

***Accessible Child Care Expedited For
Shelter System (ACCESS) in San Francisco:***
**Implications for Serving Homeless Families
in Contra Costa County**

PEGGY HENDERSON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mayor Gavin Newsom of the City and County of San Francisco has made it a goal to address the problem of homelessness in his city. One of the programs that has come out of the efforts in the city is the ACCESS program Accessible Child Care Expedited for Shelter System (ACCESS) San Francisco. It is a project to help families with at least one child under three (the most vulnerable population) currently or formerly (within the previous six months) living in one of the city's homeless or domestic violence shelters obtain childcare. ACCESS childcare is provided by child care centers and licensed family child care homes with spaces committed for this population. The program is coordinated through the Children's

Council which also handles the payment process. Catholic Charities staff help families get on the list that is managed within the Childcare Eligibility List (CEL).

Contra Costa County has a long-term plan to address homelessness issues. The childcare funds available to families in Contra Costa County, through both CalWorks and the California Department of Education (CDE), currently seem to be addressing the issue. However, Contra Costa County is in the process of changing how and to whom these funds are available. It is recommended that the county specifically looks at the potential impact on the homeless population.

Peggy Henderson is Emergency Response/Voluntary Family Maintenance/CRT supervisor with Children and Family Services in Contra Costa County.

Accessible Child Care Expedited For Shelter System (ACCESS) in San Francisco: **Implications for Serving Homeless Families in Contra Costa County**

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Introduction

The violence was bad, but you put up with it for a long time because you thought you had no options. Family and Children's Services were called and they helped you see how the violence was affecting your children. They didn't sleep well and then fell asleep in class. They didn't eat well and caught every illness that every child in their class had. They often cried when things didn't go well on the playground.

With the help of the social worker you finally left him and went to the shelter. It was a relief to not have someone watching your every move, challenging every penny you spent, and slapping you, spitting on you, or punching you when you couldn't account for some time or some money.

Sitting there in the dark and quiet felt good but now the old questions came back. "How will I take care of the children? How will I get a job? How will I find a home I can afford? I need to take care of my children. Even this place has lots of rules about watching them and monitoring them all the time." The tears slid quietly down your face as you searched for answers.

In San Francisco City and County, a woman in this situation has answers to those questions thanks to a creative and timely subsidy program called ACCESS or Accessible Child Care Expedited for the Shelter System. If a family needs childcare to facilitate looking for a job or looking for housing or taking some needed respite time to heal, there is now a system to help them.

Background

The City and County of San Francisco has many programs to help families with child care. They recently put out a bid package: the 2007-2010 Joint Competitive Solicitation for Early Care and Education. Cooperatively, the Department of Children, Youth and Their Families, First 5 San Francisco and the Human Service Agency- Department of Human Services published a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) and Request for Proposals (RFP) in ten areas. They have budgeted up to \$11, 705, 248 annually to ensure children from birth to age five have access to affordable, high-quality early childcare and education. The services build upon previously funded programs and include new, innovative activities, including the ACCESS program.

Key Elements

ACCESS was created to specifically address the needs of parents who are or have been homeless. To be eligible for ACCESS funding a family must currently be living in or have formerly within the last six months lived in, any of the following shelters:

- St. Joseph's Family Center;
- Hamilton Family Residences and Emergency Shelter;
- Compass Family Center;
- Asian Women's Shelter;
- La Casa de las Madres: or
- Rosalie House (Riley Center).

The family must also have at least one child under three years old.

When a family decides they need these services and meets the criteria, they contact their shelter case manager, or if they are no longer at the shelter they contact Catholic Charities. Case managers in the shelters also are informed of the program and may approach families to refer them. Families are then placed on the Centralized Eligibility List (CEL), a citywide child care subsidy database. CEL serves several thousand families seeking subsidized childcare. They have over 50 participating child care programs.

There are CEL providers located throughout the city who have committed to accepting ACCESS families. All of the ACCESS providers are required to meet specific standards of quality and have dedicated spaces for homeless families. The family is able to choose which provider they would like to provide child care for their children. Once a childcare provider is selected by a family, the childcare provider sends the family a letter informing them of an open slot at a site that is dedicated to ACCESS families. The provider, or the Children's Council ACCESS specialist, follows up the letter with a phone call.

ACCESS childcare is provided as an infant/toddler subsidy and lasts until the youngest child in the family turns three years old. Starting when the youngest child is two years six months old, the child care provider or the Children's Council specialist assists the family in transitioning to another subsidy so that by the youngest child's third birthday the change is made and there is no gap in services for any of the children.

Program Evaluation

Families without a home base often fall through the cracks of the many government systems that might help them. Without an address and often without a phone, it is easy to lose contact. When your days are spent trying to meet the basic needs of food and shelter, it is hard to move to more permanent solutions for long-term problems. When you add children to that mix, it can be overwhelming to think about job applications, deposits, and telling one more person about your problems.

ACCESS offers help to families on more than one level. It provides a safe environment for children while parents seek more permanent solutions to problems. It can also encourage the use of shelters for both victims of domestic violence who often stay because they do not see any other options and for parents who may be fearful of shelters in general but who will accept shelter services because childcare is made available to them.

Challenges

In developing the ACCESS program, San Francisco addressed the main challenges that may arise. They have developed a smooth handoff from shelters to Children's Council for assignment through CEL. They have an efficient payment program through Children's Council, already proven to be effective in handling other childcare payments. Through the clear expectations in the bid process, there is an understanding about what providers are expected to do and whom they are to serve. Funding is covered for the next three years. Keeping case managers at the shelters knowledgeable about the program and getting the word out to the homeless population will be an ongoing challenge to ensure the program is used by those with the needs the program was created to address.

Next Steps

Next steps for San Francisco include:

- Finding outcome-based performance measures demonstrating the need for the service will be key to maintaining the program.
- Monitoring the use of the funds and surveying the population to get feedback on whether the ACCESS program solves the problems previously identified, as well as what are future needs. They are currently looking at how to collect the data to help them evaluate the success of the program.
- Justifying the continued use of county funds through proof that the program being funded is consistent with the county's goal of addressing the problem of homelessness within the city.

Implications for Contra Costa County

In Contra Costa County, “on any given night, it is estimated that over 900 families are homeless, including an estimated 1,700 children.”¹ In 2001 Contra Costa developed a five-year strategic plan for preventing and reducing homelessness. The Contra Costa County Homeless Continuum of Care Plan report expressed concern regarding children and how to meet the needs of families with children. “Affordable childcare and affordable housing were identified as the two most important needs for families and the two hardest needs to meet.”² The lack of affordable childcare offered on a flexible schedule was identified as a major barrier to women leaving welfare and returning to work. As long as women are on welfare, their incomes will be low enough that they will be perpetually at risk of homelessness. Many low-income working parents have a difficult time finding childcare services flexible enough to meet the needs of minimum wage, service industry shift work. Lack of childcare is also seen as a barrier to women attending job-training programs that can help them raise their earning capacity. In addition, many clients said that a lack of childcare inhibits their ability to access other services to help them regain housing and address the issues contributing to their homelessness.³ “Our community has 4 single adult shelters, 4 family shelters, and 2 youth shelters, serving a total of 306 individuals and 211 families with children.”⁴

One of the employment and opportunity implementation strategies and action steps is “In order to increase the economic self-sufficiency of homeless people the Homelessness Inter-jurisdictional Inter-Departmental Work Group (HIJIDWG) must: ensure that homeless people have access to supports to facilitate their success at employment . . . the HIJIDWG will: Designate affordable childcare

slots for homeless people engaged in education and employment activities.”⁵

Currently, social workers with families receiving family maintenance services in Contra Costa County submit requests for funds for childcare to the Childcare Unit for services funded with money from CDE. One of the criteria for use of these funds is homelessness; however, no one has ever requested the funds using homelessness as a reason. CalWorks also has a service category for childcare for homeless parents while they are looking for work. Homelessness in and of itself is not considered child abuse or neglect under the Welfare and Institutions Code Section followed by Contra Costa’s Children and Family Service personnel. They use the homeless assistance childcare funds as a part of the family maintenance services while addressing homelessness through various other means including the use of the services of the housing liaison. It appears that Contra Costa County child welfare social workers have a method to provide homeless services without using all-county dollars as San Francisco is doing to fund a special system for the homeless.

Recommendations

Contra Costa County is currently in the planning stage for making changes to its childcare program, including contracting out childcare services. The current changes in the law will mean a larger pot of funds that the various services within Children and Family Services, including family maintenance, family reunification and permanent placement, will be vying for. Social workers providing family maintenance services, family reunification services, and family preservation services will all have families in need of childcare. The program will need to address how to equitably and efficiently disperse these funds.

Secondly there is currently an up to six-month waiting time for those on the CEL wait list in Contra Costa County. Families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness need the ability to immediately

¹2001-2006 Contra Costa County Homeless Continuum of Care Plan, p. 27.

²Ibid, p. 27.

³Ibid, p. 28.

⁴Ending Homelessness in Ten Years: A County-Wide Plan for the Communities of Contra Costa County, p. 12.

⁵Ibid., p. 19.

access funds to provide for their children while they re-establish themselves. The third population needing attention is those families who have cases open both in Children and Family Services and CalWorks. These families who are poor and have exhibited an inability to adequately parent their children, perhaps some of whom may have mental health issues, need a coordinated plan that speaks to the immediacy of their need.

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San Francisco's Working Families Credit: **A Local Tax Credit as an Outreach Tool** **for Anti-Poverty Programs**

STEFAN LUESSE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Since its enactment in 1975, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) has become one of the most prominent tools for the development of anti-poverty strategies in the United States. Liberal and conservative politicians embrace the credit because it promotes employment over welfare without raising the minimum wage or establishing new taxation for the funding of traditional assistance programs. Due to its low administrative costs and operational simplicity, it inspired many states and some local authorities to establish their own version of this credit. State and local EITCs usually follow the federal eligibility guidelines and allow for a moderate additional tax credit for working poor families.

San Francisco's Working Families Credit

Due to the increasingly high cost of living and the decrease in high-paying job opportunities, many working poor families have left the Bay Area in recent years. To stabilize the financial situation of its own working poor residents, San Francisco implemented a two-year pilot for a local EITC in 2005 that allowed for an additional 10 percent tax credit for all EITC-eligible families with qualifying children. The program gained national attention because of its

private-public partnership with the tax preparation chain, H&R Block. The program also provides additional services to the unbanked population. Over the past three years the program has evolved into an expanding outreach program to the working poor, focusing on referrals to other assistance programs, such as Food Stamps and Employment Services.

San Mateo's EITC Outreach

The EITC outreach activities of San Mateo County's Human Services Agency are directed primarily towards its own clients. San Mateo is, thereby, currently using an opposite approach than San Francisco in order to assist its working poor population in reaching financial self-sufficiency.

Recommendations

The *Working Families Credit* program is a successful tool in gathering useful demographic data on the working poor in San Francisco. However, several distinct operational and demographic barriers make this program difficult to replicate on a local level in San Mateo County. Still, some of its program elements would be valuable for a regional expansion under the *Earn it! Keep it! Save it!* Campaign of all participating Bay Area counties.

Stefan Luesse is a Human Services Supervisor at the County of San Mateo's Health Insurance and Food Stamps Telecenter.

