

Community Spotlight: Homelessness Prevention Housing Locator Program in Chicago, IL

Housing Locator Program in Chicago, IL

This case study explores providing 1) rapid-rehousing placement services to families who reside in homeless shelters, and 2) relocation services to families who are at imminent risk of becoming homeless. Since its inception in 2006, the Housing Locator program has housed more than 845 households, 279 of which were housed in 2008.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Housing Locator program facilitates rapid housing placement for individuals and families residing in Chicago's homeless emergency shelter and interim housing programs and rapid housing relocation for households at imminent risk of homelessness. The Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (CDFSS) contracts with three geographically dispersed homeless service organizations, Featherfist, Housing Opportunities for Women (HOW), and La Casa Norte, to provide housing location services. Emergency shelter and community-based prevention providers screen potential individuals and families for eligibility via a brief web-based screening tool and refer eligible households to the Housing Locator provider in their geographic area. Because the program is limited to providing one-time rental assistance, eligibility is based on a determination that the household has sufficient income to sustain housing without a subsidy.

Housing Locator staff at each agency (one staff per agency) conducts a housing assessment and then works with landlords in their community to place each household in housing that best meets their needs. On average, housing placements are made within two weeks of referral. Since its inception in 2006, the Housing Locator program has housed more than 845 households. In 2008, 279 households were housed.

CHALLENGE

As Chicago embarked upon the implementation of its Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness, which emphasizes rapid re-housing and the transitioning of many of its shelter programs to an interim housing model specifically focused on housing placement, many homeless assistance providers expressed doubts about their ability to successfully locate affordable permanent housing. They identified the need for staff that specialized in the cultivation of relationships with housing providers, particularly private market landlords, but acknowledged that it was not possible for every agency to fundraise separately for such a position.

SOLUTION

To address this need, the concept of a Housing Locator program was incorporated into the Ten-Year Plan "implementation schedule" and the city designed the program, allocated funding, and issued a Request for Proposals for agencies to undertake housing location services in their areas. The intent was to identify small group agencies with experience in the provision of housing placement services and the ability to cultivate a broad housing network to serve as a resource for homeless assistance agencies such as shelters that lacked housing capacity. When contacted, these agencies would mobilize quickly to identify and place eligible households in appropriate permanent housing.

IMPLEMENTATION

Shelter, interim housing programs and community-based homeless prevention providers refer eligible individuals and families to the Housing Locator provider in their area. When the program was originally piloted it served only homeless households. Since then, it has been expanded to serve households at imminent risk of homelessness. For the program's purposes a household is determined to be at "imminent risk" if they have less than two-weeks notice to move from their current unit. In 2008, 50 percent of those served were households relocated to prevent homelessness.

To facilitate appropriate referral to the program as well as to other housing resources, the city developed a web-based Housing Options Survey Tool in collaboration with Corporation for Supportive Housing. Providers complete the screening tool on-line with their clients. Once the screening is completed, the tool generates potential housing options based upon the household's housing profile. A Housing Locator program referral form is then completed for households for whom the program has been identified as a viable option and the provider contacts the Housing Locator agency in its area to make the referral.

Once a referral is made Housing Locator staff meets with the potential participant, often on site at the referring agency, to conduct a Rapid Re-Housing Assessment. This assessment identifies housing needs and preferences, income constraints, and supportive services needs, and outlines a plan for identifying and placing the household in housing. Presently, each Housing Locator provider is responsible for managing its own landlord list and tracking vacancies. However, the State of Illinois is working with Socialserv.com, a national real estate website developer that focuses on private market low-income and subsidized housing, to develop an on-line real-time landlord database which is slated to go live by Fall 2009. To help facilitate housing placement, the CDFFS also funds the Emergency Fund, an agency which provides financial aid to low-income households in crisis, to deliver one-time financial assistance to Housing Locator households including security deposits and first month's rent.

Originally, the program was designed to be a partnership between Housing Locator and referring agencies, with a clear division of responsibilities. Housing Locators were to be singularly focused on the identification of housing, developing a portfolio of units and landlords to serve very low-income households. Referring agencies were to be responsible for providing up to six months of case management, including linkage to needed community-based support services and resources. As the program has evolved, however, it has become increasingly clear that referring agencies, particularly shelters whose clientele turn over quickly, often lack the capacity to provide these services. As a result, Housing Locator agencies have moved to fill the gap – connecting participants internally to other agency services and in some cases fundraising to hire case management staff to fill this role. CDFFS is considering using federal Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) funding to address this challenge going forward, and is examining how aftercare case management services are coordinated across the entire homeless assistance system to address this need more broadly.

Following successful placement in housing, the Housing Locator is required to follow-up with each household on a minimum of a quarterly basis to monitor and report on their housing stability. In some instances, Housing Locator agencies have lost contact with households at quarterly follow-up

due to relocation. In response, several have chosen to increase the frequency of this monitoring, in some cases to monthly.

RESULTS

Housing Locator providers are required to report housing retention cumulatively, on a quarterly basis, on all households served. This data indicates that of the 845 households housed since the program's inception, 84 percent are still housed.

In addition, an external evaluation conducted at the end of the program's first year examined the characteristics of households served, their barriers to housing placement (e.g., low financial resources, histories of eviction or felony convictions, safety, health or disability issues), and housing placement rate. This evaluation found that over 60 percent of households successfully placed in housing confronted at least one housing barrier and that no individual barrier represented an insurmountable obstacle to being housed. It also found that housing placement rates did not decrease as the number of barriers increased.

INSIGHT/LESSONS LEARNED

- Regionally dispersed housing location specialists are a low-cost, effective intervention for addressing the housing needs of low-income households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Programs like Chicago's Housing Locator program capitalize on the housing expertise of community-based providers and result in agency and system level staffing efficiencies.
- Services such as transitional case management that provides direct linkage to supportive services and resources are essential to the promotion of housing stability. In prevention and rapid re-housing models such as Chicago's Housing Locator program, which do not provide these services directly, it is critical to vest responsibility for their provision with organizations that have the demonstrated capacity to provide them and to develop clear mechanisms for monitoring their receipt.
- To assess the long-term success of homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing programs, and to permit timely intervention for potential problems, these programs must include strategies such as regular check-ins with assisted households to monitor housing stability over time. In the experience of Housing Locator agencies, monitoring is most effective if it occurs on an at least monthly basis.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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