



Keeping Families Together: A Pilot Program and Its Evaluation

Demonstration of supportive housing for chronically homeless families with children at risk for abuse and neglect

SUMMARY

From 2007 to 2010, the [Corporation for Supportive Housing](#)'s New York City office piloted and evaluated Keeping Families Together, a program that provided permanent supportive housing for the city's most vulnerable families. These families had been homeless for at least a year, and had at least one case of child abuse or neglect open with the city's Administration for Children's Services.

Supportive housing offers affordable, well-managed rental housing and intensive services to individuals and families who have been homeless for long periods owing to mental illness, substance addiction or serious health problems.

Key Findings

The Corporation for Supportive Housing subcontracted with [Metis Associates](#), a national consulting firm, to evaluate the pilot. In *Keeping Families Together: Program Evaluation Overview* (available [online](#)) the evaluators cited the following findings:

- As of June 2010, 26 of 29 families participating in the pilot remained in supportive housing, with some, according to the Corporation, having achieved 30 months of residential stability. In contrast, 15 families in a comparison group either never left homeless shelters or returned to them one to three times during the pilot period.
- More than half (61.1%) of the child welfare cases that had been open when the families moved into supportive housing had been closed by the end of the pilot. All six children who were in foster care when the families moved in, and who still wanted to be reunited with their parent, had returned to their families.
- Supportive housing helped participants rebuild support systems challenged by homelessness, and had a powerful impact on the importance they placed on becoming better parents.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) supported this project with a grant of \$697,682 from June 2007 to May 2010.

Context

Since 1991, with funding from RWJF and other philanthropies, the Corporation for Supportive Housing has helped spur the creation of 100,000 units of supportive housing across the country. Supportive housing offers affordable, well-managed rental housing and intensive services to individuals and families who have been homeless for long periods owing to mental illness, substance addiction or serious health problems.

In New York City, more than 1,000 homeless families could benefit from supportive housing. The Administration for Children's Services has investigated some of these families for child neglect and abuse, and has found that they are at risk of continued abuse and breakup.

However, housing for families and services designed to prevent child abuse often operate in isolation from one another, with negative impacts on these families. Corporation staff believed that expanding the supportive housing model to these homeless families could address both residential instability and the root causes of neglect and abuse.

The Project

From 2007 to 2010, the [Corporation for Supportive Housing's](#) New York City office piloted and evaluated Keeping Families Together, a program that provided permanent housing and intensive services to some of the city's most vulnerable families. These families had been homeless for at least a year, and had at least one case of child abuse or neglect open with the city's Administration for Children's Services.

The program, which ran from June 2007 to May 2010, had three main objectives:

- *Providing supportive housing for the most vulnerable homeless families involved in the child welfare system.* Each of six providers of supportive housing agreed to dedicate one to 10 apartments to the program, and to offer health and social services to the families, or to refer them to services in the community. (See Appendix 1 for a list of housing providers.)

The project team also worked with five municipal agencies to identify and recruit the families and implement the program. The agencies were:

- The Administration for Children's Services
- The Department of Homeless Services
- The Department of Housing Preservation and Development
- The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
- The Human Resources Administration

See [Appendix 2](#) for a description of each agency's contribution to the project.

- *Improving agency collaboration in support of the targeted families.* The housing providers and government agencies formed a working group and held 23 bimonthly meetings to facilitate:
 - Monitoring implementation of the initiative, including establishing eligibility criteria for families and developing a strategy for recruiting them
 - Ensuring that families involved with the child welfare system had priority access to supportive housing, and that they received child welfare services
 - Providing technical assistance to housing providers participating in the pilot
 - Strengthening communication between housing providers and child welfare agencies

Project staff also invited an outside presenter to address each meeting. For example, Bronx Defenders, a nonprofit legal-aid organization, discussed community legal services, and the city’s Human Resources Administration outlined the process for applying for food stamps, child care, public health insurance and other services.

- *Building the capacity of providers to serve the targeted families.* Studies had shown that as many as two-thirds of families referred to mental health services fail to receive them. To overcome that challenge, the project team sought to embed evidence-based mental health services in supportive housing.

To do so, the project team held 11 training sessions for housing providers and case managers. Led by project staff and outside experts, the trainings covered topics such as:

- Providing services that address trauma
- Teaching families wellness self-management
- Helping parents with challenging teenagers

The project team also contracted with one of the outside experts, Mary McKay, Ph.D., of Mount Sinai School of Medicine, to provide one-on-one support to help housing providers and case managers implement concepts introduced in the trainings.

All families received case management services from on-site social workers, and had access to additional services through other on-site staff or community-based service providers. Case managers met with each family at least twice monthly to identify their need for substance abuse treatment, medication management, training in parenting skills and domestic violence services, and to develop intermediate and longer-term service plans.

The Corporation for Supportive Housing provided each housing provider with \$1,000 to \$2,000 per family, to cover one-time expenses intended to promote positive functioning

and self-sufficiency. Families used the funds for items such as Christmas presents, school uniforms, summer clothes, interview attire and Metro cards.

The Evaluation

The Corporation for Supportive Housing subcontracted with [Metis Associates](#), a national consulting firm, to evaluate the pilot. The evaluation included two main components:

- A retrospective assessment of implementation of the pilot, focusing on partnerships among participating organizations and coordination and provision of family services
- An outcome evaluation that examined the impact of the program on participating families, particularly their housing stability, involvement in the child welfare system, school attendance and achievement, and other indicators of family stability and functioning

The evaluators used both quantitative and qualitative methods and data from a variety of sources to assess implementation and outcomes of the pilot. The sources included:

- Interviews with project staff and the program's clinical consultant
- Interviews, focus groups and surveys with partner providers
- Interviews and focus groups with members of participating families
- Administrative data from participating agencies
- Case management records and program documents

The project team also worked with the city's Department of Homeless Services to identify a comparison group of 15 families whose shelter histories, disabilities and child welfare involvement matched those of the program families.

Findings

In their report, *Keeping Families Together: Program Evaluation Overview*, the evaluators cited the following outcomes from the project:

- **Twenty-nine of New York City's most vulnerable families enrolled in Keeping Families Together.** The families, which moved into apartments from October 2007 to December 2009, had averaged nearly 40 months of residential instability. Their needs ranged from substance addiction and mental illness to a lack of basic skills in independent living.

Family characteristics included the following:

- The adults ranged from 22 to 52 years of age, and had a mean age of 38.7 years. Four-fifths of families (79.3%) were headed by a single woman; just four families (13.8%) had two adults in the home. The heads of household were predominately Black (58.6%) or Hispanic (31%).

- All but one of the household heads had a history of substance abuse, and more than half had been diagnosed with mental illness.
 - The families moved into supportive housing with one to three minor children, or an average of 1.6, and a total of 43. The children averaged 9.2 years of age in April 2010.
 - Participating adults had 25 other children in foster care, and three in informal placement with relatives or friends. Six of those children wanted to be reunited with their parent. Parental rights had been terminated some time in the past for 15 children.
- **As of June 2010, 26 of the 29 families remained in supportive housing, with some having achieved 30 months of residential stability.** The remaining families moved out of their apartments voluntarily, with two returning to shelters.

The 15 families in the comparison group either never left homeless shelters or returned to them one to three times during the pilot period.

- **By the end of the pilot, 61.1 percent of the child welfare cases open at the time of placement had been closed, and all six children placed outside the family who wanted to reunite with their parent had done so.**
- **Families in supportive housing had fewer repeat incidents of child maltreatment.** During the three years before their move, the families had a total of 46 abuse and neglect reports—an average of 2.1 per family. During the pilot, the number of cases fell to 13, or an average of 0.6 per family. No children were removed from their home, and only two child welfare cases were reopened, during the program’s pilot period.
- **During the pilot period, 12 adults participated in substance abuse treatment programs, and seven adults received psychiatric treatment for mental illness.** Nearly all the adults who enrolled with a substance abuse problem were clean and sober by the end of the pilot.
- **The 10 children who moved into supportive housing during the 2007–2008 school year averaged 25 more days of school attendance after one year, compared with the previous year, and all showed gains in attendance.** However, only one-third of children who moved into supportive housing during the 2008–2009 school year posted positive gains in attendance one year later.
- **The academic achievement of children who moved into supportive housing during the 2007–2008 school year was mixed.** One year after move-in, only one child of six for whom results were available for all three years met state test standards for English language arts, and just three met state math standards. However, two of the six improved their English language arts scores, and three of six improved their math scores.

- **Supportive housing helped families maintain positive relationships with others and rebuild support systems challenged by homelessness, according to participants.** In interviews and focus groups, these adults reported that:
 - The program helped them form supportive relationships with other residents and case managers. Some joined religious institutions in the community, and some reconnected with long-lost family members.
 - The program had a powerful impact on the importance participants placed on becoming better parents, and gave them an opportunity to do so, according to participants.
 - About one-third of adults participated in training in job readiness or employment skills. Six adults were employed at some point during the pilot, although only one woman was employed at the end of the period.

Significance to the Field

Keeping Families Together “is the only supportive housing program that puts a focus on families,” according to Project Director Alison Harte, M.S.W. It has served as a “gateway for involving the child welfare system in supportive housing, and shown that supportive housing can assist the agency’s most challenging families—those that are the subject of repeated investigation, court oversight and foster care.”

Harte noted that families in the program “had a real intergenerational cycle of homelessness and foster care: these parents had experienced the same challenges as their children. It’s been surprising and delightful that the families could come so far in such a short time.”

According to the evaluators, “The results will inform housing, child welfare, substance abuse and mental health treatment communities about how to serve and house high-needs families, and inform policy-makers about the benefits of serving very vulnerable families through a coordinated system of case management provided through supportive housing.”

Lessons Learned

1. **Understand the interests of each potential partner in a project, and frame it accordingly.** The mandate of the Administration for Children's Services is to prevent neglect and abuse—not to house families. Although the agency’s top leaders supported the program, front-line caseworkers did not always understand supportive housing, which slowed the agency’s participation in the pilot.

According to Project Director Harte, the agency might have partnered more fully from the beginning if the project team had framed the program as directly targeting neglect and abuse.

2. **Be prepared to confront challenges in identifying families for supportive housing.** According to Harte, these challenges were aggravated by the size of city agencies, the lack of knowledge among child welfare workers of the program and its application procedures, and fear among families that they would be subject to stigma and judgment, and that their children would be placed in foster care.

The project team overcame these hurdles by:

- Working with the Administration for Children's Services to inform the 40 or so child welfare agencies with whom they contract about the results of the pilot
- Making presentations at shelters, family court and family forums held by the Administration for Children's Services
- Working with the Department of Homeless Services to ensure that it identified and prioritized eligible families for placement in supportive housing
- Hiring a consultant to assess families for their eligibility for supportive housing
- **Create a working group of supportive housing providers and government agencies to facilitate communication and education.** Most supportive housing providers had never served families, and did not understand the child welfare system, or how to ensure children's safety and well-being. The working group gave housing providers direct access to city agencies and service providers. (Project Director/Harte)

AFTERWARD

Since the RWJF grant ended in May 2010, the Corporation for Supportive Housing has continued a limited version of Keeping Families Together, supported by the corporation's own operating funds. The project team is seeking funding to further embed the model in New York City and replicate it elsewhere.

The project team is also working with RWJF and three communications firms to disseminate the program's strategies and products:

- **Fenton**, a national communications firm, is developing and implementing a media outreach strategy to position Keeping Families Together as the nation's leading model for providing supportive housing to chronically homeless families.
- **Burness Communications**, a public relations firm based in Bethesda, Md., has produced a [brochure](#) on Keeping Families Together and the potential of supportive housing to serve as a safety net for highly vulnerable families. The goal is to increase support for the approach in other cities.
- **Prichard Communications**, a public relations firm based in Portland, Ore., is conducting a webinar in February 2011 on the evaluation results from Keeping Families Together.

Report prepared by: Robert Crum

Reviewed by: Sandra Hackman and Marian Bass

Program Officer: Kristin B. Schubert

RWJF Team: Vulnerable Populations

APPENDIX 1

SUPPORTIVE HOUSING PROVIDERS

- **CAMBA** provides services to more than 35,000 individuals and families annually, in six core areas: economic development, education and youth development, family support services, HIV/AIDS services, housing services and development, and legal services.
- **Lower Eastside Service Center** provides substance use and mental health treatment and services.
- **Lantern Corp.** develops and operates permanent affordable and special-needs housing in New York City.
- **Palladia, Inc.** serves largely low-income urban individuals and families of color, and provides services to address substance abuse, homelessness, HIV, mental illness, trauma and domestic violence, as well as criminal justice and family services.
- **St. John's House II** is a supportive housing program for formerly homeless single adults and families. It is part of the St. John's Community, which provides on-site services that foster residents' independence, empowerment and personal fulfillment.
- **Women in Need, Inc.** provides shelter, housing and services to New York City women and their families who are homeless and disadvantaged.

APPENDIX 2

NEW YORK CITY AGENCIES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PROGRAM

- **The Department of Homeless Services** devised multiple strategies for identifying families that met criteria for participating in the program.
- **The Department of Housing Preservation and Development** coordinated recruitment efforts with the program's timeline.
- **The Administration for Children's Services** helped identify and recruit youth and families and confirm their eligibility. The agency also educated housing providers about the child welfare system, and how to overcome bureaucratic obstacles related to families' involvement in that system.
- **The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene** provided technical assistance to service providers on New York/New York III, an agreement between the city and state to create 9,000 units of supportive housing over 10 years.
- **The Human Resources Administration** developed an online application for service providers participating in supportive housing that resulted from New York/New York III, and implemented the application during the pilot.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of the date of this report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Communications & Advocacy

Websites

<http://www.csh.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=4085&nodeID=89>
Page on the Corporation for Supportive Housing's website on Keeping Families Together.

Reports

Swann-Jackson R, Tapper D and Fields A. *Keeping Families Together: Program Evaluation Overview*. New York: Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2010. Available [online](#).

Fact Sheets

Keeping Families Together: Supportive Housing for Family Preservation. New York: Corporation for Supportive Housing, January 2010. Available [online](#).