



April 2, 2015

## SNAPS In Focus: Family Homelessness Part I

Reflecting on our work over the last several months in SNAPS and throughout HUD, we are clearly building momentum on family homelessness – from the release of the President’s 2016 budget request, to the research we are preparing to release on interventions for families, to our participation in the Alliance’s *National Conference on Ending Family and Youth Homelessness* in February. This message is the first of two on family homelessness, and it is intended to help our stakeholders learn more about where we are nationally, what HUD has learned about family homelessness, and what our priorities are in this area.

In December, Secretary Castro announced the results of the 2014 Point-In-Time Count with the release of the [2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report \(AHAR\): Volume I](#). Between 2013 and 2014, CoCs reported a 4.7 percent decline in the number of households with children experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. This is important progress – especially the 20.5 percent reduction in the number of households with children living in unsheltered situations. To continue making progress, we know we need to do more, and we need to use the resources we have in more efficient ways.

Right now, about 40 percent of CoC Program funds serve households with children, a number that is roughly proportional to the number of people in families in the point-in-time count. But CoC and ESG funded projects are only a part of the overall plan to end family homelessness. Reaching our goal will require a systems-level approach in each community. A community’s homelessness response system must be able to respond to the housing and service needs of every homeless family regardless of their income, family size, substance use history, or any other barriers they may have. It has to be able to do this in challenging housing markets, as rents are high and rising in most of the country. And it must accomplish all of this with a limited amount of resources and many competing priorities.

With this in mind, I thought it would be useful to discuss some key steps that all communities can take to ensure that as a nation we end family homelessness by 2020.

### Use Data to Evaluate Current Resources

- Communities should be analyzing local data to determine what interventions are most successful and most cost effective at helping families exit homelessness. We recently released [system performance measures](#) to measure community-wide performance. These will become an increasingly important part of how we evaluate communities.
- Using data, communities should reallocate existing projects to more successful and cost effective types of assistance. For example, emerging evidence shows that rapid re-housing is more cost effective and successful at ending family homelessness than transitional housing for most families.

### Eliminate Barriers

- Coordinated entry processes should make it as easy as possible for families to access housing and services. When families are assessed, the questions should be directly relevant to their immediate needs, and families who go through a coordinated entry process should have a clear understanding of what assistance they will receive and what will be expected of them.



- Families with the most severe needs and those living on the street should always be prioritized for assistance.
- Providers should eliminate eligibility requirements that prevent higher need families from accessing their programs, especially requirements related to employment, minimum income, rental history, or substance use history. Providers who don't have the skills to serve these families should be increasing their capacity either internally or through partnerships.
- Providers need to be able to serve every kind of family, regardless of the ages and sexes of the adults and children. Involuntarily separating families based on the gender or age of their minor children is a violation of our regulations.
- In high-cost, low-vacancy housing markets, landlords can be very selective in who they rent to. Communities need robust strategies for recruiting and engaging landlords and other housing providers to provide them with a better understanding of the value of renting to those families and incentives to do so.
- If providers find that families are not participating in services or progressing on case plans, the providers should be modifying their services to make them more engaging and relevant to those families rather than punishing them for failing to meet program expectations. The purpose of homeless assistance is not to reward good behavior on the part of families, but to work with families to end their homelessness as soon as possible.

### Maximize the Use of Emergency Shelters

- Emergency shelters are a valuable resource for families who would otherwise have to live on the streets or in an unsafe place. In addition to their role in providing decent, safe shelter for families, shelters should be helping families find permanent housing as quickly as possible. This may involve helping families identify housing options or formally partnering with other housing and homeless assistance providers.

### Tailor Assistance to the Unique Needs and Preferences of Families

- Families endure a tremendous amount of chaos and trauma when they experience homelessness. The assistance provided to each family member should be tailored to their unique situations. Providers should focus on families' strengths and offer choices whenever possible, and no intervention should use a one-size-fits-all approach.
- To the maximum extent possible, providers should be connecting families with mainstream benefits and community resources, such as Medicaid or TANF, and ensuring that their children are going to school, pre-school or, if appropriate, childcare. These connections will provide more stability for families.
- Where you live and the type of housing you live in is a personal choice. To the maximum extent possible, families should be deciding what neighborhood they want to live in, how much they can afford, and what services they need. This may mean, for example, that a family would pay more for housing than it appears they can afford. And while we should help to inform families about what affordable options are available, ultimately that is their decision to make.

Ending family homelessness is about more than units and types of intervention. It requires attention to all parts of the family homelessness system to ensure that it is using an approach that helps families move quickly into housing and prevents returns to homelessness. It requires that we pay attention to the unique circumstances of each family and tailor homeless assistance to meet their needs.



If we make the changes we need to make, we can end family homelessness by 2020. I appreciate that we have so many partners around the country that are working with us to make that happen.

As always, thank you for your hard work on behalf of the people we serve.

Regards,

Norm Suchar

Director

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