



Homelessness Among Families with Children

THE PROBLEM

Millions of hard-working, responsible families are at risk of losing their homes as a result of job losses, reduction in working hours, or low wages. Medical crises can also lead to homelessness due to an inability to work and the financial cost of care.

Over the course of 2009, more than half a million individuals in families needed emergency shelter or transitional housing. At least 300,000 were under the age of 18, according to HUD reports. The Department of Education reported a 20 percent increase over the previous year in the number of students enrolled in public schools for 2008-09 who are experiencing homelessness. Families experiencing homelessness are usually headed by a single woman who is, on average, in her late 20s with two children, one or both under the age of six. Among mothers with children experiencing homelessness, more than 80 percent had previously experienced domestic violence.

Children in families experiencing homelessness have high rates of acute and chronic health problems and the majority have been exposed to violence. These children are also more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems. The long-term effects of homelessness on a child's school performance appear significant and long-lasting.

There are significant costs associated with family homelessness including the high cost of housing a family in emergency shelter or transitional housing as well as the strains on the education, health care, and child welfare systems.

THE PLAN

Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness sets the goal of ending homelessness for families in ten years. Families need affordable housing, sustainable employment, and community services to help them avoid or quickly exit homelessness. In order to reach this ambitious goal, all partners at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as the private and nonprofit sectors, must be engaged and focused on proven solutions, especially in these four key areas

1. Provide Affordable Housing

The Plan seeks to expand affordable housing opportunities through improved targeting of current housing programming that provides rental subsidies as well as an increase in construction of new or rehabilitated housing.

2. Increase Meaningful and Sustainable Employment

Programs designed to connect people to employment must also consider the particular needs of those who are experiencing homelessness rather than creating barriers

to access and support. Best practices must be implemented and employment strategies must be coordinated with housing and other interventions to provide workforce training and guidance for job seekers experiencing homelessness.

3. Reduce Financial Vulnerability

While many families experiencing or most at risk of homelessness are eligible for federal programs providing health care, income support, and work support, surprisingly few people access the full range of programs and services available to them. Enhanced public information and improved access to services are key.

4. Transform Homeless Services to Crisis Response Systems

Given the documented success of the Housing First model—an intervention that assists participants to move quickly into permanent housing with support services needed to achieve and maintain housing stability—communities that retool their crisis response systems with a focus on prevention and rapid re-housing will achieve greater success in reducing homelessness among families.

SIGNATURE INITIATIVE

This initiative, included in the President's FY2011 Budget, will implement a housing and services program for 6,000 families with children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. HUD will provide Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers to communities with high concentrations of families experiencing homelessness. Service providers will coordinate these vouchers with assistance and services administered by the states and available through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program and other HHS-funded programs. The Department of Education will help identify families through its network of homeless liaisons. This initiative will also test and evaluate replicable models for creating collaborations for aligning federally-funded programs and funding at the local level to improve their effectiveness helping families experiencing or at high risk of homelessness.

In Washington State the cost of transporting a homeless student to and from his or her school of origin is 6 to 80 times higher than that of the general student population.

(Carlson, D., 2006)

Children from families with housing problems are more likely to be in foster care than children without housing problems (46% vs. 27%). These children are more likely to be "long stayers" in foster care compared to children from adequately housed families.

(HHS, National Study of Protective, Preventive and Reunification Services to Children and their Families, 1997)