The Role of Child Welfare Agencies in Improving Housing Stability for Families

Parents working with child welfare agencies on goals such as increasing family stability or reunifying with their children may face a variety of obstacles. One often underestimated obstacle is inadequate housing. While housing can provide a safe, stable foundation for parents trying to struggle through poverty, mental health issues, substance use, trauma and domestic violence, its absence can delay or even derail progress.

Inadequate housing not only complicates families’ efforts, it also has huge cost implications for child welfare systems. Services provided through the child welfare system are expensive, and lack of adequate housing can exacerbate those costs. Take, for example, a mother whose children are in out-of-home care while she completes a residential substance treatment program. If she successfully completes the program and achieves almost all of the goals in her case plan, but cannot find housing, then reunification is delayed. Further, child welfare caseworkers report spending more time providing services to families that are unstably housed, compared to those with housing. Lack of a home – homelessness – may also lead to larger child welfare caseloads. Families with inadequate housing often live in chaotic environments, including doubled-up situations, emergency shelter, or domestic violence situations, putting children at risk. Having a permanent, safe place to live can improve family safety and prevent child welfare agency involvement.

This brief is intended for child welfare agencies that are responding to the housing needs of families involved in the child welfare system. It examines the research that documents the link between inadequate housing and child welfare involvement and highlights some of the innovative practices child welfare agencies have developed to respond to the housing needs of families in their care. Finally, it provides early lessons gleaned from some of these practices.

The Challenge Facing Child Welfare Agencies
Child welfare agencies must respond to an enormous need and shoulder a substantial responsibility to protect children. In 2010, 3 million children were reported to child welfare agencies as suspected victims of abuse and neglect. Of these, 702,000 children were confirmed as victims. Some children that are reported as suspected victims of abuse and neglect remain in their homes and receive services to increase family stability, while others (about a fifth of all reported cases) are removed and placed in out-of-home care for safety reasons. In 2010, approximately 662,000 children were in foster care at some point during the year. Once in foster care, children stay for almost a year on average (the median stay is 11 months), but some stay on for many years. Data indicate that among those children who return home, approximately 25 percent will return to care at some point, usually within a year.
The cost to the federal government for child welfare services is about $12 billion each year. Approximately half of that amount is designated for Title IV-E, an entitlement program that provides states with funding for foster care, adoption assistance, youth transitioning out of foster care, and administration. The foster care placements funded through Title IV-E cost the federal government nearly $3.6 billion dollars annually. Since out-of-home placements can drive up costs and strain agency budgets, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) provides incentives to decrease the number of children in foster care and sets timelines for how long a child can be in care. States may also apply for Title IV-E waivers which allow greater flexibility in the use of Title IV-E funds to promote innovation and improve services to children and families.

Despite incentives, lowering child welfare caseloads is challenging. Identified barriers include budget crises, hiring freezes, caseworker turnover and hiring delays, development and implementation of best practices, and the need for multiple system reforms. In addition to the internal barriers, child welfare systems often work with families facing multiple challenges, including poverty; physical, mental and behavioral health problems; high rates of substance use; and lack of employment and stable housing. The broader anti-poverty and safety net programs that exist to address these needs have inadequate resources to help all needy families. This can make it difficult for parents, most often single mothers, to provide safe, stable homes for their children. Child welfare caseworkers must address both the internal challenges of providing services as well as the lack of externally available resources.

Families with Housing Needs
A strong body of evidence documents the link between child welfare involvement and inadequate housing. One study found that problems with housing affordability, eviction, doubling up, and homelessness are common among child welfare-involved families, particularly among those whose children were placed in out-of-home care. Another study of 8,251 homeless children in New York City shelters found that, overall, 24 percent had some record of child welfare involvement, with 18 percent placed in out-of-home care during the five years after shelter admission, and 6 percent involved in child welfare services prior to entering shelter. In a Philadelphia study of a cohort of 23,227 women who had given birth, researchers found that 37 percent of mothers with at least one experience of homelessness were child welfare-involved, compared with 9.2 percent of other low-income mothers. Finally, research confirms that an experience of homelessness prior to out-of-home placement lowers the probability of families regaining custody of their children, while positive changes in housing are associated with family reunification.

Despite this clear overlap between child welfare involvement and homelessness, the number of child welfare-involved families with housing needs is unknown. Further, among the families with housing needs, the extent of this need and whether it contributes to child welfare involvement are also unknown. Obtaining this information is critical in order to correctly and strategically apply scarce housing resources to help the families with potential or existing child welfare involvement.
Steps Child Welfare Agencies Can Take to Alleviate Housing Burden

Developing solutions to the housing needs of families with open child welfare cases is still in an innovation phase. Leading agencies are testing different ideas, approaches, and models to see what works and what does not. This section provides an overview of five complementary strategies: (1) assess families for housing need; (2) develop housing stability plans; (3) create housing stabilization units or develop capacity by leveraging partnerships; (4) provide rapid re-housing to families who need immediate and short-term assistance; and (5) provide permanent housing assistance to families who need long-term subsidies to help them maintain their housing.

1. Assess Families for Housing Need

The first challenge for child welfare agencies is identifying families with housing needs and for whom housing is a primary or contributing factor to child welfare involvement. Child welfare agencies already complete detailed assessments of families in their care. These assessments focus on, “gathering information to understand the factors that affect a child’s safety, permanency, parental protective capacities, and the family’s ability to assure the safety of their children.” Widely used assessments include: the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale (NCFAS) and its modules for assessing reunification (NCFAS-R); the Strengths and Stressors Tracking Device (SSTD); and the Structured Decision-Making Model (SDM) developed by the Children’s Research Center. While child welfare agencies collect a huge amount of information from families, only a small portion of it focuses on housing stability. The NCFAS, for example, asks about five domains: environment, parental capabilities, family interactions, family safety, and child well-being. The environment domain includes some measures of housing stability, safety in the community, and habitability of housing.

In addition to decision-making assessments, federal law and regulations require child welfare agencies to submit to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). AFCARS data elements, under “circumstances of removal,” include measures of inadequate housing, specifically whether, “housing facilities were substandard, overcrowded, unsafe, or otherwise inadequate resulting in their not being appropriate for the parents and child to reside together. Also includes homelessness.”

This limited information provides child welfare agency staff with some knowledge of the scale of family housing need, but challenges exist with respect to data quality. Often, caseworkers do not check this information, or they may interpret inadequate housing in different ways. Further, these assessments do not unbundle the nature of the housing problem, which might include rent burden, substandard housing, or living in an untenable doubled-up situation, or living with domestic violence, to name a few. Without quality data, caseworkers will struggle to identify which resources could help address the housing problem.

Child welfare agencies looking to understand how inadequate housing affects their families can collect more information on these matters and analyze the data that does exist. A better understanding of caseloads’ housing needs can help inform the need for incorporating housing stability into case plans.
2. Develop Housing Stability Plans
A helpful practice is to develop housing stability plans as part of the services offered to families. Housing stability plans document a family’s current housing situation (e.g., homeless, doubled up, fleeing domestic violence, living in substandard housing, etc.), identify the biggest barriers to obtaining adequate housing (e.g., lack of financial resources, lack of rental history, criminal background, etc.), and outline steps and resources to help the family stabilize its housing (e.g., identify housing subsidies, navigate the housing search process, etc.).

For example, child welfare-involved families residing in shelter and transitional housing in King County, WA, create housing stability plans to help them exit to permanent housing. The county recommends that each plan include, “clear benchmarks and timelines so that when the plan is developed, everyone knows what happens next, when things need to be done, and who is responsible for each action step. It is meant to be flexible and can adjust to account for changes in a family’s circumstances.”

A family that is currently homeless may have already worked with caseworkers in shelter or transitional housing to develop a housing stability plan. If this is the case, then child welfare caseworkers can work with the family to incorporate this plan into the overall plan for family stability. If not, child welfare caseworkers can make this a key part of the family’s case plan.

3. Create Housing Stabilization Units or Develop Capacity by Leveraging Partnerships
Even when housing instability is identified as a challenge, many families are faced with difficult housing markets that offer few affordable options. Furthermore, caseworkers may lack the capacity or expertise to navigate through the homeless service system or identify housing resources. To address this gap, some child welfare agencies are building their expertise by dedicating staff to housing stabilization. These specialized staff work with unstably housed families, or they provide caseworkers with the proper training and resources to address the housing needs of families in their caseloads.

The Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS), for example, has a team of five staff that focuses on community housing resources. This team supports DSS caseworkers by providing assistance in finding temporary and permanent housing. The team also provides direct assistance to clients, helping them locate housing in the private market, making sure they are applying for subsidized housing across the state, and making referrals to the state’s Family Unification Program (FUP), which provides permanent housing vouchers to families involved in the child welfare system.

Allegheny County’s Department of Human Services (ACDHS) takes a different approach. The agency works closely with the Continuum of Care (CoC) and homeless service agencies in the county. The county provides matching funds to leverage services offered through the CoC and provides almost half a million dollars to contract the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh to offer rental assistance, lease review, and budget counseling to at-risk and homeless families. An Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh staff person is located within each of the county agency’s
five regional offices. The staff person closely coordinates with the child welfare agency caseworker to help resolve housing issues for child welfare-involved families. This partnership allows ACDHS to focus on child welfare, while its partner, the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, offers assistance in an area where it has expertise: addressing families’ housing needs.

4. **Rapid Re-Housing with Transitional Services**

For some families, housing stability may be achieved through short-term rental assistance and transitional services to promote housing stability (commonly referred to by homeless service providers as rapid re-housing). Short-term models vary significantly, but most have a few commonalities: they provide deep housing assistance for a short period (1 to 18 months) and may attach some services that focus on housing stabilization (e.g., assistance locating housing in the private market and adjusting to new housing). Many working families that have stable incomes but have recently lost their housing may only require assistance with their security deposit and first month’s rent. Other families may require assistance for a longer period of time, until they secure employment and greater financial security.

Financing for rapid re-housing comes from a variety of sources. The most common source of funding for homeless families is the McKinney-Vento Homeless Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) program. Some states allocate Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program resources to meet the housing needs of at-risk and homeless families. TANF has become an important funding source for rapid re-housing programs in recent years. Some counties have used flexible funding provided under a Title IV-E waiver to meet the basic needs of families, which can include rental assistance.

Alameda County Child and Family Services (CFS) launched a Family Reunification Housing Pilot based on the rapid re-housing model and using flexible resources made available under the County’s Title IV-E waiver. The program is designed to help address the housing needs of child welfare-involved families, to preserve families, or to facilitate the reunification of children from out-of-home care. CFS partners with a local homeless service intermediary organization, EveryOne Home, which in turn subcontracts with two homeless service organizations: Abode Services and Building Futures with Women and Children. The two homeless service agencies have expertise in providing rapid re-housing services to families. They are also aware of other community-based resources to assist at-risk and homeless families.

Abode Services and Building Futures with Women and Children help families identify housing in the private market; navigate the application process, including tips on how to overcome bad credit and lack of landlord references; and pay application and credit check fees. The program provides limited financial assistance for rental security and utility deposits, rent arrearages, short- to medium-term rental assistance (not to exceed $1,200 per month), moving assistance, and temporary motel stays.\(^{19}\) If families require more assistance than the Family Reunification Pilot provides, they are linked to other community-based housing resources that best meet their needs.
5. **Provide Permanent Housing Assistance**

A subset of families may require permanent rent subsidies to overcome their housing problems and attain housing stability. Permanent rent subsidies, including FUP vouchers, can be reserved for families who cannot be successfully re-housed with shorter term rental assistance.

Child welfare agencies can partner with public housing agencies or homeless service providers to ensure that families with the most severe barriers to housing stability are able to access the permanent housing assistance they require.

Families with permanent housing subsidies may require additional assistance to find rental units in the private marketplace and navigate the public housing agency’s program requirements. Child welfare agencies may assign agency caseworkers to help families find housing or they can leverage the expertise of partners. Salt Lake County hired a local homeless service provider to provide extra services to help families receiving FUP vouchers navigate the private rental market and the public housing authority lease-up process. This staff person is located in the housing authority. Since over 300 communities across the country hold FUP vouchers, this may be a promising approach for other communities to consider.

Some families who receive a permanent rent subsidy are unable to attain housing stability without ongoing intensive services. This subset of families may make up 2-16 percent of all homeless families; tends to be characterized by the presence of a disability, large number of children, or other extraordinary barrier; and can often be identified by their multiple or extremely lengthy homeless episodes. Permanent supportive housing, which couples a permanent rent subsidy with ongoing, intensive services is predominately targeted to serve this subset of families.

Keeping Families Together, a New York City pilot project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and designed and implemented in partnership with the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) tested permanent supportive housing for child welfare-involved families with a disability and experiencing chronic or long-term homelessness in New York City. New York City government agencies and several nonprofit permanent supportive housing providers identified and provided supportive housing to 29 homeless families with long histories and multiple contacts with the child welfare system. According to the evaluation report, of those 29 families, 26 remained stably housed during the study period, 61 percent of open child welfare cases were closed, and the six children that were in out-of-home placement were returned home.

The promising results from this pilot led the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to create a five-year public-private partnership that started in 2012. Private partners include the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. The partnership funds permanent supportive housing demonstration projects for families involved in the child welfare system in five communities. The demonstration includes local and national evaluations.
Early Lessons to Consider
Although more data collection and research are needed to understand the full impact of these innovative approaches, key lessons are emerging for agencies that recognize the connection between housing stability and improved child welfare outcomes. This section provides an overview of three different housing strategies for agencies to consider: (1) Target families and prioritize resources based on needs; (2) Provide resources from agency budgets; and (3) Partner with other mainstream agencies.

1. Target Families and Prioritize Resources Based on Needs
There is significant overlap between housing instability and involvement in the child welfare system. The range of housing needs vary widely. Some families can achieve housing stability with modest amounts of assistance, including eviction prevention funds or help with a security deposit. Other families require more significant help to establish homes where they can care for their children. Rapid re-housing assistance, which provides help with housing search, landlord negotiation, time-limited rental assistance and follow-up case management services to promote housing stability, can help most families escape homelessness, including families with child welfare involvement. Some families require on-going assistance. Permanent rent subsidies can be reserved for families who cannot succeed with time-limited rental assistance and permanent supportive housing can be used to help the small number of families who experience chronic homelessness.

The challenge for child welfare agencies is to determine how to identify and assess families with housing problems, and then prioritize the allocation of available housing resources based on these needs. It is therefore critical to clearly define housing needs and to develop scoring measures to facilitate this process. Research shows that assessment tools can help improve targeting and decision-making but existing tools used by child welfare agencies do not collect enough data to fully assess housing needs. These tools should be adapted to a model similar to those utilized by local housing and homeless service providers to assess housing barriers for homeless families. Beyond assessment of need and targeting of resources, these tools can be extremely useful for collecting and analyzing housing needs in order to examine the relationship between housing barriers and child welfare outcomes.

2. Provide Resources from Agency Budgets
Allocating resources for housing from within child welfare agency budgets is challenging, particularly since most agencies already face funding shortages and are also constrained by regulations over how they use specific funding streams. Obtaining funds for housing is not without precedent, however.

The Connecticut Department of Social Services receives an appropriation from the state legislature to fund its permanent supportive housing program. Another potential resource is the Title IV-E child welfare waiver demonstration projects. While these waivers do not provide additional funding, they allow for more flexible use of federal funds to test new approaches to service delivery and financing structures. In recent years, some states have used these waivers to allocate resources to help meet the basic needs of child welfare involved families in an effort
to reduce out-of-home placements. California, Florida, Indiana, North Carolina, and Ohio all paid for time-limited rental and utility assistance under this waiver.

3. Partner with Other Mainstream Agencies
Several options exist for agencies seeking to build housing expertise. They can dedicate resources and staff to housing stabilization units, much like the Department of Youth and Families in Massachusetts has done (as described above), or they can partner or contract with homeless service providers and housing agencies in their communities.

Child welfare agencies may develop partnerships with other mainstream agencies that can provide income, employment, and housing assistance to low-income families to help address the basic needs of child welfare-involved families. One example is public housing agencies which have the authority to establish local preferences for subsidized housing programs. Another example is agencies administering the TANF program. TANF agencies typically provide income and work supports to low-income families with children, including low-income families with children served by child welfare agencies. They may also provide tools, such as modest amounts of rental assistance, to help families avoid or escape a homeless episode. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently issued an Information Memorandum to TANF directors outlining how TANF resources can be used to help meet the housing needs of at-risk and homeless families. The Information Memorandum states that, “Given the importance of a stable housing platform for the well-being of children as well as for providing a foundation to improve the employment outcomes and economic self-sufficiency of families, TANF agencies may consider providing resources to help eligible families avoid or exit homelessness.”

Stable housing is no less important for child welfare-involved families than for other families experiencing homelessness.

Addressing Housing Needs Can Help Child Welfare Agencies Reach Their Goals
It is clear that there is a limit to how much expertise and resources child welfare agencies can or should devote to housing. However, it is also clear that when a child welfare-involved family has a housing stability problem, the child welfare agency will have to address it if they are to achieve their goals. There are some steps, like the ones outlined above, that will improve child welfare agencies’ responses to family housing needs and help them achieve desired outcomes. As noted, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that housing stability leads to improved child welfare system outcomes. This suggests that child welfare agencies may wish to integrate a focus on housing into their child welfare responses, including approaches that aim to prevent families from entering the child welfare system altogether.

At the present time, child welfare services come at a heavy price to taxpayers, but some evidence suggests that improving child welfare agencies’ capacity to address the housing needs of families may generate savings to the child welfare system. In an evaluation of the Title IV-E waiver in Indiana, child welfare caseworkers reported that flexible financial resources, including modest amounts of financial assistance to help families address their housing needs, helped caseworkers close cases more quickly and minimize the out-of-home placements of children. Research has also shown that permanent rent subsidies facilitate family preservation and
reunification while helping families achieve housing stability. The Keeping Families Together pilot demonstrated the effectiveness of permanent supportive housing for child welfare-involved families experiencing chronic homelessness.

Child welfare agencies can maximize scarce housing resources for child welfare-involved families by using data to target housing interventions to the appropriate families. Policymakers need much more data on approaches that generate cost savings. If child welfare agencies move forward with steps to address housing issues, they should pay careful attention to tracking and monetizing non-housing outcomes. Given grim budget realities, these types of data can be very powerful in advocating for more housing resources and making decisions about how to best utilize available resources.

**Conclusion**

Housing plays a clear role in building stronger families. Child welfare agencies will continue to innovate and test new strategies for addressing housing instability in families. These strategies start with doing better assessments to accurately identify families for whom housing instability contributes to system involvement. Caseworkers or housing specialists can use this information to help these families by developing housing stability plans, increasing internal housing expertise among dedicated staff, and providing access to housing resources. Alternatively, they could create partnerships with agencies that can complete these tasks. All of these actions may help child welfare agencies achieve the goal of reducing their caseloads. Moreover, the goal of increasing housing stability supports the goal of improving child welfare outcomes, which may ultimately reduce the total cost to taxpayers and make more resources available to other activities that maximize the potential and safety of our nation’s children and families.

*This brief was written by Mary Cunningham, Urban Institute and Sharon McDonald, National Alliance to End Homelessness.*

**Endnotes**

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
8 Casey Family Programs Child Welfare State Database.
9 Ibid.
18 King County Department of Children and Human Services. Creating a Housing Stability Plan with Families Residing in Shelters and Transitional Housing. 2012.
19 For more information, see the Alameda County EveryOne Home, Family Reunification Housing Pilot Policies and Procedures Manual, September 2012.
23 The Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act, signed into law on September 30, 2011, provided the Department of Health and Human Services with authority to approve up to ten Title IV-E child welfare waiver demonstration projects in fiscal years 2012–2014.