

## Poverty and Housing Instability: The Implications for Families Involved in the Child Welfare System



- Research shows there is a link between poverty and homelessness/substandard housing, and child welfare involvement (Shdaimah, 2008).
- Child welfare involvement may put a family's existing housing arrangement at risk; once child welfare is involved, a family's housing is more closely monitored (Torrigo, 2009).
- Providing poverty-related services (such as food, clothing, rent, and connecting families to counseling and mental health services) help to reduce the number of families re-reported for child abuse and neglect (Walsh, 2010).

### Overview

Affordable housing has become a major issue across every state in America. In fact, there is no state in the country where working full-time at minimum wage will enable you to afford a two-bedroom apartment at local fair market rent (Torrigo, 2009). Common sense tells us that stable housing improves the well-being of children, youth and families; as Torrigo points out, "housing provides the foundation to a child's well-being." The Child Welfare League of America states that safe, secure, and stable housing reduces poverty, supports childrens' educational attainment, and increases parental satisfaction, happiness and well-being (CWLA, 2005).

Housing issues experienced by families living in poverty can take many forms, from chronically living at risk of being homeless, to the most serious form, actual homelessness (Courtney, McMurty, & Zinn, 2004). Child welfare involvement may put a family's existing housing arrangement at risk and, once child welfare involved, a family's housing is more closely monitored (Shdaimah, 2008). To further complicate matters, housing resources for impoverished families are often scarce and tend to have complicated eligibility criteria (Shdaimah, 2010).

### How Poverty and Housing Instability Relates to Child Welfare

Research has shown a link between poverty, homelessness or substandard housing and child welfare involvement; in fact, housing instability is often the reason families come to the attention of child welfare in the first place and, in some cases, housing issues hinder family reunification efforts (Torrigo, 2009).

Housing instability increases stress for children and parents alike and causes parents to face critical challenges in adequately caring for their children (Torrigo, 2009). The very definition of neglect, which includes failure to provide adequate shelter, establishes a clear connection between housing and child protection (CWLA, 2005). Caregiver struggles have been found to be an important predictor of out-of-home placement, especially for reasons of neglect in which substance abuse was an issue (Walsh, 2010). However, the authority of child protective services (CPS) and its resources are meant to address child abuse and neglect, not housing problems, which are viewed as poverty-related (Shdaimah, 2010).

It has been estimated that roughly 30% of children in foster care are there primarily due to a lack of housing (Harburger & White, 2004). Furthermore, children living

in poverty are disproportionately children of color (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2010). Most of a child welfare agency's federal funds are spent on maintaining poor children in foster care, leaving few options to improve a family's living situation (Harburger & White, 2004).

A study conducted by Courtney, McMurty and Zinn (2004) found that homelessness in the year prior to having a child placed cut a family's change of reunifying with a child by almost half. Chronic neglect is closely related to poverty and the inability for the caregiver to meet the basic needs of their children such as food and clothing (Walsh, 2010) and it remains the most common reason children enter foster care.

While seven states have barred the removal of children for poverty-related reasons, such as homelessness or an inability to meet a child's basic needs, inadequacy of family income continues to be a strong predictor of whether or not a child reported to CPS ends up placed in foster care (Walsh, 2010). The difference between deprivation due to neglect versus that of poverty can be a challenging distinction for those tasked with making this determination (Walsh, 2010).

## What Can Child Welfare Professionals Do?

It is important for child welfare professionals and policy makers to understand how and when housing affects child welfare decisions in terms of whether or not to remove a child or later to return them home (Shdaimah, 2010). The housing needs of families involved with the child welfare system should be considered at several times during the life of the case: at the initial point in time when a child is removed from the home and later in the case when a housing issue may not have brought the family to the attention of CPS, but arises as an issue in returning them home (Shdaimah, 2010). Courtney, McMurty and Zinn (2004) found that families themselves perceived housing assistance to be one of the services most useful for facilitating and maintaining reunification. Given the overlap in populations served by both child welfare and housing agencies, a partnership to coordinate housing and service provision would yield benefits for the families served by both systems.

## Suggestions for the Practitioner

Child welfare professionals need to first acknowledge the struggle faced by families with limited economic resources to obtain safe, stable, and affordable housing. Torrico (2009) provides some suggestions on how

### Who are our homeless families?

Almost all homeless parents (95%) are female (Harburger & White, 2004). The typical homeless family is a single mother in her 20s with two children under the age of six (Harburger & White, 2004). It is important to acknowledge the interplay between domestic violence, homelessness and child abuse. Single mothers often have personal histories that include domestic violence, substance abuse, poor health, limited work experience, and it is likely they lack both transportation and child care which make both job and housing searches challenging at best (Harburger & White, 2004).

those working with impoverished child welfare involved families can help them to obtain permanent housing:

- Ask families about their current housing situation and future housing needs and help other professionals involved in the case stay informed.
- Plan for housing early. Include housing as part of the family assessment protocol and work with the family to develop a housing plan as they prepare for reunification. Help the family to think about their housing options such as housing vouchers, low-income housing units and local housing subsidy programs. Planning ahead is critical because many of these programs have wait lists.
- Provide basic, concrete assistance. Help families to access financial assistance that can prevent homelessness and/or the removal of children in the first place, such as emergency cash for security deposits, rent subsidies or payment of overdue utilities. Additionally, social workers can use local human service or community-based organizations to try to access other funding sources.
- Link to housing resources. Social workers should become familiar with local housing resources such as housing subsidies, public housing units, housing grant programs, and low-income housing units in the community. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD), Family Unification Program (FUP), has vouchers that can be used to provide access to affordable housing for families involved or at-risk of becoming involved with the child welfare system (White, 2011). Recently, Washington State was awarded an additional 199 of these Housing Choice Vouchers by FUP, the highest level in the country next to Oregon which received 200. The Housing and Child Welfare Project (which is in its early stages) provides an example of the role public

housing authorities (PHAs), the public child welfare system, and other partners can play in helping to house child welfare involved families. (Please see the sidebar, “From Vision to Action.”)

- Connect to community resources. Use community resources to gain additional support for families. Time spent reaching out to potential landlords, religious organizations, schools or universities, and/or volunteers to help address the housing needs of families can increase resources for families. Having an affiliation with an organization or agency can improve the willingness to take a “risk” on renting to a family.
- Collaborate with other service providers to fill in the gaps. Social workers can partner with other service providers to ensure appropriate services are offered and available to child welfare involved families with housing issues. For example, a child welfare worker can work with a housing authority to ensure that stable housing is available to help prepare for reunification.
- Participate in cross-system training activities. Supervisors or managers from different systems can establish cross-agency partnerships in an effort to provide staff with cross-system trainings opportunities, which can help to improve the service array and coordination that families receive. Cross-system trainings allow for the discussion of agency values, policies and legal mandates, practices and opportunities for collaboration.
- Advocate for funding. Social workers, and agency or program leaders should be involved in their community’s funding allocation process whenever possible. Social workers as advocates can be effective in raising the challenging issues that the families they serve are facing. Additionally, partnerships with other service providers can be an effective way to increase an agency’s or program’s funding to serve families.

## Conclusion

Given the intersection of poverty, housing and child welfare, it is imperative that systems serving these families work together to create a cohesive plan to address the multiple needs of these families to create long-term stability and child well-being. A recent study on Ohio’s Alternative Response Pilot found that providing poverty-related services (such as food, clothing, rent, and connecting families to counseling and mental health services) help to reduce the number of families re-reported for child abuse and neglect (Walsh, 2010).

No one system is adequately resourced nor mandated to address all the needs of impoverished families with child welfare involvement. Creative partnerships in which resources are shared and matched hold great potential for building a long-term safety net under these very vulnerable families.

### From Vision to Action: The Housing and Child Welfare Project

Building Changes, a Seattle based non-profit that unites public and private entities to create solutions to end homelessness, and the King County Housing Authority are spearheading a collaborative effort in King and Pierce Counties to address the housing issue faced by families who are ready to reunify but lack stable housing. Project partners include those from the public and private sectors involved in addressing the needs of homeless, child welfare involved families: Washington State DSHS/Children’s Administration, Washington State Economic Services Administration (TANF), local housing authorities in each county, Washington Families Fund/ Building Changes, Catalyst for Kids/Children’s Home Society, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Partners for Our Children, city and county funders – including King County Committee to End Homelessness – and nonprofit service providers.

The goal of this collaborative effort is to provide a housing resource for the Children’s Administration to use when it determines that housing would make a difference in the imminent reunification of families. Outcomes of the project may include:

1. Increasing the number of children who are reunified with their families in stable housing
2. Reducing/eliminating re-entry into the child welfare system
3. Reducing the length of time of out-of-home placements
4. Realizing savings through averted foster care costs

King County, Seattle and Tacoma housing authorities have identified 30 voucher rental subsidies and agreed to make them available to the Children’s Administration for families involved in the child welfare system. Access to these vouchers would provide the Children’s Administration with a housing resource when they need it. Stakeholders are collaborating to create a cohesive approach to service provision as families reunify in these units. The rental subsidies, combined with services from Children’s Administration and community-based organizations, will be used to reduce costly and destabilizing out-of-home placements and avert foster care costs. Project organizers continue to meet regularly to work out the roles and responsibilities. In the near future, they hope to have the first of these units available.

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