

# **“Housing First”**

## **Reversing Two Decades of Faulty Public Policy and Practice: What we Did Wrong and How We’re Trying to Fix It.”**

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How many of you remember that homelessness hasn’t always been a major social problem in this country? My career goes back to those days and I DO remember when we addressed the problem quite differently. Not that many years ago, for example, if a family on welfare became homeless in Los Angeles County, efforts were made to immediately get that family back into permanent housing. There was no shelter system they were supposed to go into first. I have often wished that we could return to those days, before we developed systems that, instead of helping people out of homelessness, tend to keep them there for months and sometimes years at a time.

In 1980, I founded a nonprofit agency called Para Los Ninos (for the children), located in L.A.’s Skid Row. I first began providing child care for infants and small children living in the decaying transient hotels of the area, and then afterschool programs and programs for youth at risk. That first year, primarily immigrant families were served, but soon we were seeing families forced out of housing in low-income neighborhoods, as rents increased, but incomes did not. During these early years, we also saw an influx of families from the Midwest, migrating to Southern California as plants closed and jobs disappeared. Once in Los Angeles, many relocated families found that jobs were hard to find, and rental housing in residential neighborhoods was beyond their reach.

During the early 1980’s, as the numbers of families moving into transient hotels of the area increased, so did the numbers of families seeking emergency food and shelter from the missions of the area also increase. I began to dread Monday mornings, because homeless families would be lined up at our front door, many of them having slept in their cars over the weekend, or arriving on the Greyhound Bus, dragging their bags and their children behind them.

I found myself in a pivotal position, poised on the corner of Sixth and Gladys in L.A.’s Skid Row, as major changes began to occur – but changes that had certainly been anticipated by people who were knowledgeable about the issues. By 1983, not only had the lines at the soup kitchens become longer, winding around the block, but... and, it seems as if this happened overnight, we began to see something we had never seen before – people actually sleeping on the streets of Skid Row. And this scenario was soon being replicated in cities and town, and in both rural and urban communities, throughout the United States.

In response, the Federal Emergency Management Agency began providing emergency food and shelter funds to communities. I applied for the first round and began sheltering homeless families in hotels for up to 28 days. And when that was not enough, we partnered with another agency receiving funds, and sheltered families for 56 days.

But the homeless population kept increasing, and, in what seems now like a very short period of time, we began to see homeless people roaming the city in desperation. During these early years of homelessness in America, although invisible compared to those who were literally sleeping in the streets, homeless families could be found living in their cars, in abandoned buildings and at campgrounds, in vermin-infested rooms of decaying, transient hotels and motels located throughout L.A. County, in garages and sheds, or doubled up with family or friends for long periods of time.

By 1984, emergency shelters were being developed, large barrack-type affairs at first, and mainly for single people – but soon for families with children too.

During that first decade of “homelessness,” as we now call it, we thought that we were dealing with a “temporary problem,” and that providing emergency shelter for homeless families and individuals would solve it. In short time, however, we knew that we were wrong. During those early years of homelessness in Los Angeles, no matter how hard we tried, nor how much we cared, we could not keep on top of the need.

But something more was going on. Homelessness was just the most visible manifestation of increasing poverty in America. During the 1980’s, deep pits were being dug in communities throughout the country, and more and more people were falling in everyday. The safety net was disappearing and the ladder had been taken away. It became obvious to many of us working in the field that our efforts were, in fact, doomed to failure if indeed the numbers in need of help were so vastly greater than our resources and current efforts.

In 1987, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act generated new federal funds targeted to homelessness programs, which also required state, and local matching funds. With the influx of new money into communities, we began developing not only emergency shelters and transitional housing, but also social services for the homeless that were actually parallel to mainstream systems – including health care, job training, and substance abuse treatment. Soon, federal, state and local governments had established a full array of emergency shelters and transitional housing programs with specialized services, in which homeless people and families with children could stay for longer periods of time, hopefully to put their lives back together and learn the skills they would need in order to live independently in the community.

And to be sure those funds were targeted exclusively to homeless programs, the federal government also developed a very structured and limited definition of who could be served, essentially precluded using funds to help prevent homelessness or, for individual and families who moved back into housing, to help them to stabilize and prevent a recurrence.

While these efforts may sound good on the surface, looking back, what actually happened in a relatively short period of time was that we in effect “institutionalized” the state of homelessness. By developing a separate yet parallel system of services, we inadvertently accepted the existence of homelessness as inevitable.

It could also be argued that we helped to create a new subclass in America called “the homeless,” a subclass that persists and is perpetuated to this day.

We entered the second decade of homelessness in America in the early 1990’s, with the numbers of homeless individuals and families actually increasing, not decreasing. Almost immediately, the Clinton administration began to focus on the issue, while Congress increased funding for the McKinney Act. In their efforts to find solutions, new leadership at HUD (the Department of Housing and Urban Development) developed the concept of a “continuum of care,” hoping that a more coordinated system of allocating money and services in communities might be more successful in efforts to end homelessness. The continuum of care included intake and assessment, emergency shelter, transitional housing, and specialized services such as alcohol and drug treatment.

And so by the mid-1990’s, emergency shelters and transitional housing had become part of an accepted homeless services system in which homeless people would move through a continuum of temporary housing and services that would supposedly lead eventually to permanent housing at the end – with the desired outcome being, of course, an end to homelessness.

And yet, looking back, this did not happen for vast numbers of people being served by this new and separate system. 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 try to serve, are simply *stepping stones*, so to speak. Alone they may simply perpetuate and prolong the homeless state.

Because if at the end of our interventions and support, the homeless are still homeless - or at risk of another episode of homelessness - then what really have we accomplished?

Homelessness ends when a family or individual is stabilized in permanent, affordable, housing, whatever that permanent housing type may be – and whatever the supports we might need to have in place for some of them, to help them stay there. And it is this last part, the movement of homeless families and individuals into permanent, affordable housing that was somehow, for a very long time, overlooked.

### **And so where did we go wrong?**

The answer is both complicated and yet fairly simple. During the 1980’s, efforts to understand homelessness focused on two opposing explanations. One school of thought blamed structural causes for homelessness, which included the lack of affordable housing and adequate employment, persistent poverty, racial inequalities, and the placement of people with severe mental illness back into communities without support. If these were the causes, then efforts to address homelessness should therefore be focused on addressing those issues. The opposing explanation blamed personal problems, such as mental illness, substance abuse, low education levels, poor or no work history, and single-parenthood.

The reality is, of course, that both come into play, with personal problems often causing people to be more vulnerable and at risk of homelessness when a crisis that could affect their housing occurs. But the real culprit is the lack of affordable housing for people at the lower levels of the socio-economic scale, including those who are unemployed, dependent upon welfare, disabled or have sporadic or minimum wage jobs.

The missing link is, going back to my earlier statements, the loss of the social safety net. Researchers in one study, for example, found that the major difference between housed low-income families and homeless low-income families was access to a social support network when a housing crisis occurred. The family with support did not become homeless, while the family that had no support or had exhausted its support system, entered the homeless services system.

After the initial response to homelessness, the development of emergency shelters, early efforts on the part of the federal government to end homelessness were focused on both permanent housing and income. I developed and implemented two demonstration programs in the early 1990's for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These programs were focused on helping homeless families back into permanent housing, not prolonging their stays in the "continuum of care" that had yet to be developed. On my visits to Washington DC, there was avid interest on the part of all of the federal agencies trying to address the issue, and particularly from HUD...interest in learning what might work and not work for different homeless populations.

These efforts were slowly reversed with the development of the "continuum of care" approach, as homeless programs began to focus on first trying to fix the problems of people they served – problems often exacerbated by being in a homeless state. What happened was the "personal problems" school of thought took control, preventing a focus on helping people who were homeless back into permanent housing. Homelessness began to be treated as if it were a disease, with dismal results.

But let me go back in time once again. During the 1980's, we were learning fast, we learned as we went along --and we learned from our mistakes. We learned the most, however, from the very people we were trying to help.

In Los Angeles, even as our systems improved, we began to see homeless families cycling in and out of emergency shelters and transitional housing that were being developed throughout L.A. County, often for months and sometimes years at a time. Other families moved into an apartment that they could not afford, and then soon became homeless again. And without the individualized support necessary to help them rebuild their lives, many families were becoming chronically homeless.

Again, looking back in time, it seems that it also took us awhile to realize that once someone actually lost their housing or experienced a situation that left them without a place to live, that for many it would be extremely difficult, if not actually impossible, to

get back into permanent housing on their own. In addition to the fact that rental housing had become essentially unaffordable for people with low incomes and/or dependent upon welfare, people who become homeless also have additional barriers to overcome, such as poor credit and eviction histories, unemployment and lack of move-in funds, to name just a few of the barriers with which they have to deal. But the homeless also faced discrimination based on income source, ethnicity, gender, and family make-up, in addition to the fact that most landlords do not want to rent their units to people who were currently in a homeless state.

Once homeless, families with children in particular encounter nearly insurmountable barriers blocking their return to permanent housing. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness<sup>1</sup>, most homeless families have no or poor housing histories; they have often lived in overcrowded or shared housing with others, moved frequently, and been evicted.

Yet, according to one study, only 20 percent of parents in homeless shelters were offered assistance in finding permanent housing, even though they listed this need, along with jobs and (other) as the most desired.

I helped to develop the first two family shelters in Los Angeles, one in 1986 and the other in 1988. What surprised me the most was the fact that while some homeless families we sheltered found housing on their own before their stay was up, it seemed that a majority of the families reached their termination date without a place to move on to. Developing affordable housing was not the answer because it took too long to build and would not begin to really help solve the problem for years, and maybe for decades.

When Beyond Shelter was founded in 1988, 18 years ago, what was envisioned at the time was a dramatic innovation in the field: helping homeless families to move as quickly as possible back into permanent housing, with the services traditionally provided in “transitional housing” instead provided to each family after they moved in.

**The housing first approach to ending homelessness has since helped to transform both public policy and practice on a national scale.**

The Housing First methodology was designed to build upon the strengths of the emergency shelter and transitional housing systems – and to then provide the next step for families and individuals served by them. Beyond Shelter's Los Angeles program was set up from the beginning to serve the emergency shelter/transitional housing continuum of a large, metropolitan city. Today, more than 60 agencies throughout Los Angeles County – emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, residential drug treatment programs, domestic violence programs, social service agencies, and other organizations serving the homeless – refer families to Beyond Shelter after they have provided initial emergency or interim services. Once enrolled in Beyond Shelter's Housing First

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<sup>1</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. (N/D). *Family Homelessness in our Nation and Community: A Problem with a Solution*. Washington, DC: Author. Accessed 04-25-2005 at [www.naeh.org](http://www.naeh.org).

Program, families are assessed for housing and social services needs and a Plan of Action is developed.

Housing specialists then help families find and move into permanent, affordable housing in residential neighborhoods located throughout L.A. County, including accessing subsidies, move-in funds, and negotiating leases. Once in housing, case managers work with families for six months to one full year, helping them to rebuild their lives for themselves and for their children.

To me, from eighteen years of direct experience, perhaps the greatest benefit of this approach is the fact that it enables vulnerable and at risk families to move out of the homeless services system into permanent housing – yet continue to receive case management support for a transitional period of time.

The methodology offers an individualized and structured plan of action for often alienated and troubled families, as they develop stable living patterns and connections to the community. Perhaps more importantly, it has proven to successfully stabilize such families fairly rapidly.

The methodology offers a critical link between homeless programs and mainstream systems that, working together, can help reintegrate homeless individuals and families into communities.

More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that the housing first approach is now being adapted across the country for a variety of target populations successfully.

Each year, we help approximately 300 homeless families with children, primarily single parents raising their children alone, back into permanent housing in residential neighborhoods throughout L.A. County. Since inception, more than 3,000 homeless families with children have stabilized in permanent housing and rebuilt their lives.

Sometimes it is important to look closely at what we are doing and admit that we might be doing it wrong.

There is no question that the current system of homeless services tends to keep people homeless for extended periods of time. Sometimes this occurs because of the very real lack of affordable housing in communities across the country – but it is also due, I believe, to the prevailing belief that the homeless – including both families and individuals – must be “housing ready” before being allowed to move back into permanent housing. In other words, people who have become homeless must somehow demonstrate or “prove” that they have learned how to “live independently” before they are assisted in renting a place to call home.

Today we know that families who remain for extended lengths of time in the homeless services system have increased difficulty in returning to permanent housing as a result. We also know that the longer a homeless person remains in a homeless state, no matter

how pleasant the environment we might create for them, the more dependent they tend to become.

And finally, in our third decade of homelessness in America, policy analysts are finally arguing that the services offered in transitional housing would be better offered in the context of permanent housing. Yet another drawback to the current system of emergency shelter and transitional housing is that services tend to be provided to people who "follow the rules" and are easier to serve, rather than to those with multiple problems who are considered "hard to serve." These individuals and families tend to be terminated from temporary housing programs, or are never allowed into them. As a result, they often join the ranks of the "chronically homeless."

As described on the website of the National Alliance to End Homelessness: What differentiates a Housing First approach from other homeless services models is that there is an immediate and primary focus on helping individuals and families move quickly back into permanent housing.

A Housing First approach rests on two central premises:

Rapid re-housing should be the central goal of our work with people experiencing homelessness;

By providing housing assistance and intensive case management and supportive services (time-limited or long-term) after an individual or family is housed we can significantly reduce the time people spend in homelessness and prevent further episodes of homelessness

And now let me briefly talk about the vital importance of research and evaluation is helping to direct and inform public policy and practice (i.e., if something doesn't seem to actually work, then why keep doing it?).

As mentioned earlier, the "Housing First" methodology was tested and refined through a number of federal demonstration projects implemented by **Beyond Shelter**, including the *Los Angeles Early Intervention Demonstration Project for Recently Homeless and At-Risk Families*, operated from 1990-1993 and the *Homeless Families Support Center Demonstration Project* sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Additional research and demonstration projects include a highly successful Welfare-to-Work Demonstration Project funded by the U.S. Department of Labor and targeted to Housing First participants, implemented from 1999-2001.

Through the years, I have also utilized the work of Ellen Bassuk of the National Center on Family Homelessness, whose research as early as 1989 was reporting that a subset of homeless families with multiple problems would be better served in permanent housing with social services support provided by outside agencies.

The best research I have yet seen is the 1991 Stanford Study On Homeless Families, Children and Youth. Again, the research concluded that there was little difference

between housed poor families and homeless poor families. It further concluded that what helped families end their homelessness was access to a rent subsidy, making rent more affordable, and not the services provided to them while they were in emergency shelters or transitional housing.

A 1998 report that followed hundreds of homeless families in New York City to determine if social disorders prolonged their situation, suggested that the real problem is the city's scarcity of subsidized housing. The report further states that this challenges a widely held view that the most effective way to end homelessness among families is by first resolving such problems as mental illness and substance abuse.

"The conventional wisdom is that homeless families need to become rehabilitated before they can become housed," said Marybeth Shinn, a professor of psychology at New York University and co-author of the study. "Our findings show that if given the housing first, homeless families will become stable and remain stable."

Most recently on March 30, 2006 - Dennis Culhane, Professor of Social Welfare Policy and Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, testified before the Senate Subcommittee of Housing and Transportation during reauthorization hearings for the McKinney-Vento Act. He states that "Research on family homelessness has not found that homeless families in general are significantly different from other poor families. Despite the many challenges a given family may face, he continues, nearly all homeless families end their homelessness, and do not recur into homelessness with the support of rental assistance.

His testimony then goes directly to a description of "Housing First" programs as an alternative to shelter among homeless families, as well as single individuals. The subsegment of families who need additional support services to maintain their housing, he continues, could and should receive those support services from mainstream child welfare and behavioral health systems.