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Beyond Shelter Announces Success in Helping Nearly 250 High-Risk and Chronically Homeless Families from Skid Row Back into Housing

Today Beyond Shelter released an evaluation report of permanent housing outcomes for 300 high-risk families served by the Skid Row Families Demonstration Project. The Demonstration Project (January 2007-December 2009) was a collaborative effort with Beyond Shelter, L.A. County departments, and two local housing authorities, intended to address escalating family homelessness in L.A.'s Skid Row neighborhood, a dangerous and unhealthy environment for homeless parents with young children. The report reveals a high program success rate despite serving one of the most challenging and dysfunctional subgroups of homeless families in L.A. County.

According to the report, 80% percent of enrolled households (241 out of 300) were able to move into affordable, rental housing in residential neighborhoods located throughout L.A. County, primarily through negotiations with private landlords and rent subsidies. At least 25% moved into permanent housing with their own lease agreements for the first time in their lives. All families received a minimum of six months of social services support after they moved in. The overall housing retention rate was 97% six to twelve months after families were placed into housing.

These outcomes were achieved despite multiple and complex challenges faced by the target population. Nearly 1 in 2 enrolled families had experienced a prior homeless episode, with 18% having experienced two or more prior episodes. Thirty-seven percent of families had at least one adult with one or more serious health issues. Approximately 40% of parents reported past domestic violence victimization. About 20% of heads of household had serious mental health issues or diagnoses, with the majority having previously untreated and/or undiagnosed problems. Nearly one quarter of families were headed by transition-age youth (18-25).

Tanya Tull, President/CEO of Beyond Shelter, stated, "One of the key factors affecting success was the 'high tolerance' program design. Many, if not most, of these families would never have been admitted to traditional programs, or would have been kicked out of them, due to their presenting issues and dysfunctional behavior. These are the families who often fall through the cracks and cycle in and out of homelessness. The phenomenal outcomes demonstrate that with the right approach, they too can stabilize in permanent housing and rebuild their lives."

Beyond Shelter, a nonprofit homeless services agency, has served as the lead provider for the Demonstration Project, with primary responsibility for program design and implementation, including a full range of emergency shelter and permanent housing options and case management activities. The program design includes the Housing First approach to ending family homelessness (i.e. rapid rehousing) and is based on "the human right to housing." Partnering with the agency in the collaboration have been the L.A. County Departments of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Public Social Services (DPSS), Mental Health (DMH), Health Services (DHS), and Public Health (DPH), and the Housing Authorities, City of Los Angeles (HACLA) and County of Los Angeles (HACoLA). The Chief Executive Office (CEO) of L.A. County has provided oversight for the project, while DCFS has served as project coordinator.

L.A. County Supervisor Gloria Molina was instrumental in bringing the Demonstration Project to fruition. Her leadership and advocacy to protect the health and safety of homeless children in Skid Row has led to significant policy and program changes, including the "Zero Tolerance" policy for children, the creation of the inter-departmental Skid Row Assessment Team, and funding for the Skid Row Families Demonstration Project from the County's Homelessness Prevention Initiative. She states, "This pilot project demonstrates great successes when City and County governments partner with non-profits to address the needs of our homeless families in Skid Row."

The results from the Skid Row Families Demonstration Project come at a time that family homelessness continues to be prevalent throughout L.A. County. The 2008-2009 Winter Shelter Program administered by LAHSA saw an 87% increase in homeless families from 2007-2008. The L.A. County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) reported 7,574 homeless families on CalWORKs in April 2009, a 40% increase from April 2008. It is hoped that demonstration projects such as this will show that efforts to end family homelessness, even for the most difficult to serve, can be successful, given the right program design and adequate resources to address affordable housing needs.