



What We're Learning About Housing's Role in Child Welfare Services

by Deborah DeSantis and Judith Meltzer

Three years ago, our organizations began a journey leading us toward a better understanding of the roles that housing, case management and supportive services play in stabilizing vulnerable families, particularly those confronting complex challenges that trigger the involvement of child welfare agencies.

We became partners in the national effort spearheaded by the federal government and four well-known philanthropic foundations ó [Robert Wood Johnson](#), [Annie E. Casey](#), [Edna McConnell Clark](#) and [Casey Family Programs](#) ó to evaluate whether supportive housing could change the trajectory of families facing a number of destabilizing factors that can lead to homelessness, open cases with child welfare agencies and foster care placements. Officially known as ["Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System"](#) and launched by the [U.S. Administration on Children, Youth and Families](#), a total of five initiatives across the country receive funding and expertise to create opportunities for vulnerable families to access affordable housing and services tailored to address medical and mental health care needs, substance use recovery, and other supports essential to the well-being of every member of the family.

The goal is to learn if housing coupled with intensive monitoring and services (known as supportive housing) can improve the lives of children and parents to the point where placing or keeping children in foster care is preventable and unnecessary.

The five sites in the demonstration are housing and co-located services in [Broward County, Fla.](#); [Cedar Rapids, Iowa](#); [Memphis, Tenn.](#); [San Francisco, Calif.](#) and the [State of Connecticut](#). Their goal is to ultimately provide supportive housing to more than 400 families with children at risk of, or already in, foster care placement. Why do the federal government, major foundations, experts and advocates alike want to explore alternatives to foster care placement? Because a plethora of data convinces us that if we can identify and provide viable solutions forming a platform from which families can remain safely together in a home of their own, children win. Families win. And communities win.

Our two organizations were paired to assist the five demonstration sites because of [CSSP's](#) strong record of promoting innovative ideas, policies and programs that advance the well-being of children and families from low-income communities, and [CSH's](#) leadership in developing supportive housing models serving vulnerable families. Our respective missions have overlapped in several ways, but most important for this demonstration is the premium we place on creating stable and safe environments where children and their parents thrive together.

Through our work with the demonstration sites, strategies have already emerged to better coordinate and serve families who come into contact with child welfare agencies. Among those strategies (links added to more information):

- [Use of cross-systems data to target families most in need.](#)
- [Establishing multi-agency teams to coordinate services to families.](#)
- [Creative housing partnerships.](#)

In addition, we have just released this week three products to help guide supportive housing administrators and practitioners developing and involved in supportive housing efforts serving families with children. Each guide is intended to ensure providers have access to the most relevant and up-to-date information as all of us endeavor to deliver the best possible housing and services to vulnerable families.

The guides:

[Welcome Home: Design and Practice Guidance for Supportive Housing for Families with Children](#)
[A Practice Framework for Delivering Services to Families in Supportive Housing](#)
[Tenant Manual & Welcome Packet](#)

Although we have more than two years remaining before the five-year demonstration winds down and full data for evaluation is available, we know anecdotally there have been high rates of reunification and successful prevention of foster care placements among participating families. To date, all five sites have successfully housed nearly 300 families and their joint retention rate is roughly 91 percent.

We are seeing promising results and have been honored to partner with outstanding and committed funders and providers as we learn more about the potential of supportive housing to work with and help transform the lives of vulnerable, fragile families. Most importantly, we have been struck by the resiliency of the families participating in the demonstration, their commitment to one another, and their determination to stay together.

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