



# Home for now: A mixed-methods evaluation of a short-term housing support program for homeless families



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## ABSTRACT

The use of short-term rental subsidy vouchers offers a new approach to addressing the housing needs of families facing homelessness. In Massachusetts, the Family Home pilot program placed homeless families in housing instead of shelter, providing two years of rental subsidy plus support services with the goal of enabling families to maintain market rate housing. This mixed-method case study complements staff and participant interview data with participant survey and administrative data to evaluate the implementation and short-term outcomes of Family Home in one region. Data point to improved family well-being in housing but also persistent barriers to achieving longer-term housing and economic stability. Of the families who had exited the program at the end of the study, one quarter were able to retain their housing at market rate, only 9% returned to shelter, and one in five moved in with families/friends. Lack of affordable housing in a high rental cost region and jobs that pay living wages were among the major reasons that families struggled to maintain housing. This research points to the need for integrating supportive services from the program's start, including targeted workforce development, to plan for the end of the short-term rental subsidy.

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## 1. Introduction

The number of homeless families<sup>1</sup> has been growing and becoming increasingly visible since the early 1980s, when families first began to appear on the streets of U.S. cities (Burt, 1991; Rog & Buckner, 2007; Schön & Rein, 1995). Nationally, family homelessness increased sharply since the early '80s, and has only leveled off and begun to decrease slightly since 2005 (Berg, 2012; Office of Community Planning and Development, 2013b). In contrast to this recent national trend, the number of homeless families in Massachusetts has continued to grow, increasing by 71% between 2007 and 2012 (Office of Community Planning and Development, 2013a). In Massachusetts and nationally, while a Housing First approach has gained more traction in the recent decade, the

predominant approach to addressing family homelessness (as for other homeless groups) continues to be the Treatment First model utilizing emergency shelter and other programs that address service needs when individuals and families become homeless.

Families who lose their homes in Massachusetts, a right-to-shelter state<sup>2</sup>, need to qualify for shelter assistance based on family income and assets, unlike single homeless persons (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2011). In Massachusetts, this assistance is called Emergency Assistance (EA), a package of services that includes shelter and case management directed at finding a permanent housing solution. In shelter, families are expected to access the resources they need to transition to market-rate housing. Research has demonstrated that exit from shelter into stable housing is mostly determined by access to permanent housing subsidies plus support services (Rog & Buckner, 2007). However, the number of permanent housing subsidies for low-income people has decreased in recent years (Curnan, 2010; Rice, 2014). In response to these trends, the state turned to a new

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<sup>1</sup> In Massachusetts, a homeless family is defined as a family with one or more dependent children under the age of 21, or a pregnant woman with no dependent children who is facing homelessness (Eligibility for Emergency Assistance (EA), 2012). It is worth noting that the federal definition is more restrictive: According to HUD, a homeless family is defined as one or more parents with one more children under the age of 16—a pregnant woman with no dependent children does not qualify (Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing: Defining 'Homeless', 2011; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> "Right-to-shelter" means that any family that meets the eligibility criteria has a right to state-sponsored shelter, in an emergency shelter, a scattered-site apartment, or a motel.

approach to supporting homeless families in accessing stable housing: the use of short-term housing supports.

Massachusetts piloted a short-term housing support program in the summer of 2009, referred to in this text as Family Home<sup>3</sup>. Family Home provided rental vouchers plus case management support for up to two years to families that qualified for EA in Massachusetts, a state known for its high rents and housing affordability challenges. Case management services were provided by housing stabilization workers, a new position created for Family Home. Services were minimal: monthly contact in person or by phone that mostly focused on filling out applications for permanent housing subsidies. The program's goal, according to the state, was for Family Home participants to increase their incomes so that they could maintain housing at market rate, and to support these families during the two years in Family Home in achieving housing stability as a first step in their journey toward self-sufficiency. Family Home ran for two years, from August 1, 2009 to the fall of 2011.

This new short-term housing support approach was loosely based on the Housing First model for chronically homeless individuals that originated in the late 1990s (Bassuk & Geller, 2006; Padgett, Gulcur, & Tsemberis, 2006). Reversing the Treatment First model ingrained in the emergency shelter approach, which focuses on providing services first (i.e., before housing,) the Housing First model focuses on placing people in stable housing *first* and then providing them with the intensive services they need to be able to sustain this housing. This model has proven extremely effective with chronically homeless individuals (Meschede, 2007) and, in particular, with those struggling with psychiatric disabilities (Padgett et al., 2006). However, Family Home differed from the Housing First model in three important ways. First, the Family Home rental subsidy was limited to two years; second, the case management services provided once they were in housing were very limited; and third, the program was for families, not individuals.

This study provides a critical evaluation of one region's participation in Family Home, including both program implementation and participants' short-term outcomes. Using several data sources examining multiple perspectives, this research aims at providing empirical evidence in three areas: (1) life in Family Home, including access to and quality of housing, and finding and maintaining employment; (2) assessment of the pilot model by multiple stakeholders; and (3) expected and actual housing outcomes at program exit. This study adds to prior research (e.g., Davis & Lane, 2012) by using a mixed methods research design to incorporate many perspectives to this new approach of addressing family homelessness. Data collection for this evaluation was funded by the largest homeless service provider in the region. The funder had no role in the study design or analysis and had no part in writing this article or in the decision to publish it.

## 2. Background and previous literature

### 2.1. Homeless families and access to housing

Family homelessness has many negative impacts for parents themselves and poses substantial challenges for raising their children without housing. Nationally and locally, homeless families are predominately female-headed households with young children (Rog & Buckner, 2007). Homelessness affects these mothers' ability to parent, as well as their own and their children's health and well-being (Cutts et al., 2011). Life in shelter is often characterized by a

lack of privacy, rigid rules, and routines; compliance is required in order to continue to receive shelter services and this requirement can compromise homeless mothers' relationships with their children (Friedman, 2000). Research suggests that rigid shelter rules and the constant presence of shelter staff disrupt parents' ability to create structure and discipline in their children's lives (Lindsey, 1998). Mothers have to negotiate their simultaneous roles as parents with authority and as clients who are required to submit to staff authority (Deward & Moe, 2010)<sup>4</sup>.

Without housing support – i.e., rental subsidy and supportive services – it is extremely difficult for these families to transition to self-sufficiency (Rog & Buckner, 2007). Families facing homelessness have extremely low incomes, often cannot afford market-rate rents, and lack the social networks that can provide housing support in times of crisis (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988). Housing subsidies are a critical element to preventing homelessness and maintaining stable housing, both of which improve child and family welfare (Bassuk & Geller, 2006; Shinn, 2009). However, long-term housing vouchers have been on the cutting block in recent years (Rice, 2014). In Massachusetts, state funding for permanent housing subsidies has been dramatically reduced over the years: allocation to housing vouchers in the state's 2010 budget was less than a quarter of its allocation in the 1990 budget (Curran, 2010).

While housing supports are critical to homeless parents' ability to return to housing, research suggests that they are not enough to move these families toward self-sufficiency. Once re-housed, homeless parents need steady employment to be able to maintain their housing for the long term, particularly as cash assistance programs suffer budget cutbacks (Shaheen & Rio, 2007). Low-income single mothers in Massachusetts with low levels of education face few job opportunities, and those jobs that are available pay extremely low wages, often much less than these women need to support their families (Loya, Liberman, Albelda, & Babcock, 2008). However, these women do not have the resources to pursue higher education, and if they do increase their earnings slightly then they face the possibility of losing valuable work supports such as child care vouchers (Loya et al., 2008; Prenovost & Youngblood, 2009). Women continue to earn less than men on average, and although women's employment rates suffered less than did men's in the most recent recession of 2007–2009, the persistent gender pay gap leaves low-income women with few opportunities for economic mobility (Albelda & Kelleher, 2010; Shriver & The Center for American Progress, 2014).

### 2.2. Short-term housing subsidies

Since 1983, Massachusetts state law has mandated that families facing homelessness and meeting certain income and asset eligibility guidelines (income under 115% of the federal poverty line and no more than \$2500 in assets) have a right to EA, a package of shelter and case management services<sup>5</sup>. EA-eligible families are placed in either congregate housing or scattered site units; when these are full, the state puts overflow families into budget motels. The number of homeless families in Massachusetts had risen steadily over the course of the last decade and continues to rise. Shelters had been filled to capacity (almost 1900 beds) for many years (Culhane & Byrne, 2010; Office of Community Planning and Development, 2013b). As a result, in 2011, over 1700 families were living in motels (Burge, 2012). Escalating expenses for shelters and

<sup>3</sup> The actual pilot program did not have an official name. Program staff informally referred to it by one of its many funding sources. It is worth noting that this pilot preceded HomeBASE, a statewide short-term housing support program initiated in 2011.

<sup>4</sup> A vast literature on the effects of homelessness on children exists, but will not be reviewed here because this evaluation did not include assessment of children's well-being.

<sup>5</sup> The right to shelter was established in the state's Acts of 1983, Chapter 450, §1(D)(d), as part of then-Governor Dukakis' large-scale plan to reduce homelessness in the state (Schön & Rein, 1995).

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