



## Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System: *Lessons from Cedar Rapids, IA*

In September 2012, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded five-year demonstration grants to Broward County, FL, Cedar Rapids, IA, Memphis, TN, San Francisco, CA, and the state of Connecticut to test the effectiveness of supportive housing for particularly vulnerable families involved in the child welfare system.

In addition to providing more than 500 families with supportive housing and wraparound services, the demonstration was intended to strengthen partnerships between child welfare, housing, health care, employment, and other local systems, in order to reduce bureaucratic barriers and improve outcomes for the highest-need families. Targeted outcomes included reducing rates of child maltreatment, out-of-home placements, and overall involvement with the child welfare system.

We spoke with Kelli Malone, Chief Program Officer, and Debbie Craig, Program Officer, at [Four Oaks Family and Children's Services](#), in Cedar Rapids, about what they have learned so far and their next steps. That conversation is summarized here.

### **What made your community decide to apply for the Supportive Housing for Families Demonstration Program? What were your goals?**

When we first learned about the federal demonstration program, there were virtually no available supportive housing units in our community. Cedar Rapids does not have its own housing authority, and the city's Department of Housing had closed the waiting list for vouchers. There was a concern that families with open child welfare cases were getting stuck in a cycle of homelessness, making it harder to prevent separations or reunify families. Several members of our team had the opportunity to travel to Washington, DC, where they heard Bryan Samuels, then-Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, speak specifically about this population – predominantly young mothers with young children who were both involved with the child welfare system and struggling with homelessness – and were motivated to raise the possibility of focusing on this population with our Department of Human Services (DHS) partners.

The idea of working together on a project aimed at this specific population spurred the creation of a new, more formalized relationship. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established between Four Oaks and DHS, which resulted in a collaboration to provide supportive housing and vouchers for families with an open child welfare case and served in the program. The city administration and HUD then approved an administrative preference for families experiencing homelessness with open child welfare cases.

The overarching goal was to serve 100 families during the demonstration program and provide support for this particularly vulnerable population.

**As you began your planning process, who were the most important stakeholders to have at the table?**

**What strategies were the most effective in engaging them?**

Before the proposal was even submitted, we felt it was important to gather local stakeholders to discuss community needs, the potential model, and how we would move forward if the grant were awarded. Since DHS is responsible for case management of child welfare cases, we wanted to ensure we were creating a model that would work for them and align with existing case management models.

Once the proposal was approved, the original stakeholders joined together with additional community partners to create three planning groups: practice/model, data, and housing. After the planning year, these members transitioned into an Inter-Agency Implementation Team (IIT) comprised primarily of program supervisory staff, and an Advisory Board made up of the directors and CEOs of the same organizations. This structure allowed the Advisory Board to focus more on system-level collaboration, while the IIT focused more on programmatic concerns.

It was also important to have formal MOUs in place that mapped out both the shared goals of the group and individual responsibilities of each organization. Over the five years, this was especially helpful when new team members came on board, and had to get quickly up to speed on the commitments their respective organizations had made to the demonstration program.

Key partners included:

- Department of Human Services
- University of Iowa
- Department of Public Health
- Affordable Housing Network, Inc.
- City of Cedar Rapids
- Service Providers (mental health, domestic violence, financial literacy, in-home providers)
- School System
- Juvenile Court

Due to the relatively small size of Cedar Rapids, many of these partners were familiar with each other prior to the demonstration project, but had not necessarily worked together, and certainly not at this level. In general, organizations were excited about this project and recognized the value of targeting this specific population, because it not only helped children and families end their homelessness in the short term, but would also benefit the community in the long term.

**How did you design your targeting criteria? Did your criteria evolve over time? If so, how?**

National research shows that families involved with child welfare who are also housing-insecure are typically very young single mothers with very young children. When we examined our own local data, we found that our population turned out to be primarily young mothers with *school-aged* children. As such, the program was originally designed to serve this demographic.

When enrollment began, however, the average age of children within the families turned out to be 3 (closer to the national average), so we adjusted our programming

	<p>accordingly. Our original screening tool did not change over the five years, and included the following factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homelessness or near homeless</li> <li>• Child welfare involvement</li> <li>• Children 12 and under in the household</li> <li>• Low income (30% of Area Median Income)</li> <li>• Complex service needs (such as, criminal behavior, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, etc.)</li> </ul>
<p><b>As the 5-year demonstration period comes to a close, what have been some of your most significant outcomes?</b></p>	<p>The most significant outcome was a 100% housing rate. Every family that enrolled in the program received housing within two weeks (with an average of 8 days). Getting families housed quickly allows them to focus on their cases with the Department of Human Services, either keeping children in the home or expediting their return from foster homes and closing the case. The concept was that if you take the element of homelessness out of the equation for these families, they will be better able to keep their children safe and focus on their other needs.</p> <p>The majority of families stabilized once they had stable housing and access to services. Another aspect of the program that showed successful outcomes was connecting families with a service coordinator at enrollment that would work with the family throughout the entire project, assisting with education, employment, transportation, housing, etc. Genuine relationships developed. One major takeaway is that levels of success within this population are much higher when a dedicated contact person can help them connect to different organizations and navigate the next steps.</p>
<p><b>What is the hardest thing you overcame doing this work?</b></p>	<p>The service coordinators developed trusting relationships with families. This was beneficial (as mentioned earlier, this relationship had an impact on the success rates of families), but also extremely difficult on the service coordinators, especially when a family had been progressing and working hard, but suffered a substance abuse relapse or returned to a violent relationship. Families in the system have a lot of expectations put on them, and it is unrealistic to expect a smooth road to success, but setbacks can be emotionally and mentally taxing for the service coordinators.</p>
<p><b>What surprised you the most?</b></p>	<p>In retrospect, the implementation group had a somewhat naïve vision that with the supports provided, families would be able to follow a straight line to success and stay there. Families are where they are in the process, and it was important to acknowledge that and jump back in when they had setbacks.</p> <p>Another surprising element was that families sometimes had different definitions of success. It was important to understand the family's story, culture, and goals. For instance, reunification may not have been possible – the child may have been adopted by a family member -- but the housing and supports provided during the program allowed the parent to get themselves into a position to be part of their child's life. This may have met the family's goal, while not specifically meeting the definition of 'success' outlined in the program.</p>

Families reported in satisfaction surveys that the service coordinator was one of the elements they appreciated most. We underestimated how much of a difference having someone to navigate families through the system would make, not only by helping them find out which benefits they were eligible for and assisting with the application process, but also as someone they can count on to consistently provide support.

**What is your advice to other communities interested in testing supportive housing for child welfare-involved families who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness?**

Communication and engagement of the community is key to a successful project. Look at the needs within the community, determine who should be involved, and then find out who is willing to engage. It is vital to create a solid model in the planning process, and engage partner organizations on multiple levels – CEOs, managers, and front-line workers.

Once the project begins, be prepared for families to have setbacks. It is also important to develop an objective method to track progress and determine when to scale back the level of support so that families can build skills and find success on their own. During the demonstration, we created a tool for ourselves called a Progress Management Index (PMI), containing a series of indicators that attempt to gauge a family's progression and need for supports and services. As families moved through this index, we gradually decreased their service coordination.

**How are you planning for sustainability after the demonstration ends?**

Based on the demonstration project results and family surveys, the most important elements to sustain are housing support, family/team decision-making meetings, community collaboration, and service coordination. These four elements are being interwoven into a new initiative; some grant funding for supportive housing has already been received, while other grants are pending for service coordination and additional needs. At the end of this grant, we will also present the city with recommendations regarding the need for supportive housing. We feel confident that with the lessons learned and new level of coordination among stakeholders, we will be able to sustain the progress we have made and continue to ensure that housing is not a barrier to keeping families together.