

Community Spotlight: Rapid Re-Housing

Rapid Exit Program in Hennepin County, MN

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This case study explores Rapid-Exit, programs that offer rapid re-housing and supportive services to families who reside in homeless shelters of Hennepin County, MN. In general, these homeless shelters experienced 1) a reduction in the number of families who utilize homeless shelters, and 2) a reduction in the lengths of stay at homeless shelters. Approximately 500 families are served by Rapid-Exit every year.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Hennepin County provides Rapid Exit services to homeless families in County-contracted shelters. A central intake conducts an assessment of each family's barriers to getting and keeping housing, and triages the family to a Rapid Exit agency. Advocates help the family find housing through their networks of landlords, then offer six months of stabilization and support to both the family and the landlord. The program assists around 500 families per year.

CHALLENGE

The safety net was collapsing. Since the 1980s, Hennepin County had voluntarily provided shelter to all homeless families with minor children who had no other options. But by 1992, after three consecutive years of 35% increases in shelter census, every shelter bed and every budget motel room were filled. It was clear that the policy would soon be meaningless—perhaps even rescinded. None of the traditional approaches to homelessness could impact increasing shelter admissions and length of stay in time to prevent shelter turnaways.

SOLUTION

Non-profit service providers and County staff began meeting weekly to envision new approaches. The group focused on two strategies—reducing admissions to shelter and rapidly exiting homeless families into housing. Everyone agreed on the goal, but had no known models to achieve it. The planning group decided to consult the “experts,” holding focus groups with over a hundred homeless families. “What caused you to become homeless?” “What’s keeping you homeless?” Using their responses, the group decided to focus on the intended outcome, experiment with a variety of methods, and learn from the results. Meanwhile, they successfully lobbied for flexible new state funding for family homelessness grants that would, for the first time, specify only the intended results—leaving decisions about service design to local communities.

IMPLEMENTATION

With the new, flexible, state funding, Hennepin released a competitive Request for Proposals, seeking non-profits to rapidly move families out of homeless shelters. The primary target was the 80% of homeless families who had moderate to moderately serious housing barriers. Non-profits would move families into private market housing and provide stabilization support for six months to achieve non-recidivism performance targets. The contracts were outcome-based, with few service specifications so there would be no contractual obstacles to innovation.

As the project evolved, independent outreach to homeless families was replaced by a central intake, assessment and triaging. More community agencies began accepting referrals from the central “Rapid Exit” Screener, increasing housing options. A Landlord Advisory committee offered insight into landlord needs and concerns. Rapid Exit advocates became skilled “credible intermediaries,” devising creative and effective techniques to minimize the risk to landlords of renting to families with poor Tenant Screening Reports.

Monthly meetings between County and non-profit staff for training, problem-solving and data-sharing have continued for over sixteen years. As a result of the ongoing exchange of ideas, Hennepin County has made major internal changes: flexible County funding that can quickly pay many re-housing costs, and a specialized County-operated Shelter Team to coordinate Rapid Exit Housing Plans with public benefits.

RESULTS

The systems goal was achieved. For the past 16 years Hennepin County has been able to maintain the “Shelter All” policy for families with no turnaways. Shelter admissions and length of stay were reduced substantially. In one four-year period, when internal County funding and staffing changes were implemented to support rapid re-housing, shelter admissions declined by 42%, average length of stay by 47% and the total number of purchased “bed-nights” was reduced by 70%. Household goals were also achieved. Since 1995, over 8000 families, with more than 20,000 children, have received Rapid Exit re-housing. One year after case closing, 92% had not returned to shelter.

INSIGHTS/LESSONS LEARNED

- Through service delivery and two detailed Housing Surveys that included several thousand respondents, it is clear that this is what people want: their own place, as quickly as possible.
- Once homeless people are housed, the majority feel safe enough to work on other life goals—particularly employment and children’s schooling. The most effective approach is to make sure services are voluntary (housing is not contingent upon service utilization or progress on life goals) and the household can decide their own priorities, sequencing and timing.
- Culturally-competent staff are critical to program success. The majority of Rapid Exit staff mirror the racial/ethnic demographics and life experiences of homeless families. Staff have experienced homelessness, poverty, single parenthood, chemical dependency and/or incarceration. They can quickly engage with homeless families, offer practical advice, and act as role models, inspiring clients to succeed. “I did it and so can you.”

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