

**Family Unification Program:  
Serving Homeless and At-Risk Homeless Families and Youth**  
*October 10, 2008*

Later this year, HUD is expected to release a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) for approximately 3,000 Housing Choice Vouchers through the Family Unification Program (FUP) to help preserve and reunify families in the child welfare system and assist in the transition of youth aging out of care. Application for the FUP vouchers requires a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the local public housing agency (PHA) and the child welfare agency. The PHA administers the vouchers and the child welfare agency provides supportive services to child welfare-involved families and youth.

Local planning to prepare for the NOFA's release can strengthen a community's application for the vouchers by crafting a viable partnership and commitment between the local PHA and the child welfare agency. The involvement of those committed to ending homelessness can also help ensure the resources will serve those who require it the most and improve program performance.

An evaluation of the FUP program was conducted by Debra Rog to examine the program's impact on homeless families with children.<sup>i</sup> The evaluation found that the development of the cross-system partnership and standards of practice for two very different agencies were challenging for many communities and ultimately delayed the release of many housing vouchers. Developing standards of practice early can facilitate the timely release of vouchers, once awarded.

The evaluation further found that the child welfare agencies had difficulty identifying families on their caseloads who were literally homeless (in shelter, transitional housing or in places unfit for human habitation) to refer to the FUP program. Approximately one in five families served in the FUP program were experiencing literal homelessness upon referral to the program. Among the cities studied, only St. Paul used a majority of the FUP housing vouchers to serve homeless families.<sup>ii</sup> Early advocacy on behalf of homeless families may help ensure that a greater number of the new vouchers will serve families with dire housing needs; those experiencing homelessness.

Communities may want to explore opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of how the FUP program couples housing assistance with supportive services to stabilize homeless and at-risk families and youth while improving the overall performance of the child welfare agency. Careful evaluation can build the case for future investments in housing

assistance or even shifts in how existing child welfare resources are used to stabilize at-risk families and transition youth to independent living. Homeless service providers, planners, and advocates should be involved in designing a community's plan for how the vouchers will be used and for developing a competitive application for FUP vouchers.

### **Understanding the Intersection of Homelessness and Child Welfare**

*Studies have consistently found high rates of child welfare involvement among families experiencing homelessness and youth who age out of foster care. Children of families who have experienced homelessness may also represent a significant proportion of an agency's child welfare caseload.*

Responding to homelessness is a critical issue for child welfare agencies because it impacts so many of the families and children on their caseloads. A 1998 survey of 195 children under the age of four in foster care in a northern California county found that one half of the children in care had a parent with a history of homelessness.<sup>iii</sup> A five year study that followed a cohort of children born in Philadelphia found that 60 percent of the children who were placed in foster care before the age of five had a mother who experienced homelessness.<sup>iv</sup> A study of families in Milwaukee found that 29 percent of the families receiving services to reunify with children in care experienced homelessness within the previous 12 months. Ten percent of intact families receiving services experienced homelessness within the same time frame.<sup>v</sup>

Families who have experienced homelessness are at heightened risk of child welfare involvement. Children of mothers who have experienced homelessness have higher rates of placement into foster care and longer stays in foster care than children of low income, housed mothers. In one study, children born to mothers who experienced homelessness were four times more likely to be involved with the child welfare agency before reaching age five than children born to low income mothers who did not experience homelessness.<sup>vi</sup> A recent study that examined the factors that facilitate or impede reunification of children who are placed in foster care found that reunification rates are 50 percent lower for families who experienced a homeless episode in the 12 months before the child was placed into care.<sup>vii</sup>

Evidence suggests that enhancing child welfare agencies' capacity to meet the housing needs of child welfare-involved families can reduce out-of-home placements and facilitate earlier family reunification. This can improve the performance of the child welfare agency in meeting its agency goals for family preservation and reunification and promote stability for at-risk families. Investments in helping to meet the housing needs of families may also prove to be a more efficient use of resources than other services offered to strengthen and stabilize families.

In testimony provided to the Washington State Supreme Court, a Superior Court Judge reported that "housing is a 'significant' factor in a substantial number of foster care cases."<sup>viii</sup> An analysis of cases in Washington State found that 5-10 percent of initial placements into care would have been prevented if the family had adequate housing and

reunification would be expedited in 20 percent of cases.<sup>ix</sup> A Toronto study also found that the lack of appropriate housing influenced the decision to place a child into foster care or delayed reunification by an average of six months in 20 percent of the cases. The cost of prolonged foster care placements that resulted from the delayed reunification was estimated at \$2.9 million.<sup>x</sup>

The effectiveness of the FUP program in housing, preserving, and reunifying families has been examined. The evaluation found that 88 percent of homeless families who were provided a FUP voucher retained their housing one year later.<sup>xi</sup> Among all families who retained their housing over a 12 month period, 90 percent of the families at risk of having a child placed in an out-of-home placement remained intact and 94 percent of families with children in foster care were reunited.

*Approximately one in five youth who age out of foster care will experience homelessness. Systems-involved youth comprise a significant proportion of the young people who experience homelessness.*

Each year 24,000 young people age out of foster care and are expected to transition to living independently.<sup>xii</sup> Studies examining the outcomes of these young people find that they experience high rates of homelessness and face many challenges to securing independent housing. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, which followed young adults who were in foster care between 1988 and 1998, found that 22 percent experienced at least one night of homelessness.<sup>xiii</sup> A multi-year study, the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, is following a cohort of young adults who were age 17 or 18 and in foster care in 2002 and 2003 on a wide range of outcomes. The study has found that 18 percent of the youth had been homeless at least once since exiting care and 14 percent reported a homeless episode before reaching age 19.<sup>xiv</sup> Nearly 40 percent reported that they did not receive the training or assistance required to help them live independently.

Studies have also found that a significant number of unaccompanied, homeless youth have experienced an out-of-home foster care placement. A study conducted by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless found that 44 percent of the homeless youth surveyed had experienced an out-of-home foster care placement.<sup>xv</sup> A study conducted in Minnesota found that 40 percent of homeless youth and 37 percent of homeless young adults had lived in foster care.<sup>xvi</sup>

Former foster youth may also comprise a significant proportion of the young mothers experiencing homelessness. A study in Massachusetts found that 30 percent of young homeless mothers reported having been placed in foster care as a child or youth. This is more than double the rate of other low income, housed young mothers.<sup>xvii</sup>

The FUP vouchers can be used to provide rental assistance to young people age 18 to 21 who transition from foster care or who left foster care at age 16 or older. Young adults that are currently homeless and left foster care after age 16 should also be eligible for the FUP program. FUP vouchers can be used to subsidize the rent of an eligible youth for 18 months. There is no such time restriction on families.

There has been no evaluation of the impact of the FUP program on youths' transition from care to independent living. The release of the new vouchers provides an important opportunity for communities and researchers to examine the impact of FUP on stabilizing the housing of young people transitioning from foster care and the impact of stable housing on a broader array of outcomes.

### **Promoting Successful Partnerships to Help Families and Youth**

The involvement of providers, advocates, and policymakers committed to ending homelessness can be instrumental in the submission of strong applications for FUP vouchers and successful implementation of the program. They can help facilitate a partnership between their local PHA and the child welfare agency. The resources and expertise of the homeless service community may also prove invaluable to successful implementation of the program.

Providers, advocates, and policymakers may need to encourage their local PHA and child welfare agency to enter into a partnership in order to compete for the FUP vouchers and may also need to encourage them to target the vouchers to homeless and at-risk families and youth. This may require informing local government and agency leaders about the research on the intersection of child welfare and homelessness and the benefits that can result from partnering with homeless systems planners. The use of local data outlining the housing needs among child welfare-involved families and youth can be even more compelling than national research.

Homeless service providers can offer their expertise to help families and youth rapidly access and then sustain housing. The 1998 evaluation of the FUP program found that it took families an average of four months from the point of referral to move into a rental unit and much longer in communities with tight housing markets and/or a shortage of units with three or four bedrooms. Many homeless service providers have experience working with landlords, helping homeless individuals and youth find housing that meets their needs, and overcoming clients' barriers to housing such as poor credit or criminal records. This expertise can be leveraged to allow communities to shorten the time needed to move vulnerable families and youth into stable housing. Streamlining this process can also help minimize the time children are in out-of-home placements.

Homeless service providers are already actively working with child welfare-involved families and homeless youth who have aged out of foster care who are in dire need of housing and supportive services to stabilize their lives. They often have long histories of working with the most vulnerable subset of youth and the families who are at heightened risk of prolonged child welfare involvement (e.g. families with multiple homeless episodes). The providers may be well placed to offer services that complement those offered by the child welfare agency to preserve and reunify families and help young people transition to greater independence. Such services may include home-based case management that helps families and youth stabilize in their new housing and resolve landlord-tenant issues that may arise to avoid housing disruption. Homeless service

providers and existing homeless management information systems can also be instrumental in the identification of families and youth eligible for the FUP program, particularly if there is interest in targeting the vouchers to particularly vulnerable subsets of families and youth.

Homeless service providers, advocates, and policymakers may also wish to explore the opportunities the FUP program offers to advance knowledge about the targeting of intensive services with housing assistance to stabilize and preserve families with even the most challenging histories. Homeless systems are increasing their capacity to direct more intensive services where they are most critical. Further refining communities' capacity to target interventions to stabilize families, particularly those at risk of family separation or delayed reunification would be a substantial contribution to those committed to ending homelessness.

---

<sup>i</sup> Rog, D. J., Gilbert-Mongelli, A. M. & Lundy, E. (1998). *The Family Unification Program: Final Evaluation Report*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Zlotnick, C., Kronstadt, D. & Klee, L. (1998) Foster care children and family homelessness. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88(9) 1368-1370.

<sup>iv</sup> Culhane, J. F., Webb, D., Grim, S. and Metraux, S. & Culhane, D. (2003). Prevalence of child welfare services involvement among homeless and low-income mothers: A five year birth cohort study. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 30(3), 79-95

<sup>v</sup> Courtney, M., McMurtry, S. L., Zinn, A. (2004). Housing problems experienced by recipients of child welfare services. *Child Welfare, Special Issue: Housing and Homelessness*, 83(5), 393-422.

<sup>vi</sup> Culhane et al. (2003).

<sup>vii</sup> Courtney et al. (2004).

<sup>viii</sup> Kellam, S. (2001). When foster care and homelessness intersect. *ABA Child Law Practice*, 20(4), 50-55.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Rog, D. et al. (1998).

<sup>xii</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2006). *The AFCARS report: Preliminary estimates for FY 2005 as of September 2006*. Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children Bureau.

<sup>xiii</sup> Percora, P. J., Kessler, R. C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A. C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C. R., Wiggins, T., & Holmes, K. E. *Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

<sup>xiv</sup> Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Cusick, G. R., Havlicek, J., Perez, A. & Keller, T. (2007). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.

<sup>xv</sup> Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (1993). *Alone after dark: A survey of homeless youth in Chicago*. Chicago: Chicago Coalition for the Homeless.

<sup>xvi</sup> Owen, G. (2006). *Overview of Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in Minnesota, St. Paul*. Minneapolis: Wilder Research Foundation.

<sup>xvii</sup> Personal communication, Wendy Vaulton, National Center on Family Homelessness. September 30, 2008.