

Promising Strategies:

Mercer County Board of Social Services and Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness

Mercer County, New Jersey

Overview

The Mercer County Board of Social Services (MCBOSS) and Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness (Mercer Alliance) are transforming the County's response to family homelessness and they are seeing results. In a two year period, the number of families in shelter or transitional housing on any given day declined by 20 percent and the number of families residing in motels over the course of a month declined by 66 percent. This was achieved through expanding rapid re-housing and shifting how Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) resources are used to help families move quickly out of shelter programs and into housing and jobs.

Background

MCBOSS has local responsibility for administering TANF and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). In this role, MCBOSS provides income, work support, and employment assistance to low-income families. Like other local agencies administering TANF in New Jersey, MCBOSS is also responsible for helping families experiencing homelessness. Traditionally MCBOSS has been removed from the day to day work of solving family homelessness. The agency functioned largely as a fiscal agent, reimbursing shelter and transitional housing programs in their County for each night they hosted a family. The shelter and transitional housing programs absorbed the primary responsibility for delivering services to families.

In 2008, Mercer Alliance convened MCBOSS and other local homeless service funders in a year-long study of the County's family homeless service system. The purpose of the study group was to explore what they could do locally to improve family outcomes. A financial audit found that the annual public cost of providing families with homelessness prevention assistance, emergency shelter, and transitional housing was nearly \$10 million each year. The monthly cost of serving each family in an emergency shelter or transitional housing program was very high: \$3,750 for emergency shelter and \$2,310 for transitional housing. They further found that while

New Jersey offered time-limited rent subsidies to families exiting TANF assistance, few, if any, homeless families accessed it because it was available only to working families.

The examination raised concerns about how the homeless service system functioned in preventing and ending homelessness. In particular, the study group found that families' needs were not uniformly assessed. There seemed to be little correlation between the complexity of families' needs and the duration of families' homeless episodes or the intensity of services delivered. Instead, it appeared that local agencies made program-level decisions about which families they would serve and what they would provide to them. This resulted in the duplication of some services and large gaps for others. There was no system-level planning in place to ensure that a full array of service options was available to meet families' needs or data to evaluate program outcomes and the progress the community was making toward ending homelessness.

Based on the findings of their year-long investigation, the study group, comprised largely of professional social workers, committed to redesigning their family homeless system. The funders agreed to change how they used locally controlled resources to reshape the system. The study group believed that shifting what they funded and how they funded could improve coordination across programs and reduce the incidence and length of families' homelessness. The study group adopted the following principles for the system redesign:

- *Get people into homes as rapidly as possible;*
- *Wrap services around them in their home;*
- *Match intensity and cost of services to intensity of need; and*
- *Reallocate public funds to pay for housing and services.*

MCBOSS received permission from the State to allocate some state TANF-funded time-limited rent subsidies normally available only to working families to pilot rapid re-housing. Mercer County was one of 23 communities awarded a national Rapid Re-housing for Families Demonstration grant by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The relatively small rapid re-housing pilot they initially envisioned quickly expanded in scope when the community also received resources from the new federal Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP).

System Description

MCBOSS serves as the single point of entry for homeless services for families experiencing a housing crisis in Mercer County. MCBOSS social workers conduct intake and assessment. At

intake, families are offered a wide array of services that could help them avoid having to resort to emergency shelters. These include rent and utility assistance, case management, and landlord negotiation assistance.

MCBOSS social workers rely on a uniform, upfront assessment tool that was modified from the Rapid Exit Assessment Tool employed by Hennepin County, MN. This tool quantifies the challenges families will face in finding new housing and helps the County social workers assess the extent of help families will likely need to exit homelessness. The assessment tool is also used to identify which families are referred to rapid re-housing and which families are referred to transitional housing.

Families with very minimal barriers to housing are expected to need very little assistance to exit homelessness and some quickly leave shelter without any assistance. Until recently, families with moderate levels of housing barriers were equally likely to be referred to rapid re-housing or transitional housing. As of July 2012 only families with the most significant barriers, including families that include a parent with a mental health or substance abuse disability, are referred to transitional housing.

Most homeless families now receive rapid re-housing. They may be served by MCBOSS, which operates a rapid re-housing program in-house, or by a community-based provider. The rapid re-housing staff serves as housing advocates, visiting prospective apartments with their clients, helping them negotiate rents with landlords, and carefully reviewing leases to ensure tenant rights are protected. Families on TANF in Mercer County are eligible to receive up to 24 months of emergency rental assistance to help them exit homelessness. The rental assistance is funded through the state-funded tenant based rental assistance program for TANF families. Additionally, HUD resources are used to help families ineligible for the state funded rental assistance.

While families can receive 24 months of rental assistance, most stop receiving the assistance once they become stably employed. The first cohort of families who were rapidly re-housed received an average of 12 months of rental assistance before exiting the program. The second cohort who received more help finding work received approximately 5 months of rental assistance.

Families who are rapidly re-housed receive case management services designed to help them stabilize in their new housing and ensure they have the resources they need to stay stably housed. A primary focus of services is helping parents find employment. Many of the families require a lot of support, as it is their first exposure to work and, for young mothers, their first apartment. Both housing and employment services are offered to both TANF and non-TANF

families and services are carefully coordinated so families can achieve housing stability through employment. In addition, families are offered an array of services that many families on TANF are eligible to receive, including parenting support, budgeting assistance, and child care.

Outcomes

The expansion in rapid re-housing and narrow targeting of transitional housing have helped the county reduce family homelessness during a difficult economic period. Over a two-year period, the number of families seeking emergency shelter over the course of a year *increased* by 50 percent, but the number of families experiencing homelessness on any given day *decreased* by 20 percent.

How did this happen? There are fewer families in homeless service programs on any given day because families are receiving help to move out of shelter faster. As a result, they are spending less time in homeless service programs, which contributes to a lower daily shelter census. This reduces the need to provide motel vouchers to families when shelter programs are full. Between 2010 and 2012, the average length of time families stayed in emergency shelter declined from 87 days to 57 days. In 2012, fewer families were referred to transitional housing and those who did enter transitional housing also exited homelessness faster. The average length of stay in transitional housing dropped from 253 days in 2010 to 184 days in 2012.

Reducing shelter and transitional housing stays can reap savings that can offset the cost of providing rapid re-housing. A typical stay in transitional housing in 2010 cost the system \$21,252 per family. Today, with shorter stays, the typical cost of a transitional housing stay is \$15,456 per household. Shorter stays in emergency shelter reap an average savings of \$3,750 per household.

The bulk of the cost of providing rapid re-housing is the rental assistance, which is funded with state TANF resources. The initial cohort of rapidly re-housed families received nearly 12 months of services, including rental assistance and case management support, at an average cost of \$17,750 per household. The second cohort received an average of 5 months of rental assistance and case management support, at an average cost of \$7,050 per household. The second cohort of families received more focused and specialized employment support. With help to connect quickly to employment, families required fewer months of assistance.

Rapidly re-housed families appear to have better employment outcomes than families with similar employment barriers served in long-term transitional housing programs. An examination of the income and employment outcomes of families served with rapid re-housing and transitional housing before July 2012 (after which time only families with the most severe

challenges were referred to transitional housing) finds that rapidly re-housed families are 3.5 times more likely to be employed at program exit than families who received transitional housing. This had a significant impact on family income at program exit. Families exiting rapid re-housing have an average monthly household income of \$835 while families exiting transitional housing have an average monthly income of \$558. Families exiting the rapid re-housing program with employment have an average monthly income of \$1,300.

Rapid re-housing is helping families quickly and successfully exit homelessness and the vast majority of families stays housed. To date, less than 5 percent of rapidly re-housed families have returned to shelter.

System Refinements

MCBOSS, Mercer Alliance, and their partners view the re-design of the family homeless service system as an ongoing process: as new data and information become available, they refine their approach. Pleased with the success of rapid re-housing, they are expanding rapid re-housing capacity in the County and plan to further reduce their reliance on transitional housing. They plan to improve their ability to help all families exit homelessness as fast as possible. To achieve this, they are setting a goal of rapidly re-housing all families with minimal to moderate barriers to housing within 30 days of entering shelter. They are also setting a goal of helping families with the most significant barriers to housing identify a permanent housing destination within 90 days of entering shelter. To achieve this, MCBOSS will convene case conferences for each of the families in this subset to explore in depth what public and private resources are needed to minimize their homelessness. Finally, Mercer Alliance is working on developing new permanent supportive housing units in the County for families with the most severe challenges.

One of the most notable innovations in Mercer County is the creation of a rapid re-housing unit within MCBOSS. The social workers who were once responsible for approving payments to shelter and transitional housing providers are now on the frontline of delivering services. They are helping families with housing search, educating them about their tenant rights, and helping them negotiate with landlords to get a better deal. Since MCBOSS has staff co-located with the County One-Stop that is responsible for helping low-income families find employment, the in-house rapid re-housing program makes it even easier to coordinate housing and employment interventions.

MCBOSS leaders report that by using existing staff to provide rapid re-housing services, they are keeping costs low and helping their TANF clients meet their employment goals. The MCBOSS rapid re-housing staff also report enjoying the work and like being on the frontline of solving homelessness. They no longer transfer some of the most vulnerable families on the MCBOSS

caseload to the homeless service system. Instead, they help their own clientele reconnect to housing and employment and, in that way, fulfill their agency's mission of helping families become self-sufficient. MCBOSS plans to expand its rapid re-housing capacity so that all homeless families on TANF can be served by MCBOSS staff.

MCBOSS stands out for its leadership. As a primary funder of the County's family homeless service system it has a lot of power over how the system operates. The study group initially convened by Mercer Alliance helped it identify areas where the system could be improved. It has stepped up to meet the challenge and is demonstrating remarkable progress. It is improving the accessibility of services, improving families' outcomes, and making better and more efficient use of scarce public resources.

Lessons Learned

Mercer Alliance and MCBOSS identified the following as key lessons from the effort to redesign the County's homelessness system.

- Involve funders in the re-evaluation of the community's intervention to help create ownership over the issue.
- Pilots are helpful in building evidence that is needed to build interventions to scale.
- Do not underestimate the importance of selecting rapid re-housing providers who believe in the model.
- It is helpful to have staff skilled in working with employers, who "speak their language" and understand their concerns. People seeking work tend to be more responsive to individuals they believe understand employers and can help link them to real work opportunities. More resources should be invested in job development activities as opposed to job readiness programs (e.g. resume writing, dress for success classes). It is also important that staff have a thorough understanding of the employment barriers families' face. This allows programs to match parents to promising work opportunities and to develop plans to overcome challenges, for example, finding child care suitable for young children with frequent illnesses.
- Creating a truly integrated rapid re-housing and employment intervention requires that providers communicate regularly. This ensures that progress is being made in both areas and that the services families receive are complementary. It also helps providers identify issue areas (e.g. a family under threat of a TANF sanction) that can jeopardize efforts to help families quickly and successfully connect with housing *and* employment if not quickly resolved.

- Monitor implementation data and use findings to help identify program and system level strategies that need to be addressed to improve family outcomes. Continuous monitoring of data led systems planners to identify families most likely to experience problems after being placed in housing.ⁱ This information can be used to modify the services families are offered after a housing placement to improve system outcomes.

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ⁱ In the initial pilot, Mercer Alliance reports that families that include families headed by a single dad, survivors of recent domestic violence, and families in which the mother became pregnant after re-housing were at particularly high risk of returning to shelter. For single fathers the primary issue appears to be outstanding child support orders which make it difficult for men to transition to employment. Understanding the subpopulations at particular risk in the community allow system planners to modify their assessment process and enhance services to improve the outcomes of these families.