

ACF

Administration
for Children
and Families

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration on Children, Youth and Families

1. Log No: ACYF-CB-IM-17-03

2. Issuance Date: 01-18-2017

3. Originating Office: Children's Bureau

4. Key Words: Family and Youth Homelessness; Child Welfare; Federal Resources

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

TO: State, Tribal and Territorial Agencies Administering or Supervising the Administration of Title IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act, the State Office, Agency or Organization Designated by the Governor to Apply for a Child Abuse and Neglect State Grant, and Court Improvement Programs.

SUBJECT: Efforts by child welfare agencies, local communities, and federal agencies to end family and youth homelessness.

LEGAL AND RELATED REFERENCES: Title IV-B and title IV-E of the Social Security Act (the Act); and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this Information Memorandum (IM) is to share information on Federal efforts and resources to enhance child welfare's response to family and youth homelessness.

INFORMATION:

The connection between homelessness and child welfare involvement is documented by administrative and research data and the individual stories of families and youth entering the child welfare system each year. In 2015, approximately 265,000 children entered foster care across the country. For over 10 percent of these children (approximately 27,000 children), inadequate housing was reported as a reason associated with the child's removal, and this percentage is even higher among older youth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2016). Inadequate housing includes homelessness as well as substandard, overcrowded, unsafe or otherwise inadequate housing facilities determined to be inappropriate for parents and their children to reside together.

I. Background

Nationally, families and youth make up a substantial proportion of the homeless population. The 2016 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) [Point-in-Time count](#) estimated that there were 61,265 family households experiencing homelessness on a single night in January, representing 35 percent of the homeless population. Over one-fifth (22%) of all people experiencing homelessness were children and nine percent were young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 (HUD, 2015). These numbers provide a snapshot of the scope of family and

youth homelessness among those who are living in shelters or on the street. However, many families and youth experiencing homelessness are living doubled up with friends or family and many more are housing insecure.

Family and youth homelessness is a key issue for child welfare systems. Inadequate housing and homelessness increase the risk of entry into foster care and cause delays in the reunification of children in foster care with their families. Being proactive in addressing housing needs can prevent the unnecessary removal of children from their families and substantially improve the short- and long-term well-being of children, young adults and their families.

The Children's Bureau in the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families is committed to better addressing homelessness among families who are in or at-risk of involvement in the child welfare system and youth who are emancipating from foster care. The purpose of this IM is to highlight work at the federal level and provide guidance to strengthen state and local efforts. The IM focuses on the interrelated populations of families and youth served by the child welfare system.

Families

Families with children make up an estimated one-third of the homeless population. Nationally, child welfare systems are challenged in adequately responding to the needs of families experiencing homelessness. Among families experiencing homelessness, recurrent shelter entries and longer stays in the shelter system increase the likelihood of involvement in child welfare (Courtney, McMurtry, Zinn, 2004; Park, Metraux, Broadbar, & Culhane, 2004). Many families and children experiencing homelessness have complex needs. While families may be facing homelessness for the first time, many are caught in a cycle of poverty, mental illness, trauma, domestic violence, or substance use. Compared to other poor but housed children, homeless children are more likely to demonstrate higher anxiety, depression, and behavior problems; have poorer school attendance and achievement; and have poorer health and more developmental delays (Cowal, Shin, Weitzman, Stojanovic & Labay, 2002; Rog, McCombs-Thornton, Brito, & Holupka, 1995).

Young families with newborns and infants are among the most likely population to need and seek shelter due to housing instability or homelessness. The first year of life is when children are most likely to enter shelter and transitional housing programs, followed by ages one to five (Gubits, Shinn, Wood, Dstrup & Solari, 2015). Almost half of children in shelters are under the age of six (HUD, 2016). Homelessness and housing instability are traumatic experiences and might be particularly traumatic for young children. Research indicates that experiencing homelessness during pregnancy and in the early years may be harmful to children's development (Narayan, Kalstabakken, Labella, Nerenberg, Monn, & Masten, 2016; Richards, Merrill, Baksh, & McGarry, 2011).

Youth

The developmental stage of young people in their late teens and early twenties is often characterized as transitional in nature. Multiple transitions can occur in interpersonal and

intimate relationships, jobs and education, and even housing. Particularly when it comes to housing situations, many youth in the U.S. have a gradual transition to independent adulthood, often living with a parent into their early 20's or cycling in and out of the parental home, and across multiple independent living settings. For youth with current or prior experiences in foster care, the risk of becoming homeless, at some point during the transition to independent adulthood is alarming. Few young people are prepared to assume total responsibility for securing and maintaining housing at age 18 or 21, yet for young people who reach the maximum age in their state's foster care system, that is the expectation.

In a recently released Family and Youth Services Bureau study on the [Street Outreach Program](#), the intersection of homelessness, childhood abuse, and foster care was clearly articulated by the interviewed youth. Half of the youth reported physical abuse at the hands of a caretaker and one-third reported sexual abuse. Overall, half of the youth living on the street reported having been in foster care at some point and were more likely to report longer episodes of homelessness compared to youth who did not report being in foster care.

In addition to numerous studies that have documented the intersection between homelessness and experiences with the foster care system, states are now collecting and reporting information on homelessness for youth as they transition from foster care. On October 1, 2010, states began collecting and reporting data on the outcomes of youth in foster care through the [National Youth in Transition Database](#) (NYTD). States are required to report on the independent living services provided to youth and on outcomes for youth, as reported through survey data at ages 17, 19, and 21. The first collection of survey data for the first cohort of youth was completed September 30, 2015, and the first data [brief](#) was recently released. At age 17, 16% of youth reported being homeless at some point in their lifetime. At age 19, 20% of surveyed youth reported being homeless in the last two years; at age 21, the number rises to 26%. Across all waves of data in the cohort, 43% of youth reported ever being homeless in their lifetime. It should be noted that the definition NYTD uses for homeless does not include “couch-surfing” or “staying with friends.”¹ Not surprisingly, youth who experienced other risk factors, such as referral to substance abuse treatment or incarceration, were more likely to report experiences with homelessness. Conversely, youth who reported a positive connection to an adult were less likely to report homelessness.

II. Federal Partnerships and Initiatives to Address Child Welfare's Response to Family and Youth Homelessness

Effective and meaningful cross-agency collaboration to end family and youth homelessness must involve the child welfare system. Families and youth who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness are often served by multiple systems, including child welfare. The Administration for Children and Families is working across its offices, including the Children's Bureau, the Family and Youth Services Bureau, the Office of Family Assistance, the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development, the Office on Trafficking in Persons, the Office of Child Support Enforcement, the Administration for Native Americans, and the Office

¹ Homeless definition in NYTD: A youth is considered to have experienced homelessness if the youth had no regular or adequate place to live. This definition includes situations where the youth is living in a car or on the street, or staying in a homeless or other temporary shelter.

of Regional Operations to support state and local responses to family and youth homelessness. Detailed information on some of this work is included in Appendix A.

Over the last five years, the Children’s Bureau has invested in demonstration projects in 23 communities to improve the outcomes of families and youth through the provision of safe, stable, and affordable housing. These discretionary grants focused on the development of interventions for a target population of the most at-risk families and youth. The evaluations of the demonstrations are still underway, but there are some early lessons learned from the implementation of the interventions. More information on these promising practices is included in Appendix B.

We encourage states, localities and tribes to review this information to see how they can strengthen their own efforts to communicate and collaborate across systems at the state and local level.

III. The Role of Child Welfare Agencies in Housing

As child welfare agencies take a greater role in securing stable and affordable housing for youth and families, there are several strategies child welfare agencies can employ in their state and communities:

1. Actively consider and prioritize the role of safe, stable, and affordable housing in child welfare outcomes.

It is important for child welfare leaders to articulate a clear vision of the relationship between safe and stable housing and achieving positive child, youth, and family well-being outcomes across the child welfare system. Far too often, the child welfare agency does not play an active role in securing housing for families and youth; instead child welfare agencies often rely on more generic referral to services or providers.

At the state and local level, child welfare agencies may designate an individual to be the point person on housing resources for families and youth, and attend community meetings on housing and community development to make the housing needs of children and youth involved in the child welfare system a priority.

2. Use and link child welfare administrative data with other available data to understand and document the housing needs of families and youth.

Administrative data systems should be used to understand the scope of housing issues among families and youth involved in the child welfare system as well as to drive targeting decisions for available housing services and interventions. More importantly, documenting the needs of families and youth can be used to advocate for additional housing resources and supports. Under the updated Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) regulations, which were published on December 14, 2016 in the Federal Register, State child welfare agencies must document whether “inadequate housing” and “homelessness” were circumstances contributing to the child’s removal and placement. (The regulations had previously only required states to report

“inadequate housing” but not “homelessness” as a circumstance of removal.) [More information here.](#)

The Children’s Bureau encourages the use of administrative data to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of work within child welfare agencies as well as data sharing between systems to foster coordination and maximize resources across systems that are available for families and youth involved in the child welfare system. State and counties have utilized other federal administrative data sources including Unemployment Insurance, National Student Clearinghouse, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), and their child welfare data to understand how their families and youth are faring after service provision.

3. Attend and participate in Continuum of Care (CoCs) meetings.

A CoC is a network of people and organizations in a locally-defined geographic area responsible for coordinating the local response to homelessness. The CoC process developed by HUD (see Appendix A for more information) is used to allocate housing resources in communities and involves a diverse set of members. A portion of families and youth involved with child welfare will need access to short- and long-term housing supports. Child welfare agencies may often assist with one-time payments for housing or utilities, but longer term assistance may not be within the resources or responsibility of the child welfare agency.

Involvement with the CoC can give child welfare agencies the opportunity to partner with many different homelessness and crisis response providers that may not be part of the traditional array of child welfare service providers. Furthermore, CoCs have the ability to prioritize housing and services based on the needs of the community, including child welfare involved families and youth. By being a part of the CoC, the child welfare agency can assure that the needs of some of the most vulnerable and at-risk families and youth are represented.

4. Meet the Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) in the community.

Developing a relationship with PHAs is a key strategy in understanding how the housing resources are being allocated at the local level. PHAs, with HUD’s approval, may create priorities for vouchers and other resources. For example, some PHAs have institutionalized preferences for youth and families who are child welfare involved. Additionally, the Family Unification Program (FUP) promotes family unification by providing Housing Choice Vouchers to families for whom the lack of adequate housing is the primary factor in separation, or threat of imminent separation, of children from their families and to youths 18 to 21 who left foster care at age 16 or older and lack adequate housing. [More information about FUP is available here.](#)

Having a clear understanding of what resources, programs, and services are available creates the framework for partnership. It is also important for the PHA to understand the role of the child welfare agency in supporting the needs of homeless families and at-risk youth in HUD-assisted housing.

5. Partner with housing providers, including landlords.

It is important to know the service providers addressing both housing and homelessness in the community. Housing providers are experts in securing housing, negotiating leases, resolving evictions, and other aspects of getting families and youth into housing. In addition, at the child welfare agency leadership level, it is important to develop relationships with landlords and understand the needs of landlords. Homelessness service providers and housing providers are experts in landlord engagement. Child welfare agencies can help these experts understand the needs of their families and youth, and housing experts can help child welfare agencies with landlord engagement strategies. Often the families and youth involved with child welfare have specific needs in terms of location and size of housing. Conversely, private and nonprofit housing developers may also have requirements around offering housing for low-income individuals and families. Determining how to well-position youth and families to meet the needs of private and nonprofit landlords is an effective strategy for child welfare to increase the number of housed families and youth.

6. Use case management as a method to leverage housing resources and support services.

The provision of case management is an important support for families and youth that can be used to leverage housing resources. Case management services provided by child welfare can be a major incentive to housing and service providers serving child welfare youth and families. Child welfare agencies should not underestimate how the provision of case management to youth and families involved with child welfare can serve as an asset that helps landlords and housing programs to see them as desirable clients and tenants. Furthermore, when case workers are involved with families that are housed they should take an active role in ensuring that housing is safe and affordable and work collaboratively with housing providers.

7. Ensure a range of safe and appropriate housing options through transition planning and extend foster care for young adults.

Child welfare agencies are required to plan for a youth's transition from foster care prior to aging out at age 18 or older (section 475(5)(H) of the Social Security Act). The transition plan is required to address the housing needs of the youth. Due to their high-risk of homelessness, youth/ young adults should be well connected to a range of housing options, programs, and providers in the community to ensure all youth have a long-term sustainable plan for housing. It is also important to consider how friends and families are a natural support network for housing and how the child welfare agency can support those people close to the youth. Finally, it is important to develop a response system to *create immediate access to housing and services* when youth are in crisis or homeless.

Since October 1, 2010, title IV-E agencies have also had the option to amend their title IV-E plans to extend eligibility for the federal title IV-E foster care program to youth ages 18-21 years old. Title IV-E agencies have an additional flexibility to allow these young adults ages 18 or older to live in "supervised independent living settings" that,

unlike placements for younger children, may not need to meet state licensing requirements. Title IV-E agencies have discretion to develop a range of supervised independent living settings. For example, a title IV-E agency may determine that host homes, college dormitories, shared housing, semi-supervised apartments, supervised apartments or another housing arrangement meets the supervised independent living arrangement requirement, when paired with a supervising agency or supervising worker. Allowing additional time for youth to complete their education in a range of safe and appropriate housing options through a more normative and gradual transition to adulthood can be an important step to preventing homelessness.

8. Create conversations outside of the immediate community.

In urban areas with competitive housing markets, as well as rural areas with limited housing options, families and youth may need to consider relocating to find viable long-term housing options. Planning a state or regional approach to both service delivery and housing supports from the outset will help to ensure a more robust system to address the long-term needs of families and youth. Partnering with housing and service providers both inside and outside the traditional boundaries of states, communities, and child welfare services areas may be the most beneficial for families and youth.

IV. Conclusion

There is a critical need for child welfare systems to address the prevalence of housing instability and homelessness among the families and youth who come to their attention. The Children's Bureau and federal partners are working at the federal level to promote promising practices and model partnerships between child welfare and key stakeholders. Child welfare has an investment in this work because of the intersection between housing instability and child welfare involvement. It has been long recognized that child welfare systems have unique expertise in engaging and meeting the service needs of particularly vulnerable families and youth. Further, child welfare agencies can use their expertise in family engagement to help unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 18 re-engage with safe and appropriate family members. It is essential that child welfare agencies play an active role in their community's plan to ensure no child experiences homelessness. Meaningful partnerships with targeted homelessness and mainstream housing resources are needed to better serve our families, children, and youth.

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/s/
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Attachments:

A - Federal Partnerships in Addressing Family and Youth Homelessness

B - Promising Practices

C - CB Regional Office Program Managers

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