

## Community Spotlight: Homelessness Prevention

### Homebase in New York City, NY

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This case study explores Homebase, a program administered by the New York City Department of Homeless Services, that offers community prevention, diversion and aftercare services to homeless families in the New York City area. The program serves roughly 5,000 households per year and has generally experienced a lower rate of increase in shelter entry between years 2004 and 2007.

#### PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Administered by New York City's Department of Homeless Services, the Homebase program provides homelessness prevention and aftercare services through a network of eight community-based providers with 13 offices across the city. Homebase offers three interventions: community prevention for individuals and families who are experiencing a housing crisis and are at risk of homelessness; diversion for those who have applied for shelter; and aftercare for those leaving shelter. Services may include housing search and relocation assistance, benefits and employment supports, money management and budgeting workshops, landlord mediation, short-term financial help, or legal assistance. The program serves roughly 5,000 households per year.

#### CHALLENGE

Faced with an average daily census of 33,000 individuals straining shelter capacity in 2002, city leaders and nonprofit partners began to transform the way homeless services were delivered. The prevailing culture in New York City, and nationally, was to manage homelessness through provision of shelter. The Homebase program was the cornerstone initiative in the broader City strategy that sought to shift from managing to solving homelessness. DHS officials viewed homelessness prevention—particularly targeting services to households at imminent risk of homelessness—as a critical component of the City's response.

#### SOLUTION

DHS worked extensively with a research organization and partner city agencies to obtain quantitative and qualitative data on family homelessness and service usage. Staff identified risk factors that seemed to precipitate homelessness, including incidents of prior homelessness, young heads of households, and households in "doubled up" situations. The City also added geo-coding abilities to its administrative tracking system in order to identify "hot spots" of shelter demand. Use of this technology helped determine where the initial pilot programs were placed, and also enabled the agency to produce regular community-specific maps and profile data to guide outreach and targeting efforts as the program unfolded.

DHS issued an RFP and selected experienced neighborhood-based service providers with in each community district to implement the program. Minimal programmatic structure was imposed on the providers, in order to allow for maximum flexibility and to leverage the particular strengths of each organization. The new program was introduced to the community through

assertive outreach and education strategies designed to recruit at-risk households for services, as well as to educate the community at large about alternatives to shelter.

## IMPLEMENTATION

In 2004, the Homebase pilot was implemented in six community districts, with an annual budget of \$12 million from federal (TANF) and City sources. In July 2007, the program expanded citywide, with eight providers serving all 59 community districts, and a budget of just over \$20 million by FY 2009.

Homebase provides intensive case management as well as financial assistance when needed. The services provided, either directly or through referral, include mediation with a landlord or family members; family counseling; legal services; employment, training, or educational services; benefits advocacy; and budgeting skills. Flexible financial assistance can be provided to help families remain housed, or to find new housing. Financial assistance can be used to ease a crowded living situation; provide money for food or other necessities; to pay back rent to prevent an eviction; or help with relocation costs when the housing is deemed unlivable. The average financial assistance grant per client is over \$2,000, with a yearly limit of \$15,000. Approximately 20 percent of clients access financial assistance.

Homebase also partners with the local housing authority to offer priority Section 8 applications for working families and individuals in the community that require longer-term housing support. DHS collaborates with the housing authority to ensure that applicants qualify for and maintain stable housing.

In addition to community outreach to new and formerly homeless households, outreach for Homebase diversion services occurs at the central DHS shelter intake center. Families who have applied for shelter and who might benefit from diversion services are referred to Homebase staff who help them explore alternatives to entering shelter. Homebase staff target households who have income or the ability to obtain employment, are likely to be eligible for a housing subsidy, and are motivated to resolve their housing crisis.

Once a family is found eligible for Homebase services, a Homebase case manager conducts an extensive intake interview designed to document the family's history and identify current needs for housing as well as other supportive services. Embedded in the assessment tool are "risk calculators" that calculate a risk of homelessness for the household. A flexible service model and flexible funding sources allow Homebase to tailor services to the needs of each household. Services duration could last anywhere from two to 24 months.

Data on Homebase clients are maintained in an on-line database to which DHS and Homebase providers have access. Homebase providers meet monthly and are in telephone contact with DHS daily. DHS provides updates on shelter applicants and departures to Homebase providers, who can then target those households for follow-up.

Finally, with the assistance of a private funder and the advertising expertise of the city Health department, DHS was able to launch a targeted public awareness campaign that included brochures, posters, billboards, and bus shelters in high need communities. Launched in the summer of 2008, unfailingly the season of highest demand for DHS services, the campaign

immediately resulted in a 40 percent increase in 311 calls transferred to Homebase, as more and more New Yorkers learned that shelter was not their only option when facing a housing crisis.

## RESULTS

Before the program was expanded citywide, the pilot program showed encouraging results. From its inception in 2004 until 2007, DHS found that the Homebase communities showed a lower rate of increase in shelter entry than a comparison group of similar communities without Homebase. Comparing the rate of increase in shelter to the comparison group, shelter entry rates would have been expected to increase by 37 percent. Instead, the rate increased 27 percent – a substantial 10 percent difference. Based on these early results, DHS added four new programs and expanded the coverage citywide in 2008.

From September 2004 through April 2009, more than 14,000 households were served by Homebase. Over 90 percent of these households did not enter shelter within one year of service. Homebase has also provided diversion services to more than 1,000 families.

Homebase outcomes are also measured by recidivism rates of clients who move out of shelter. By the end of 2008, only 1 percent of households who had been out of shelter a full year had returned, an unprecedented low rate.

Beginning in 2006, the partnership between DHS and the local housing authority to offer priority Section 8 applications has resulted in the opportunity for more than 4,000 households to access long-term affordable housing.

## INSIGHTS/LESSONS LEARNED

DHS has learned many lessons since its implementation, and the organizations have continuously tailored their approach to align with the realities of their communities. The target population is households in New York City who would enter shelter *but for* homelessness prevention services. To this end, Homebase has continually calibrated services to target and engage those who are at the highest risk.

At its inception, Homebase was solely a community prevention program. Providers focused heavily on prevention through door-to-door outreach to find the right clients, based on the profiles of typical shelter entrants. To improve targeting, the program expanded to include prevention activities at a range of intervention points, including diversion services at the shelter door, as well as aftercare for those who have left shelter and are at risk of reentry.

DHS also learned that the original Homebase model does an excellent job providing long-term, comprehensive, and intensive services. However, because services are staff and resource intensive, they must be directed at households at imminent risk of homelessness, leaving few resources for households that needed only minimal assistance.

With the assistance of the New York Community Trust, Homebase began providing similarly effective short-term interventions in 2007 for those in need of basic services and/or housing advice to stem an impending housing crisis before it's too late. Homebase is now able to provide a large number of households with advice, short-term services and limited financial assistance to resolve problems that are contributing to a housing crisis that may eventually result in shelter

entry. These households might only need to engage in several contacts over a brief period of time while housing issues are being resolved or financial assistance is provided.

The most important lesson DHS soon realized was the necessity of collaborating with mainstream resources for the most effective provision of services. In the community, at the courts, in the job centers, and at the shelter door, TANF funds are used in combination with Homebase to pay rent arrears, assist with deposits and moving expenses, remediate benefit issues and encourage the use of work supports for at-risk households transitioning to long-term stability. A full range of service options drawn from multiple funding streams allows New York City to match need to resources, maximizing the number of households who can be assisted. Similarly, DHS and the New York City Housing Authority have partnered in a program that gives households who are at-risk of homelessness priority access to Section 8 vouchers, eliminating the incentives to go to shelter to receive housing, and targeting a valuable federal resource to those households who need it most.

Finally, DHS revised provider contracts so that approximately half of the providers' budgets are performance-based. Providers receive a fixed reimbursement for diversion clients who do not enter shelter for one year.

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