

# Families Moving Forward: San Francisco County's Approach to Serving Homeless At-Risk Children and Their Families

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Families that are experiencing homelessness are at risk of child welfare involvement. Specifically, children who do not have a stable living situation and one or more familial risk factors, such as domestic violence or substance abuse, are more likely to be removed from their families than children who have the same risk factors but are living in stable living situations. San Francisco County implemented a program, Families Moving Forward, after receiving a \$4 million federal grant in order to place previously homeless families in stable housing and provide them with comprehensive wraparound services and support. The program is on track for assisting 160 families by the end of the current implementation cycle in 2017.

Contra Costa County's at-risk children and families experience housing challenges similar to those in San Francisco. Contra Costa County has recently received a similar, but smaller grant from the state to help reduce homelessness. A new program, HousingWorks!, was recently implemented for families receiving CalWorks and are currently homeless. This program provides subsidies for housing along with services from a community provider to aid in finding permanent, stable housing. This case study explores the possibility of creating a means for families involved with both Children and Family Services and CalWorks to have an opportunity to find stable housing through a coordinated effort of services that help get at the root causes of homelessness along with the financial means to sustain the housing.

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## Introduction

The correlation between homelessness and child abuse and neglect is striking, with almost half of all children in foster care having a parent with a history of homelessness. Even though homelessness is not a reason for placement outside of the home in and of itself, children of homeless families have higher risk factors, including three times the rate of emotional disorders and four times a greater likelihood of experiencing developmental delays than children who are not homeless. Additionally, homelessness continues to be a significant factor in reunification outcomes. Approximately 30% of children in foster care could be reunited with their parents if their families had homes to live in (Rapport, 2015).

San Francisco County currently has approximately 6,455 homeless persons, ten percent were persons in families (Tam, 2013). The county found that between 2008 and 2012, 50% of children who were homeless and investigated for maltreatment went into foster care, versus just 13% of non-homeless children. If the family had an additional risk factor, such as mental illness, domestic violence, substance abuse, or criminal history, the likelihood of placement jumped to about 80% (San Francisco Human Services Agency, 2014).

The Families Moving Forward program is designed with the rationale that for families that are dealing with the issue of homelessness along with other issues, such as domestic violence or substance abuse, it can reduce the rate of child maltreatment

with a combination of rapid housing and focused, intensive social services for the family. This design allows children with the highest risk for placement into foster care to have their housing needs met early in their child welfare system involvement.

For many families facing child welfare system involvement, they are asked to make use of a myriad of services in order to stabilize the family. They can include substance abuse treatment, counseling, and parenting and domestic violence classes. When parents are consumed daily with trying to meet life's basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, it is easy to understand how they can be absorbed in meeting these basic needs and find themselves unable to complete many of the requirements needed to have their children returned to their care.

San Francisco County found the goal of preventing removals generated a cost avoidance in the agency budget (San Francisco Human Services Agency, 2013). The probability of child removal in the following populations were high:

- Homeless with domestic violence: 72% probability of child removal
- Homeless with mental health: 82%
- Homeless with substance abuse: 86%
- Homeless with medically fragile infant: 87%

A year in foster care currently averages \$37,000 in San Francisco. Local general funds and state realignment money account for 67% of this cost (or \$25,000). If a family has two children who are likely

going to foster care, but neither in fact does, San Francisco would save \$50,000 in local and state dollars. Additionally, reunification rates for children in foster care are approximately 50% lower for families who experienced a homeless episode in the year prior to placement (Courtney et al, 2004).

In September 2012, San Francisco-Human Services Agency (SF-HSA) won a \$4 million, five-year grant and plans to work with 160 families over the course of the grant. The program design includes:

- Accelerated triage and assessment procedures to identify homeless families who are at high risk of having children removed;
- Rapid referral of identified families to receive housing subsidies and assistance in locating and securing permanent housing;
- Establishment of multi-disciplinary service teams to help families not only maintain their housing, but also improve overall functioning and well-being;
- Hands-on, fluid, and intensive peer-based outreach and case management to ensure access to an array of health, behavioral health, employment, parenting, and other services;
- Expanded trauma-informed mental health services for children and parents;
- A focus on increasing family income through SSI advocacy and wage subsidies;
- Cross-system training for staff from the housing and child welfare departments

*(San Francisco Human Services Agency, 2013)*

## Logistics

San Francisco County employs a “lottery” system in which families are referred based on the social worker’s notation on the Structured Decision Making Tool that a family was homeless. This ensures a randomized sample into the program versus ‘services as usual’.

To be eligible for the lottery the family has to meet the following criteria:

1. Currently homeless, per the City and County of San Francisco’s definition, which includes

temporary housing, single room occupancy hotels, “doubled-up” housing, or in a shelter.

2. At least one child in the family is at the beginning of his or her first child welfare case.
3. One or more of the following risk factors present:

Caregiver	Child
Mental Illness	Developmental Disability
Criminal History	Physical Disability
Domestic Violence	Medically Fragile
Substance Abuse	Mental Illness

San Francisco is unique in the fact that it has a Housing and Homeless Services Division that manages local housing and homeless programs and Shelter Plus Care funded through federal, state and local dollars. The division works in collaboration with the Housing Authority, which manages Public Housing and Section 8 where a set number of Section 8 vouchers (20) can be set aside per year. These vouchers are valued at \$22,000 each per year. SF-HSA is also setting aside 10 permanent housing units and dedicating 30 shallow rent subsidies. San Francisco faces an additional challenge of high rents and not a lot of incentive for subsidies. Instead of the \$800 subsidy that is typically given, families involved in this project will receive a monthly subsidy of up to \$1,700 while they await a Section 8 voucher.

Where this program excels is the intensive wrap-around model for services assisting families to maintain housing. SF-HSA partners with community providers in order to provide comprehensive services. All families receive services through the Homeless Prenatal Program (HPP). This program includes intensive, face-to-face case management for the length of the grant, assistance with direct services, a wellness center, financial services, and job training. They have numerous community outreach programs and supports, such as parenting groups and GED classes. The hallmark of this model is a minimum one-time-per-month case management meeting with all service providers involved with the family.

Additionally, while the family has an open child welfare case they must meet regularly (often weekly) with the HPP case manager. This consistent communication with the family and all parties helps to ensure everyone's responsibilities are very clear.

### Challenges

Currently in San Francisco, a Section 8 voucher covers rent up to \$1,800 per month. However, the median rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$4,000 per month. There are simply not enough affordable housing resources to meet the demand. Families have been housed in temporary situations awaiting permanent housing or forced to move to surrounding counties. This compromises the service model families need for supportive services.

#### SUSTAINABILITY

The current grant expires in 2017. SF-HSA has been planning on how to sustain this program and has a Board of Supervisors approved fund of \$500,000 annually through discretionary realignment money to provide deep rental subsidies and move-in accounts for families. With the cost savings by children not going into foster care, contracts with service providers giving families the needed support are partially offset. Additionally, with collaboration between the Housing Authority and SF-HSA, twenty Section 8 vouchers per year can be secured. SF-HSA has created deep rental subsidies and a move-in fund with realignment dollars, which is now part of the agency's baseline budget (San Francisco Human Services Agency, 2013).

### Implications for Contra Costa County

Contra Costa County currently has a homeless population of 8,409 individuals impacting 1,935 families. In September 2014, Contra Costa County Employment & Human Services was awarded a \$1 million grant for a CalWorks Housing Support program. Currently, families who are enrolled in CalWorks, who are chronically homeless, have a parent with a history of homelessness, a parent under 24 years old or a child less than 6 years old are given priority

for the grant money. The program is modeled after the Housing and Urban Development's Rapid Re-Housing Program. The project goal is to house 100 families within a six month time period. Each family is given an average subsidy of \$5,999. The program has seen success thus far, having found housing for 60 families in an average of 30.75 days from referral.

### Model Applicability

For the past 25 years, studies have demonstrated the key to ending long-term or repeated homelessness is supportive housing. This includes intensive, frequent, face-to-face, multidisciplinary services. These services include outreach to those families who are distrustful of public systems, health care coordination including mental health, and services to help them maintain their housing. Families who maintained supportive housing have a reduced rate of initial foster care placement and quicker reunification rates (Rapport, 2015).

In Contra Costa County, many of the community-based services are conducted through Shelter Inc. This program offers supportive services to families including case management services, life skills training, employment, and other supportive services intended to promote self-sufficiency. Additionally, many of the families served through CalWorks have other life stressors, such as substance abuse or domestic violence that may qualify the family to participate in Family Stabilization Services. This program offers additional case management and wraparound services that can address the underlying reasons behind why the family is homeless.

#### SUSTAINABILITY

For Contra Costa, the million dollar state grant may or may not be given on a yearly basis. This makes planning for programs difficult when the grant money is not guaranteed. Finding a sustainable funding source to reduce homelessness is essential to success. Looking strictly at allocation numbers for children in foster care, San Francisco found if 80% of the children that were likely to be removed who met the enrollment criteria were not, an average of

\$6.05 million would have been saved (San Francisco Human Services Agency, 2013). These placements could generate a significant level of cost avoidance by offsetting the cost of services.

### **Bringing Families Home Proposal**

Currently, the Corporation for Supportive Housing and Housing California are partnered to advocate before the legislature for the 2015-2016 budget process for a county-matching grant program to end homelessness among families involved in child welfare. This \$10 million budget item would provide grants to counties willing to match state resources for homeless families who are currently receiving Family Maintenance services or homeless families who are receiving Family Reunification services where housing would enable reunification. The funds include assistance for two types of housing: 1) Rapid Re-Housing for about 340-400 families and 2) Supportive Housing for 135-140 families. The remaining 10% is to be used on data, reporting, and a liaison to bridge the gap between child welfare and homeless systems in each county.

#### **PARTNERSHIP WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES**

Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services is in a unique position to have a collaborative relationship with CalWorks and Children and Family Services through reinstating the Linkages program. This program bridges the gap between families receiving services through CalWorks programs such as Family Stabilization and Child Welfare cases. What can be learned from San Francisco County is that by focusing on families with the greatest risk of losing their children and fostering the stability that housing provides, fewer children will need to be removed from care. By CalWorks working collaboratively with Children and Family Services, the county can identify which of these families are at the greatest risk and start to serve them before the crisis levels reach a point where the family is disrupted.

Children and Family Services can bring a coordinated effort of wraparound services to this

partnership. The community partner that CalWorks is currently using looks at the issues of homelessness but must refer out to specialized programs, such as those focused on domestic violence and substance abuse. Having regular meetings with all of the providers involved is a must for family coordination. Part of the Linkages model is to have regular Safety Team Meetings where all providers and the family are involved. SF-HSA has had great success in having regular meetings with the family and all service providers involved in the case. By ensuring that all service providers and the family are working collaboratively, the family will have a greater chance of sustained success. While SF-HSA has resources for a much larger scale of programming to reduce homelessness, it is recommended that Contra Costa County look at key elements to create a comprehensive approach for working with children who are homeless and are at risk of abuse.

In summary, the following recommendations would be instrumental for Contra Costa County to implement a program similar to San Francisco County's Families Moving Forward:

- CalWorks and Children and Family Services develop standard criteria that screen and identify homeless families.
- Create and develop a formal protocol for CalWorks and Children and Family Services social workers on how to best serve homeless families who become involved with the child welfare system.
- Develop community providers to collaborate with Linkages families, including consistent participation in Safety Network Meetings.
- Look at a stable funding source for homeless services for consistent Rapid Re-Housing.
- Provided the Bringing Families Home Proposal is granted in the state budget, it is recommended that Contra Costa County take full advantage of this funding source and implement the proposed process to bridge child welfare with the housing systems.

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