



Preventing and Ending Child and Family Homelessness

I. Strategies for Preventing and Ending Child and Family Homelessness

Research, program evaluation, and front-line experience have yielded extensive information on how to prevent and end family homelessness. We have learned about the characteristics and needs of homeless families and children and about some effective service delivery strategies. We know that to address and end homelessness, families need ready access to safe, affordable housing as well as services and supports. Although we know that rapid re-housing is essential, we know far less about the type, mix, and intensity of services and supports that are needed to ensure that families maintain housing, achieve economic stability, and improve their well-being. The literature on the impacts of housing subsidies and services on homeless families is limited. To date, research indicates that “access to housing vouchers seems to increase residential stability. There is also evidence that case management and other services contribute to residential stability and other desirable outcomes, including family preservation and reunification. However, additional research is needed to better understand the role of housing and services in stabilizing families, which approaches are most cost-effective, and how to best meet the needs of different subgroups of families” (Bassuk & Geller, 2006).

II. Best Practices for Ending Child and Family Homelessness

- Increased Numbers of Housing Vouchers

Housing vouchers are critical for preventing and ending family homelessness. Vouchers are a preferred form of housing assistance because they are timely, flexible, cost-effective, and successful in ending homelessness for families (Khadduri, 2008; Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 2009; Millennial Housing Commission, 2002).

- Increased Access to Services/Supports Provided by Mainstream and Targeted Programs

Families who are homeless need access to mainstream and targeted services, but face significant obstacles in accessing them. Various strategies can improve access including: increased funding for key programs; priority access for homeless families; expanded funding for case management; support and follow-up as families transition to permanent housing; improved coordination among mainstream programs; and providing training for mainstream and homeless service providers.

- Develop Individualized Housing/Service/Support Plans

Homeless families are heterogeneous and housing, services and supports should be tailored to meet each family’s unique circumstances. Ongoing assessment of parents, children and the family unit as a whole should be conducted and plans modified as circumstances change.

- Provide Trauma-Informed Family Support Services

Traumatic stress impacts every aspect of a person's life including their ability to maintain housing and employment, achieve educational success, form relationships, and maintain their physical and mental health. Practices that protect children and their families from the damaging consequences of these traumatic experiences are critical in ending family homelessness (e.g., trauma-informed organizational assessments; implementation of BSAFE).

- Provide Educational and Other Supports for Children

Homeless children need supports and services specifically targeted to their unique needs. Children's needs must be assessed and program and policy responses developed to mitigate the impact of homelessness. Homeless children also face significant educational challenges. Despite the promise of the McKinney-Vento (M-V), a lack of funding impedes state efforts to ensure all homeless children are identified and supported in school. In addition, the M-V educational assistance program should be independently evaluated.

- Ensure Homeless Service Delivery Workforce Development and Support

Providers must be supported to use promising and evidence-based practices through training, TA, fostering information exchange among providers, and creating professional standards and competencies.

- Develop A Prevention Framework

A prevention-oriented framework for family homelessness must be developed. Research must be conducted that addresses both population and high-risk prevention strategies.

- Answer Critical Research Questions

On-going research/evaluation is needed to improve our understanding of effective program and policy interventions to prevent, address and end family homelessness. Research focused on prevention, the impact of services, the needs of children, and cost effectiveness should be given priority.

III. Barriers to Ending Child and Family Homelessness

- Current resources dedicated to ending family homelessness are insufficient.
- Differing federal definitions creates barriers to accessing critical supports and services and causes unnecessary confusion on the ground. The definition of homelessness included in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act accurately reflects the reality of family homelessness and should be adopted by all federal programs.
- Lack of coordination among federal agencies/programs must be addressed.
- The current emergency shelter system for families is fragmented and requires families to connect with mainstream service systems that are not designed to serve those who are homeless; focuses primarily on housing and employment needs; offers limited programming for children; provides no support/follow-up as families transition to permanent housing; and is staffed by providers who are overworked, underpaid and do not have access to educational and training opportunities.
- Lack of routine assessment of parent(s), children and the family unit limits understanding of the needs of family members and ability to respond effectively.
- Significant gaps exist between research/science and practice.

IV. How the Federal Government is Effective in Preventing and Ending Family Homelessness

- Providing housing vouchers is critical; however, funding levels are inadequate.
- Funding seminal, longitudinal research.
- Disseminating knowledge and facilitating best practices to the field.
- The Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program.
- Mainstream programs provide needed services; however it is critical to reduce barriers, prioritize homeless families and collect data on residential stability.
- The USICH provides important leadership on state/local planning and commitment to ending homelessness; however, these plans should be expanded to include families.

V. How the Federal Government Can Improve Its Effectiveness

- Include the needs of homeless families in all planning and policy efforts.
- Create integrated, holistic approaches to ending family homelessness.
- Sponsor research that answers the question of type, mix and intensity of services needed to ensure that families obtain and maintain housing.
- Require federally-funded programs to conduct a comprehensive assessment of all family members.
- Develop uniform criteria to determine which families are eligible for permanent supportive housing.
- Address the unique needs of homeless families (e.g., vet families; parents with mental illness; teen parents; and families living in urban, suburban and rural areas) through targeted specialized approaches.
- Develop best practices and effective service delivery mechanisms for serving homeless children.
- Provide adequate supports and training about best practices for providers. Consideration should be given to credentialing the workforce and defining competencies.
- To truly solve the problem of child and family homelessness, the solutions must be based on the needs of children and families, not on the amount of resources available.

For more information, please contact Christina Jordan or Ellen Bassuk, MD of The National Center on Family Homelessness at 617-969-7146, or at Christina.Jordan@familyhomelessness.org or Ellen.Bassuk@familyhomelessness.org.

References

- Apicello, J. (In press). A paradigm shift in housing and homeless services: Applying the population and high-risk framework to preventing homelessness. *Open Health Services and Policy Journal*.
- Bassuk, E.L. & Geller, S. (2006). The role of housing and services in ending family homelessness. *Housing Policy Debate*, 17(4), 781–806.
- Bassuk, E., Volk, K., Olivet, J. (In press). A framework for developing supports and services for families experiencing homelessness. *Open Health Services and Policy Journal*.
- Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. (2009). Introduction to the Housing Vouchers Program. Washington, DC: Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.
- Guarino, K., Soares, P., Konnath, K., Clervil, R., and Bassuk, E. (2009). *Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit*. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the Daniels Fund, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Available at www.homeless.samhsa.gov and www.familyhomelessness.org.
- Herman, D., Conover, S., Felix, A., Nakagawa, A. & Mills, D. (2007). Critical Time Intervention: An empirically supported model for preventing homelessness in high risk groups. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 28, 295-312.
- Khadduri, J. (2008). Housing Vouchers Are Critical for Ending Family Homelessness. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.
- Millennial Housing Commission. (2002). Meeting Our Nation's Housing Challenges. Retrieved from <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/mhc/MHCReport.pdf>.
- The National Center on Family Homelessness. (1999). *Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts*. Newton, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.
- The National Center on Family Homelessness. (2009). *America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness*. Newton, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.
- The National Center on Family Homelessness. (2009). *Building on Strengths and Advocating for Family Empowerment (BSAFE)*. Newton, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.
- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2007). Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress. Washington, DC: United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.