

# Emerging Solutions

## Family Homelessness Research

### Models of Support for Vulnerable Families

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#### Family homelessness is on the rise in Australia.

In 2010-2011, 38% of all people accessing specialist homelessness services were children accompanying their parent or caregiver<sup>1</sup>. In 2010-2011 30.2% of all support periods provided by specialist homelessness services were for family groups, overwhelmingly women with children<sup>2</sup>. Both these figures have risen since 2006-2007. It is important that services are able to respond to this need with effective interventions that deliver real outcomes for these families and their children.

#### A study of crisis intervention and planned family support with vulnerable families

##### A National Homelessness Research Project

This fact sheet presents the findings of a research project<sup>3</sup> into the experiences of 88 families that were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. These families were accessing either crisis intervention or outreach family support services on entry to the study. The research explored their experiences and outcomes over a 14 month period.

#### Crisis intervention model

Crisis intervention models are widely used in homelessness services to intervene in service user lives at a point of housing crisis and to develop a short-term, goal orientated response to housing and other needs<sup>4</sup>. Two crisis intervention services were involved in this research – Micah Projects Assessment and Referral Team and Brisbane Youth Service Berwick Street. Both services are centre-based programs with support workers providing crisis interventions to people who phone or present in-person at the service. The primary presenting need for families at these agencies is housing. Most families are currently homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. Support workers at Micah Projects and Brisbane Youth Service assess immediate needs and provide information, referrals, advocacy and practical assistance to meet these needs.

#### Outreach family support model

The planned family support approach is a service model that enables the support worker to work simultaneously on a range of family goals, some of which may not be directly related to housing crises. The family support services involved in this research were Micah Projects Family Support and Advocacy Team, Brisbane Youth Service Young Families team and the Brisbane Domestic Violence Advocacy Service. These services work with families both in their service centres and provide outreach to families in their home and community.

Family support workers undertake an assessment of the needs of both parents and children, and develop support plans with the family to work towards addressing these needs.

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1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, *Government-funded specialist homelessness services SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2010-11*, AIHW, Canberra.
  2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, *Government-funded specialist homelessness services SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2010-11 - Australia Appendix*, AIHW, Canberra.
  3. A study of crisis intervention and planned family support with vulnerable families, Prof. Karen Healy, project funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.
  4. Healy, K. 2005, *Social Work Theories in Context: Creating frameworks for practice*, Palgrave, Basingstoke

“...crisis intervention and outreach family support had a vital role to play in building the resilience of vulnerable families.”

## Research findings

Overall, this study found that families involved in both crisis intervention and outreach family support services were vulnerable due to limited pathways out of poverty. Specific findings included:

### Housing

Over the course of the project the housing circumstances of families in the crisis intervention group improved and stabilised. Overall the families in the outreach family support group maintained high levels of long-term housing and stability throughout the study.

### Family relationships

Almost half of the families receiving outreach family support reported improvements in family relationships. The key reasons included that improved communication with family members and changes in self had led to better relationships with family members. For example, one respondent from the outreach family support sample stated:

*Because I've gotten better, which makes it easier to communicate with my family members.*

### Mental health

Midway through the study, the majority of families in the outreach family support group reported that their mental health had improved. A range of reasons were reported for this including improvements in housing situation, leaving an unsatisfactory relationship and gaining better medical or psychological support for a mental health condition.

### Friendships

Families in both groups reported substantial improvements in their relationships with friends. Families in the crisis intervention group commented that friends had helped them during the tough times they were experiencing.

*Because when you really hit the lowest point of your life [I've found that] my friends have been generous to me, now that we are in hard times.*

Families in the outreach family support group identified that changes in their own outlook such as being “happier” and “more open” had meant they attracted more friends. Families also identified the opportunity to meet with others in a similar situation, such as other pregnant and parenting young women as contributing to better friendships.

### Partner relationships

Families in both groups reported that their partner relationships had improved, though this was most marked for the family support sample. Some attributed this improvement to the development of communication skills.

*[we are] learning to speak to each other and coping strategies. We used to just yell and scream at each other but now we just walk away from each other.*

### Use of child care and early education

Families in the outreach family support group made increased use of child care and early education over the course of the study, with children's enrolment rising from just over 50% to almost 80%.

### Transition to outreach planned family support

Families using crisis intervention services and those using family support services experienced some similar challenges, with the challenges facing the former appearing to be more entrenched. Despite this, few families from the crisis intervention group transitioned to outreach planned family support services during the study, even though it would appear they could have benefited from the broader range of intervention strategies provided by this model. There are a number of factors that influence referral to more planned support services; however a key issue is that of the capacity of these teams to take on further referrals.

### Employment circumstances

Just under 20% of families in both groups stated that there had been improvement to their employment circumstances. This was largely related to their confidence in their ability to gain employment, as only a small number of persons gained employment over the course of the study.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

Unfortunately, due to some key limitations to this study, it is not possible for us to directly attribute the reported outcomes to the model of service received. However, both families receiving crisis intervention services and outreach family support services were similar in important ways. Families in each sample experienced housing instability, domestic violence, child protection involvement, health and wellbeing challenges such as drug and alcohol use, low income and low employment participation. It is not possible for this study to recommend one form of intervention over another, which directs us to a more nuanced consideration of the need to tailor the intervention to the family.

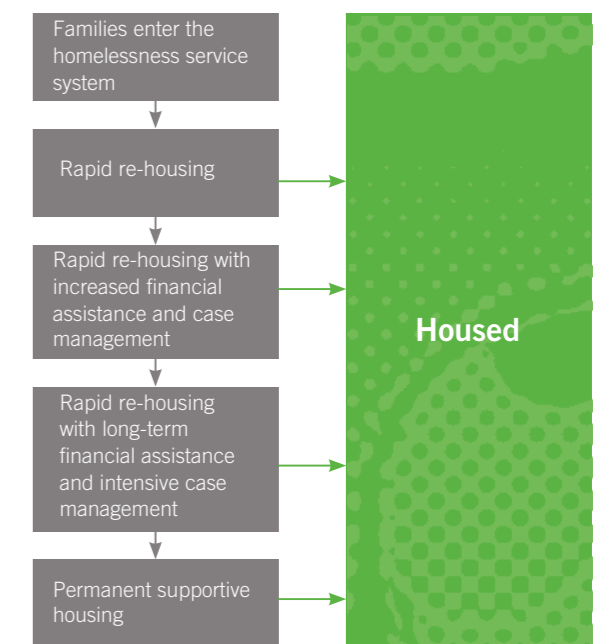
There is at present no sufficiently evidenced method of assessing families, at the point of first entry into the homelessness service system, as to the level of support that will be required by that family to achieve stability. Indeed, best practice understandings of assessment conceptualise it as an on-going and iterative process. Relationship building is key to developing a quality assessment, and as trust and rapport is developed, people are more likely to disclose<sup>5</sup>. This presents a tension in how best to mobilise resources so that the homelessness service system is able to effectively assist the greatest possible number of families.

### Progressive Engagement

A key promising solution to this issue is the Progressive Engagement model. Under this model, all families at first contact with the homelessness service system will be provided with an initial basic level of assistance. This assistance is focused on rapidly re-housing the family or providing crisis services aimed at saving tenancies. If this basic level of assistance does not achieve stability for the family, they would progress on to a higher level of assistance, including

low levels of case management. Again, if stability was not achieved the family would be provided with intensive case management services and a higher level of assistance. The final stage for families would be admittance to a permanent supportive housing service.

The below diagram, adapted from the National Alliance to End Homelessness in the USA, illustrates this process<sup>6</sup>.



The proposed advantages of the progressive engagement model include:

- Greater time to comprehensively assess families, no need to predict levels of support needed before intervention
- Less disruption for families, as they are able to receive the continued extensions of support from the one service
- More efficient use of resources, as service provision is tailored to family need<sup>7</sup>.

5. O'Connor, I., Wilson, J. and Setterlund, D. 2003, *Social Work and Welfare Practice*, 4th edn., Pearson Education Australia, NSW

6. National Alliance to End Homelessness 2011, *Designing Rent Subsidy Programs: Lessons Learned*, paper presented at the National Alliance to End Homelessness Conference 13-15 July 2011, viewed 5 August 2012, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/2011nationalconferencepresentations>

7. One Family Inc. 2011, *Innovation in the Spotlight – Progressive Engagement*, viewed 6 August, <http://www.onefamilyinc.org/Blog/2011/11/21/innovation-in-the-spotlight-progressive-engagement/>

The USA National Alliance to End Homelessness has identified progressive engagement as a promising practice. At present there is little evidence around this model as few services have moved to implementation. However, a number of communities across the US have adopted this practice, and it will be interesting to track their experiences with the model<sup>8</sup>.

The final stage of this model, permanent supportive housing, is a critical resource that is currently lacking in Australia. While there are some new permanent supportive housing programs for single adults, there has been little investment in this area for families.

### Supportive Housing for families

Supportive housing is the intentional connection of long-term housing and support services people need to break the cycle of homelessness. The key elements of permanent supportive housing are:

- Tenants pay no more than 30% of household income towards rent and utilities
- No limits on length of tenancy
- Participation in support services is voluntary. Tenants are only required to keep to the provisions of a standard lease agreement
- All members of the family have facilitated access to flexible and comprehensive support services specifically tailored to their needs
- Property management strategies include approaches to addressing concerns resulting from issues such as substance use and mental health crises, with the focus on maintaining the tenancy<sup>9</sup>.

While permanent supportive housing is a relatively new approach for families, research is demonstrating its efficacy with vulnerable families, both for breaking the cycle of homelessness<sup>10</sup> and addressing child protection involvement<sup>11-12</sup>.

Importantly, permanent supportive housing ventures do not necessarily have to cost extra funding to implement, as government, or individual non-government organisations themselves, can align resources from housing, family support, child protection, early childhood and education to create supportive housing projects.

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  - Brisbane Domestic Violence Advocacy Service
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  - Mater Hospital.

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8. National Alliance to End Homelessness 2011, *Designing Rent Subsidy Programs: Lessons Learned*, paper presented at the *National Alliance to End Homelessness Conference* 13-15 July 2011, viewed 5 August 2012, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/2011nationalconferencepresentations>

9. Corporation for Supportive Housing 2011, *Silos to Systems: Preserving and Strengthening Families and Children Experiencing Recurring Child Welfare System Encounters and Housing Crises*, Corporation for Supportive Housing, New York.

10. Bassuk, E.L., Huntington, N., Amey, C.H. and Lampereur, K. 2006, *Family Permanent Supportive Housing: Preliminary Research on Family Characteristics, Program Models, and Outcomes*, Corporation for Supportive Housing, New York.

11. National Centre on Family Homelessness 2009, *Family Unification Program: Serving Homeless and At-Risk Homeless Families and Youth*, National Centre on Family Homelessness, Massachusetts

12. Swann-Jackson, R., Tapper, D., and Fields, A. 2010, *Keeping Families Together: An evaluation of the Implementation and Outcomes of a Pilot Supportive Housing Model for Families Involved in the Child Welfare System*, Metis Associates, New York