



**The Framework for
an Equitable COVID-19
Homelessness Response**
#HousingEquity

Immediate and Flexible Crisis Options for Children and Families

In alignment with the Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response. The creation of this document was led by Barbara Poppe with Tiffany Haynes, Alexis Kramer, and Sharon McDonald as primary contributors.

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The Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response project is being collaboratively guided by the following partners:

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities • National Alliance to End Homelessness
National Innovation Service • National Healthcare for the Homeless Council
National Low Income Housing Coalition • Urban Institute
Barbara Poppe and associates • Matthew Doherty Consulting

Contents

Overview	4
• Purpose	4
• Need for Flexible Crisis Options	5
• Optimal Features for Communities Responses to Family Homelessness	6
• Spotlight Communities	7
Key findings	8
01. Ensure capacity to serve all families	9
02. Center equity and culture throughout every element of planning and programming	11
03. Utilize hotels/motels, vouchers, and master-lease units strategically and effectively	13
04. Implement homelessness diversion activities across the system	15
05. Connect sheltering strategies to rehousing assistance	17
06. Embed homelessness assistance within broader community systems of services and support	19
Ways to Organize Your Flexible Crisis Response	21
01. Community-wide Systems	23
• Washington, DC	
• Cleveland/Cuyahoga County, OH	
• Greater Richmond, VA	
02. Comprehensive Agency Response	25
• Family Gateway, Dallas, TX	
03. Collaborative agency response	27
• HOPE Atlanta, GA	
• Mother Nation, Seattle, WA	
04. Culturally Informed Programs	29
• Asian Americans for Community Involvement, Santa Clara County, CA	
• Mother Nation, Seattle, WA	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rainbow Services, Los Angeles, CA 	
05. Serving Survivors of Domestic and Interpersonal Violence	31
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian Americans for Community Involvement, Santa Clara County, CA • Mother Nation, Seattle, WA • Rainbow Services, Los Angeles, CA 	
06. Approaches in Rural Settings	32
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mahube-Otwa Community Action Partnership, Detroit Lakes, MN 	
Recommendations	35
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System and Program Design 	35
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding and Policy 	36
Closing	38
Appendix A: Spotlight Organization Details	39

Overview

Purpose

The [Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response](#) project provides guidance to communities on how to use a wide range of federal funding sources, including the American Rescue Plan Act and the CARES Act programs, strategically across key public health and economic recovery strategies to meet public health goals, increase housing stability, and prevent future increases in homelessness – all with a racial justice and equity lens.

Aligned with that guidance, this brief focuses on the need for **immediate and flexible crisis options paired with strong housing exits** that can be replicated, adapted, and scaled up or down as needs and/or scale of resources change in each community, with the goal that “no child sleeps outside.” A project team composed of four individuals with professional expertise (two also had with lived expertise of homelessness) conducted the research to uncover programs and community responses that are offering flexible crisis options that can be applied to other places. More than thirty programs and communities were contacted and ultimately nine (9) programs were selected to spotlight in this report.



Need for Flexible Crisis Options

We strongly believe that every community must reimagine the shelter/crisis response system for families with children by leveraging lessons learned and being learned through the COVID-19 pandemic, using a racial justice and equity focus. Through the development of two prior resources within the Framework project,¹ it became clear that very few communities have adopted approaches that ensure that “no child sleeps outside”. Instead of having a community approach that scales up or down based on the needs of families experiencing a homeless crisis, too many families are left on waiting lists for shelter or turned away because their family configuration is not consistent with the family shelter programs that are available in the community (e.g., programs don’t serve multi-generational families). The consequence is severe as many families are living without shelter in places not meant for human habitation,

1 [Making the Case: An Equitable Response to Homeless Children and Families and Responding to Homeless Families’ Needs During COVID-19 Crisis](https://houseingequityframework.org/), available at houseingequityframework.org.

Equal Access is not only a best practice, but also required by the HUD Equal Access Rule.

All individuals, including families, should have access to crisis options, housing, and services based on their self-defined gender identity, actual or perceived sexual orientation, or marital status. Individuals who identify as transgender and non-binary are also protected.

Programs may not exclude individuals based on their gender identity or age, i.e., teenage boys and adult males as part of families should be accommodated.

Admission and services should be provided without families being subject to intrusive questioning or being asked to provide documentation of gender for any family member.

like cars, tents, and abandoned buildings, causing adverse outcomes in health, economic, and academic attainment for parents and children.

These families need urgent access to resources to avoid further trauma and negative health impacts including acquiring or transmitting COVID-19. But a missing component in most communities is the availability of flexible crisis options that ensure safe shelter for all children and their families. Communities should prioritize getting all children and their parents off the streets and providing families with help to transition immediately into safe, appropriate temporary or permanent housing. To be effective, all crisis options must be welcoming spaces for children and parents who might otherwise remain outdoors or in vehicles, stay in unhealthy or unsafe doubled up situations, or be unable to flee domestic and interpersonal violence. Minimizing barriers to entry or participation are critical. Families must be able to [self-define what family means](#) and family members must not be separated by gender or age.

Optimal Features for Communities Responses to Family Homelessness

The research team set out to identify programs and community responses that could be replicated across the country to achieve the vision that “no child sleeps outside” and that offered approaches that embraced serving families in settings designed to meet the unique needs of each family. While not every program or community approach that we are spotlighting in this report was able to satisfy every optimal feature, we do believe that taken collectively these features are represented with approaches meeting most of the criteria described below.

We sought approaches that:

- Can rapidly expand, and contract based on demand with access 24 hours per day and immediate (same day) response.
- Offer dignity-based, safe, low-barrier, temporary shelter options that were culturally responsive, non-discriminatory, welcoming to LGBTQ people, and accessible for people with disabilities and family members who may be undocumented.
- Amplify racial justice and equity practices and deeply engaged with families in design, planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- Are family-centered, providing a priority for ease and convenience of families
- Use trauma-informed design and practices, and accommodate a range of family definitions and configurations, e.g., children of all ages, multi-generational families, pets, etc.
- Practice Housing First with harm reduction and serve as a bridge to long-term housing, providing evidence of quick connections to housing and high rates of housing exits.
- Prioritize and help unsheltered families and support exits that reduce return to homelessness.

Ideally, communities can right size through seamless integration with diversion, rapid resolution, and rapid rehousing. While recognizing that comprehensive approaches can be challenging in a crisis program, we wanted to identify programs that offer both parent and child services, provide childcare and child supports, afford agency to families (self-determination), and have been successful at coordinating with schools, family serving agencies, the Continuum of Care (CoC), and Coordinated Entry Systems (CES).

Spotlight Organizations



Key Findings

Introduction

The project team identified several key practices that are essential when considering how to enhance the community response to family homelessness and ensure “no child sleeps outside” [i.e., having sufficient capacity to accommodate all types of families and all families]. These practices are described in the following sections:

01. Ensure capacity to serve all families
02. Center equity and culture throughout every element of planning and programming
03. Utilize hotels/motels, vouchers, and master-lease units strategically and effectively
04. Implement homelessness diversion activities across the system
05. Connect sheltering strategies to rehousing assistance
06. Embed homelessness assistance within broader community systems of services and support



Ensure Capacity to Serve All Families

The vision “no child sleeps outside” is a challenge to achieve across the country and in most communities. This vision encompasses having both capacity (i.e., units funded and available) and design to be inclusive of all family types. Among the communities we are spotlighting, despite having innovative approaches, not all were funded sufficiently to meet all the needs. Nonetheless, all programs hewed to the vision and were working to make the vision true through advocacy, expanding partnerships, and continuously trying to improve and enhance existing approaches.

All nine spotlight organizations accommodate families of all configurations and fully comply with equal access best practice. Four (4) of the nine (9) spotlight organizations were able to ensure that families without any other options were able to be accommodated; all other organizations were constrained by financial resources so ability to flex capacity was dependent on funding availability.

Key design features

- Centralized or coordinated access point(s) to triage families in crisis – several spotlight organizations could see where shelter spaces were available through a shared database
- Homelessness diversion was offered before admission to shelter or another crisis option
- Coordinated with other crisis programs to expand range of options for families
- Accommodate families as self-defined households, e.g., multi-generational, single male parent with children, etc.
- Legal status (e.g., citizenship), criminal history, or prior utilization of the system was not a barrier to being served
- Crisis capacity maximized fixed shelter capacity while remaining flexible to scale up or down as needed
- Housing First, low-barrier admission practices, and family-centered practices were key to being inclusive of all families
- Efforts were made to make the crisis option convenient and accessible for families, without requiring families to travel long distances nor be put on waitlists
- Families could be transferred to fixed site shelters when vacancies arose
- Families had access to housing resources through Coordinated Entry

Benefits

- Children and family members are safer than being turned away with unknown prospects for help
- Families' needs were met more quickly, reducing the trauma associated with uncertainty and potential to being unsheltered
- Existing fixed shelter capacity is better utilized through a coordinated or centralized approach
- Community referrals are better able to be managed through a coordinated or centralized approach
- Same day access eliminates the need for bureaucratic wait lists or daily family call-backs seeking shelter

Challenges

- Political will to commit to the vision and policy/resource implications
- Sufficient funding to scale to need
- Identifying sufficient spaces to accommodate fluctuating demand
- Need for well-trained staff to provide diversion, triage, and pre-admission housing planning to set realistic expectations with families and to avoid excess admissions and costs
- Sufficient exit options to avoid long stays and cost overruns

“Families see hoteling as a great option, since it allows for the family to be together in a private living space while continuing to provide access to the full scope of AACI services including housing, case management, primary health, and behavioral health.”

**Aarti Subramanian, Housing Coordinator,
Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI)**

Center Equity and Culture throughout Every Element of Planning and Programming

Homelessness, like COVID-19, is disproportionately experienced by Black families and people of color.² Those who identify as LGBTQ are being disparately impacted by homelessness. Ending family homelessness requires providers and systems to act intentionally to overcome the barriers that disproportionately impact Black and Native American families resulting from long-standing systemic and structural racism. Programs and systems should be regularly assessing for disparate impact using disaggregated program data by race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This analysis along with feedback from people who access the program should be used to improve offerings to reduce disparities, advance equity, and offer healing-centered trauma informed care.

Flexible crisis options provide opportunities to offer culturally relevant services that are tailored to the unique needs of families that may not be possible in larger programs. Hotel/motel and master leased apartment settings can better serve the self-defined family household and allow for greater autonomy and agency. Adding voluntary access to culturally specific programming, ensuring diverse staff that includes people lived expertise, and regularly consulting with participants on ways to improve programming are all ways to center on equity and culture.

Three spotlight programs have embedded culturally specific and/or culturally informed services in their approach to providing flexible crisis options. All spotlight programs have either historically or more recently adopted practices and policies to advance racial justice, equity, and equal access.

Key design features

- Be attentive to the diverse cultural identities of people served by programs/system as well as people who may be underutilizing their program/systems
- Engage people with lived expertise to identify types of culturally specific programming that is offered and in planning, implementation, funding decisions, outreach, and provision of services
- Culturally specific approaches are offered that reflect the culture of the population served by the agency
- Families can choose which culturally specific options to explore and utilize
- Build bridges with culturally specific programs and diverse faith communities
- Regularly disaggregate program data (admissions, types of exits, length of stay, and improvements in income) by race, gender, and LGBTQ to uncover disparities. This includes understanding if current programming is working effectively with all

2 [Responding to Homeless Families' Needs During the COVID-19 Crisis](https://www.housingequityframework.org), available at [HousingEquityFramework.org](https://www.housingequityframework.org)

household types.

- Culturally specific approaches must be survivor-driven and trauma-informed recognizing both historical and recent trauma
- Display program materials and/or signage that reflects the diversity of participants
- Hire diverse staff and provide training by leaders and trainers of color/LGBTQ on about all the cultures, races, and ethnicities that are served by the program
- Evaluates potential partners' policies and practices to ensure their services are centered on equity and culture to avoid exacerbating trauma for program participants
- Adopt "Equity-Based Decision Making" approaches (see [here](#))

Benefits

- Families will feel supported and "seen" when programs with culturally specific offerings are available.
- Staff education and training about the cultural traditions of program participants will help programs be more successful at providing person-centered services.
- Building bridges with diverse community programs and leaders will enlarge the group of people and agencies working to combat homelessness and advocate for better public policy.
- Partnerships with diverse organization can improve homelessness response systems' capacity to provide culturally appropriate services and better attend to equity.

Challenges

- Building the organizational will, capacity, and time to explore and focus on creating culturally specific options.
- System and program leadership being willing to shift some power to people with lived expertise to design programs and systems.
- Securing sufficient resources for staff training, program design, and program costs.
- Lack of culturally specific resources in the community. Too often culturally specific organizations are volunteer run with extremely limited resources.

"Indigenous people need access to our cultural practices to heal. Mother Nation celebrates and inspires the ancestral strength of each participant through cultural services combined with housing assistance."

Norine Hill, founder Mother Nation

Utilize Hotels/Motels, Vouchers, and Master-lease Units Strategically and Effectively

All nine (9) spotlight communities utilized or could mobilize either hotel/motel space, hotel/motel vouchers, and/or master leased apartments to provide flexible, crisis options. In general, these sites were viewed more desirable than fixed shelter sites for all or some families. Some agencies began offering hotel/motel options when their fixed capacity shelters were decompressed during the pandemic. Agencies noted while staff were initially concerned or skeptical, the flexible options offered unexpected advantages for some families.

Key design features

- Expandable/contractible options to adjust to demands and needs
- Geography of the crisis option should match needs of people who need it -- be in places where families want to be to access services and their support systems. Multiple sites in various geographies are helpful
- Select hotel/motel sites that offer kitchenettes (or at least free breakfast), allow family to be in the room 24/7, are family friendly (i.e., not next to adult entertainment) and can accommodate pets
- Educate master lease landlords and hotel/motel operators about homelessness, the program and agency. Provide a 24/7 contact at the agency who can problem-solve issues that may arise.
- Provide services onsite and remotely (based on family preference), offer transportation to agency programs and community services, and ensure all basic needs met food, hygiene supplies, diapers, formula, etc.
- Coordinate with schools, childcare, and other child/youth serving organizations to ensure children's care, activities, and education are not disrupted
- Embed these crisis options within the existing program and broader community response so families can access Coordinated Entry resources and be tracked through HMIS (unless exempted)
- Hotel/motel programs should either reserve rooms or have other mechanisms to ensure availability when needed

Benefits

- Each family has their own space which preserves family roles and rituals and offers greater family autonomy and self-agency than a congregate shelter facility
- Less conflict between families and within families than a congregate shelter facility since families have more privacy and autonomy
- Provides each family with their own bathroom, which is more convenient for families and creates less conflict

- Easily accommodates a range of family definitions and configurations, e.g., children of all ages, multi-generational families, nonbinary people, pets, etc.
- When units provide kitchens, families can use their SNAP benefits to prepare their own meals so dietary needs and preferences can be better met than in congregate meal settings

Challenges

- Seasonal and other event-related variation in hotel/motel availability
- Need for well-trained staff to provide diversion, triage, and pre-admission housing planning to avoid excess admissions and costs
- Establishing cost estimates and securing funding
- Ensuring contracts with apartment property managers/owners and hotel/motel managers that are cost-effective and don't impose extra unnecessary requirements (e.g., 24/7 onsite staffing)
- Managing costs during peak demand
- Ensuring that both facility-based and flexible options offer parity in services availability and access to housing
- Sufficient exit options to avoid long stays and cost overruns – this is one of the most critical needs that must be met to keep a system in balance

“Problem solving together to mediate conflict and create a tailored, individualized plan from a variety of flexible and interchangeable tools.”

“Safety is central. The goal is to not only meet needs, but create spaces and situations where people can thrive.”

Implement Homelessness Diversion Activities Across the System

Diversion has been shown to be an effective and cost-efficient approach for resolving homelessness for many families. A trained staff member engages families facing homelessness in an exploratory conversation to brainstorm practical solutions for families to resolve their crisis quickly and safely. Staff help the families generate creative ideas and identify realistic options for safe housing and avoid admission to shelter. The goal is for families to become housed right away. Some families may require financial assistance to secure an apartment while others may opt for shared housing, often without financial assistance, while others may need some flexible financial assistance to help with transportation, childcare, or rental applications.

All nine (9) spotlight programs have embedded Diversion in their approach to providing flexible crisis shelter.

Key design features

- Staff trained in problem-solving techniques to help families generate options and able to help families assess options to ensure safety
- Diversion is offered and explored before admission to any shelter option

Homelessness Diversion

is a practice used to help families who are seeking crisis services or to enter shelter including those who may have already lost their housing, find safe alternative places to stay to avoid shelter or unsheltered homelessness. Diversion practice, coupled with flexible financial assistance, short- or long-term rental assistance, and/or other supports can reduce the number of families exposed to unsheltered or sheltered homelessness. Diversion has been demonstrated to be both effective and efficient. Expanding and strengthening diversion by offering targeted assistance to help families quickly secure new places to stay can avert a shelter stay or need for a flexible crisis option.

- Diversion services can be continued while in flexible crisis option and be a great way to help families exit more quickly to safe and stable housing
- When needed, diversion services include provision of relocation assistance, e.g. landlord referrals, help with initial move-in costs related to rent, utilities, and arrearages, etc.
- Families can choose which diversion options to explore and accept
- Diversion is a key part of “Domestic Violence Housing First” approaches which are survivor-driven and trauma-informed, and provide mobile advocacy, community engagement, and flexible financial assistance [see [here](#)]

Benefits

- Families’ needs can be identified and met more quickly. By avoiding shelter admission, the trauma associated with homelessness is reduced
- Reduces needs and demand for crisis shelter which frees up resources to invest in housing supports

Challenges

- Building the political will to adopt this relatively new practice
- Securing sufficient resources for staff training, flexible financial assistance, and staff wages

Connect Sheltering Strategies to Rehousing Assistance

Using an array of interventions [see text box], programs and systems work to realize the goal of providing re-housing assistance to every family that requires help to exit homelessness. While innovation and investment in re-housing assistance is growing at an impressive pace, resources remain far below what is needed. As a result, programs are largely unable to offer families the level of assistance families require to achieve long-term housing stability. All nine (9) spotlight programs have embedded re-housing strategies in their approach to providing flexible crisis shelter.

Key design features

- Families are quickly linked to re-housing assistance upon becoming homeless.
- Re-housing support is available to every family that does not quickly self-resolve.
- Homelessness assistance providers ascribe to a Housing First orientation. Re-housing support is not conditioned on compliance with service requirements and is available to every family that requires support regardless of family challenges.
- Families are assisted with housing identification and landlord negotiation. Family choice is prioritized and supported by staff.

Supporting Transitions to Stable Housing Is Critical

A range of re-housing interventions to help families transition out of shelter and back into permanent housing were used, including:

- Flexible financial assistance
- Rapid resolution
- Housing navigation support
- Rapid re-housing
- Affordable rental housing
- Permanent supportive housing

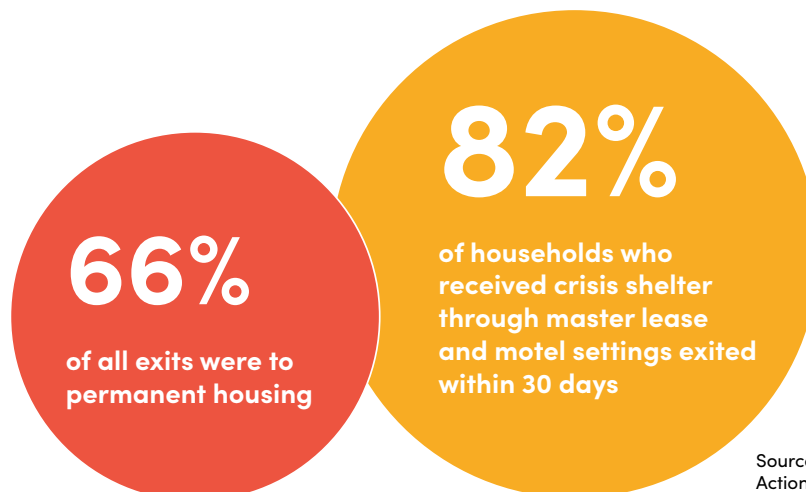
- Homelessness assistance programs are responsive to the concerns of both newly re-housed families and landlords to facilitate successful long-term tenancy
- A progressive engagement approach is utilized; there is an ability to transition families seamlessly to a richer intervention (longer-term, more intensive support) as needed.
- Re-housing assistance includes a focus on linking families to community-based supports to facilitate long-term family stability and well-being

Benefits of Re-housing Assistance

- Re-housing assistance connects families to permanent housing, ending their homelessness. It is the form of assistance families typically seek when they turn to providers
- Children and families thrive with the foundation of a permanent home
- Families that receive re-housing assistance experience shorter episodes of homelessness and are more likely to exit to a permanent housing destination, minimizing the trauma that can accompany prolonged dislocation
- Re-housing assistance allows emergency shelter resources to be used more efficiently.
- Investments in re-housing assistance can lessen overall demand for shelter within a region by facilitating more rapid turnover of shelter units, potentially garnering significant cost-savings

Challenges

- Programs and localities may lack the funding to scale interventions to assist every family or to provide the depth of assistance required for families to afford housing.
- Localities struggle to identify housing options that are affordable and available to families exiting homelessness. Scarce affordable housing options also allow landlords to impose barriers to housing for families with very low incomes
- Housing market that families can afford on their own, whether units are available in the geographic region
- The political will to invest in re-housing assistance, or reform homelessness assistance provision, is often absent



Source: MAHUBE-OTWA Community Action Partnership, 7/1/20-6/30/21

Embed Homelessness Assistance within Broader Community Systems of Services and Support

Families are better served when homeless service programs are well coordinated, integrated within both the larger homeless services community and with the broader array of local support programs available to low-income families and children. Leading organizations are committed to creating seamless transitions for families across diverse social service programs and fields to ensure children and adults in families have the tailored support they require to thrive. All nine (9) spotlight programs have embedded their approach to providing flexible crisis shelter as one component of the community's response to homelessness.

Key design features

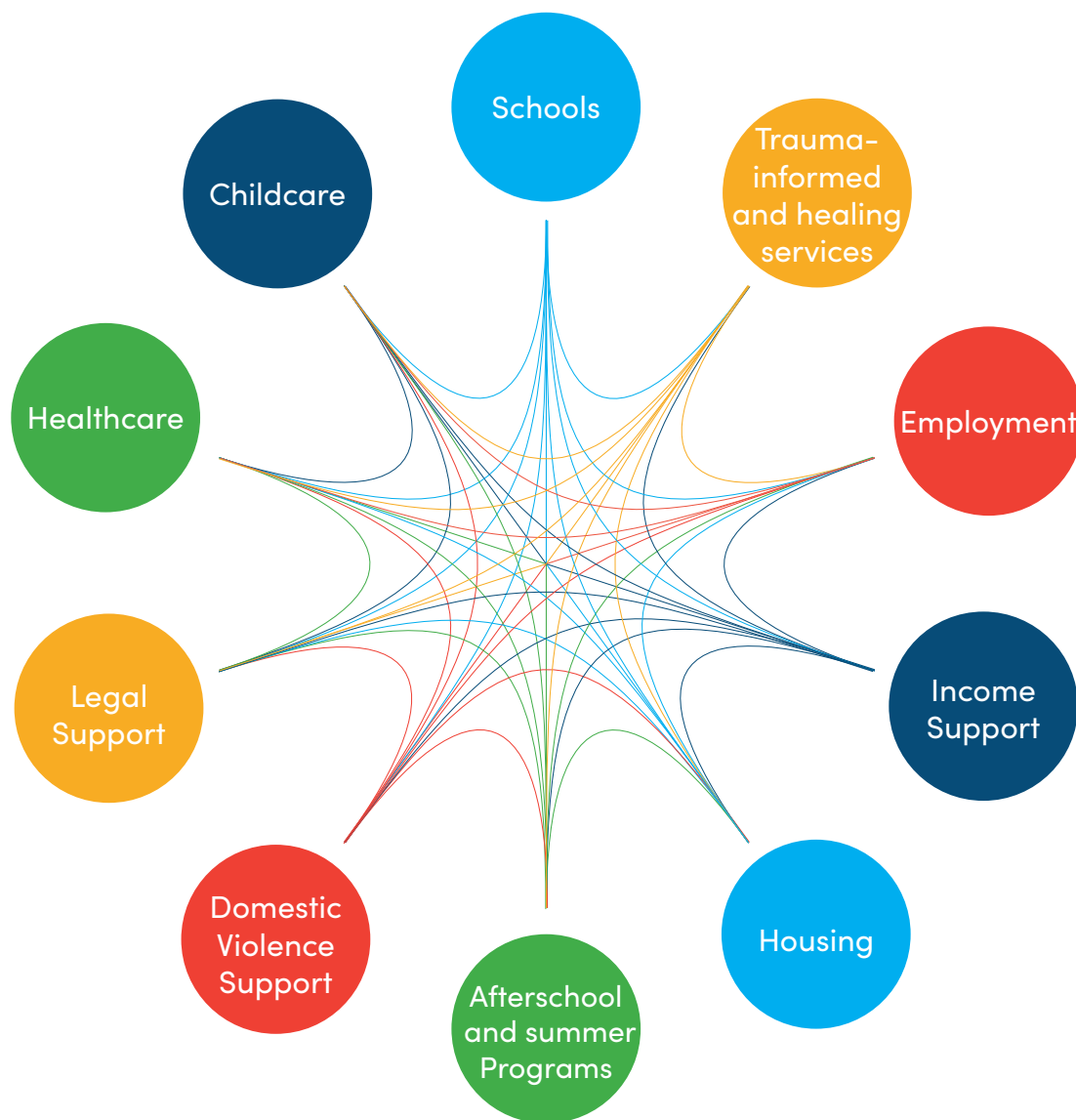
- Homelessness assistance providers closely coordinate service provision to ensure families have a seamless transition from shelter to re-housing support and that families ensure those who require more intensive support are quickly connected to providers best equipped to support them
- Families are quickly, and voluntarily, connected to income and support services available in the community, including childcare, child development services, education, employment, counseling, and mental health services
- Homelessness assistance system leaders and providers meet regularly to continuously assess system performance and outcomes. This includes ensuring the services each organization can provide are fully leveraged
- Homelessness assistance system leaders continuously assess and work to improve families' access to community-based services and the quality of services families receive. This is achieved through close collaboration and advocacy with social service and political leaders

Benefits

- Family members receive the supportive services they desire to help them achieve their own personal and family goals
- Connections to income and support services can bolster family well-being and stability, which can facilitate families' exit from homelessness and protect them from future housing instability
- Well-integrated service systems allow all engaged organizations to work efficiently as each organization can focus on assisting families with the services that they have expertise in providing while also ensuring families receive a holistic service response
- Allows homelessness assistance programs and systems to focus on their core function of responding to families' immediate crisis needs, including shelter or assistance reconnecting to housing

Challenges

- Community-based resources and services, such as childcare, may not be adequately funded, creating shortfalls in the critical services families require.
- Leaders of large social service systems may not prioritize coordination with homelessness assistance providers and leaders.



Ways to Organize Your Flexible Crisis Response

We believe every community can ensure that “no child sleeps outside” but how to achieve this vision will vary since every community has different strengths and challenges. We have uncovered programs and community responses across the country that are offering flexible crisis options in various ways. More than thirty programs and communities were contacted and ultimately nine (9) programs were selected to spotlight in this report. The ways that these approaches are delivered varies so we have grouped the spotlight communities to showcase common approaches that can be applied to other places.

This section showcases practical ways that communities can embrace and align with the optimal features described earlier in this brief.

Does your community have a strong Continuum of Care or other system-led response to family homelessness? Then check out how three communities have embedded flexible crisis options in [Community-wide Systems](#)

Does your organization provide a full range of homelessness assistance for families? Then check out how you could expand your services to include flexible crisis options in [Comprehensive Agency Response](#)

Does your organization currently provide crisis assistance for families and have capacity to partner with other organizations? Then check out how you could add flexible crisis options to fill gaps in your community’s response to family homelessness in [Collaborative Agency Response](#)

Does your organization provide culturally specific services and serve families who are often not well served by mainstream providers? Does your community have gaps in meeting the culturally specific needs of homeless families? Then check out how you could add flexible crisis options to fill gaps in your community’s response to the unique cultural needs of families in crisis in [Culturally Informed Programs](#)

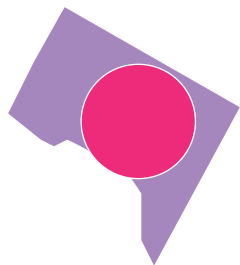
Does your organization serve survivors of domestic and interpersonal violence but struggle with having sufficient capacity to meet the needs of all types of families? Then check out how you could add flexible crisis options to fill gaps in your community's response in [Serving survivors of domestic and interpersonal violence](#)

Does your organization serve families in rural and smaller communities and want to expand crisis options for families? Then check out how one organization is working to respond to families across a large rural geography in [Approaches in Rural Settings](#)

01. Community-wide Systems
 - Washington, DC
 - Cleveland/Cuyahoga County, OH
 - Greater Richmond, VA
02. Comprehensive Agency Response
 - Family Gateway, Dallas, TX
03. Collaborative agency response
 - HOPE Atlanta, GA
 - Mother Nation, Seattle, WA
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Community-wide Systems

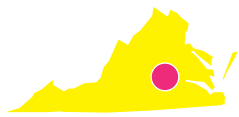
Washington, DC; Cuyahoga County, OH; and Richmond, VA are examples of localities that have achieved, or are close to achieving, a fully developed homelessness assistance system that can shelter every family facing unsheltered homelessness and minimize the time families are homeless by quickly reconnecting all families that do not self-resolve to permanent housing interventions.



Washington, DC recently replaced a large shelter facility with small attractive facilities scattered throughout the city that offer families greater privacy. The shelter programs are low-barrier, immediately accessible and can accommodate all families without safe housing options. Investments in diversion mitigates shelter demand as does helping families quickly secure new housing with rapid re-housing. This approach meant the District did not need to utilize any motels during the pandemic. Since 2016, Washington, DC has reduced the number of families sheltered nightly from 1200 to below 100, and the average time families spend in shelter declined from one year to 90 days. Racial equity is a key focus and “part and parcel” of every conversation about improving the system. A workgroup is identifying strategies to improve equity across the system, including within the grantmaking process, such as what is sought from grantees, how applications for funding are scored, and who is at the decision-making table.



Cleveland/Cuyahoga County, OH provides a full continuum of services to families facing homelessness using a progressive engagement approach. Robust investment in prevention and intensive diversion support helped the County meet the needs of all families without expanding shelter capacity throughout most of 2020. When more options became necessary, Cuyahoga relied on motel vouchers and an overflow shelter program offering families’ individual rooms and 24/7 safe accommodation. The entire system is Housing First oriented, there are no documentation barriers, and all programs are low barrier. Staff working across the system are trained to be trauma informed. Cuyahoga can connect all families to a re-housing intervention and, on average, families are rehoused in 70 days. Youth providers in partnership with the Race Equity Lab are helping the entire system expand and intensify the system’s focus on race equity. Action steps have included updating their charter and adding seats to their CoC Board. They are also exploring a CoC-standard for diverse leadership within each participating organization



Greater Richmond, VA is building a homelessness assistance system for families that diverts shelter entry whenever possible, shelters every family who cannot be safely diverted, and can re-house every family that does not self-resolve. Shelter programs are low barrier, Housing First, and trauma informed. The goal is to reconnect families to housing within 30 days of shelter entry. They have embarked on a process to assess race equity by disaggregating system data to identify disparities in program access or outcomes. In response to the pandemic, community leaders strengthened Coordinated Entry and leased motel units to ensure every family without safe options had access to shelter. Outreach workers and system partners (e.g., LGBTQ organizations and school liaisons) also received flexible financial assistance to provide immediate assistance and prevent unsheltered homelessness. The CoC is now adopting a more deliberative shelter intake process and streamlining families' connection to rapid re-housing assistance to reduce over-reliance on motel use in their system.

Comprehensive Agency Response

In many parts of the country, leading nonprofit agencies work to offer a comprehensive response to family homelessness from initial triage and diversion to crisis support through rehousing. They regularly evaluate how their program is serving families and the outcomes being achieved systemwide. Beyond offering a comprehensive approach to homelessness they also play a leadership role to seek improvements in the community response by filling service gaps, innovating, coordinating with other area providers, and advocating to improve social policies and programs.



Family Gateway is the first point of contact for all families seeking shelter assistance in Dallas County. They staff or support a help line that is available to families 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Shelter requests are triaged, so families in most urgent need are moved immediately to the front of the line for shelter access.

Family Gateway was the first program in Dallas to offer diversion assistance. Over 700 families avoided shelter entry with diversion assistance during 2020. Family Gateway is now working to further expand, standardize, and streamline diversion across the system by training partner organizations and exploring ways to hold diversion conversations virtually. Virtual diversion will soon begin in a partner's shelter with potential future plans to pilot in schools and/or police stations.

Families who cannot be safely and successfully diverted enter one of the local area shelters. Throughout the pandemic, every family in need of shelter received immediate shelter access despite a net loss of shelter units systemwide. Dallas opened a motel to expand safe shelter options and investment in diversion and re-housing assistance maximized the efficient use of the available shelter capacity. Family Gateway was also able to use flexible financial assistance to connect families with a motel voucher when no other options were available.

During the pandemic, 80 percent of sheltered families resided in the shelter or motel overflow space operated by Family Gateway. Family Gateway worked with a public health epidemiologist to determine the safest use of existing shelter resources, including how motel units could be used to maximize safety for all families.

Family Gateway's shelter programs are low barrier with a Housing First orientation. They accept all families in all configurations (multi-generational, same sex couples, families with children over the age of 18 and pregnant single moms). While Family Gateway's services are heavily focused on housing

and employment for adults and educational support for children, they work with other partners to bring in other familial supports, including mental health and medical services. A range of re-housing supports are available to families, including flexible financial assistance, rapid re-housing, project-based vouchers, and permanent supportive housing. Helping families quickly reconnect to housing has allowed Family Gateway to make the most out of existing shelter resources and reduce the average amount of time families spend in shelter from 120 to 51 days over the past five years.

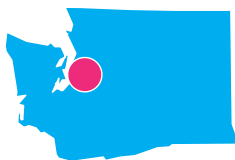
Family Gateway and all other homelessness service leaders are currently going through an extensive process to incorporate racial equity and the impact of implicit bias in their internal programs and systemwide to improve assistance families receive.

Collaborative Agency Response

Flexible crisis options are intended to fill gaps within the homelessness response for families. To be effective and efficient, programs which offer these options must work closely and collaboratively with other emergency shelter options, outreach, homeless hotlines, coordinated entry and rehousing programs.



[HOPE Atlanta](#) works across the metro region to provide families with support through diversion, crisis options using motel/hotel settings, and short-term rapid rehousing. HOPE Atlanta does not operate a traditional emergency shelter but does partner with shelters across several CoCs and can respond to assist families when shelters are full. The program can accommodate families who may be unable to access shelter due to their family configuration and needs. The capacity of their flexible crisis program is limited by funding availability, but every effort is made to help families avoid unsheltered homelessness. The program tries to navigate through the various shelter and re-housing regulations and priorities that differ across CoCs and shelter programs. This includes helping families connect to housing resources through the CoC. The program case managers help families create an individual goal plan and link them to a broad array of community resources. All staff are trained in motivational interviewing which can help families take advantage of resources like schools, workforce development, child services, etc. Staff work hard to be aware of community and CoC resources by participating in all CoCs within the metro Atlanta region. HOPE Atlanta staff have been addressing issues that advance racial equity. Key focus areas that emerged because of internal race equity work are protecting the right to vote and participating in broader housing advocacy to expand opportunities for Black Atlantans advocacy to counter NIMBYism, and other issues.



[Mother Nation](#) is a Seattle-based Indigenous led grassroots Native American organization founded 8 years ago and culturally designed for Indigenous women and families. Services include mobile advocacy for participants seeking safety from gender-based violence as well as wrap around services in homelessness prevention, diversion, and Native American cultural healing groups. Native American families with tribal enrollment, descendant's letter or other verification can define their household members. Pets are welcome, too. Based on needs, the family is served by a Yeha:wi Advocate or Case manager (Yeha:wi Services serves survivors of domestic violence and gender based violence. Yeha:wi was a name gifted by the Oneida and means "She holds her sacred") or Cultural

Response Team. Diversion, including relocation to stable, affordable housing is used to help most families avoid entry into the crisis hotel option. All are low barrier and use best practices in homelessness services including Housing First and harm reduction. Hotel stays range from 2 to 30 days (maximum per funder) with most households exiting to stable housing. To learn more about Mother Nation see this [article](#). See other section in this report for more about cultural services.

Mother Nation coordinates with the King County family sheltering system that has a coordinated shelter intake process facilitated by Mary's Place which is also the largest provider of family shelter. Mother Nation works closely with Mary's Place staff to identify families who will benefit from culturally specific services. Mother Nation participates actively in the Continuum of Care and uses HMIS. As a result they have insight into what other agencies have or are serving participants. Mother Nation can refer to Coordinated Entry but generally relies on other resources to rehouse families due to the limited resources available through CES. Mother Nation's capacity is defined by the availability of funding and the demand for these services. Staff make decisions on a case-by-case basis and always try to figure out a way to meet the need. By using private donations to fill the gap, or making connections to the mainstream shelter system, the program makes sure unsheltered relatives are connected to a resource.

Culturally-informed Programs

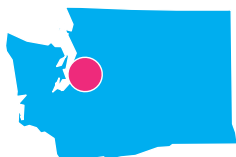
Flexible crisis options provide opportunities to offer culturally relevant services that are tailored to the unique needs of families. AACI, Mother Nation, and Rainbow Services are strong examples of programs that address the language, cultural, and immigration-related needs of diverse families through Housing First, trauma-informed, and person-centered services.



[AACI](#) (Asian Americans for Community Involvement) is a large multi-service organization serving Santa Clara County, CA. The leadership, board, and staff are diverse, and the agency offers services in more than 40 languages and dialects. Realizing the enormous cultural and linguistic barriers immigrant families faced, AACI formed Asian Women's Home (AWH) in 1986 and opened its shelter doors in 1994. AWH operates the only domestic violence shelter in Santa Clara County that focuses on the pan-Asian community, and is one of only nine shelters focusing on the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) community in the entire continental U.S.

AWH serves everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, socioeconomic background, or sexual orientation. Recent data indicated 46% were API, 15% Latinx, 24% White, 4% Black, 9% Multi-racial. A team of multilingual advocates handles a 24/7 hotline in 7 languages and dialects, including API languages, Spanish, and English. The program also uses a language line. Many clients are underserved immigrant individuals and families facing complex barriers to care. Survivors are supported to take English classes, access immigration relief that opens doors to public benefits and employment authorization, and secure jobs to increase their income levels.

AACI continually works to increase its responsiveness to emerging community needs and to advocate with policy makers to remove requirements that disproportionately limit access to immigrants and communities of color. Through a comprehensive portfolio of services, clients receive whole person care - coordinating health, behavioral health, and wellness services - that addresses both the needs of the moment and the social determinants of health impacting a family's long-term health and safety.



[Mother Nation](#) is a Seattle-based Indigenous-led grassroots Native American organization, which provides diversion and flexible motel assistance to Native Indigenous families who are experiencing gender-based violence or may have health medical

needs that aren't well-served by traditional family shelters. The heart of Mother Nation programming is Yeha:wi Services, which provides supportive services to survivors of domestic violence and gender based violence. Yeha:wi was a name gifted by the Oneida and means "She holds her sacred". Native women experience the highest rates of sexual assault and violence and before Mother Nation, there weren't specific Native services by and for Native people specializing in traditional healing and culture for survivors in this region. All services and programs Mother Nation takes on center women, their children, and then the broader Native community to support safety, wellness, and healing through culture. Housing instability is a major consequence of gender-based violence and is the reason Mother Nation has chosen to also focus on homelessness prevention and diversion for unsheltered relatives.

The organization expanded its offerings to serve homeless families when the local United Way had an interest in funding BIPOC organizations. Mother Nation's culturally informed healing services are custom designed and provided by credentialed Native American Elders who apply culture to clinical practice. A mobile cultural response team can serve families in hotels, shelter, or unsheltered setting. This is specific to family request and can include prayer, blessings, brushing off, smudging, sweatlodge, or a traditional healer for support. Elders guide the program which values living a life of overall wellness free from substances consistent with cultural norms but use of substances is not a barrier to receiving any services.

Mother Nation also has partnerships with local Tribes in areas of cultural training for social service providers, workshops for the community with traditional practices or healing groups for gender-based violence. All cultural activities are custom designed by the Tribe and are considered a support to existing programs within the Tribe.



[Rainbow Services](#) was established to serve survivors who are fleeing domestic and interpersonal violence; the agency has frontline staff who were Spanish speaking and became the default Spanish speaking hotline in LA county. The agency is in an ethnically diverse community, offers programming that supports the unique needs of Latinx survivors, and ensures all direct service staff are Spanish speaking. The 24-Hour crisis and referral hotline is bilingual. Five of seven agency leaders identify as BIPOC. The agency can accommodate people regardless of their legal status. Recently, Rainbow Services launched Team JEDI which is reviewing policies and practices related to Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion across the organization. A Lived Experience advisory council will be introduced this fall.

Serving Survivors of Domestic and Interpersonal Violence

Flexible crisis options can provide a safe, welcoming place for survivors of domestic and interpersonal violence when services are survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and comprehensive. The privacy afforded in a non-congregate setting combined with strong housing navigation has been demonstrated to be effective at helping survivors and their families exit to safe, stable housing.



[AACI](#) (Asian Americans for Community Involvement) is a large multi-service organization serving Santa Clara County, CA – the heart of Silicon Valley. AACI offers an array of health and wellness services including a federally qualified health center, behavioral health services, youth and seniors programming, and a program serving survivors of interpersonal violence/domestic violence (IPV/DV) and human trafficking (HT).

AACI Asian Women’s Home (AWH) offers crisis support, including a 24-hour multilingual hotline, a 10-bed congregate shelter, and hoteling when shelter is full or not appropriate. Housing Problem Solving (diversion) is being piloted to offer alternatives to emergency shelter. AWH serves all survivors of IPV/HT, including multi-generational households and nonbinary/LGBTQ survivors. The shelter can house service animals, and pet lodging is arranged through other organizations. Most households served are headed by women, but men and nonbinary survivors are also served. Families served in hotels typically exit within a couple weeks, while shelter residents stay for an average of 6 weeks.

All AWH services are client-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive. Clients work with advocate case managers to set goals and access a breadth and depth of services including but not limited to safety planning, systems navigation, access to other community resources, housing programs and services, language access, public benefits assistance, and internal referrals to AACI’s primary care, behavioral health, and wellness services. Legal advocacy and court accompaniment, including help with restraining orders and immigration relief, are available as well. To ensure that services are responsive to survivor needs, AWH utilizes survey-based feedback loops, posting past client feedback and program responses in the shelter so other survivors can see how their feedback is utilized in informing AWH’s work.

AWH housing programs provide a continuum of support to survivors and their families. COVID-specific housing assistance allowed AWH to cover up to 12 months of rent and security deposit. The Coordinated Entry system runs a separate confidential queue for survivors to access programs including

Transitional Housing, Rapid Re-Housing, and Permanent Supportive Housing. AWH is building landlord relationships to identify affordable placements. Annual data has shown that over 90% of households staying in shelter for at least four weeks have exited the crisis program to a safe living situation.

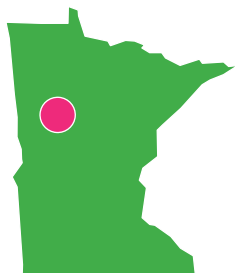


[Rainbow Services](#), based in Los Angeles, serves individuals and families who are fleeing domestic and interpersonal violence. It offers emergency and crisis assistance, transitional housing, rapid rehousing, and support for survivors who can remain in their own housing. Supportive services including case management, counseling, legal services, children's services, education, and advocacy. All Rainbow Services programs are survivor-centered and trauma-informed to support survivors to choose the services which are right for them and encourage them to participate in the programs that are the best fit for their needs and the needs of their family. Rainbow Services is part of the DV Housing First movement, and the agency is co-leading the DV Homeless Services Coalition. LA county DV shelters have a shared database (DV-IRC) where shelter space availability is posted. Work is underway to create a coordinated, standard intake for emergency shelter (already in place for transitional housing).

Crisis assistance includes a 24/7 hotline and emergency shelter – both a fixed capacity traditional shelter and more recently, flexible crisis options through hotel arrangements. Both programs are pet-friendly, low-barrier, and open to diverse individuals and families of all configurations. Due to the pandemic, the capacity of the shelter had to be reduced so Rainbow Services joined LA's Project Safe Haven, which began with a major philanthropic donation to the City of Los Angeles to begin providing shelter accommodations in hotels. Project Safe Haven covered the costs of meal cards and other operating costs. Rainbow Services added a case manager and housing advocate to serve the Project Safe Haven participants. Project Safe Haven participants were able to access all Rainbow Services programs, which were operating virtually due to the pandemic. When funding for Project Safe Haven ended, the agency continued the hotel program as its shelter continued to operate at a reduced capacity. Many families have expressed a preference for this approach over the communal living of the shelter. The hotel model has enabled alignment with trauma-informed care and was shown to be very successful at keeping families safe and exiting to stable housing. The hotel component has an average length of stay of 70 days with more than 40% of households exiting to permanent housing – this represents significantly better housing outcomes than the traditional shelter facility.

Approaches in Rural Settings

Rural settings present challenges related to larger geographies to serve, lower rental housing stock availability, limited transportation options, and fewer public-philanthropic resources. Thus, providers are always seeking creative and responsive ways to address homelessness. Flexible crisis options are particularly important in rural communities and small cities.



The [MAHUBE-OTWA Community Action Partnership](#), serving people across 5,000 square miles in northwest Minnesota, has developed creative and flexible ways to provide crisis options for people experiencing homelessness. They offer low-barrier, crisis shelter via master-leased units and hotel/motel units. Both settings allow households to meet their basic needs and have their own space. MAHUBE-OTWA provides case management services and ensures basic needs are met for food, hygiene supplies, diapers, formula, etc.

An active member of two Continuums of Care, MAHUBE-OTWA serves as an access point to Coordinated Entry. The agency also provides homelessness prevention, rapid rehousing, and permanent supportive housing. All programs incorporate a Housing First approach and prioritize homelessness assistance to those with the most severe service needs.

Crisis units are located across the region to provide the option for households to stay in their home community. MAHUBE-OTWA staff are mobile and provide both on-site and virtual support. Leases are held by the organization which also provides furnishings, supplies, and equipment. Hotel/motel rooms with kitchenettes are generally used and purchased in 3-day increments, renewing as needed. Seasonal demands from tourism can impact room availability. Households prefer master leased units since they provide more autonomy and less stigma.

There is no time limit on crisis stays but the goal is to move swiftly while making sure households are stable in their new home. Housing planning begins immediately as the supply of affordable rentals is extremely limited. Households in master leased units generally stay longer than hotel/motel units. Overall stays range 30-60 days but most exit within 30 days (average is 22 days). Overall, two-thirds exited to permanent housing with most using rapid rehousing to support the transition.

MAHUBE-OTWA'S INNOVATION STORY

Our innovation was to create a framework to help us meet clients where they are at and support them in their efforts to move to the next level and achieve their dreams. Families can enter at any of the five levels, we work with them to move up to the next level and shore up protections that serve as backstops to ensure continued advancement.



1 Homelessness, domestic violence, mental health, or substance use emergency

2 Application assistance, public/private benefits/ resources

3 Education, employment, and "other" pathway

4 Financial, cultural, and social capital

5 Leadership development, volunteerism, peer support

MAHUBE-OTWA's strategy is rooted in equity and a Whole Family Approach. They use the Intercultural Development Inventory and external reviews of policies/procedures/perceptions to guide continuous quality improvement on their goals of recruiting and retaining a diverse board and staff and eliminating disparities based on race in their community. An Ojibwe language group, LGBTQ signage, and a person-centered, trauma-informed approach create a safe space for community members. As a Community Action Agency, their mission is focused on upward mobility across a range of services.

Recommendations

System and Program Design

Flexible crisis options only work when designed as part of the broader community response to homelessness. Following are recommendations on how to design a more optimal system that ensures “no child sleeps outside”.

1. Pinpoint opportunities to advance racial equity within the system and ensure “no child sleeps outside” by creating flexible crisis response options for families. This may include scaling up diversion with housing relocation and housing opportunities like rapid rehousing, permanent supportive housing, and deeply affordable rental housing. This will allow the system to operate more efficiently and effectively.
2. Regularly consult families with lived expertise to review program/system results and offer ways to improve access, programs, and results.
3. Regularly conduct racial equity impact analysis using data about families served by the system and disaggregated by race, gender, and LGBTQ, including review by system/program performance. Conduct focus groups with participants and frontline staff to identify factors leading to the over-representation of people of color and under/over representation of LGBTQ identity among the population of families experiencing homelessness. Understand what neighborhoods and public systems are associated with high numbers of families entering homelessness. Develop actions to reduce disparities, including advocacy goals, new partnerships, and expanded responses.
4. Identify organizations that are BIPOC/LGBTQ led to provide culturally specific, affirming, and welcoming programs and services. Support these organizations to offer diversion and crisis shelter or to bring their programs and services to families who are accessing flexible crisis options or emergency shelter.
5. Offer sufficient crisis options such that all families can be accommodated and not fall into unsheltered homelessness. Offering flexible crisis options through hotel/motels or master leased units can ensure that there is both sufficiency and adequacy to serve families of all configurations.
6. Fund and design the flexible crisis program to accommodate a range of family configurations (e.g., multi-generational, nonbinary, etc.) and needs. Programs should be low-barrier, permit pets, and be grounded in best practices, especially trauma-informed care, harm reduction and Housing First.
7. Resource and design the flexible crisis program to establish a housing plan immediately upon intake, set clear expectations on the length of time that a crisis option will be available, and offer a range of supports to help families quickly exit to stable housing. This should include coordination with CES to connect families to housing resources dedicated to homeless families.

8. Review traditional emergency shelter programs and facilitate transformation, as needed, to lower admissions and program requirements, accommodate a range of family configurations, utilize best practices, accommodate pets, and update facilities to permit families greater privacy and autonomy.
9. Reach out to hotel/motel managers and landlords to identify locations that can provide flexible crisis options that are accessible and convenient to families. Ensure that locations are family friendly (e.g., close to schools, playgrounds, parks versus places with high violence, trafficking activities, or heavy nightlife).
10. Embed the flexible crisis options within a coordinated or centralized method for triage, diversion, and intake. This may or may not be part of the Coordinated Entry System. Establish means to coordinate with traditional emergency shelter programs. Use diversion as the first response then triage for traditional or flexible crisis options.
11. Ensure staff at all access points, programs, and services reflect the diversity of families served by the system. All staff should be trained in best practices and able to competently serve diverse families.
12. Establish program and system benchmarks for performance that support strong housing outcomes, short crisis stays, and minimize returns to homelessness. Closely monitor flexible crisis options with clear cost controls and optimizing use of traditional shelter without compromising quality for families. Update racial equity analysis.
13. Encourage faith-based and civic organizations to join with the public sector to provide funding for operations and services, as well as contribute supplies, furnishing, food, and gift cards for families to use for food, clothing, or other basic needs.

Funding and Policy

Improved funding and policy at the federal, state, and community level is essential to ensure the vision that “no child sleeps outside”. Some changes can be accomplished in the near term while others will require changes to policy and funding beyond the homelessness assistance system. These include both upstream and downstream shifts.

Immediate actions that are achievable in the near term:

1. Promote equity by building equity into policy and funding decisions (including which organizations get funded) and use equitable decision-making practices. Support culturally diverse organizations that are representative of the community and require all grantees to adopt certain practices that promote equity.
2. Homelessness assistance systems and programs should recognize, and work to dismantle, punitive system and program policies that impede and police Black families and other families of color rather than support family well-being, autonomy, and success. For example, programs can identify and work to dismantle policies within

homelessness assistance programs that replicate/mirror such policies (e.g., “good behavior” rules, compliance w/service requirements, curfews) that don’t honor the autonomy of families and parents as decision-makers for their family.

3. Increase funding for crisis response systems to enable them to accommodate all families with children who experience homelessness, including flexible funding to meet families’ unique and self-defined needs
4. Ensure policy and funding supports Housing First approaches that are inclusive, holistic, and trauma-informed, e.g., provide language access and are culturally informed, connections to community services, behavioral health, healthcare access, transportation, childcare, etc.
5. All funding and policies should ensure accountability for meeting each family’s needs. Conduct comprehensive program and system evaluation to measure outcomes and family satisfaction with services. Hold programs accountable for results.

Systemic actions that require persistent advocacy and more durable changes:

1. Stop criminalizing black and brown people and policing their activities. These policies include ones that create criminal history/barriers like unfounded charges by child protective agencies, vagrancy laws (laws that criminalize homelessness and being poor—targets black people), drug charges, and racial disparities in eviction. Child protection services shouldn’t penalize families but instead should help parents meet children’s needs.
2. Eradicate barriers to assistance for immigrant and undocumented family members to reduce their vulnerability to homelessness and ensure those who do experience homelessness are able to receive full array of shelter, housing, support, and services.
3. Significantly increase the supply of deeply affordable rental housing, expand access to rental assistance, and remove barriers (i.e., credit/eviction/legal histories, source of income discrimination, etc.) that limit families’ access to safe, stable housing. Expand geography of where deeply affordable rental units are available.
4. Support policies that raise families’ incomes and promote economic stability. This may include making the Advanced Child Tax Credit permanent; mandating living wages for work; family friendly work practices such as paid sick leave; education, workforce development, and other career enhancement supports; paid family and medical leave requirements; and provision of low-cost quality, childcare for children from birth through high school.
5. Expand capacity of community and public social service programs to respond quickly and effectively to low-income families experiencing a housing crisis so vulnerable families avoid eviction, housing loss, housing crises and homelessness.

Closing

Every community should reimagine the shelter/crisis response system for families with children using a racial justice and equity focus. This brief describes ways that each community can leverage lessons learned through the COVID-19 pandemic. Investments in diversion and re-housing can mediate the need for immediate and flexible crisis options by ensuring that families in crisis have ready access to safe accommodation when in crisis. There remains in most every community a need for expanding **immediate and flexible crisis options** paired with strong housing exits that can be scaled up or down as needs and/or scale of resources change in each community so “no child sleeps outside”. The examples contained in this brief can be replicated and adapted to help communities improve systems and programs in the near term while continuing to advocate for better policy and investment that reduce and ultimately end homelessness.

