

Supporting Self-Sufficiency through Cross-Systems Collaboration: An Innovative Service Delivery Model for Homeless Families

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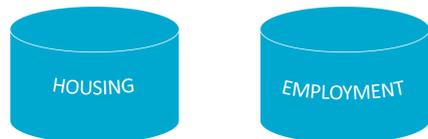
Introduction

When families with children experience homelessness, they need support in multiple areas of their lives in order to return to stable housing. Families end up homeless most often because they simply cannot afford the cost of housing (Rog & Buckner, 2007). Massachusetts grants eligible families facing homelessness the right to temporary shelter. But this resource will not help them to increase their incomes, find permanent housing or restore family stability. To achieve these goals, they need assistance with applying for housing subsidies, accessing public benefits, and most importantly, getting a job that pays enough to support their families.

Homeless families face barriers to finding work: they need child care and transportation. They might also need job search assistance, résumé support, skills training and certification, credit repair, and myriad other services. Public benefits programs offer assistance in many of these areas, but they have to apply for each through a different state administration, and access them from different providers. It is extremely difficult for parents to navigate multiple service provider agencies in order to get help, particularly while their families are in crisis because they lost their homes. And it is difficult for service providers to tailor services according to each family's specific needs when they are only focusing on one specific barrier. A cross-systems collaborative approach to service provision can increase flexibility and efficiency in service delivery, to support families in addressing multiple barriers simultaneously.

Background

Siloed service delivery has long plagued safety net programs (Alter & Hage, 1993). Housing and employment services in particular have traditionally been offered independently of each other: housing case management services do not include employment services.



And mainstream employment services, such as those offered at One-Stop Career Centers, often are not able to meet homeless people's needs (Rio & Shaheen, 2006).

However, as federal and state governments continue to cut funding for permanent housing support, families need to work in order to afford rapidly increasing market rates for housing. In response to these issues, in 2012, a private family foundation in Massachusetts partnered with the state to develop and pilot a service delivery model that integrates housing and employment.

This service model is characterized by collaboration at every level, including:

1. Inter-agency and public-private partnership between the funder, the state and relevant state agencies related to housing, TANF, and child care
2. Collaboration between local housing and employment service provider agencies, and with area employers
3. Regular communication between all frontline workers, including housing stabilization workers, employment specialists, case workers from the state TANF and/or disability administrations, health care providers, children's educators, and others.

When service provider agencies collaborate, the relationship eases each worker's burden and the service package can adapt to a family's changing needs (Ivery, 2007).

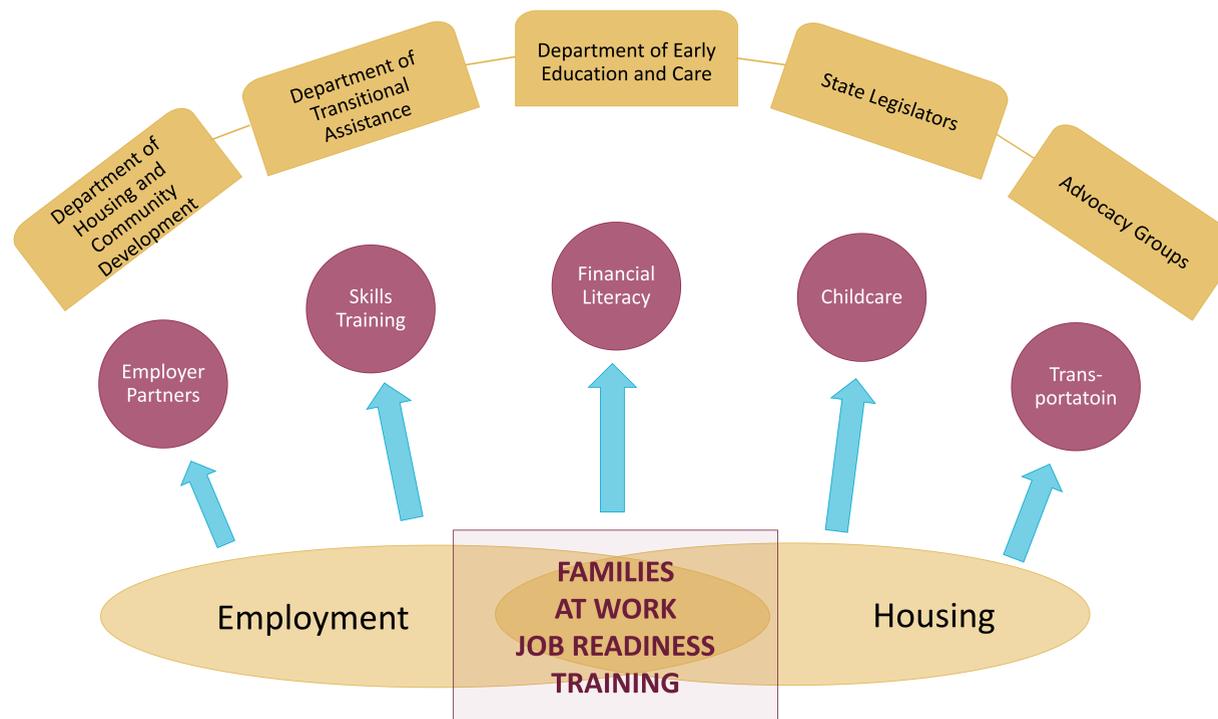
Methods

This research uses data from a mixed-methods evaluation of a two-year program pilot called Families at Work. The research employs a mixed-methods study design, which offers a comprehensive view of family employment and housing outcomes as well as the mechanisms through which families achieved these outcomes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Data collection began in January 2013, and will continue through June 2016. Data sources include:

- Demographic and employment data on all enrolled families
- Annual focus groups with participants at all sites
- Annual focus groups with frontline staff at all sites
- Monthly implementation reports from all sites
- Quarterly convenings of all sites plus representatives from state housing and TANF agencies
- Occasional topic-based interviews with site coordinators at all sites

Cross-Systems Collaboration



Conclusions

Parents experiencing homelessness need to work in order to return their families to stable housing. Cross-systems collaboration can facilitate their entry into the labor market efficiently and effectively. Collaboration between service provider systems is especially important for homeless families because their complex service needs require interaction with many different providers. To avoid duplicating efforts and to ensure that providers have all the relevant information, providers must have mechanism in place through which they can communicate.

Secure Jobs required housing and employment service provider agencies to institutionalize regular communication into their everyday practice. Frontline staff expressed widespread support for this new model, and participants noticed a significant improvement in service delivery over previous provider relationships because of this communication.

In order for institutional practice to change permanently, however, both service provider and state bureaucratic administrations must also embrace the practice of collaboration. Secure Jobs encouraged collaboration at these levels but state agencies in particular were unable to embed the collaborative model into their existing systems. State agencies have different funding sources, different indicators of success, different participant tracking systems and different priorities. In the case of Secure Jobs, these barriers proved insurmountable.

Policy Recommendations

To promote cross-system collaboration at every level, this research suggests the following:

- For state agencies:
 - Institute regular meetings of inter-agency committees to share information and practices
 - Create shared data management systems so that all participant information is centrally located
 - When funding service provider agencies, include performance-based metrics related to generating and maintaining community partnerships
- For service provider agencies:
 - Leverage existing community resources through regular advisory board meetings
 - Generate shared internal data collection systems
- For frontline workers:
 - Build regular communication with all relevant service providers into everyday practice

References

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Results

Participants	
Female	83%
White	47%
Hispanic	29%
<30 years old	49%
Single	81%
Average # children	2
High School+	80%

Participants tend to be young non-Hispanic African-American single women who graduated from high school and have two children.

Housing Source	
Shelter/Motel/ Scattered Site	56.07%
RAFT	3.32%
HomeBASE Housing Assistance	23.41%
Other Rental Support	10.41%
Front Door	6.79%

Just over half of program participants are enrolled from shelter. The rest are either in rental subsidy programs or have been diverted from homelessness with temporary assistance.

Employment	
Newly Employed	67%
Average Wage in New Job	\$11.08
Average # Hours Worked	31.5
Full Time Employment (32 hours +)	53%
Any Work Related Benefits	34%

Two-thirds of program participants found new work while in the program, working just under full-time hours. Outcomes were the same for all participants regardless of housing source.

It's a partnership by design. Not just a program we've heard about and are referring people to. It's easier to refer people if you know you can follow up in the next meeting. In other programs, we feel like we send a referral into the abyss and just hope for the best.
-Housing Staff

Housing staff and [our] staff... have a weekly phone call to discuss cases, issues and solutions, and [we] have monthly in-person meetings as well.
- Employment Staff

I think a lot [of partnerships] are mutually beneficial too—like a symbiotic relationship between the two agencies
- Families at Work Staff

Before, you know, [it was,] "We're the housers, we're the shelter-providers, we're the daycare people," and now it's "Okay, we're really going to try to find a way of ensuring all the pieces that a family needs in order to be successful are threaded together."
-State Agency Staff