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FROM SHELTER TO HOUSING: RESTRUCTURING THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA'S APPROACH TO SERVING FAMILIES

Overview

Over the last several years, the District of Columbia has seen an unprecedented number of families seeking emergency shelter. This family housing crisis is creating an unsustainable over-reliance on shelter, which is both expensive and not good for families. And for the past several years, full shelters have meant little or no access to shelter for families in need during the non-winter months. In response, the District is changing how we serve families.

Rather than a shelter-first approach, we want to stabilize and rapidly re-house families who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless. But housing stability doesn't happen in a vacuum. For most families seeking shelter, their housing situation is intertwined with their ability to get family sustaining employment. In fact, most families seeking shelter or in shelter today are also receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). And TANF, as we are now showing in the District, not only provides a pathway out of economic dependency, but it can and should help families get housing and stay housed.

For parents receiving TANF, stable housing is essential to address their barriers to work and successfully re-enter the workforce. Likewise, a parent's ability to get a job and build a career is an essential part of maintaining stable housing and raising successful children. So instead of relying on costly, long-term shelter, we are working with each family to prevent the need for shelter, stabilize their housing situation, and help them build a future in which they can afford housing and take care of their family.

The Virginia Williams Family Resource Center (VWFRC), which serves as the central resource center for families experiencing or at risk of homelessness in the District of Columbia, is showcasing how a family-centered, holistic approach using the TANF Redesign model as the framework, can give families new hope and the support they need to tackle these difficult issues. With a team approach that includes the family and any other agency or service provider the family is also working with, families can focus on and get the support they need to work on their goals.

This family-driven approach is at the heart of the re-structured Homeless Services system. We assist families with housing resources in combination with a plan to address their short- and long-term housing and economic self-sufficiency goals. This plan is integrated with their TANF plan, and can address the whole needs of the family.

To achieve the goals of fewer families becoming homeless, for shorter periods of time, and achieving better outcomes for parents and children, we need to (1) shift from a shelter driven approach to keeping families in their communities through prevention and re-housing; (2) strengthen TANF families at risk of homelessness before a crisis necessitates shelter; and (3) enact the proposed amendments to the Homeless Services Reform Act.

Family Shelter Re-Structuring Plan

The following five goals of the re-structured family homeless services program will result in better outcomes for families, reduced need for emergency shelter units, and a resumption of year-round access to family shelter.

Goal #1: Safely and appropriately prevent families at risk of homelessness from needing shelter.

- Serve all families at risk of homelessness, not just those in crisis.
- Identify families at risk of homelessness through the TANF assessment.
- Use emergency housing resources to keep families in their communities and work with families through their TANF plan to help them stay housed.
- Target prevention programs, such as the District's Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP), to families at risk of homelessness.
- Use the TANF Redesign to work with families in a holistic, collaborative way to address barriers to housing and increase housing stability.

Goal #2: Shorten the time families stay in shelter by making their time in shelter count.

- Implement provisional shelter placement while a family completes the full TANF assessment and community resources are fully explored.
- Use the holistic family-driven TANF model to maintain a sense of urgency and provide the support families need to quickly re-connect to housing.
- Co-locate sister agency staff at the shelters to provide real-time diagnostic services and direct connection to community-based services, including mental health, substance use, adult education, child care and child support.
- Use the proven assessment tool, the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT), to determine the appropriate housing program for each family. To date, use of SPDAT in the District shows that of the families in shelter:
 - About 80% need rapid re-housing,
 - About 10% only need one-time assistance, i.e., security deposit and first month's rent, and
 - About 10% need permanent supportive housing.
- Increase family resources to exit shelter through strategic use of escrow and financial management education.

Goal #3: Help families exit shelter more quickly to permanent housing.

- Target housing appropriately through use of SPDAT.
- Shift resources from costly emergency shelter to more cost-effective re-housing and other permanent housing programs.
- Use innovative approaches, such as on-site housing fairs, to immediately match families with affordable units and accelerate the lease-up process.
- Increase appropriate permanent housing options through implementation of the Mayor's Comprehensive Housing Task Force recommendations.

Goal #4: Reduce return to shelter.

- Use the family's TANF plan and the unified approach of the TANF Redesign to support long-term housing stability and independence, regardless of housing option.
- Continue to use a team approach that includes any other agency or service provider the family is working with to collaboratively support the family achieve its goals.
- Continue to help families address barriers to work by making direct connections between the family and critical services they need to stabilize and address physical and behavioral health issues for parents and children.
- Help parents get a job, get a better job, and get a career through TANF, Department of Employment Services, and other employment resources.

Goal #5: Reduce the number of family emergency shelter units, resume year-round access to family shelter, and help families succeed.

- By achieving the above goals of prevention, shortened shelter stays, and more permanent housing options for families, the District can shift resources from costly emergency shelter to serving more families through permanent housing.
- DC General Family Shelter can be reduced from 271 units to no more than 153 units year-round in FY 14 and no more than 100 units by the end of FY 15.
- Resume shelter placements year-round for families in need for the short time it takes to re-connect them to permanent housing.