



## **Crisis Response and Systems Change: Community Profile**

**Program Name:** Housing First Program for Homeless Families

**Agency Name:** Beyond Shelter

**City, State:** Los Angeles, California

Beyond Shelter's Housing First Program for Homeless Families in Los Angeles, California, provides families experiencing homelessness referred by area emergency shelters, transitional housing and other shelter programs with assistance in securing permanent rental housing. It then provides home-based case management support for six months to help families transition to stability and make connections to community supports. Beyond Shelter established the program in 1988 to build the capacity of family shelters to end, not just manage, family homelessness by partnering with them to assist their clients to obtain and retain permanent, affordable housing. At the time, it was the first rapid re-housing program for families in the country.

### **Problem or Challenge**

After developing some of the first family shelters in Los Angeles, Tanya Tull, Beyond Shelter's founder, recognized a major limitation in their original design. Despite the clear need families experiencing homelessness have for affordable housing, shelters rarely provided their clients with proactive assistance in searching for rental housing and in overcoming poor credit, prior evictions, landlord discrimination, and other barriers that often prevented them from leasing housing on their own. Beyond Shelter was established to fill this service gap and to help families experiencing homelessness move back into permanent housing as quickly as possible, rather than remaining in shelters for extended periods of time.

Beyond Shelter's Housing First Program for Homeless Families (Housing First Program) facilitates the family's move into permanent housing, and then engages the newly housed family in a progressive set of time-limited, individualized case management activities and interventions that help the family transition to stability. This rapid re-housing approach is premised on the belief that vulnerable and at-risk families experiencing homelessness are often more responsive to social services interventions and support after they are in their own housing, rather than while living in temporary housing situations. With permanent housing, families can begin to regain the self-confidence and control over their lives they lost when they become homeless.

The approach offers a cost effective alternative to longer stays in emergency shelter and transitional housing. Depending upon individual family need and circumstances, the cost of Housing First Program services average about \$7,300 per family, excluding the cost of any housing assistance (e.g., rental assistance) that families may receive. This is a fraction of the cost of emergency shelter or transitional housing programs.

## **Solution**

Beyond Shelter pioneered its rapid re-housing approach to ending family homelessness in response to increasing numbers of homeless families in Los Angeles County. Since 1988, the agency has assisted more than 5,000 homeless families to obtain permanent housing.

The Housing First Program helps families with children experiencing homelessness move as quickly as possible into affordable rental housing in residential neighborhoods. After this relocation, the program provides individualized, intensive, home-based case management to help stabilize the families in housing. Services are time limited (up to six months) while families are connected to mainstream services and programs, as needed, for longer-term support. This time-limited relationship is intended to empower the family and foster its self-reliance as a member of a neighborhood and community.

## ***Eligibility***

The Housing First Program relies primarily upon the existing homeless services system in greater Los Angeles for outreach, crisis intervention, and short term (one to six months) stabilization of families experiencing homelessness. Shelter providers refer families to Beyond Shelter for the “next step” after they have provided initial emergency shelter and/or crisis intervention services. This next step consists of assistance in increasing household income through benefits (Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers) and/or employment, moving into permanent rental housing and then the provision of temporary home-based case management support. Families experiencing homelessness are referred to Beyond Shelter from approximately 45 organizations located throughout Los Angeles County, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, domestic violence shelters, and residential drug treatment programs.

To be eligible for the program, a family must consist of one or two adults with legal custody of one or more children under the age of 18, and be referred by an authorized referring agency with a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Beyond Shelter.

All families served by the Housing First Program are living at or below the federal poverty level. Most families consist of single mothers with an average of three children each. Approximately 90 percent of the families are people of color (African American, Latino and Asian). Close to 40 percent of participating families became homeless as a result of domestic violence, and 20 percent have a history of substance abuse.

## **Implementation Steps and Tips**

Each year, Beyond Shelter’s Housing First Program assists 200-250 homeless families to relocate into permanent housing. The program is implemented through some key steps:

- **Screening, Assessment and Planning:** Case Managers conduct an extensive assessment of parents and children to ascertain family needs and assets, and then develop goal-oriented plans with each family. These plans delineate the services and action steps necessary to address children’s

developmental and educational needs, increase adult employability and household income, and obtain permanent housing.

- **Training & Employment:** This component offers working-age family members individualized career planning, employability workshops, industry-specific vocational training, and job placement assistance. The program provides a menu of individualized, employment readiness services and soft skills training that prepare participants for successful participation in short-term training programs (e.g., in-home health care training or Certified Nursing Assistant certificate programs) offered by partnering local Workforce Investment One Stop Centers and training providers. These services also prepare individuals for success in the job search and interviewing phases of the program.

Given the lack of recent and/or any work experience among many participants, and recognizing that some homeless parents are not as successful or comfortable with classroom-based training approaches, Beyond Shelter is now developing skill development opportunities that go beyond traditional models; these opportunities include on-the-job training and externships/work experience in conjunction with local employers. The agency is targeting employers from in-demand industries with current growth for these partnerships. To facilitate these opportunities, the agency has secured grants to provide modest financial incentives to partnering businesses (e.g., temporary wage reimbursement), as well as work stipends to participants. These partnerships will provide targeted skill-building and paid work opportunities for participants that they likely would not otherwise be able to access in this economy.

Families unable to work due to disabilities or other reasons do not participate in this program component, but rather are given priority access to the limited number of rental subsidies (Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers) available to the Housing First Program.

- **Housing Search and Placement:** While families are working on increasing their incomes through employment and training and/or accessing public benefits, the Housing First Program's Housing Specialists assist them to develop and implement customized housing search plans. Staff use a variety of strategies to assist families to find suitable, permanent housing, including:
  - 1) *Developing housing search plans* tailored to individual family needs, including rental costs, housing size, proximity to schools and work sites, and neighborhood safety;
  - 2) *Addressing barriers to leasing housing*, e.g. repairing poor credit, writing letters of support explaining past rental problems, negotiating lower security deposit and/or monthly rent amounts, and accessing financial assistance for move-in costs; and
  - 3) *Outreaching to landlords* through networking, cold calls, and other means in order to build personal relationships and market the benefits of the program to property owners.

The program has three to four housing specialists at any one time, each of whom serves about 50 families.

- **Home Visitation Services:** Once families have moved into their new homes, case managers visit them regularly for up to six months to help them to:

- Acclimate to their new surroundings – e.g., identify the location of neighborhood amenities such as grocery stores, libraries, post offices, and community health clinics
- Enroll in and/or access important community resources – e.g., banks, child care, food pantries, academic tutors, after-school programs, mental health counseling, recreational and other enrichment activities
- Build life skills and develop survival strategies – e.g. budgeting and financial planning, household management, conflict resolution, and parenting strategies
- Provide and/or reinforce tenant education, including roles, responsibilities, and expectations of renters and landlords – e.g., what are the terms of the lease agreement, when and how to make rent payments, when and how to ask for unit repairs, what rights do property owners and managers have

In general, home visits are fairly regular and intensive for the first few months: every two weeks in the beginning, and then tapered as families become stable in housing and as the case manager and family near case closure (generally at six months). The case manager to client ratio is 1:25.

### **Outcomes and Results**

Internal program data reported that 427 families were enrolled in Beyond Shelter’s Housing First Program in 2009-2010. Of these, 327 moved into permanent rental housing (93 percent); of those, 90 percent received case management and remained stable in housing for six months following their move.

In 1999, the program was one of 19 programs nationwide to be included in a two-year national evaluation initiative of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. For the evaluation, the School of Social Work at the University of Southern California and Rutgers worked with Beyond Shelter to evaluate outcomes for 97 families enrolled in the Housing First Program over a two-year period. Results indicate that the program successfully relocated vulnerable and high-risk families into permanent housing and assisted them in stabilizing after their move to permanent housing. After residential stability was sustained for six months, outcome measures for families had either increased or remained constant.

In 2003, Beyond Shelter’s Institute for Research, Training and Technical Assistance conducted a longitudinal study to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of the Housing First Program. Two hundred families experiencing homelessness successfully completed the Housing First Program from 1997 to 2001 and were contacted over a 16-month period. During their two to seven years since completing the Housing First Program, close to 90 percent remained consistently housed without any repeated episodes of homelessness.

### **Contact Info for Follow-up**

Beyond Shelter: [www.beyondshelter.org](http://www.beyondshelter.org)