

The Role of Supportive Housing in Improving Responses to High-Risk, Young Parents and Adolescents in Cross-Sector Involvement

Highlights and Notes from a Reflective Seminar for Supervisors in the Child Welfare System*

Hubert Humphrey Center, University of Minnesota

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Introduction

The context for today's meeting is marked by three distinctive factors in our Minnesota Human Services environment:

- A statewide commitment to end homelessness
- A recent legislative initiative to extend benefits to the 21st year for adolescents in the child welfare system—"Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act"
- A set of initiatives to assure a successful educational experience for every Minnesota child

Overall, there is a deepening concern with disparities in various measure of well-being of children and families with racial and ethnic backgrounds.

A wide range of public initiatives and an active private, non-profit sector are engaged in responding to the challenges of adolescents in high-risk life situations.

Case planning for the adolescents who are parents and may also be involved in juvenile corrections presents a formidable challenge for the Child Welfare system. In essence, a case plan is required that demands that the adolescent "finish growing up." These are the tasks to be accomplished: continue in school; attend training classes for work; take care of baby; deal with the father of their child; search for transportation; respond to MFIP requirements; and prevent another pregnancy.

A Summary of the Exchange with the Panel: **Stephanie Harms**, Chief of Staff, The Corporation for Supportive Housing; **Ben Van Hunnik**, Director of Information, Research, and Evaluation, Hearth Connection; **Kathleen Hiniker**, Social Services Program Consultant, Adolescent Services Unit, Minnesota Department of Human Services; **Beth Holger-Ambrose**, Youth Services Coordinator, Office of Economic Opportunity, Minnesota Department of Human Services. Also contributing was **Claire Hill**, SELF Program Coordinator, Adolescent Services Unit, DHS.

How does the question of housing emerge in this planning process?

*Support was provided by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, School of Social Work, College of Education and Human Development and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota.

For the Child Welfare system, housing issues emerge in the case planning process. Part of the 90-day discharge plan is to discuss housing plans. These plans vary: going back to the biological family; staying with friends; searching for options.

Supportive housing is an important possibility. The basic concept of supportive housing is one of combining the opportunities for safe housing, along with attention to services that will improve housing stability. These could include employment, school attendance, mental and physical health.

Further, the characteristics of supportive housing—voluntary participation, flexibility, and individualized planning—are especially useful for Child Welfare planning.

How does a caseworker access the resources of supportive housing?

There are typically three models that county Child Welfare has developed:

1. Someone in the county is selected to become an expert on housing resources and is to be available for case planning.
2. A few counties have developed contracts with community agencies to carry out the tasks of discharge plans and assure stability.
3. Most counties are engaged in collaborative efforts, mobilizing resources, as needed.

Among the issues identified in the supportive housing and child welfare exchanges:

- For Child Welfare families, the “garbage house” is a condition that threatens safety and well-being. However, these families may not meet the definition of “homeless.” It is understood that substandard housing is a threat, but resources are very limited, and in most parts of the State, supportive housing has to be limited to a strict definition of “homeless.”
- Minnesota has only 108 emergency shelter beds: these are for young people who are “truly homeless”; i.e., not couch-hopping, rather living in cars, park shelters, abandoned buildings.
- There are serious limitations to the role of county Child Welfare as a “parent” to youngsters who are not prepared for adult life. Finding adults, on a voluntary basis, to become the “pseudo-parent” to a youngster who is engaged with other systems (for reasons of disability, mental illness, corrections) and also assuming the parenting role is very difficult.

- In the pursuit of becoming adults with adult skills, these young people require some fun; leisure activities. The need for volunteers, here, is especially important.
- Several programs exist within the private, non-profit sector that respond to older adolescents in their phase of growing into adult life: minor parent programs; family foster care for older adolescents and their children. For supportive housing, a case manager is assigned and all relevant parties are brought together to address stability-threatening issues.
- While there are some models of responding to older adolescents and their experiences in groping toward adult life, these have been difficult to replicate. The models are not always followed with fidelity, because this may well be a period of unexpected and chaotic circumstances before settling down.
- A few counties, notably Chisago, have developed an important response. If adolescents choose to leave the system before their 21st birthday, they are encouraged to come back, if services are still needed.

A Model that Works

FamilyWise (formerly known as Genesis II for Families), on contract with Hennepin County, has developed the High-Fidelity Wrap-Around Model for older adolescents.

Ann Gaasch, program director at FamilyWise, presented attributes of this model. The following is a partial review:

- When a family is involved in multiple systems, they are stretched thin by varying program requirements. High Fidelity Wrap-Around aims to bring everything together in one place, with supports—a team circle of supports. The goal is not to throw services at a family, but instead allow the family to brainstorm solutions for themselves. This guides the process.
- The worker is alert to see what is working. If the interventions are not working, then move on to something else, which may include an appreciative inquiry into another set of possibilities for the family—culture included. At the very heart of what youth and families need are relationships and all of its accompanying components.
- Forgiveness is a key part of building a therapeutic relationship. Youth involved in the formidable tasks of growing up with many, many obligations and expectations need an act of forgiveness, on occasion, for errors made along the way.
- Be creative. Develop ways to stay in contact with youth that are highly mobile. This helps to shed light on who is important in each youth's life. Sometimes youth have

behaviors that should be stopped. Building relationships helps to address this in a positive way.

- A belief that some kind of reunification is possible does not necessarily mean moving back in with parents. Rather, reunification may involve some kind of support for a parent/child relationship.

Is there a limit to “forgiveness?”

- Case facilitators have to dig deeper into the needs and goals of these youth. They may have a myriad of problems, but that doesn't mean their goals are not the same as any other youth. The best thing workers can do is to not get in their way—build relationships. Ask questions and facilitate an experience that will allow these youth to experience success.
- Modeling a relationship to a youth or family, along with teaching skills, is a process that allows for forgiveness. A failure does not need to knock them off track. We need to model how to learn and grow through failures.

Sharon Henry-Blyth is with the Family Housing Fund and Director of the Visible Child Initiative. The Visible Child Workgroup came out of a collaborative effort of agencies around the state to create a framework for a plan to address the needs of homeless children—what is the current status of homeless children? What are their needs? What are the strategies needed to address this issue?

- Attention must be paid to infants and toddlers in high-risk families.
- Ultimately, our window of opportunity in serving this population is so brief that we need to see them immediately and reach them through their parents. There is always more than just the child involved in these situations. We know the resources are not there. Workers have a deep passion for their work, but the system is not designed to meet the intricate needs of these families, even with the passion behind workers in this field.

Politically, how did you garner support for this issue in the current financial climate?

- Legislators were truly interested in the topic of homeless children, and the Children's Defense Fund was an incredible advocate for this topic.

Marcie Jefferys—Children's Defense Fund: Some of the brain and developmental science helped fuel the urgency and legitimacy of this issue—how experiences impact children and their life-long trajectories. Many stakeholders saw this as prevention, both in terms of saving money and stopping cycles of homelessness.

Sharon Henry-Blythe: We cannot forget to look at culture, parenting, practices, and traditions when developing staff training and programming. The goal is to help workers in the field address the complex needs of families experiencing homelessness to be able to identify what is coming from trauma and what is coming from culture. This is an important part of building the worker/parent relationship. Culture is the foundation and trauma breaks the foundation down.

Concluding Inquiry

How does the University teach students (soon to be workers) to be more engaged in the youth's multiple systems involvement?

Traci LaLiberte, Director of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare: Speaking for the School of Social Work, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, we just redesigned our whole program—to be rolled out this Fall (2012). It is now a competency-based model based on what the community is asking us to do. This attempts to balance foundational knowledge with the *practice skills* required by counties and agencies in their work with families and communities.

While we conclude our discussion today, the agenda for us, in our concerns with this late adolescence, high-risk population is unfinished. Among the questions yet to be explored, we note the following:

1. Are there limitations in exchanging information among the systems that are involved?
Are there confidentiality agreements?
2. With case plans involving multiple systems, entangled in a thicket of rules, reimbursements, and regulations, who owns the case plan?
3. Have we responded, in a coherent way, to influence policy by noting “services needed, but not available” (transportation, early childhood care, volunteers as an extended support system)?

Can we build on the excellent base provided by supportive housing as a partner with child welfare to assure stability of housing and well-being for this high-risk adolescent population? (See The Role of Supportive Housing in Homeless Children's Well Being: An Investigation of Child Welfare and Educational Outcomes, authored by Kristine Piescher and Saahoon Hong. Full Report available from CASCW at:

http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/attributes/PDF/minnlink/Report_11.pdf

Handouts from this “Reflective Seminar” are available on the CASCW website at:
http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/events/past_events/

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