SNAPS In Focus: Family Homelessness Part II

In Part 1 of my message on family homelessness, I focused on the system-level changes we should be working towards to meet our goal of ending family homelessness by 2020. Today, I want to focus on two types of interventions that can have a meaningful impact, rapid re-housing and housing subsidies.

We have been looking at research on family homelessness and reviewing examples from communities that are making significant progress on ending family homelessness locally. We have also talked to many stakeholders about what it will take to end family homelessness. It is clear that rapid re-housing and housing subsidies such as Housing Choice Vouchers will be the key interventions that will drive progress, and that in most communities, increasing these resources is the most important step to ending family homelessness.

Rapid Re-Housing

Evidence indicates that for most families, rapid re-housing is less costly and achieves the same or better outcomes than transitional housing. To reach our goal of ending family homelessness, we will have to continue to shift more of our investments from transitional housing to rapid re-housing. Continuums of Care (CoCs) should continuously review transitional housing programs to determine if reallocating to rapid re-housing is the right decision. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released a reallocation tool to help determine whether or not reallocation is the best decision in your community. We also encourage recipients of the Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) funding to focus more on rapid re-housing.

Like other types of assistance, rapid re-housing programs are not all equally effective. CoCs and providers should ensure that rapid re-housing programs are achieving good outcomes and serving families regardless of their barriers or service needs. Rapid re-housing projects should be moving people out of homelessness and into housing as quickly as possible, preferably in less than 30 days from the moment they became homeless. Research indicates that rapid re-housing can be effective regardless of the barriers—such as income, housing history, or disability—that families face. This means there is no good reason for rapid re-housing providers to screen out families based on these factors. The Rapid Re-Housing Brief that we published last year describes the core components of rapid re-housing programs.

Housing Subsidies

Many studies point to the benefits of housing subsidies, both on reducing homelessness and improving the health and well-being of families. Here at HUD, we are forming close partnerships between the programs that primarily serve households experiencing homelessness and those that provide affordable housing (like Public Housing, Housing Choice Vouchers, and Multi-Family Housing). Communities should continue working to form those same partnerships at the local level to access affordable housing options, and these resources can help CoCs and Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) better collaborate.

To maximize the effectiveness of Housing Choice Vouchers and other housing subsidies for families, PHAs, CoCs, and homeless assistance providers will have to pay very close attention to how subsidies are targeted and how quickly families can use them. Housing subsidies are more effective when families experiencing homelessness can access them right away and not after spending months or years on a waiting list. However in most communities, long waiting lists are the norm. CoCs and PHAs should work together to create a process that allows families, particularly those with higher needs, to quickly access...
housing assistance. This can include a set aside or a limited preference. If there are not enough subsidies to serve families being referred, CoCs should refine their targeting so that the number of families being referred matches the number of subsidies available. Although it is challenging to predict which families most need subsidies, those who have histories of homelessness, larger families, or who have failed in other programs, may benefit more from subsidies.

Here at HUD, we are very invested in ending family homelessness, and we will be looking for ways to encourage communities to take the steps necessary to achieve that goal. Here are some of the things we are doing or plan to do:

- Request more housing subsidies, including special purpose Housing Choice Vouchers targeted to families experiencing homelessness, in our FY 2016 budget request;
- Continue to create incentives—through funding notices, regulations, messages, and in our partnerships with other agencies—to shift resources from transitional housing to rapid re-housing;
- Encourage partnerships between PHAs and CoCs to provide more housing subsidies to families experiencing homelessness;
- Provide robust guidance on coordinated entry to ensure that families are not screened out of receiving needed assistance and to ensure that when resources are scarce, they are targeted to families with the greatest needs; and
- Increasingly emphasize system performance, especially through our new System Performance Measures.

Lastly, I know that you work hard every day to help children, youth, and adults experiencing homelessness. Converting programs and changing systems is very challenging work. I deeply appreciate your work and your dedication to ending homelessness.

Regards,

Norm Suchar
Director
Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs

Additional Research and Resources

- SNAP5 Rapid Re-Housing Brief
- Family Options Study: Interim Report
- Family Options Study: 18 Month Outcomes (forthcoming)
- USICH Reallocation Tool
- Resources for Working with PHAs
- Department of Veterans Affairs Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) University (resources for rapid re-housing providers)
- Rapid Re-Housing Resources from the National Alliance to End Homelessness
- Ending Homelessness for Families: The Evidence for Affordable Housing