Strengthening the Tie that Binds: Project Keeps Families Under One Roof
Evaluation of the Family Unification Program

SUMMARY
Starting in April 1993, the Child Welfare League of America provided technical assistance to local agencies implementing the new federal Family Unification Program.

The grant also funded an evaluator for the program and an additional grant in 1996 funded completion of the evaluation by Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies.

Key Results
- Agencies in eight cities and regions received technical assistance in collaborating to serve families in need.

Key Findings
- Some 85 percent of the participating families were still housed after 12 months, the evaluators found.
- They found that most families in the Family Unification Program succeeded in holding their families together or reunifying them.

Funding
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) supported the technical assistance project with a grant of $450,408 and supported completion of the evaluation with a grant of $45,487.

THE PROBLEM
A 1995 study by the American Public Welfare Association found that more than 25 percent of children entering the child welfare system faced either inadequate housing or homelessness, and that housing problems often contributed to difficulties in returning children home from foster care.
In 1990, Congress authorized the Family Unification Program, which would provide rent subsidies to low-income families that were in danger of being split up or whose children were unable to return to their parents because of housing problems. The vouchers were made available only in limited areas and required local public housing authorities and child welfare agencies to collaborate in efforts to keep these families together or reunify them—collaborations which have often proved difficult to assemble and even harder to maintain.

The Family Reunification Program, administered by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), received its first appropriation in fiscal year 1992.

When the Family Unification Program was first implemented, the Child Welfare League of America, a national association that provides technical assistance on, and advocates for, child welfare issues, launched an initiative to provide technical assistance and consultation to the local housing/child welfare agency collaborations that were administering the Family Unification Program vouchers. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation provided $75,000 for this effort.

Also in 1990, RWJF, working jointly with HUD, launched a national program, the Homeless Families Program, which sought to address the needs of homeless families by restructuring the systems that provide health care, social services and housing to those families. The program provided grants to agencies in nine cities to integrate these services, and HUD set aside rental vouchers for families served by the program. The program’s national program office, at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, guided the program and provided technical assistance to the local agencies.

**THE PROJECT**

In April 1993, RWJF awarded a grant of $450,408 (ID# 021822) to the Child Welfare League of America to expand and strengthen the technical assistance it offered to communities implementing the Family Unification Program.

The league awarded a subcontract to the Homeless Families Program national program office, which retained the services of several consultants: Julie Hardin, former co-director of the office; Allan Katz, a specialist in health care financing; and Lisa Mihaly, a specialist in child welfare.

A team including these consultants and league staff provided technical assistance, including on-site meetings, staff training and phone consultation, to housing and child welfare agencies in communities receiving Family Unification Program funding.

The league also subcontracted with the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies to conduct a descriptive evaluation of the Family Unification Program itself, examining the
program's design, implementation, outcomes and long-term implications. The evaluators relied on two data sets:

- In May 1995, they mailed a survey to the housing and child welfare agencies in the 31 cities and regions that had received Family Unification Program funding in federal fiscal year 1993, the second year of funding. The survey covered such topics as eligibility criteria, the referral process, the extent of interagency coordination and procedures for dealing with waiting lists for rental assistance.

- They adapted a management information system, which they had initially developed to evaluate the Homeless Families Program, to track the backgrounds, needs and progress of the 1646 families who received assistance in federal fiscal year 1993. The team was able to collect child welfare data on 1228 of those families, and information on the housing situation of 995 families 12 months after they had received assistance.

Delays in the start-up of the federal program and slow implementation by the local agencies eligible for the Family Unification Program rental assistance complicated the task of gathering data on the Family Unification Program recipients for the evaluation. In 1996, RWJF provided a second grant totaling $45,487 (ID# 029267) directly to Vanderbilt to complete the data collection and analysis.

Other Funding

In 1994, the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided a grant of $100,000 to the league for its work on the Family Unification Program. The Casey grant funded a newsletter, a manual on public housing authority/child welfare collaborations and training conferences for agencies administering the Family Unification Program assistance.

RESULTS

- Agencies in eight cities and regions received technical assistance in collaborating to serve families in need. The localities served were:

  — Contra Costa County, Calif.
  — Santa Clara County (San Jose), Calif.
  — Stanislaus County (Modesto), Calif.
  — Tampa, Fla.
  — Pinellas County (St. Petersburg), Fla.
  — Baltimore
  — San Antonio
  — Central and southern regions of New Jersey.
The consultation helped child welfare agencies and housing authorities gain an understanding of the barriers to collaboration and ways to overcome them. In Santa Clara, for example, the team helped the two agencies develop protocols and procedures for working together.

Many of the local partnerships involved other health and social services agencies as well, and the technical assistance team helped these agencies gain more Medicaid and other federal funding for the services they provided to Family Unification Program families.

The team helped the Contra Costa Department of Health Services win funding to test a new Family Maintenance Organization, which sought to provide mental health, substance abuse, counseling, youth and employment services to vulnerable families. The organization, however, did not come to fruition. (See Program Results Report on ID# 023705.)

**Findings**

The evaluators published the following findings in a 1998 report, The Family Unification Program: Final Evaluation Report, issued by the Child Welfare League of America:

- **The Family Unification Program awarded two-thirds of the housing certificates to families with a child at risk of being placed in out-of-home care; one-third went to families needing a child reunified from out-of-home care.** The majority of families in the Family Unification Program were headed by single females in their early 30s who had two or three young children. Racial and ethnic composition reflected the local population trends, except that African Americans were over represented.

  Prior to being referred to the Family Unification Program by the child welfare agencies, nearly half of the families were "precariously housed," usually doubled up with family or friends; about a quarter were in their own substandard residence or were victims of domestic violence; and another 22 percent were homeless. Of the children living outside the home, half were in foster care, and more than a third were living with a relative.

- **Some 85 percent of the families participating in the Family Unification Program were still housed after 12 months.** The high rate of residential stability is consistent with rates found in other housing studies. Families who had lost their housing subsidies (14%) most often did so because they were no longer eligible or had committed lease or program violations.

- **Most families in the Family Unification Program succeeded in holding their families together or reunifying them.** When their child welfare cases were closed (on average, about 11 months after they gained housing), 62 percent of the families that had been split up had all their children living with them. Some 90 percent of those who were at risk of losing their children had not done so.
Unification Program reunification rates fell within a range found in other studies, but preservation rates were higher than expected.

In the same report, the evaluators noted the following implications for the future of the Program:

- **It is important to identify which families are most appropriate for the Family Unification Program.** Agencies want to target homeless or precariously housed families who either have children who are truly at risk of being removed or are ready to be rejoined if proper housing is available, but not those whose challenges are so great that out-of-home placement is inevitable or reunification is highly unlikely.

Some child welfare agencies have found the adoption of specific criteria to guide caseworkers in their referral decisions to be helpful in this regard.

- **Agencies should recognize that some children may be better off placed out of the home rather than remaining in the home or living with an abusive or neglectful parent.** Child welfare agencies are under pressure to stabilize families and close cases to keep up with excess demand; however, housing agencies would prefer case workers to follow the families for as long as possible, in part to intervene with residents that might damage property.

Ongoing support can be provided in a variety of ways, including tapping other federal support programs and local resources, such as family resource centers.

Agencies should also establish a coordinated process to identify and respond promptly to family crises, by intervening with families whose cases are still open or expediting the reopening of the case.

**Limitations**

Because there was no control group of comparable families who did not participate in the Family Unification Program, it is impossible to determine whether the outcomes would have occurred without the program.

**Communications**

The evaluators produced *The Family Unification Program: Final Evaluation Report*, along with interim reports on the program sites and the survey results. In addition to providing training sessions for the agencies receiving technical assistance, the Child Welfare League of America collaborated with HUD to host annual Family Unification Program grantee meetings as a way to disseminate lessons learned to participating agencies across the country. The league also posted some information on the program on its website. See the Bibliography for details.
LESSONS LEARNED

1. Technical assistance providers must exercise an artful combination of pressure and reward to convince public housing authorities and child welfare agencies to collaborate on behalf of their common clients. The existence of funding that required them to apply jointly was a necessary first step to building that collaboration. (Project Director)

2. Expanding partnerships requires that agencies be convinced that the effort and time required will bring a tangible benefit to their organizations. Sometimes, though rarely, that benefit is financial. More often, it comes in the form of access to new clients or creation of a positive public image. Raising the public profile of a program can help in promoting it among local agencies. (Project Director)

AFTERWARD

In June 1998, RWJF denied a request from the league for renewed funding of the project. However, continued funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation has allowed the league to maintain its role as trainer, information provider, clearinghouse and advocate for the Family Unification Program. As of 2002, the Family Unification Program had grown to serve approximately 40,000 families.

Prepared by: Robert Crum
Reviewed by: Robert Narus and Molly McKaughan
Program Officers: Stephen Somers, Rosemary Gibson (ID# 021822) and Marjorie Gutman (ID# 029267)
Grant ID# 21822, 29267
Program area: Vulnerable Populations
BIBLIOGRAPHY

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

Reports

