Rico and Australia. It is an excellent example of innovative practice and collaboration. The primary goals of Project Homeless Connect are to:

- Improve access to services and housing for homeless San Franciscans
- Engage and increase the collaborative involvement of homeless consumers, business, non-profit community and individual volunteers to work together to create solutions to homelessness.

- To improve the system of care by creating opportunities for collaboration and sharing of best practices among San Francisco's homeless provider community.
- Leverage private, corporate and foundation money and in-kind support to augment city efforts to increase housing options and build service capacity for homeless San Franciscans. (Project Homeless Connect, www.projecthomelessconnect.com)

Every other month, a Project Homeless Connect event is held wherein services providers are brought to a central location to better access to care. These events are staffed primarily by volunteers from community and corporate volunteer programs. An average of two thousand homeless individuals and families are served at a PHC event. Project Homeless Connect is innovative in that it does not actually provide services directly, but creates a venue for the multitude of service providers that exist within the city to reach a broad base of homeless constituents who use their services. More importantly, by centrally locating these services, homeless users can engage in multiple services in a "one-stop shop." To assist in making this "one-stop shop" most efficient, clients are triaged as they enter to determine of which services they need. Clients are then provided with a volunteer guide to make their way through the event.

The array of services available at a PHC event spans medical services to ministerial support.

There is a diversity of mental health providers that reflect the homeless population within the city. Some of the key services that appear to be most utilized include: medical and dental care, alternative medical services, storytelling, a hot lunch food bank, a range of social services, and wheelchair Repair. Some of these services are described in more detail below.

Medical and Dental Services

Clients going through a Project Homeless Connect event have the opportunity to have their physical well being evaluated by doctors, dentists and medical and dental students. For dental needs that cannot be met on site (e.g., root canals, extractions, fillings, etc.) clients are transported to local dental offices to have those procedures performed. As PHC events are done every two months, it is sometimes known in advance that a client may need a procedure. Those clients are brought to the event early, triaged and sent to their appointment—with the expectation that the client will be able to return later in the day to take advantage of other services.

Doctors onsite are also able to evaluate clients for physical conditions that otherwise might be left to worsen. Clients are able to receive confidential HIV testing and delousing/debugging. Additionally, through the assistance of several optical stores, clients have been able to have an eye exam and receive a pair of prescription glasses. For many, this may be their first pair of glasses since needing them. Moreover acupuncturists, chiropractors, and massage therapists donate their time and expertise as well. These service providers do see a number of clients during each event. The acupuncture is often used to assist clients with pain relief and anxiety.

The massage therapy meets many of the same needs, but also provides human touch/contact which homeless clients often do not receive.

Storytelling

As with many of the ideas for Project Homeless Connect, the idea of storytelling is one that began with an idea and a digital camera. The idea was to take pictures of what was going on during the event as evidence of the power of the work. The result has been a professional photographer that does professional sittings for clients and volunteers who are interested. Additionally, they are able to tell their story that led them to participate in the event. The pictures are powerful. A single sitting may involve twenty to thirty shots. With each portrait, a layer of defensiveness, frustration, along with a variety of

emotions necessary to live on the streets, is stripped away. The end results are stunning black and white photographs that begin to restore dignity to the client. Clients receive their photo several weeks after the event. Some clients have reported that they were able to give their children a picture of themselves for the first time since becoming homeless. Others have remarked that the time of the sitting helped them to feel that someone actually saw them.

In addition to restoring dignity to the clients that participate in the event, these photos also serve to assist with public awareness and corporate fundraising. It is easy for an advocate to tell the story of how a client became homeless, but it is more powerful to hear the story from the clients themselves. These photos are available on the website and there are plans for a public display in and around San Francisco.

Homeless Outreach

Although a number of clients are able to get to Project Homeless Connect on their own, there are also outreach teams that work on the day of the event. These teams walk the streets of the San Francisco and approach homeless individuals who may not be aware of the event. These teams actively encourage the homeless they encounter to participate in the event to receive services or at a minimum a hot lunch. Those who are physically unable to get to Project Homeless Connect may receive a taxi voucher.

For the homeless who live in outlying areas of San Francisco (e.g., Bayview Hunter's Point) on event days, Project Homeless Connect works with community centers to serve as pick-up points throughout the city where clients can go and get a ride to the event. Additionally, these clients are also triaged by service providers at the community center, so that when they reach the event they are able to enter without having to wait.

Additional Service Providers

As part of their ongoing pro bono work, the Bar Association of San Francisco regularly volunteers at Project Homeless Connect. They assist by evaluating if a client may be eligible for a voucher from the

Department of Motor Vehicles to receive a free California ID. They then assist with completing the necessary paperwork. The Department of Motor Vehicles completes this process by taking the photo necessary for a photo ID. Identification is important as most government services, banks, etc. require valid identification.

Volunteers from Sprint/Nextel provide free phone calls for clients participating in the event. Clients are able to make a variety of phone calls. Sometimes these calls are for business; other times it to connect with an estranged family member. Occasionally, these phone calls lead to a client being reunited or relocated to live with that family member. Event participants are also able to receive a hot meal during the event. Further the San Francisco Food Bank provides groceries to participants. Finally, there are a number of government social service program supports available at each event. Clients are able to access assistance from CalWORKS, SSI, and Medi-Cal.

Challenges

As with any successful program, there have been challenges that have had to be addressed. First, Project Homeless Connect has had ongoing corporate support since its inception. These corporate sponsors range from a variety of well known corporations, including Sutter Health, Kaiser Permanente, Deloitte. These corporate sponsors have contributed to the underwriting of PHC events. However, in recent years this support has begun to dwindle. It does not appear that the change in support is the result of the current recession but rather that corporate sponsors are spreading their support throughout the community. Thus a project may receive support for a few years but then have that support moved to another worthy project.

A second challenge that Project Homeless Connect has experienced is limited participation by families in their events. It is known that services are needed, but there is a belief amongst the administration/provider network that families are less likely to participate as they wanted to avoid their children

coming into contact with homeless individuals with mental health or substance abuse issues. In an effort to address the concerns, the first Family Connect was held on April 8, 2009; only homeless families were allowed to attend. The basic services provided above were available, but there was an emphasis on services families would utilize. For example, CalWORKS staff was available to assist clients with completing an application or to address a sanction. Planned Parenthood was available and they emphasized the basic health care they could provide to families. This event seemed to address the concerns of families, as a number of families with children were present.

The most significant challenge faced by Project Homeless Connect is the lack of available housing. Although PHC has been successful in getting a number of clients into transitional housing, as long as there is limited permanent housing, clients will continue to experience homelessness.

Budget Implications

It is difficult to estimate the costs of administering the Project Homeless Connect Program, and its every other month events. Officially, Project Homeless Connect has an annual budget of \$500,000. This covers the costs of staffing, office space, etc. However, this is only a portion of the cost of administering the program. Other departments within the City and County of San Francisco, including Department of Public Health, Department of Public Works, Human Services Agency, etc., provide in-kind support in the form of staffing. Participation in the preparation for each Project Homeless Connect event, as well as day of support becomes part of the "work assignment" for these staff. Moreover, supplies (e.g., chairs, buses, etc.) are contributed by various departments as well.

In addition to the administrative costs for Project Homeless Connect, each event averages approximately \$20,000–\$30,000, with the variance depending on the donations received for the event. Project Homeless Connect has been fortunate to secure corporate sponsorships to underwrite these additional costs.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice in Alameda County

Alameda County and the City and County of San Francisco have similar demographics with their homeless populations. It is estimated that Alameda County has approximately 6,200 individuals that were homeless on any given night (Alameda County-wide Shelter Survey Report, 2004). In 2007, it was estimated that San Francisco had approximately 6,500 homeless individuals. San Francisco continues to address the problem of homelessness through Project Homeless Connect and several other efforts. Alameda County has a number of service providers and has been seeking a unified approach through the EveryOne Home plan, which has plans to find 15,000 homes by 2010.

However, in Alameda County it is estimated that approximately 43% of the county's homeless are families, and 28% are children. These families are in need of a swifter approach to action and a basic need to be connected with services. By providing broad-based prevention services in the form of Family Connect events, Alameda County could assure that those families do not come to the attention of Children's Protective Services due to a parent(s) inability to meet a child's basic needs. It should be noted

that homelessness by itself is not sufficient reason for a child to come into foster care; however a lack of medical attention, nutrition and a myriad of other problems that homeless families often face can result in a family being brought to the attention Children's Protective Services.

Alameda County has the unique opportunity to utilize funds present in the Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project to underwrite a collaborative of service providers to create a Family Connect Program, which would offer broad-based preventive services to homeless families. It is recommended that Alameda County create a cross-departmental steering committee with members of the homeless provider network to have a Project Family Connect in Year Three (FY 2009–2010) of the Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project.

Acknowledgments

I would like to formally thank Kendra Stewart, homeless advocate, for opening doors, sharing her story with me, and her assistance with this case study. I would also like to express my gratitude to Judith Klein, Project Homeless Connect Director, for her hospitality and the opportunity to study a truly innovative practice.