

Addressing Family Homelessness

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HEALING HANDS

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Addressing Family Homelessness

Not since the Great Depression have so many American families been without homes. Families are the fastest growing subpopulation of those experiencing homelessness (Sermons & Witte, 2011), representing over one-third of the total homeless population in the United States. Approximately 242,000 people in families experienced literal homelessness on a given night in 2010, and family homelessness increased 20 percent from 2007 to 2010 according to the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (US Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2011).

HUD's report demonstrates that the portrait of homelessness differs significantly by household type, i.e., people homeless by themselves are very different from those who are homeless as part of a family. Homeless individuals are more likely to be white men, over the age of 30, and have a disabling condition. In contrast, adults in families are more likely to be minorities and substantially less likely to have a reported disability. Almost 60 percent of those in homeless families are children under the age of 18, and the majority of adults in families are age 30 or younger (HUD, 2011).

The typical homeless family is one headed by a single woman in her late twenties with two children, one or both under the age of six. Many families stay intermittently with friends and family, moving frequently from place to place before becoming literally homeless and turning to shelter because they have nowhere else to go (Rog, Holupka & Patton, 2007). Some of these mothers may have psychiatric and/or substance use disorders, and face additional challenges such as limited employment skills, low education levels, poor credit ratings, and criminal justice involvement (SAMHSA Homeless Families Coordinating Center, 2005). Researchers have found that the majority has a history of interpersonal violence, and over 80 percent of mothers with children experiencing homelessness have previously experienced domestic violence (US Interagency Council on Homelessness [USICH], n.d.).

CURRENT TRENDS

While homelessness is typically the result of interwoven systemic and personal problems, its primary cause is economics. Those who become homeless lack the financial resources to maintain or get housing. A prolonged recession between 2007 and 2009 and the continued sluggish economy have had a broad impact on vulnerable individuals and families, and research indicates that economic

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conditions affect family homelessness more than it does individual homelessness (HUD, 2011; Macy-Hurley, Park & Tull, 2010). The economic risk factors that worsened during the recession and contributed to increases in family homelessness include (Sermons & Witte, 2011; USICH, n.d.):

- Lack of affordable housing
- Inadequate wages and the decrease in average income levels
- Job loss and sustained high unemployment rates
- The number of foreclosed housing units, affecting both homeowners and renters

Other common reasons for families becoming homeless are domestic violence, the insufficiency of subsidized housing, decreasing government supports, having children at a young age, changing family demographics, the challenge of raising children alone, or not having a social support network (National Center on Family Homelessness [The National Center], 2011; USICH, 2011a). There is also a link between family separations and homelessness, including foster care placement and involvement with child welfare services (Rog et al., 2007).

THE CONVENTIONAL RESPONSE

Even before the recession, many communities lacked capacity to meet shelter demand. A survey of 23 cities found that almost 30 percent of shelter requests by homeless families went unmet in 2006 (US Conference of Mayors [USCM], 2006). While traditional solutions to shelter shortages have been adding beds to existing facilities, developing additional shelters, or providing motel vouchers, researchers have found that emergency shelters and motels are an expensive solution to family homelessness (Culhane, Metraux, Park, Schretzman & Valente, 2007; Macy-Hurley et al., 2010; Spellman, Khadduri, Sokol, Leopold & Abt Associates, 2010).

Besides being costly, emergency shelters and transitional housing programs frequently have admission criteria that break up families to accommodate them. Adult males may be housed in a single adult facility, while the mother and children are lodged in a family

shelter. Age limitations may prevent teenage boys from staying in shelter with their families (Macy-Hurley et al., 2010), and some communities lack any shelter beds for families (USCM, 2006). Shelter rules often restrict resident liberty and supplant parenting roles. There is generally a lack of privacy, exposure to disease, and other health and safety issues (Beyond Shelter, National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, & National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness, 2010).

While motels may suffice as temporary shelter for families who might otherwise be sleeping in cars or other unsafe places, the typical budget motel is neither a safe nor adequate environment for parents with children. Motel rooms used as shelter are often substandard, and force families to live in crowded conditions without sufficient food storage or cooking facilities. When families are unable to access shelter in their own communities, they may be sent to motels in other areas, making it difficult to maintain existing ties to schools, jobs, community-based programs, and other supports. A major educational barrier for homeless students is



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About 1.6 million American children are homeless in a year (The National Center, 2011).

transportation to and from schools of origin, i.e., the school that they last attended or which they attended when last permanently housed (Beyond Shelter et al., 2010; Macy-Hurley et al., 2010).

“When we do nothing to prevent crises or intervene at the critical point when a family needs help—such as providing rental assistance during unemployment or health services in the event of an illness or addiction—we create new problems that become harder to address and lead to the more familiar ‘chronic homelessness’ that we see among single adults,” says **Barbara DiPietro, PhD**, policy director for the National Health Care for the Homeless Council.

[Editor’s note: Read one family’s story of the challenges of living in an emergency shelter and in a hotel while homeless in the November 2011 issue of *Healing Hands*, *No Place at the Table: Hunger and Homelessness*.]

OUR PHOTOGRAPHY: LOOKING INTO LIGHT

To focus attention on the growing numbers of children & families experiencing homelessness, The National Center on Family Homelessness & its Campaign to End Child Homelessness are presenting a photo exhibit, *Looking Into Light*. The exhibit documents the experience of family homelessness in America, bringing the stories of these children & their families to life.

Looking Into Light uses photography to motivate social change. “The images visually & emotionally connect viewers with people experiencing homelessness & inspire them to take action,” says **Ellen L. Bassuk, MD**, The National Center’s founder & president. “We know that housing with support services will end this tragic problem & we must act now.”

The exhibit is touring the nation over the next two years. Venues are booked in Seattle, Boston & Washington, DC. If you have suggestions for locations to host *Looking Into Light*, contact **Jennifer Teti** at jennifer.teti@familyhomelessness.org.

To commemorate the tour & provide a way to help homeless families, reproductions of selected photographs are available and proceeds will directly support work to end child & family homelessness. To learn more, visit www.familyhomelessness.org/LookingIntoLight.

HOUSING FIRST: AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

A nonprofit agency specializing in family homelessness, Beyond Shelter is renowned for developing the Housing First—or rapid re-housing—methodology for families as an alternative to the conventional system of emergency shelter and transitional housing. “While shelters and transitional housing can provide vital assistance to those in crisis, they have not tended to focus *up front* on addressing families’ credit and income barriers to returning to permanent housing,” says **Ryan Macy-Hurley, MSW**, Beyond Shelter’s director of grants and evaluation. Historically, shelters have not prioritized housing-focused services—such as landlord outreach and rental assistance—as a principal response to homelessness (Culhane & Metraux, 2008).

The housing first model is based on the premise that homeless families are more responsive to interventions and social supports *after* they are in their own housing. This approach—which has proven successful in ending and preventing family homelessness—

stresses the family's quick return to independent living followed by life skills education and other supportive services being delivered in the home rather than in shelter (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2010).

With a few exceptions, families that experience homelessness are very similar to other low-income families (NAEH, 2010). Furthermore, recent studies have found that residential disruptions—not homelessness per se—elevate mental health, behavioral, and academic problems among children. These findings provide evidence for the need to move families into permanent, affordable housing quickly and to address their needs with the same types of aid that benefit poor, continuously housed families (Tull & Macy-Hurley, 2010).

Promoting systems integration among homeless & mainstream programs. “The evolution of the homeless services system has taught us important lessons. While emergency shelters provide an important crisis response, in and of themselves they do not solve homelessness,” Macy-Hurley says. “Transitional housing—which was developed to provide longer-term, more service-rich shelter—creates a parallel system that imitates services already available—although not always easily accessible—to poor families regardless of housing status. In many communities, it is used as a substitute for the lack of affordable housing. This model has not been shown to produce cost-effective outcomes for most homeless families.”

Beyond Shelter's approach is to reintegrate families into the community quickly, providing landlord outreach services and rental assistance, and then to facilitate linkages to mainstream services, which sometimes can be difficult for families to access on their own. *Mainstream* refers to aid, benefits, and supports whose eligibility criteria do not incorporate housing status and are not designed to address specific needs of those experiencing homelessness. Examples include Head Start, food stamps, job training, and welfare benefits.

Beyond Shelter's housing specialists provide guidance for a successful housing search, while home-based case managers provide life skills and tenant education. Beyond Shelter created a *Family Survival Guide* that addresses many practical matters of everyday life that are vital for housing stability and family well-being, covering money management, health care and nutrition, parenting, child care and

TABLE 1. Program Strategies To Overcome Housing Attainment Barriers

Develop marketing tools

- Program brochures, flyers & fact sheets
- “Dear Landlord” letters
- Client success stories
- Program or agency media coverage

Strategically target outreach to the landlord community

- Present at local apartment owner association meetings
- Host landlord orientation sessions

Emphasize core program benefits

- Home-based case management
- Financial assistance for move-in costs
- Free tenant screening
- Speedy tenant referrals to reduce turnover time in rental units
- Reduced advertising costs

Use creative advocacy approaches

- Character letters from trusted or respected third-parties
- Advocacy letters explaining past rental, credit, or criminal problems

Offer individualized landlord incentives & protections

- Master leasing or co-leasing (time-limited or ongoing)
- Protective payee services
- Increased security deposits

Source: Macy-Hurley, Hooper & Mann, 2010.

development, interpersonal violence, housekeeping, and home safety. Download a copy at <http://partnering-for-change.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/FamilySurvivalGuideMay2012.pdf>

Reframing & reconfiguring the homeless services system.

Partnering for Change, headed by Beyond Shelter's founder **Tanya Tull, ScD**, is a natural evolution of Beyond Shelter's national systems change work. Partnering for Change offers consulting and training in housing first strategies and works to take evidence-based program models to scale. “We assist child and family service organizations to provide timely, appropriate responses to their clients' housing crises,” says Tull, “and we collaborate with others—researchers, policymakers, organizations, communities—to develop and test innovative approaches that improve the social and economic well-being of vulnerable families.” Visit Partnering for Change online to learn more and access webinars and other resources.

In 2010, Partnering for Change, Beyond Shelter, and their partner HomeStart, a Boston-based homeless services provider, released a report—*Rapid Re-housing for Homeless Populations*—that highlights promising and successful techniques and policies being used by agencies and communities across the country. The diverse strategies focus on building partnerships with landlords and overcoming common hurdles to rental housing such as poor credit, criminal records, and eviction histories; Table 1 outlines several of the innovative and effective practices covered in the report. Macy-Hurley says, “These promising practices represent an evolving paradigm shift among homeless service providers and systems of care, one that recognizes the fundamental importance of housing assistance of various kinds in combating homelessness.” ■

FAMILY-FRIENDLY SERVICES

“In practice, being family friendly means valuing the dignity and autonomy of the individual,” says Ryan Macy-Hurley. To transform lives, agencies must examine why and how they are serving their clients. Family-friendly services incorporate these best practices:

- **Strengths-based approach**
- **Trauma-informed services**
- **Voluntary services, that are seen as opportunities, not obligations**
- **An individualized—not cookie-cutter—approach for each family that includes meeting parents & children's needs**

Support Services: When Housing Is Not Enough

CREATING LASTING SOLUTIONS

The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless is nationally recognized as a leader in the integration of housing, health care, and support services for those experiencing homelessness. Key to its mission to create lasting solutions to homelessness, the Coalition develops a variety of supportive, affordable housing for homeless families and individuals. Its integrated approach to housing combines high-quality housing for homeless families and individuals with affordable homes for working households with lower incomes.

"The burden of meeting basic survival needs is profound," says Family Support Services Program Manager **Sarah Younggren, LCSW**.

"Homelessness creates immense stress both on the individual and the family, and so many of our families have experienced trauma." The program provides a range of crucial services including emergency services, 24 months of service-enriched transitional housing, children's programs, and permanent supportive housing programs. To help those once homeless gain housing stability, the Coalition provides counseling, training in life skills and financial literacy, and employment assistance.

"Delivering family-centered care is at the heart of what we do," Younggren says. "We regard the family as a whole, without focusing on just one member. We have a successful eight-week group therapy program serving eight to 10 families. During the program, they share meals and other family activities in a safe, supportive environment. They build skills in problem-solving and communications, develop social connections, and learn to trust within the family system. Community building is important."

NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS

A nonprofit social services agency in Portland, Oregon, Friendly House is a neighborhood center providing educational, recreational, and other life-sustaining aid. Services for homeless families include housing assistance, case management, art therapy classes, and referrals and information related to job training. Families receiving housing support are eligible for additional financial and in-kind assistance such as food boxes, bus tickets, scholarships, as well as access to donated household items, clothing, and items for children.

Housing assistance for homeless families is available at two levels. Partial to full rental assistance for families with minimal barriers to permanent housing, and monetary assistance with application fees, move-in costs, rent, and support services costs for families with multiple barriers to permanent housing.

Mya Chamberlin, director of services for seniors and homeless families, says "Due to funding cuts, our program refined our goals to focus on housing and employment, and we collaborate with community partners to provide a spectrum of services. We used to work with families for two years, now it's six months, barely enough time to get the family placed into housing and employment.

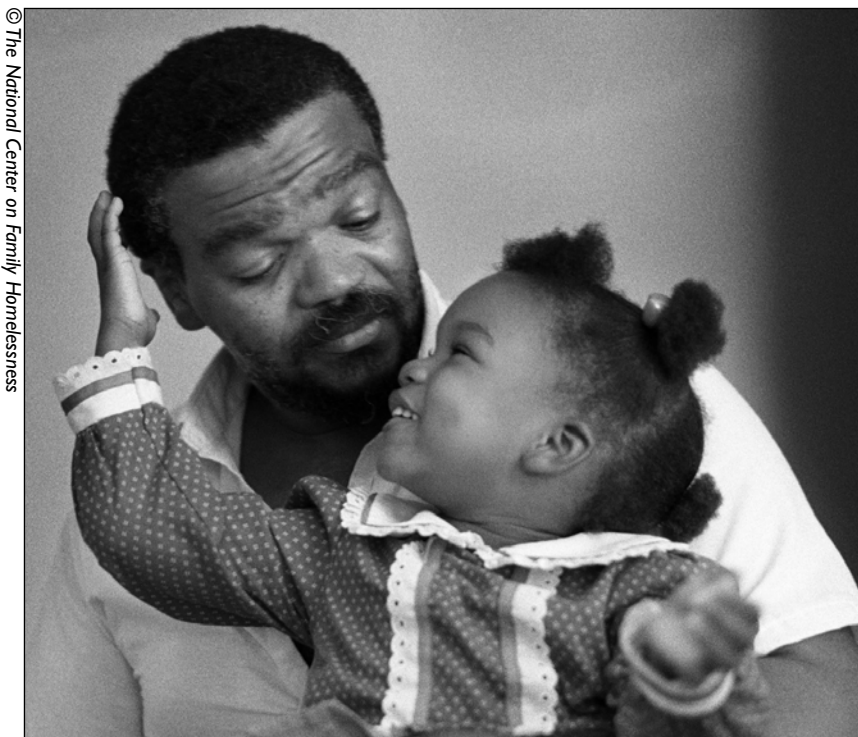
"Families are under enormous pressure," Chamberlin says. "Sometimes it seems that the system supports their failure, not success. There is an imbalance of power, and we see how homeless families can be at the mercy of an apartment manager or DHS worker. Often they are afraid to advocate for themselves for fear of being turned in or having their children taken away. One wrong step can take them to a place it's hard to get out of."

Using a strengths-based approach, case managers help homeless families progress towards self-sufficiency, relying on the family's wisdom, resilience, and strength. Case management addresses issues such as:

- Housing and rental history
- Employment and education
- Child care
- Money management
- Physical and behavioral health
- Domestic and family violence

ADDRESSING CLINICAL CONCERNS

"A commonly overlooked area in families experiencing homelessness is clinical depression," says **Ellen L. Bassuk, MD**, president of The National Center on Family Homelessness. "Homeless mothers have higher rates of depression, young mothers have higher rates of depression, and when you combine both risk factors, rates go through the roof. It is a shame that this doesn't get more focus because depression is very treatable. When depression is properly treated, mother-child bonding improves—an important outcome for the whole family.



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Children experiencing homelessness are sick four times more often than other children (The National Center, 2011).

"Health care needs are important," Bassuk says. "A child who has chronic asthma and makes a couple of trips to the emergency department can be enough to push a family that is barely getting by into homelessness. Homelessness exacerbates many health conditions in children—such as asthma—and making sure that these families get needed care before an emergency arises can help prevent the first domino from falling. Experiencing homelessness has a devastating effect on children, especially school-age kids. Mothers are better able to buffer kids under the age of five from the reality of homelessness, but this is harder to do as children get older" (USICH, 2011b).

MEETING THE NEEDS OF YOUNG HOMELESS FAMILIES

The Strengthening At-Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children Initiative was managed by a coordinating center made up of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, The National Center on Family Homelessness, and Zero to Three. This five-year demonstration project involving four sites was developed to create innovative service models, and then to measure the interventions' outcomes and costs. Rapid transition to permanent housing, or rapid re-housing, is a widely accepted approach to ending homelessness, but housing alone will not end homelessness for many young families who need additional supports to remain housed and make progress toward stability and independence (The National Center, 2012).

The initiative generated over 20 publications outlining the project's findings, costs, and program and policy implications. A few of the lessons learned from the initiative include (The National Center, 2012):

- **Address the multiple factors** that have contributed to young mothers' homelessness, including traumatic experiences, the lack of a social support network, the limited capacity to generate a livable wage, and the stress of a young parent at-risk of or experiencing homelessness
- **Assess and respond to the needs of homeless and at-risk children**, especially developmental delays
- **Promote collaboration across service systems** to increase intervention effectiveness, extend services, and increase resources available to programs and families

ENDING FAMILY HOMELESSNESS BY 2020

A number of initiatives are underway at the federal level to end family homelessness. These activities include (USICH, 2011c):

- The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act investment of \$1.5 billion in HUD's Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing (HPRP)
- Four research projects to expand knowledge about the nature of homelessness and solutions that work
- Improved federal coordination and interagency collaboration
- Investigation into the role of public housing and affordable housing units in preventing family homelessness and in housing homeless families



Many homeless mothers experience anger, self-blame, sadness, fear & hopelessness (The National Center, 2011).

Of the almost 700,000 people receiving HPRP assistance in the program's first year, 44 percent were children (HUD, 2011).

The US Interagency Council on Homelessness, an independent agency that coordinates the federal response to homelessness, developed a comprehensive strategy to eradicate homelessness. This ambitious plan—*Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*—aspires to end homelessness for families, youth, and children by 2020. The plan is a roadmap for collaborative action among federal, local, and state partners in the public and private sectors. A central tenet is the recognition that stable housing is the foundation on which people build their lives. The plan's objectives and strategies focus on these key areas:

- Increasing leadership, collaboration, and civic engagement
- Increasing access to affordable, stable housing
- Increasing economic security
- Improving health and stability
- Retooling the homeless crisis response system

To learn more about partnering with this national effort, visit www.usich.gov/action/opening_doors_across_america. ■



Homelessness is devastating for children.

PRACTICE PEARLS: WORKING WITH AT-RISK & HOMELESS FAMILIES

- Tune-in, make it personal, and get to know the moms and kids. These are real people, not just a problem to be solved, and simply making this connection can help.

—Ellen L. Bassuk, MD, Founder & President
The National Center on Family Homelessness

- Working in homeless health care, we are all super heroes, but to be better advocates, we need to become *super friends* with colleagues who also serve our clients. Network with others, tell them about your services, and invite them to tour your site. Exchange phone numbers, share a laugh, shake hands—they'll remember you. It will make your work easier.

—Kathleen M. Shuton, RN, PHN, Coordinator
Homeless Family Team & Shelter Health Program
San Francisco Department of Public Health

- How you ask about housing status is important. When we ask families 'Are you homeless?' it's likely we won't get a response that will guide services. A better option is to ask an open-ended question such as 'Tell me about where you're staying' and to listen for clues in the response about housing status.

—Carie Bires, MSW, Systems Integration Manager
Heartland Health Outreach, Chicago

TOOLKIT OF PRACTICAL RESOURCES TO HELP FAMILIES EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Websites

Child Welfare Information Gateway Administration for Children & Families DHHS	www.childwelfare.gov
Families with Children US Interagency Council on Homelessness	www.usich.gov/population/families
National Alliance to End Homelessness: Families Section	www.endhomelessness.org/section/issues/families
Partnering for Change National Institute for Innovative Strategies to Combat Family Homelessness & Poverty	www.partnering-for-change.org
Strengthening At-Risk & Homeless Young Mothers & Children	www.hiltonfoundation.org/mothers
The National Center on Family Homelessness	www.familyhomelessness.org

Children & Youth

National Center for Homeless Education	http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/ibt.php
SchoolFamily.com Expert tips, helpful tools, insightful articles to help parents set up their kids for success	www.schoolfamily.com
Zero to Three National Center for Infants, Toddlers & Families	www.zerotothree.org

How-To Guides

Creating family friendly posters to solicit ideas, suggestions, concerns & information from parents	www.arbetterbeginnings.com/downloads/SAToolkit/SAToolkitBldgRelationships6.pdf
Designing Developmentally-Based Services for Young Homeless Families	www.familyhomelessness.org/media/313.pdf
A Long Journey Home: A Guide for Creating Trauma-Informed Services for Mothers & Children Experiencing Homelessness 2008	www.nrchmi.samhsa.gov/ResourceFiles/a4ik4an3.pdf
PEACH: Physical & Emotional Awareness for Children Who Are Homeless Curriculum for families in shelters	www.familyhomelessness.org/peach.php?p=ss
Positive Parenting Program for Homeless Families: Implementation Guide	www.cwla.org/programs/housing/usghousingreport.pdf

continued on page 7

TOOLKIT OF PRACTICAL RESOURCES TO HELP FAMILIES EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS, *continued***Background Reading & Policy Considerations**

Characteristics & Dynamics of Homeless Families with Children 2007	http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/improving-data08/report.pdf
Characteristics & Needs of Families Experiencing Homelessness Fact Sheet	www.familyhomelessness.org/media/306.pdf
2012 Advocates' Guide to Housing & Community Development Policy National Low Income Housing Coalition	http://nlihc.org
Ending Family Homelessness in Washington State: An Emerging Approach Policy Paper 2011	www.buildingchanges.org/news-room/heads-up/307-policy-paper-charts-course-for-ending-family-homelessness
State of Homelessness in America: A Research Report on Homelessness 2011	www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3668
State Report Card on Child Homelessness: America's Youngest Outcasts 2010	www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/media/NCFH_AmericaOutcast2010_web.pdf
Homeless Children: Update on Research, Policy, Programs & Opportunities 2010	http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/10/HomelessChildrenRoundtable/index.pdf

Trauma Interventions for Homeless Families

Delivering Trauma-Informed Services Healing Hands December 2010	www.nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/DecHealingHandsWeb.pdf
Trauma Interventions for Homeless Families: Innovative Features & Common Themes	www.prainc.com/pdfs/trsrvcsfinaldoc.pdf
Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit for Homeless Services	www.familyhomelessness.org/media/90.pdf

Housing Resources & Homelessness Prevention

Homelessness Prevention & Rapid Re-Housing for Survivors of Domestic Abuse 2012	www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3822
HUD's Homelessness Prevention & Rapid Re-Housing Program	www.hudhre.info/hprp/index.cfm?do=viewHPRPIssuances
Making Home Affordable The Obama Administration's strategy to help homeowners avoid foreclosure	www.makinghomeaffordable.gov
National Center on Housing & Child Welfare	www.nchcw.org
Rapid Re-Housing for Homeless Populations: Program & Community Strategies for Recruiting Private-Market Landlords & Overcoming Housing Barriers 2010	http://partnering-for-change.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Brief_RehousingStrategiesFINAL.pdf
SAMHSA Homelessness Prevention Panel: Guiding Principles & Strategies 2012	www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_SAMHSA_expert_panel_on_prevention_fact_sheet_FINAL1.pdf

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