

Making Effective Use of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to End Family Homelessness

Innovative communities are demonstrating how the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program can be used more effectively to combat family homelessness. They have recognized that solving families' housing crises is integral to their own mission of improving the long-term self-sufficiency of low-income families with children.

Homeless families have similar employment barriers and issues as other low-income families. They are not a separate population, but rather a subset of the families TANF agencies are charged with serving. Homelessness is not an uncommon experience for the families TANF agencies serve. One longitudinal study of families receiving TANF assistance found that over a three year period, one in four experienced a homeless episode, and almost half doubled up with other households to manage housing expenses.¹

Innovative communities are making use of TANF-funded short-term rent assistance to help families avoid or quickly escape homelessness. Employment services are also being mobilized to help re-housed parents quickly access sustainable employment so they can pay the rent on their own once the limited rent assistance ends. The short-term rent assistance and employment services are being used as part of a proven approach to address family homelessness, commonly referred to as rapid re-housing. Rapid re-housing programs return homeless families quickly back to housing, through providing help with the housing search and landlord negotiation, modest amounts of rent assistance, and time-limited services to help families find employment and stabilize in their new housing.

Rapid re-housing is designed to minimize the amount of time families are homeless. This reduces children's exposure to the damaging effects of homelessness, and returns families to greater stability and normalcy in homes of their own. Once in stable housing, parents have the necessary platform to achieve stable employment and greater economic self-sufficiency.

Communities adopting rapid re-housing have shown dramatic impacts on reducing family homelessness. Directly, or in partnership with local homeless service providers, TANF agencies can provide the resources and expert help that homeless families require to move back into homes of their own and become self-sufficient through employment. Rapid re-housing is a perfect complement to the aims and philosophy of the TANF program. It provides limited and targeted assistance that is intended to help low-income families transition quickly from reliance on shelters and homeless service programs to self-reliance in housing of their own that they pay for with earnings from work.

Short-Term Rental Assistance

In addition to the more commonly known use of TANF funds – the provision of cash assistance and work supports to low-income families – TANF resources can be used for short-term, non-recurrent benefits to help families address a need that is not expected to be long-lasting, or to recur. States can provide families with up to four months of assistance through the provision of short-term, non-recurrent

benefits. States do not have the same extensive monitoring and federal reporting requirements for families receiving only short-term, non-recurrent benefits that they do for families who receive ongoing help from the TANF program, such as families who receive TANF cash assistance. This makes short-term assistance easier, and less costly, to administer. It also makes it possible for states to re-grant TANF funds to partnering organizations to meet the short-term needs of families without requiring significant, potentially cost-prohibitive, administrative oversight.

States can use short-term, non-recurrent benefits to provide at-risk and homeless families up to four months of TANF-funded rent assistance. This resource can be used to help all eligible low-income families who are at-risk of experiencing homelessness, whether or not the family is already receiving TANF assistance. The short-term rent assistance can be blended with other supports and resources to help families avoid or quickly exit homelessness. Additional supports may include rapid re-housing services and help connecting parents to employment.

For many families, four months of rent assistance or less is all they require to escape homelessness. Other families may require more help. Communities can extend rent assistance as necessary through using other resources, including TANF assistance that cannot be considered a short-term, non-recurrent benefit for reporting purposes. Communities can also marry short-term, non-recurrent benefits with resources from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), such as the Emergency Solutions Grant Program.

Employment Services

Beyond providing short-term rent assistance, TANF agencies can improve the self-sufficiency of homeless families by strengthening parents' connections to work and coordinating employment services with rapid re-housing assistance.

Promote Connection to TANF Employment and Support Services.

The best available data indicate that only 41 percent of families entering homeless shelter programs are connected to TANF income and employment support.ⁱⁱ Reducing family homelessness starts with minimizing the time it takes to reconnect families to permanent housing that they can afford. Minimizing the time it takes to connect families to TANF employment support can reduce the length of time it takes for families to exit homelessness and achieve self-sufficiency while residing in homes of their own.

A first step, therefore, is to ensure that families who are homeless receive help from TANF agencies to find employment as rapidly as possible. TANF agencies may consider waiving pre-application

The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare has granted TANF funds to a nonprofit rapid re-housing provider to help families move quickly out of homelessness and back into housing of their own. The TANF funds are used to provide four months of rental assistance and intensive case management services.

requirements for homeless families and instead expedite families' applications for assistance. Communities can also establish protocols to proactively connect families to the supports and services they are eligible to receive upon entering shelter.

One potential tool is the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS). Homeless service providers are required to input data to HMIS about the individuals and families they serve, including families' income sources. Communities can use HMIS to determine if families entering homeless programs have appropriate access to TANF supports. If high numbers of families enter shelter without employment income or TANF services, it is likely that some policy and practice changes are needed to allow families at-risk of homelessness more rapid access to TANF assistance. This step alone can help some families avoid homelessness by providing a rapid connection to resources that may help them keep their housing.

As more communities adopt a common intake process for families entering shelter programs, TANF agencies might also consider developing protocols that allow families to apply for expedited TANF assistance when they apply for shelter. TANF agency staff may also be outplaced in programs serving homeless families to quickly connect families to the services they require to rapidly exit homelessness.

Coordinate Employment and Rapid Re-housing Assistance.

TANF agencies can also improve employment outcomes by coordinating employment services with programs that offer rapid re-housing assistance. Homeless parents have a lot of the same employment barriers that other low-income parents face, including a lack of education and limited work skills, and

they require the same supports, including child care and transportation assistance. While the strategies that work best to help other low-income parents find employment are also likely to work well for homeless parents, they will not be effective until the family obtains some stability in housing.

TANF agency officials and rapid re-housing providers report that employment interventions are more effective when families are first re-settled in homes of their own. Parents shift from a day-to-day crisis-orientation to one that is focused on meeting their other goals. Since rapid re-housing interventions typically offer only modest amounts of rent assistance, finding employment is often their most pressing priority after they have moved into new housing. Once they are stably housed, they are likely to eagerly welcome very intensive support services to help them connect to work that will allow them to sustain the housing.

Homeless families need both housing and employment, and both are easier to get when the agencies providing these

The Utah Department of Workforce Services uses TANF funds, administered by a homeless service provider, to provide four months of rent assistance to help Salt Lake City homeless families reconnect quickly to housing. Workforce Services also assigns a staff to the homeless service agency to help rapidly re-housed families connect quickly to employment. Over 1,000 families exited homelessness with Workforce Services support over the last two to three years.

services work together. TANF agencies can promote regular communication between frontline and management staff helping families to access housing and employment. Regular communication between rapid re-housing and employment service providers allows for the quick identification and resolution of issues that may arise, such as a lost job or conflict with a landlord, which can undermine a family's path toward greater self-sufficiency. Regular communication can also facilitate extensions of employment or housing assistance to ensure that families have the time and support they require in order to achieve both stable housing and employment.

Promote Greater Self-Sufficiency and Stability for People with Disabilities and Severe Barriers

Some parents, up to 20 percent, have significant challenges that may require more intensive support than TANF employment programs are typically able to provide. When quality, intensive employment services have failed to help parents find and maintain employment, an in-depth functional assessment may be appropriate. Such an assessment may indicate that longer-term vocational rehabilitation and intensive services are required to increase economic self-sufficiency.

In some instances, families that include a person with a disability may be better served by the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. TANF agencies can establish protocols for referring the families on their caseload who appear to have the most difficulty maintaining employment or are long-term welfare recipients for in-depth employment assessments and possibly SSI. Early identification of people with disabilities, particularly those whose disabilities have never been identified, can ensure they are quickly connected to supports that will help them achieve the greatest possible level of self-sufficiency. This can also serve as a tool to prevent family homelessness.

Just as some families require more help than TANF employment programs can provide, there are some families who will be unable to achieve housing stability without more support than rapid re-housing programs provide. When extensions of rental assistance and case management services are insufficient to help families stabilize in housing, families may be referred to programs that offer long-term and intensive support, such as transitional housing and permanent supportive housing. These richer interventions are intended to serve families who have the greatest barriers to achieving stable housing, including families who have been homeless multiple times and face an array of other challenges, including mental health and substance abuse issues, and children placed in foster care.

The Mercer County Board of Social Services (MCBOSS) rapidly re-housed nearly 200 homeless families over the last seven months, relying on its own caseworkers to provide housing search assistance, landlord negotiation, employment services, and case management to homeless families. Rapid re-housing programs operated by MCBOSS and nonprofit organizations in the community helped reduce the number of families residing in emergency shelter or transitional housing on any given day in Mercer County, New Jersey by 20 percent over a two year period.

It is likely that there is significant overlap between the families who struggle the most to achieve and maintain employment and the families who face the greatest difficulty maintaining housing stability after a homeless episode. TANF agencies should consider working with homeless service providers to identify the best strategies to promote the self-sufficiency of these highly vulnerable families and leverage the resources of the multiple systems (which may include mental health, early childhood development, substance abuse and child welfare) to support this small subset of families with the most acute needs.

Conclusion

Nearly 173,000 families turn to emergency shelter and transitional housing programs each year. Despite challenging housing markets, most families do not remain homeless for long.ⁱⁱⁱ They navigate the best that they can, using their time in shelter and transitional housing to find employment, save up for a security deposit and first month's rent, and search for a landlord willing to overlook their poor rental histories.

Families typically escape homelessness in less than three months, but it is often an extremely stressful and traumatic experience for all family members. Parents face significant challenges meeting their own needs and the needs of their children when they are not in homes of their own.

Rapid re-housing is designed to help restore families to housing as quickly as possible. It can dramatically reduce the amount of time families spend homeless and, in doing so, alleviate the strain on overcrowded family homelessness programs. This can result in cost-savings to communities, because they do not have to expand family shelter programs or turn to expensive motel vouchers when shelters are full. More importantly, rapid re-housing can reduce the incidence of homeless families being denied shelter without having anywhere else to go.

Rapid re-housing has proven to be effective in ending families' homelessness, but communities lack the resources to implement it to the scale needed. Marrying TANF short-term, non-recurrent benefits and employment services with HUD resources to rapidly re-house families allows communities to implement this approach at the scale necessary to dramatically reduce family homelessness in the nation.

ⁱ Mark Courtney and Amy Dworsky, *Economic Hardships and Food Insecurity: Findings from the Milwaukee TANF Applicant Study*. Chapin Hall Center For Children at the University of Chicago, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Abt Associates, Inc., *The Impact of Housing and Services Interventions on Homeless Families*, unpublished. The study is underway and findings have not yet been published. When completed, it will be published by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Office of Policy Development and Research. HUD convened researchers associated with the study to present initial findings which largely included baseline data on July 19, 2012. Recordings from the convening are available on the web at: http://www.huduser.org/portal/hmlessrch_conv/.

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2011 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*. Office of Community Planning and Development, 2012.