

The Family Permanent Supportive Housing Initiative: Preliminary Findings Report Executive Summary

May 2004

This report was prepared by The Urban Institute and Harder+Company Community Research for Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation. The report was written by Clare Nolan, Michelle Magee and Martha R. Burt.

CHARLES AND HELEN SCHWAB FOUNDATION

Homelessness Program
Cassandra Benjamin
Homelessness Program Officer
1650 S. Amphlett Blvd.
Suite 300
San Mateo, CA 94402
650.655.2410
www.schwabfoundation.org

THE URBAN INSTITUTE

Clare Nolan
Martha R. Burt
2100 M Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20037
<http://www.urban.org/>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors acknowledge the time and helpful input of the family permanent supportive housing providers who participated in this evaluation, as well as the mothers who agreed to be interviewed. We also wish to thank Aimee Crisostomo, Hieu Ngo and Susanne Ross for their valuable contributions to the evaluation as a whole and this report in particular.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Permanent supportive housing for families (FPSH) is a relatively new undertaking throughout the country. FPSH grew from the recognition that some adults have both disabilities that render them unable to maintain stable housing on their own and also children they are trying to raise. Without substantial help, these parents have not been able to provide themselves or their children with a stable residence. FPSH addresses these difficulties by providing families in affordable housing with access to programming that has proven effective at helping disabled single homeless people achieve housing stability.

In March 2003, the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, the Urban Institute and Harder+Company launched an evaluation of the Family Permanent Supportive Housing Initiative (FPSHI). This evaluation is designed to assist the foundation in understanding the impact of its innovative approach to meeting the long-term needs of formerly homeless families in permanent supportive housing. While the multi-year evaluation consists of many information-gathering components, this report presents baseline findings from initial interviews with 60 families that were conducted between November 2003 and January 2004, as well as descriptions of four FPSH sites included in the study sample. Subsequent evaluation reports will include baseline and follow-up information for a larger pool of families, as well as findings from additional qualitative data collection.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH MOTHERS

The original criteria chosen for the family interview sample was that the family be headed by a single female parent and have at least one child under 18 living in the household. The data suggest that while many of these families are still struggling with economic issues and coping with the long-term effects of earlier homelessness and addiction issues, the majority of mothers appear to be maintaining residential stability in the FPSH programs. The findings also imply that families' generally high satisfaction with their current living situations and their ability to access an array of health and social service supports are helping them provide stable home environments for their children.

Demographics

About half of the women in the study sample are African American (53 percent) and in their late 30s and early 40s (38 percent). Fifteen percent of the women were White and 15 percent were Latina, followed by mixed ethnicity (10 percent), Asian or Pacific Islander (3 percent) and Native American (3 percent).

History of Homelessness

The average age at which mothers first became homeless was 24.

However, one-third of the mothers reported becoming homeless for the first time as a minor. On average, mothers experienced four homeless episodes and were homeless for a total of approximately four years over the course of their lifetime.

During the two years before moving into supportive housing, mothers reported living in an average of 3.4 different living situations, which suggests that their living situations were quite unstable. However, 15 percent of FPSH mothers reported living either in their own house or apartment or that of a friend or relative for the whole two years before FPSH move-in, suggesting some possible issues with FPSH selection processes. In light of the residential instability of most mothers before FPSH, it is important to note that mothers in the sample have been living stably at their current residence for an average of two and a half years.

Characteristics of Mothers Living in FPSH		
Characteristic (n=60)	n	%
Ethnicity		
African-American	32	53%
White	9	15%
Latino	9	15%
Mixed	6	10%
Other	4	7%
Age		
17 to 24	11	18%
25 to 34	17	28%
35 to 44	23	38%
45 and older	9	15%
Average Age First Homeless:		24
Average # Homeless Episodes		4
Average Length of Time Homeless		4 yrs

Education, Income and Employment

The education levels reported by mothers were high – nearly three-quarters (73 percent) reported completing a GED or having a higher education level. Despite this, employment and income data reveal that women struggle to meet their families’ economic needs.

- ★ Almost two-thirds of the mothers are currently unemployed. Disabilities and illnesses account for the low proportion of mothers with jobs.
- ★ Only 38 percent of working mothers are working full-time and they are generally working in low-wage sectors. While most (90 percent) make more than the California minimum wage of \$6.75 an hour, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) earn less than \$11 per hour.
- ★ Mothers’ monthly income varied from a meager \$200 to \$2,600, with an average of \$929 a month or \$11,148 per year. This annual income is less than one-fifth of

Education and Income		
Characteristic (n=60)	n	%
Educational Attainment		
Attended college	19	32%
High school diploma / GED	25	41%
Some high school or less	16	27%
Mothers Employed	20	33%
Mean Hourly Wage:		\$10.24
Average Monthly Income:		\$929
Average # Sources of Cash Income:		2.7

the median household income in San Francisco (\$58,621). Mothers rely on several sources of cash income to make ends meet, and most also rely on noncash public benefits – particularly on Medi-Cal and food stamps.

- ★ Getting enough food to eat was a problem for many FPSH households (66 percent). More than half of the mothers also reported difficulty paying for rent and/or bills during the past 12 months, despite having a housing subsidy that kept their rent at 30 percent of household income. FPSH mothers reported rates of economic hardship (difficulties meeting food and housing costs) that are 12-13 percentage points higher than rates for poor single-parent households in the United States.
- ★ The implications are that FPSH households are likely to need significant housing and service supports for long periods of time. Of course, that is the premise of family permanent supportive housing; the situations reported by FPSH mothers confirm that most need the FPSH investment and the investment serves them well.

Children of Mothers Living in Permanent Supportive Housing

Mothers in the sample had an average of 2.7 minor children. The majority (82 percent) reported living with all of their children. Only 23 minor children did not live with their mothers at the time of the interview. According to the mothers, these children were primarily living with other relatives. Almost half of the children currently living in FPSH (42 percent) were five years of age or younger.

Children Living in FPSH		
Characteristic (n=60)	n	%
Average Number of Children		2.7
Age of Children in FPSH		
Less than 5 years	47	42%
6 to 10 years	36	32%
11 to 15 years	21	19%
16 to 17 years	8	17%

A majority of mothers reported that their children attend school regularly (95 percent), do their homework on a regular basis (79 percent), and care about doing well in school (75 percent). Mothers also reported that they enjoy parenting (81 percent) and that they give their children encouragement on a daily basis (92 percent). More than half (53 percent) indicated that at least one of their children is experiencing a health problem. The majority of these mothers (93 percent) indicated that they are getting help for these problems.

Health, Mental Health and Substance Use

More than half of FPSH mothers (55 percent) who were interviewed rated their current health as being “good,” “very good” or “excellent.” These results compare unfavorably to poor single parents nationally, among whom 70 percent gave similar responses. With regard to mental health, a majority of mothers (80 percent) reported low levels of symptom distress during the seven days before their interview.

Most mothers said they had had problems with alcohol or drug use in the past. However, the majority reported that they have not had these problems during the past 12 months. While more than two-thirds (68 percent) used illegal drugs three or more times a week in the

past, 75 percent said they had no problems related to drug use during the past 12 months. Similarly, while 40 percent of mothers reported drinking to get drunk more than three times a week in the past, 78 percent said they had no problems related to alcohol use in the past 12 months. While these findings are positive, 10 percent of mothers described problems related to drug use and 6 percent described problems related to alcohol consumption.

Living Environment

Mothers consistently expressed feeling satisfied or very satisfied with regard to various features of their current homes, including affordability, control over visitors, privacy and amount of living space. They also reported feeling respected by supportive housing providers and having autonomy regarding the services in which they choose to participate. The services that FPSH families used most frequently in the past six months included health care (82 percent), free food or groceries (75 percent), mental health services (48 percent) and employment services (48 percent). Mothers also reported feeling confident and optimistic about their future.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES FROM SITE INTERVIEWS

Detailed descriptions of four permanent supportive housing sites were developed based on interviews with providers and managers of Tenant Services at Canon Barcus, Cecil Williams House, Community Housing Partnership and supportive housing programs on Treasure Island. Some major cross-program themes emerging from these interviews include the following:

- ★ Each San Francisco FPSH program has crafted a unique blend of services and supports for tenants. No single program model appears to be significantly better than any other at helping tenants achieve the primary goal of housing stability, as long as the model succeeds in creating an environment of respect and trust among tenants and staff and is able to provide the resources that tenants need.
- ★ Constant and open communication between Property Management and Tenant Services is crucial to maintaining an effective working relationship and is essential to maintaining stable housing for residents.
- ★ Supportive services offered by the FPSH providers are based on best practices identified by affordable housing policy bodies.
- ★ Being receptive to tenants' desires influences tenant satisfaction. FPSH staff are deliberate in developing and planning activities and events aimed at community building. At the same time, providers report that engaging residents in services can be challenging. Program staff must strike a delicate balance when attempting to involve tenants in services and activities.
- ★ Programs have found that tenants and their families do better when the children are involved in activities and have some services available specifically for them. Programs therefore continue to develop and integrate children's services into their supportive housing models, creating the principle difference in program models between FPSH and PSH for single individuals.

In summary, interview findings provide rich information about the lives of mothers and children living in FPSH in San Francisco, as well as the FPSH sites themselves. While the findings presented at this time are preliminary, they do provide the retrospective testimony of tenants and FPSH program staff about the differences that FPSH can make in the lives of families. They tentatively answer several important policy questions:

- ★ FPSH targeting – A majority of tenants (85 percent) in the study sample meet a criterion of long-term or repeated homelessness before moving to FPSH. However, about 7 percent of mothers said they had never been homeless and 15 percent reported living in their own house or apartment or that of a relative or friend during the entire two-year period prior to moving into FPSH. Targeting of FPSH may need improvement in order to maximize the value of investments in this housing model.
- ★ Long-term need for FPSH – Indicators of economic hardship suggest that FPSH mothers’ relatively high levels of education, work history and vocational training have not translated into economic well-being. Many are still unemployed, and many still struggle to meet their family’s economic needs. Given the lack of employment and the fact that most of those who are working earn very little money, it seems that the majority of these families will continue to require cash assistance, housing subsidies and supportive services for the foreseeable future.
- ★ Tenant satisfaction and stable residency – The menu of services provided by FPSH programs, both on and off site through collaborations and referrals, are designed to be voluntary – helping residents address issues as they arise, and supporting residents in creating a sense of community and optimism about their future. Overall, baseline findings from interviews reveal satisfied tenants who access an array of services and who are able to think about a better future for themselves and their children. This may be a key aspect of families’ stable residency at FPSH.

Future evaluation reports will provide more in-depth information and longitudinal data that will help us understand the impact of FPSH as an approach to meeting the long-term needs of formerly homeless families.