



Crisis Response and Systems Change: Community Profile

Program Name: Priority Home Partnership

Agency Name: EveryOne Home

City, State: Alameda County, California

EveryOne Home, Alameda County's ten-year planning body, retooled its homelessness prevention strategy to reach families and individuals at greater risk of homelessness, including families who are tenuously doubled-up and those with extremely low incomes. Prevention services are delivered through Priority Home Partnership, a network of seven coordinated, regional Housing Resource Centers that share a common assessment tool and targeting criteria.

Problem or Challenge

Alameda County's traditional homelessness prevention programs, like those in many other places, targeted households who had their own home or apartment lease and experienced a crisis that led to rent arrears or an eviction notice. Households typically needed to demonstrate that they could sustain housing after receiving one-time or short-assistance, which was often capped at a small dollar amount. In many cases, the program restricted access to only one time within a lifetime or one time within a year.

This targeting was based on historical assumptions that the household being evicted would become homeless if it did not receive prevention assistance, and that a household who could not demonstrate that it can stabilize very quickly without assistance was a "bad risk."

However, as Alameda County discovered, a growing body of research is finding that the majority of evictions do not lead to homelessness. A Boston Foundation study compared results for who received one-time rental assistance with those who were turned down because the program was out of funds. The research found that 79 percent of people who *were* assisted retained their housing, while 71 percent of people who were *not* assisted also retained housing.¹ Similarly, a detailed study in New York by researcher Mary Beth Shinn and colleagues found that only 20 percent of families that received eviction notices went on to become homeless, and only 22 percent of families entering homeless shelters had ever had an eviction.²

¹ Friedman, D. H., J. Raymond, et al. (2007). Preventing Homelessness and Promoting Housing Stability: A Comparative Analysis. Understanding Boston. Boston, The Boston Foundation; The Center for Social Policy, McCormack Graduate School at University of Massachusetts Boston.

² Shinn, M. and J. Baumohl. 1998. Rethinking the Prevention of Homelessness. Retrieved on November 21, 2008 from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/progsys/homeless/symposium/13-Preven.HTM>.

In working to increase the effectiveness of its programs to prevent homelessness, Alameda County was faced with this challenge: how do we find the people who will become homeless?

Solution

To answer this question, the County conducted a study that looked at its Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data and conducted interviews with families in shelter within Alameda County. Most of the families reported having stayed with family or friends prior to recognizing a need to seek help. All had some past or current relationships with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF). Few were aware of prevention assistance or the 211 hotline. And none would have qualified for the then-available one-time rental assistance because they could not show they had enough income to sustain housing.

Based on this study, the County realized that its typical homelessness prevention programs probably did not prevent homelessness, nor did they reach the people most likely to become homeless. They concluded that they should target the County's limited prevention and re-housing resources to those staying with friends and family, staying in hotels and motels using their own resources, receiving TANF, losing their housing subsidies, or with additional risk factors besides rent arrears.

Federal Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) funding provided an opportunity for the County to improve their system to reach people at greater risk of homelessness. It also enabled them to test the assumption that households who cannot prove they can stabilize very quickly without assistance are "bad risks." The County is now targeting prevention assistance to the following groups:

- People living doubled up with family and friends
- People being evicted from subsidized housing, and
- Households facing eviction with incomes at 30 percent of area median income (AMI) or lower or additional barriers included in the HUD HPRP notice

Implementation Steps and Tips

The jurisdictions of Alameda County, ten nonprofit agencies and EveryOne Home (the ten-year plan body) have worked together to implement HPRP through a coordinated network. The joint program, called Priority Home Partnership (PHP), offers services at seven Housing Resource Centers (HRCs), providing a variety of both prevention and rapid re-housing services, linked through a countywide outreach, referral, targeting, assessment, and outcome-tracking system.

Outreach

PHP partners conducted outreach to places where very low income households are likely to seek services, such as One-Stop Employment Centers and food pantries. The County Social Services Agency, which operates the TANF program, and the County Behavioral Health Care Services Agency are also partners and promote the program to their service agencies and clients. Landlords who have had tenants in the program are contacted frequently to make sure they will refer other tenants who may be

in need. PHP distributes flyers and brochures promoting the services and describing the eligible housing situations persons much face to qualify. The 211 phone line, which is the entry point for the first screening, is also widely publicized through the County.

Intake

An initial telephone screen at the 211 referral line identifies callers who are experiencing homelessness and those who are currently housed and at imminent risk. Those at risk of losing housing must have at least one of the additional risk factors described above. Once callers are initially found to meet the high-risk criteria they are referred to the HRC in their area, which contacts them within 24-48 hours for assessment.

The seven coordinated HRCs serve different regions of the county and two target specific subpopulations. Each HRC is co-located with other community services such as family resource centers and multi-service centers.

Assessment

Using a common assessment tool, the HRC provides the head of household with an in-depth assessment. This includes a financial assessment which seeks to further target HPRP to those with greatest barriers, while also recognizing that some applicants may need deeper services than PHP is able to offer. The HRC provides referrals and follow-up to households that need additional assistance.

The assessment provides a score based on current and past income, housing costs, debt, and barriers such as past housing and legal history. People who score high (low risk, low barriers) are generally provided with one time referrals to community services. People who score very low (high risk, high barriers) are generally referred to longer-term programs or shelter. Those who score in the mid-range and are eligible are recommended for HPRP or other assistance. Assessment scores are included in HMIS.

The level of intensity of case management/ housing stabilization services and financial assistance are determined after the assessment with the development of an individualized Housing Stabilization Plan. The minimal level of assistance considered necessary to secure the housing is offered, and can be increased or extended if needed upon reassessment. Housing relocation services are offered when a prevention situation is not sustainable and the client household needs to relocate to new housing. Prevention clients usually pay a minimum of 50 percent of the rent.

Targeting to those who truly would become homeless if not for the assistance received is emphasized in local trainings and materials and is discussed regularly at monthly meetings of the PHP Implementation and Learning Community, comprised of PHP partners. This is supplemented by an on-line Google Group used for information sharing, guidance and advice.

Outcomes and Results

With PHP's prevention targeting strategy, in the first two years the following results were seen:

- 20 percent of participants assisted were doubled up with family and friends
- 15 percent of participants were at immediate risk of losing a housing subsidy
- 4 percent were staying in hotels/motels
- 58 percent were at immediate risk of losing other rental housing and had *at least* one other risk factor

Six percent of those served with HPRP in the first year returned to the program later seeking additional assistance. Less than 1 percent of those served in the first year subsequently entered a homeless program (this includes both prevention and rapid rehousing participants).

In the first year, close to one third of those served with prevention assistance had low assessment scores (i.e., higher risk, higher barriers). Outcomes of those with low scores that received financial assistance were not significantly different than those with higher scores, though they were more likely to exit the program before they could receive assistance.

The prevention program appears to have had a positive impact on homelessness in the County. The County's 2009 homeless count identified just over 3,000 "hidden homeless" – those living temporarily with family and friends, staying in hotels or about to be evicted within seven days. This was triple the 2003 number. Yet, the 2011 homeless count showed a 3.8 percent reduction in the number of persons that were on the streets or in shelter – suggesting that the "hidden homeless" did not end up on the streets or in shelters in 2011.

Contact Info for Follow-up

Everyone Home: www.everyonehome.org. This includes links to the County's 2008 Prevention Study, HPRP program design, the assessment tool, and the Plan to End Homelessness.