



BEYOND SHELTER

Beyond Shelter's "Housing First" Program for Homeless Families *Recognized as a "Solution for America" by the Pew Partnership*

Summary

Beyond Shelter's "**Housing First**" Program for Homeless Families was identified by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change as one of 19 sites nationwide to participate in a two-year evaluation initiative, *Wanted: Solutions for America* (2000-2001). Research was conducted by the University of Southern California, in conjunction with the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University.

The emphasis of the "**housing first**" methodology is to move homeless families, including those who are vulnerable and at-risk, into permanent, affordable, rental housing *as quickly as possible*, followed by time-limited support services after they have been relocated out of the homeless services system.

Public and private solutions to homelessness have historically focused on providing homeless families with emergency shelter and/or transitional housing, which alone neither end homelessness nor prevent a recurrence of homelessness for a significant segment of the homeless population. "**Housing First**" is an alternative to the current system of emergency shelter/transitional housing, which tends to prolong the length of time that families remain homeless. The methodology is premised on the belief that vulnerable and at-risk homeless families are more responsive to interventions and social services support *after they are in their own housing*, rather than while living in temporary/transitional facilities or housing programs. The program methodology facilitates the move into permanent housing for homeless families *and then engages the newly-housed family in a progressive set of individualized case management activities and interventions for a limited period of time, as the family moves toward improved social and economic well-being.*

Over a two year period, quantitative data was compiled on 97 families who enrolled into the "**Housing First**" program and were moved into permanent housing. The goal was to measure the effectiveness of the "**housing first**" methodology for those who completed six months in permanent housing. The majority of families received a Section 8 voucher and were able to move into neighborhoods of their choice. The data was collected within the first month of the family's move and then again at the end of six months sustaining their permanent housing. At that time, the family "graduated" from the "**Housing First**" program. Indicators of program outcomes included housing, finances, domestic violence, substance abuse, health, employment/training, education and parenting.

The overall increase, and in some cases stability, in positive responses to outcomes measured suggest that participants in the "**Housing First**" program achieved both improved social and economic well-being and stability in permanent housing.

The "**housing first**" approach provides a link between the emergency shelter/transitional housing systems that serve homeless families and the mainstream resources and services that can help them rebuild their lives in permanent housing, as members of a neighborhood and a community. In addition to assisting homeless families in general back into housing, "**housing first**" offers an individualized and structured plan of action for alienated, dysfunctional and troubled families, while providing a responsive and caring support system. The combination of housing relocation services and home-based case management enables homeless families to break the cycle of homelessness. The methodology facilitates long-term stability and provides formerly homeless families who are considered *at risk of another episode of homelessness* with the support necessary to remain in permanent housing.

Research Design

The study investigated immediate, short- and long-term measures for mothers and their children. Two models were identified for evaluation: (1) the Program Logic Model for Homeless Mothers and Children developed and widely used by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA); and (2) a model to measure self-sufficiency in non-profit housing programs by Rachel Bratt and Langley Keyes in the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy at Tufts University. Descriptive statistical data was collected on families at two points in the program: (1) within the first month in permanent housing, and (2) at the end of six months sustaining permanent housing. Three behavioral scales were used to further operationalize the SAMHSA model to measure depression and its symptoms, self-esteem and problem-solving.

Demographics

Eighty-seven percent of homeless families studied were headed by single mothers with an average of three children. The average age of the parent was 30. Most of the families were either African-American (60%) or Latino/a (25%). Fifty-nine percent of the families had a history of domestic violence, and one-quarter had a history of substance abuse. A majority of the families were homeless for 8 to 12 months prior to enrolling in the program.

Findings

Pre- and post-testing of families indicate that the “**Housing First**” program successfully relocated vulnerable and high-risk families into permanent housing and stabilized them upon their move. After sustaining in permanent housing for six months, outcome measures for families had either increased or remained constant. This confirms the notion that, through the acquisition of permanent housing and the provision of home-based case management, homeless families, particularly those who are vulnerable and at-risk, will stabilize their living patterns and attain improved quality of life for themselves and their children. Outcomes included:

- 91% of families had paid their rent on time for three consecutive months after moving into permanent housing.
- 70% of families with a history of domestic violence entered the program living violence-free. Six months later, 97% reported living violence-free.
- Parents were more likely to have attended a child development class and participated in employment and training activities, such as ESL, GED, and computer classes.
- Parents who were employed fulltime for two or more weeks upon moving into permanent housing remained employed fulltime six months later. Parents who were working fulltime for three or more months at the time of move were still employed fulltime six months later.
- Scores on the depression scale, tested in paired samples, indicate a 20% reduction in symptoms of depression.

Why It Matters

Despite a booming economy, homelessness did not disappear in the 1990s. Data indicate that on any day, at least 800,000 people are homeless in the United States, including about 200,000 children in homeless families.¹ During a typical year, between 900,000 and 1.4 million children are homeless with their families.² Thirty-four to 37 percent of the national homeless population is families with children.³

The “**housing first**” methodology presents an alternative to traditional homeless services for families, which often fail to address their permanent housing and long-term needs. Without *dedicated housing relocation services*, many homeless families are unable to overcome the barriers to obtaining affordable housing (which includes poor credit and eviction histories), often resulting in a state of chronic homelessness for themselves and their children. The methodology provides a responsive support system to help homeless families develop stable living patterns and connections to the community.

¹ Burt, M., et. al. (2001). What will it take to end homelessness? Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

² Ibid.

³ Who is homeless in Los Angeles? *Just the facts*. Los Angeles, CA: Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty.

Dissemination of “Housing First” Research

The Pew Partnership’s **Solutions for America** is a national initiative to document and disseminate information about the types of programs and solutions that are working to solve tough challenges in communities across the country. The initiative translates complex evaluation research into actionable strategies needed to build stronger communities. The research collected through the Pew Partnership initiative will serve as a tool to further advance the “**housing first**” approach as a method for ending and preventing family homelessness nationwide and promoting systemic change.

Beyond Shelter’s Institute for Research, Training & Technical Assistance works closely with government agencies, service providers and community groups to promote adaptation of the “**housing first**” methodology and to promote national systemic change. The Institute disseminates information through regional and national technical assistance workshops, presentations, direct consulting, and the development and distribution of publications and manuals. In addition, Beyond Shelter has participated in “demonstration projects” for the Federal Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Labor.

The “**housing first**” approach to ending homelessness has become a key component of the *Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness* (2000) developed by the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Recognition for the “Housing First” Program

Nonprofit Sector Award — National Alliance to End Homelessness (1996)

One of “**25 U.S. Best Practices**” — United Nations Conference, Habitat II, Istanbul, Turkey (1996)

One of “**100 International Best Practices**” — United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (1996)

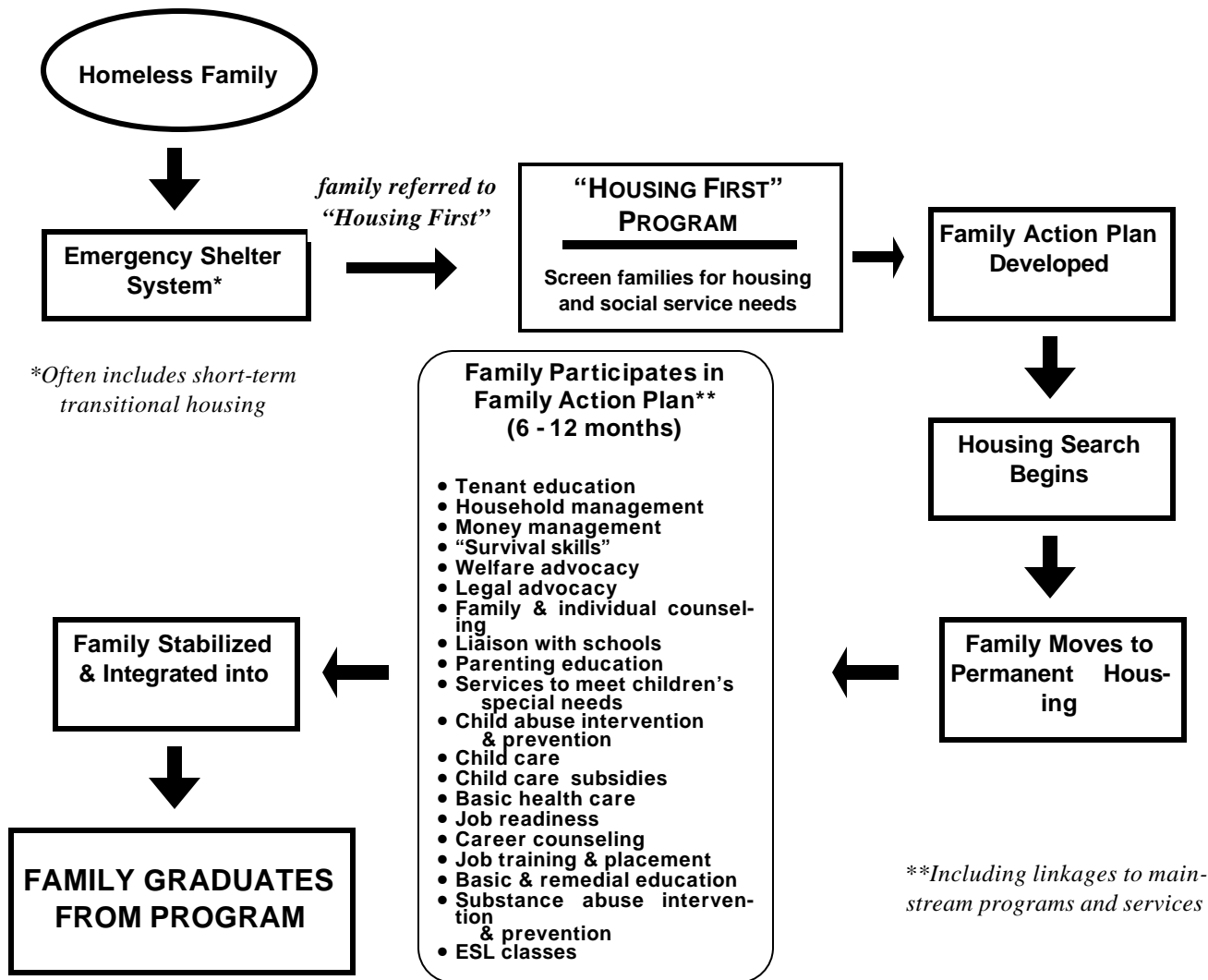
“**Best Practices in California**” — Selected by California state agencies in a study prepared for

How does the “Housing First” approach work in Los Angeles?

Homeless families are referred to Beyond Shelter by more than 35 collaborative agencies, including emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, domestic violence shelters, residential drug treatment programs, social service agencies, and homeless drop-in centers. Approximately 350 homeless families are relocated into permanent housing each year.

The “**housing first**” approach is implemented through three primary stages:

- 1. Screening, Assessment and Planning:** The “**housing first**” methodology relies on an in-depth screening and assessment. Each family is assisted to develop a Family Action Plan that builds upon their strengths and addresses their needs.
- 2. Provision of Housing Resources:** After the completion of screening and assessment, the next phase involves assisting homeless families in moving to permanent, affordable housing in a residential neighborhood. This is accomplished by helping them overcome various barriers to obtaining rental housing, including assistance in obtaining rental subsidies. Direct marketing to property owners helps to increase the housing options for homeless families. City and county housing authorities also participate in this process.
- 3. Provision of Home-Based Case Management:** The “**Housing First**” program includes the provision of six months to one year of individualized, home-based case management *after the move*, to help families improve coping and household management skills, re-orient to stable living patterns, and link with local services and resources. Some families may receive periodic monitoring and support after “graduating” from the program, as they continue to progress.



About Beyond Shelter

The mission of Beyond Shelter is to combat chronic poverty, welfare dependency and homelessness among families with children, through the provision of housing and social services, and the promotion of systemic change. Beyond Shelter's programs in Southern California serve as a "laboratory" for the development of innovative methodologies. Beyond Shelter's Institute for Research, Training and Technical Assistance conducts workshops, trainings, and private consulting for governmental and community-based agencies nationwide. The Institute also publishes specialized methodology manuals on the agency's initiatives.

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