



HOUSING AS A BARRIER TO REUNIFICATION

BACKGROUND: HOMELESSNESS AND CHILD WELFARE

Thousands of children each year are separated from their families or unable to leave foster care because their parents are homeless, live in inadequate housing or because the family is displaced due to domestic violence¹. Children are the fastest growing group of homeless people in the United States². High unemployment and skyrocketing home foreclosure rates are only exacerbating this problem in our community. Most shelters offer very short term housing for adults; very few shelters will allow both mothers and fathers, and almost no shelters provide housing for single fathers and their children³. Although homelessness in and of itself cannot legally be grounds for removing a child from their family, the compounding impact of homelessness and poverty may cause a family to enter the child welfare system.

Homelessness affects all facets of child well being, including health, education, and safety. Children from homes with housing problems are more likely to be in foster care and stay in foster care longer compared to children whose families have adequate housing⁴. Research has shown that affordable housing is a more prevalent barrier to reunification than substance abuse⁵.

HOMELESSNESS AS A RESULT OF DEPENDENCY

For many families in the child welfare system, parents who have overcome substance abuse or escaped domestic violence are still unable to reunify with their children, because they are without adequate housing. According to a report by JLARC, nearly 35% of parents in the study lost their housing after their children were removed, thereby threatening their ability to reunify with their children⁶.

There are a variety of reasons why a parent may lose their housing when their child is moved to out-of-home care. For example:

- Many supportive housing programs require that children reside in the care of the parent. Once the child is removed, the parent may no longer be eligible to live there.
- A parent whose child was removed due to domestic violence may be forced to flee their home out of fear of attack from their partner.

Once homeless, a parent may face increased obstacles to re-gain housing. These obstacles include:

- Limited money to pay for landlord credit checks.
- Limited money to provide a security deposit or first month's rent.
- Lack of employment, which will likely deter a landlord from renting to a parent.
- Poor credit score, which will likely deter a landlord from renting to a parent.

Parents who lose their housing as a result of their child's dependency often struggle to re-gain housing once they have addressed the problems leading to the dependency. Parents who have attained sobriety or escaped domestic violence may be left without any money, housing or social

support. Their homelessness delays and sometimes prevents them from reunifying with their children.

Even for the most successful birth parents who have overcome huge obstacles to obtain sobriety or escape domestic violence, these barriers can continue for many years⁷. If these parents were able to obtain affordable, adequate housing, their children could safely be returned to them more quickly. A lack of affordable housing prevents these families from reunifying and forces children to unnecessarily remain in the child welfare system.

According to the Tacoma Housing Authority, two different interventions are needed to overcome barriers to housing for families:

1. One-time payments for first and last month's rent, security deposits, and fees for accessing credit reports.
2. On-going rental assistance to decrease housing costs for families⁸.

Current Tenant Screening Practices as a Barrier to Housing

There are two major issues families face when searching for housing: multiple fees and inaccurate or incomplete screening reports. The multiple fees involved in screening applicants for housing eligibility and the use of screening reports with inaccurate or incomplete information, eliminate many families involved in the child welfare system from qualifying for housing.⁹

Portable Screening Reports

One way to address the multiple fees people are charged while applying for tenancy is to make screening reports portable, so that housing applicants can utilize the same screening report for up to thirty days and pay one screening report fee for several applications.¹⁰

Regulate Screening Reports

Inaccurate/incomplete information on a screening report, such as an eviction lawsuit against a tenant that the renter won in court, appears on the report and may exclude the applicant from qualifying for housing. In addition, a protection order filed by a victim of domestic violence may appear on a report and influence the landlord's decision about leasing to an applicant. Despite the illegality of this act, it is impossible to prove whether this information has influenced the landlord's decision. To address these issues a regulatory framework must be established to ensure fairness, consistency of reporting requirements, and establish standards for types of information appropriate to be collected and disseminated in screening reports.¹¹

Stories from Parents

Paulia

My earlier experiences with trying to find an apartment were that since I have a criminal background everyone said, "NO WAY," and my latest experiences were pretty much the same. I was very honest with every person that I was trying to rent from. I told them up front that I had a conviction in my background and exactly what it was. They told me they didn't see any reason why they couldn't work with me since my convictions were in December 2003 and I currently had a job with the courts, but that I would have to pay the 30 to 40 dollar screening fee and wait until the screening came back. In May I paid 30 dollars twice and paid 40 dollars four times, and when my screening came back I was told "NO". Then, in August I paid a 40 dollar screening

fee six times, and I was denied every single time. They could not have found anything more than what I told them verbally and wrote and signed for them before they took my money.

Corrina

In 2009 my husband, two children and I were residing in a two- bedroom apartment. Our twelve year-old son and eleven year-old daughter were sharing a room with a bunk bed. We decided in January of 2010 we needed an affordable home with more space that would accommodate the needs as our two teen-age children. Unfortunately, I have an eviction from 1998 and both my husband and I have criminal convictions on our records and domestic violence. As we were both aware of the issues this might cause, we decided it was in the best interest of all parties to disclose this information to landlords and tenant screening companies up front.

My husband and I had to complete separate applications and pay two fees every time we applied for housing, even though we have been married for the past seven years. Together we paid approximately \$80.00-90.00 each time we applied. We never knew exactly why we were denied and whether it was related to one issue, or a combination of all. Not only was this discouraging to our entire family, it was expensive! Especially for a family trying to make ends meet.

Our intent was to be honest from the start to prevent multiple denials that could ultimately result in hundreds of dollars in lost. Our search throughout the King County area resulted in nine hundred dollars lost, despite disclosing our backgrounds up front. It took my family six months to locate an owner that was willing to rent to us and *he did not charge an application fee*. He was willing to give our family a chance. He met with us, we disclosed all of our background, completed his application and a few days later we were advised we could rent the home.

HOUSING AND CHILD WELFARE SERVICES: RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE

A variety of studies have investigated the impact of homelessness on child welfare involvement and reunification. A 2009 study by Partners for Our Children in Washington State of parents involved with the child welfare system found that in the last 12 months 45% of the surveyed parents had been evicted, forced to move in with family or friends, or had been homeless.¹² In addition, 70% were unable to pay the rent or mortgage, buy needed clothing, or pay an important bill.¹³ The survey also measured the importance of various services to parents and social workers, which revealed that parents often rank meeting basic needs high, but social workers do not rank needs such as food, clothing, and housing as top priorities for these parents.¹⁴

One study in Massachusetts found that families in homeless shelters were twice as likely to have children removed, compared with low-income families with housing. Child Protection Services (CPS) workers were more likely to investigate families who accessed homeless shelters¹⁵.

In San Diego County, researchers found that families who had inadequate housing at the time of a child's removal were significantly more likely to be re-referred to CPS and to re-enter out-of-home care¹⁶.

A study of Milwaukee's Child Welfare system found that 40% of families entering the system stated that they did not have "enough money to pay their rent or mortgage." 58.5% of parents in the sample who had children in out-of-home care reported "needing help finding a place to live." Researchers also found that families who had been homeless at any point 12 months prior to a child's removal were 50% less likely to ever reunify¹⁷.

A growing body of national research around homelessness and child welfare has produced the following conclusions, including recommendations for improvement:

- Housing problems are a significant risk factor for child welfare services involvement.
- Housing problems impact permanency and safety outcomes for children involved with child welfare services¹⁸.
- Child welfare agencies should attend to families' housing problems in assessing and serving families.
- Housing agencies should prioritize provision of services to families at risk of involvement or already involved with child welfare services.
- Child welfare and housing agencies should better coordinate their efforts¹⁹.

HOMELESSNESS AND CHILD WELFARE: NATIONAL LEGISLATION

The most important legislation impacting housing support for families involved in or at risk of dependency is the Family Unification Program (FUP), which was signed into law in 1990. FUP provides homeless and almost-homeless families involved with the child welfare system with affordable housing and support services in order to safely reunify families. FUP has awarded more than 39,000 Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These vouchers have enabled over 200,000 children to reunite with their families from foster care or avoid foster care placement altogether²⁰. In August of 2010 the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded \$20 million of FUP vouchers to public housing and child welfare authorities. They will be awarding additional vouchers in the spring of 2011. In addition to homeless families, qualifying young people ages 18-21 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and were in foster care after the age of 16, are eligible to receive a FUP voucher.²¹

Savings in addressing housing needs:

- The average cost of an average family (2.7 children) in the foster care system is \$56,892 annually.²²
- The average cost of voucher and supportive services for a family this size is \$13,319, totaling an annual savings of more than \$40,000 per family
- Research suggests a federal investment to address the housing and social service needs of families who are separated due to homelessness would save the U.S. more than \$1.94 billion annually²³.

Despite the success of the FUP program, child welfare agencies across the country are forced to separate or delay reunification for families due to a lack of affordable housing²⁴. Waiting lists for FUP vouchers across the country are incredibly long, making vouchers inaccessible to many families. Without adequate housing, caseworkers will often keep a child in out-of-home care.

CHILD WELFARE AND HOUSING IN WASHINGTON STATE

National data about the interaction between homelessness and the child welfare system is consistent with trends in Washington State. A recent evaluation of Washington State child welfare services by Partners for Our Children found that 37% of families with children in out of home care had experienced homelessness in the past 12 months²⁵.

The Washington Families Fund, led by Building Changes, was created by the Washington State Legislature in 2004 to ensure that homeless families with children have the supportive services linked to housing they need to move from crisis to stability. To date, the Fund has awarded grants to 48 programs across Washington State dedicated to preventing and ending family

homelessness. These programs have helped more than 1,200 families—including 2448 children and 1,695 adults— receive housing and supportive services.

Litigation

Several legal efforts have been made to ensure that housing is not a barrier to family reunification in Washington. *Washington State Coalition for the Homeless v. DSHS*²⁶ found that the inability of caseworkers to provide housing assistance prevented families from addressing reunification and other problems. As a result of this case, the state Supreme Court ruled that the court “has the authority to order DSHS to provide the family with some form of assistance in securing adequate housing in those cases where homelessness or lack of safe and adequate housing is the primary reason for the foster placement or its continuation²⁷.” Despite this ruling, many children remained separated from their families primarily because their parent(s) were without housing.

Progress in Washington State

In 2008, DSHS issued a policy, which allows parents to receive TANF cash and medical benefits for up to 180 days after a child is temporarily removed if the child is expected to return to the parent’s home²⁸. This helps birth parents retain their housing so that they can focus their finances and energy on overcoming the challenges that led to their child’s removal. Though this policy change offers helpful support for families, the Washington State Office of Public Defense found that in practice, benefits are often *not* extended for families in dependency proceedings²⁹.

In 2009 the link between housing and involvement in the child welfare system was recognized with the passage of HB 1769 in the Washington State legislature. This legislation requires the court to inquire whether housing assistance has been provided for a family to prevent the removal of a child. In addition, the law necessitates a written response to “whether a parent’s homelessness or lack of suitable housing is a significant factor delaying permanency for the child by preventing the return of the child to the home of the child’s parent and whether housing assistance should be provided by the department or supervising agency.” Despite the importance of the legislation, no funds were allocated by the legislature to support the law.³⁰

In addition, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation partnered with DSHS to expand public-private partnerships to increase *collaboration between child welfare and housing services at the state and county levels*³¹. The Children’s Home Society initiative, Catalyst for Kids, also received a grant from the Gates Foundation to work with veteran parents, child welfare system stakeholders, and housing system stakeholders to build relationships and increase collaborative work between the two systems.³²

¹ CWLA. *Housing and Homelessness: About the Program*. See: <http://www.cwla.org/programs/housing>

² *Ibid*

³ Catalyst for Kids, *The Interface between Housing and Child Welfare Outcomes*. Prepared by Nancy Roberts-Brown and Brenda Lopez

⁴ NPACH, et al. *Helping Homeless Families: The Role of the Child Welfare System*. Retrieved from: http://www.npach.org/facts-child_welfare.pdf

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Personal Communication, Corrina Walters, January 4, 2009

⁸ Tacoma Housing Authority. *Relationship Between Homelessness and Foster Care*. October 2, 2009

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- ⁹ Materials from Washington Low Income Housing Alliance. *The Fair Tenant Screening Act*.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*
- ¹¹ *Ibid*
- ¹² Partners for Our Children. *Families in Child Welfare System Struggle to Meet Basic Needs*. (2009) Retrieved From: <http://www.partnersforourchildren.org/knowledge-center>
- ¹³ *Ibid*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*
- ¹⁵ Bassuk, et al. *Characteristics of Sheltered Homeless Families*. (1997). Retrieved from: <http://ajph.aphapublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/76/9/1097>
- ¹⁶ Jones, L. *The Social and Family Correlates of Successful Reunification of Children in Foster Care*. (1998).
- ¹⁷ Courtney et al. *An Evaluation of Services in the Bureau of Milwaukee County Child Welfare Services*. (2004).
- ¹⁸ Testimony provided by Mark E. Courtney, Executive Director, Partners for Our Children, School of Social Work, University of Washington, to the Washington State House Committee on Early Learning and Children's Services, February 6, 2009, in reference to House Bill 1769.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*
- ²⁰ National Center for Housing & Child Welfare, "HUDS's Family Unification Program." Retrieved from: <http://www.nchcw.org/fup/>
- ²¹ National Center for Housing and Child Welfare. "HUD Awards \$20 million in Subsidies to Reunite Thousands of homeless Families and Prevent Homelessness Among Youth Aging Out of Foster Care in 20 States." (2010). Retrieved from: <http://www.nchcw.org/media/>
- ²² *Ibid*.
- ²³ *Ibid*, 20. Formula for cost per child based on calculations from "Reunifying Families, Cutting Costs: Housing-Child Welfare Partnerships for Permanent Supportive Housing." By Deborah S. Harburger and Ruth A. White. 2004. Child Welfare League of America.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 20
- ²⁵ Ongoing Evaluation of Solution Based Casework. Information presented by Mark Courtney to the House Early Learning and Children's Services Committee on January 14, 2010.
- ²⁶ *Washington State Coalition for the Homeless v. DSHS*, 133 Wn.2d 894 (1997)
- ²⁷ Mirra, M. "Some Information on the Relationship Between Family Homelessness and Foster Care." Tacoma Housing Authority, January 15, 2008.
- ²⁸ State of Washington Department of Social and Health Services, letter addressed to The Honorable Ruth Kagi, September 30, 2009.
- ²⁹ Dowd, P. Washington State Office of Public Defense. Letter provided to the Senate Human Services & Corrections Committee. October 2, 2009.
- ³⁰ Lippold, L. "Housing and Other PAC Priorities Addressed in the 2009 Legislative Session." (2009). *Washington State Parent Advocacy Committee Newsletter*. Retrieved from: <https://app.e2ma.net/app/view:CampaignPublic/id:35097.2749998634/rid:13d6eac6ae2dd9bdad42bb1851e026a9>
- ³¹ Memorandum of Understanding between the Washington Department of Social and Health Services, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Building Changes.
- ³² Personal Communication, Nancy Roberts Brown, December 6, 2010.