Solutions for Family Homelessness

Executive Summary
Cincinnati/Hamilton County 2015
Taking Action....

what we know

In 2014, 661 families found themselves living in emergency shelters in Hamilton County; however, there were hundreds more families who did not receive services or found themselves within a system that lacked coordination and supports to more effectively assist each individual family. And for all of the families turning to the homeless system, earlier interventions could have helped to prevent their plight.

Family homelessness is a complex, multi-faceted issue. Contributing factors include a lack of affordable housing, generational poverty, the challenges of raising children alone, changing family demographics, domestic violence and lack of social supports. As the gap between housing costs and income continues to widen, more families are at risk.

The Cincinnati Family Homelessness Services Study, completed in 2014, outlines the scope of the at-risk and homeless family population in Hamilton County. Identifying strengths and gaps in the current service system, the study found mixed results. Positively, 9 out of 10 families served in homelessness prevention programs in 2013 avoided eviction, and 4 out of 5 families served in an emergency shelter did not return to homelessness.

The discouraging news was the extent to which needs were not met. In 2013, 56% of families seeking Emergency Assistance were turned away, and 69% of families seeking Emergency Shelter or Shelter Diversion were turned away, largely due to a lack of capacity. The complete study is available online at www.strategiesoendhomelessness.org.

Tiana was finally able to find the courage to leave her violent relationship knowing she did not want her children growing up seeing their mother being abused. The case manager was able to connect her with access to childcare vouchers, so she could continue working. When she was ready, Rapid Re-housing funds were available to help her pay her first and last month’s rent and deposit, which was enough to get Tiana and her children back on their feet.
Our overall goal is to make family homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring, which will require action in partnership with multiple systems, sectors and providers, more strategic uses of funds, changes in systems and programs, and the use of data to drive community improvements. Without effective coordination, our community would be unable to determine the most effective ways to assist at-risk and homeless families. This summary includes high-level recommendations and success measures. The full plan is available at www.strategiestoendhomelessness.org.

Allison, who was struggling with severe depression and other health issues, her husband James and young son came into a family shelter after James was unable to find employment due to a conviction on his record and lack of stable employment history. They moved from the shelter to an apartment in a permanent supportive housing program; enrolled in classes at Cincinnati State; James began getting regular temp assignments; and Allison can consistently access her doctor and mental health services. As a result of the stable and happy home, James, Jr. began showing interest and excelling in school.

community-wide strategy

The data compelled action. Led by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Family Housing Partnership (Bethany House Services, Interfaith Hospitality Network of Greater Cincinnati, The Salvation Army, and YWCA of Greater Cincinnati), and Strategies to End Homelessness, a Steering Committee, a Community Advisory Committee and a variety of Work Groups were formed. The participation of more than 60 organizations led to the development of Solutions for Family Homelessness—a collaboratively developed, multi-year plan designed to solve critical issues for homeless and at-risk families. This plan identifies how we, as a community, can proactively address the needs of families. Recommendations are focused in four key areas—Prevention, Capacity Building, Policy Change, and Housing.

solving family homelessness

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Prevention
what we know and what we plan to improve:

Emergency Assistance and Shelter Diversion programs are proven to be successful and cost-effective ways of preventing homelessness, but too many families that would otherwise be able to receive this assistance are being turned away due to a lack of resources.

Families that are relying on others for a place to stay (‘doubled up’) may be unaware of community resources or uncomfortable asking for help. As children are naturally engaged with multiple community systems due to routine needs for healthcare and education, these systems could become ‘first responders’ for prevention of homelessness.

Children reveal information about their circumstances to childcare providers, teachers and pediatricians that, if appropriately recognized, could more quickly connect families to prevention resources. These providers need additional education and/or access to available resources to ensure optimal effectiveness.

While existing Emergency Assistance and Shelter Diversion services are available for families in crisis, such as facing eviction or entering a shelter, earlier interventions could prevent the severity of the crisis and meet the needs of families with a more modest financial investment.

prevention strategies

1. Focus more resources on Emergency Assistance and Shelter Diversion services.

2. Educate community providers such as physicians/practitioners, early childhood providers, and schools about risks of family homelessness; develop and implement a process for such providers to connect families to homelessness prevention resources.

3. Provide the lowest level of assistance necessary to effectively assist each family and stop their progression toward homelessness.
Capacity Building

what we know and what we plan to improve:

There are differing definitions and expectations for case managers across agencies, programs, and funding streams. The lack of standardization and coordination creates unnecessary barriers to achieving stability.

Furthermore, other services that address issues related to employment, parenting, physical and mental health, and childcare lack the coordination needed to respond quickly to families’ needs. Shelters do not have sufficient resources, services, and staff to meet the needs and potential impact of trauma experienced by both the parents and their children.

Providing access to quality shelter services, such as mental health care, employment or educational assistance for children struggling in school, is compromised by the fact that Cincinnati/Hamilton County provides emergency shelter to families within 7 separate buildings. This scattered approach dilutes the resources available, reduces the effectiveness of services, increases lengths of stay in shelter, and negatively affects outcomes.

The Family Homelessness Services Study conducted in 2014 described the average homeless family in Cincinnati as a single 30-year old mother with two children under the age of 6. Homeless shelter residents have difficulty seeking jobs, finding housing, and accessing other resources outside of the shelter without having somewhere to leave their children on short notice. Also, childcare services need to be equipped to handle the special needs of children traumatized by homelessness, which can be difficult to manage and respond to effectively.

capacity building strategies

1. Increase coordination and efficiency among providers and funders.

2. Improve quality of emergency shelter facilities to provide all families access to the care needed, at the level required to ensure success.

3. Develop specialized early childhood services for families to access childcare and supportive services while in shelter.
Housing
what we know and what we plan to improve:

Families access housing services in an uncoordinated, first-come first-served manner without regard to length of time homeless, vulnerability or service needs. There is a lack of affordable housing and existing subsidy programs do not consistently prioritize families experiencing the most significant housing crises.

The three most common concerns of landlords in leasing to people experiencing homelessness are non-payment of rent, property damage, and the financial burden associated with eviction and apartment turnover. Common concerns for families and homeless service providers are the lack of quality landlords who maintain safety, security and cleanliness.

People sign up on multiple lists to obtain housing; however, this duplication delays access for at-risk families needing immediate placement. While the four Family Housing Partnership agencies that share funding often collaborate and coordinate such services, there are other faith-based organizations that provide emergency assistance and housing services to families, which are not coordinated with larger publicly-funded systems.

housing strategies

1. Implement Coordinated Entry System to connect families to the most appropriate housing.

2. Maximize subsidized housing opportunities by coordinating waiting lists, increasing subsidies, and strategically targeting existing subsidies toward homeless and at-risk families.

3. Increase collaboration with private landlords and faith-based service providers.
Policy Change

what we know and what we plan to improve:

There is a lack of affordable housing in Hamilton County and funding that could be used to develop additional affordable housing is not being used to do so. Funding streams typically dictate compartmentalized approaches to services, which limits the ability of programs to follow families across transitions and to consider needs beyond housing.

One of the conditions of the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (HTC) program is that communities must designate one Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) project as the community’s highest priority each year. HTC is a tax incentive program designed to increase the supply of quality, affordable rental housing, including PSH programs for the homeless, by helping developers offset the costs of rental housing developments for individuals with low to moderate income. Families at risk of homelessness cannot access particular resources that might prevent housing instability; instead they must wait until they are literally homeless.

policy change strategies

1. Expand local government support for the development of affordable, family-sized housing units
2. Explore policy changes needed to secure sufficient and flexible funding that will allow for implementation of recommendations
3. Expand Ohio Housing Finance Agency (OHFA) Low Income Housing Tax Credit program to allow for the funding of more than one Permanent Supportive Housing project per community.
4. Expand services currently available to homeless families to include families at-risk of homelessness
Our Commitment to Take Action

After years of research and planning, our commitment to take action is unwavering. Many organizations that contributed to the development of this plan have pledged their continued support. Strategies to End Homelessness, the Family Housing Partnership – Bethany House Services, Interfaith Hospitality Network of Greater Cincinnati, The Salvation Army, YWCA of Greater Cincinnati – and St. Vincent de Paul will lead the process and engage other partners to ensure progress and monitor results.

Overarching Success Measures

The goal of the plan is to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring. Measures of the plan’s progress are as follows:

- Reduce the number of families who become homeless
- Reduce the number of families that return to homeless
- Reduce the length of homeless episodes for parents and children
- Increase the number of homeless families who become permanently housed
Denise

When you’ve never had to ask for help, it can be very difficult to reach out. When you have four little girls depending on you, you have no choice. Denise had always worked to support her family, sometimes working two or three jobs. Then due to an error in the re-certification of housing paperwork and a change in management at her apartment complex, she became homeless. Devastated by the situation, she was referred to a family shelter - the experience changed her life and helped her to become independent again.

Denise had access to life skills classes, which helped boost her self-esteem. The classes “taught me the importance of moving forward and not being defined by my past,” she said. Denise enrolled in the State Tested Nursing Assistant program, which enabled her to obtain her nurse’s assistant license and then secure a job. She credits the director of client services for being her mentor, and helping guide her back to self-sufficiency. Denise knew that she could always seek support after leaving the shelter, but says she didn’t need it, stating they “gave me enough tools to be successful in my life.”

Denise has been a nurse’s assistant working in the Cincinnati Public Schools for over 10 years now and is happily married to Mike, who she met through church. Her four little girls have all grown into beautiful young women. Three are in college and one is a new mom, making her a very proud grandma. Denise stays in touch with those who helped her and volunteers to help other families in shelter saying, “it’s my turn to give back!”

While Denise and her daughters represent one of the families that received effective, coordinated assistance, there are thousands that have not. This community-wide strategy will proactively transform our system to make family homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring. Will you help us take action now?
Special Thanks

Heartfelt thanks to all the individuals and organizations who participated in the development of Solutions for Family Homelessness. Our apologies to anyone we may have inadvertently omitted from the list.

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