



## Crisis Response and Systems Change: Community Profile

**Program Name:** Memphis Emergency Housing Partnership  
**Agency Name:** City of Memphis  
**City, State:** Memphis, Tennessee

The City of Memphis and community partners used the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) as an opportunity to restructure the service delivery system for families who experience homelessness. They established a centralized intake system for homeless assistance programs; a uniform risk assessment based on a tool used in the child welfare system to identify families needing services beyond financial assistance; and a team of Family Housing Advocates focused on helping families build natural support systems.

### Problem or Challenge

Prior to HPRP, transitional housing was the preferred response to family homelessness in Memphis and Shelby County. More than 65 percent of all households who experienced homelessness were served in transitional housing programs. The results were disappointing: of those who exited transitional housing, only one in three left for permanent housing of their own control, and the average length of homelessness for families was 147 days. The City saw HPRP as an opportunity to experiment with alternative interventions that would cost less and be more effective.

### Solution

The City of Memphis, along with community partners (collectively called the Memphis/Shelby County Emergency Housing Partnership), used federal HPRP funding to create a new system of response with four main components:

- Centralized intake, using a hotline and a central intake site co-located with a benefits counselor
- Uniform assessment process using a screening tool designed to identify families in need of services
- A team of Family Housing Advocates providing supports and a Housing Specialist to identify housing units
- Short-term financial assistance

### Implementation Steps and Tips

#### *Centralized intake for families*

Beginning in October of 2009, the Memphis area family shelter and transitional housing programs agreed to establish a new “front door” to the system by foregoing their own intakes and joining in a centralized intake. The intake has two components. The first is a **24-hour telephone hotline** manned during the day by the Tennessee Community Service Agency (TNCSA), and in the evenings and weekends by the family shelter and transitional housing providers. The hotline screens for basic eligibility (i.e.,

whether the person is homeless or imminently homeless, according to the HPRP definition). The hotline screened more than 18,000 requests for help in the first year; close to one third of these were referred to the Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association (MIFA) for further assessment.

The second component is a **central intake site** for families where MIFA conducts in-person intake assessments for shelter diversion, prevention, and intake into shelter and transitional housing. Families no longer self-select homeless assistance programs but are matched to them based on their needs, as determined through the assessment process. More than 5,000 households were served by the center in its first year. Most received mediation and/or housing counseling. Less than one in ten received financial assistance, and only 6 percent were placed in shelter or transitional housing.

A city-funded emergency assistance program is co-located at the central intake site as well as a SEEDCO Earned Benefits Counselor, who provides application assistance for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance, Medicaid, TANF, and other mainstream benefits.

Other households eligible for prevention and rapid re-housing assistance include domestic violence victims, youth aging out of the child welfare system, Veterans, and ex-offenders who have case management support. They are referred by community agencies that sign partnership agreements and commit to provide supportive services.

### ***Uniform risk assessment***

All families who qualify for assistance through HPRP complete a brief interview using a risk assessment tool known as Structured Decision Making (SDM). SDM has been found in a number of evaluations to be highly predictive of future risk of child maltreatment. Memphis adapted this tool for use at its intake center as a way to determine whether supportive services are needed by the family in addition to financial assistance. Households who received a score of high or very high risk of abuse and neglect and are at imminent risk of homelessness are referred to a Family Housing Advocate (FHA) at either Agape Child and Family Services or TNCSA.

Families who are assigned to shelter or transitional housing receive the assessment within two weeks of entry. Those who receive a score of moderate or higher are also referred to the FHAs, who have regular rotations to assess and engage people experiencing homelessness with a goal of rapid re-housing.

### ***Support services***

Rather than case managers, the program uses Family Housing Advocates who provide culturally-competent, community-relevant, strength-based supportive services informed by the VanDenBerg Wraparound Principles (<http://www.vroonvdb.com/>). Through this approach, FHAs assist the family in establishing strong relational supports, recognizing the central importance of the support that a family member receives “naturally,” i.e., from the individuals and organizations whose connection to the family is independent of the formal service system and its resources (family members, friends, faith communities, etc.). These sources of natural support are felt to promote greater resiliency and are most likely to be available to the family after formal services have ended. The FHAs also make referrals to

community providers as necessary to access additional services to address mental health, substance abuse, transportation, and other concrete needs.

The FHAs provide supports for a period of six months (sometimes more, depending on client needs). All FHA services are delivered in the client's home, and in most cases by peers.

In addition to the FHAs, the Partnership also uses a Housing Specialist to reach out to landlords to identify willing partners in the project – those who will overlook poor credit or criminal histories and those with affordable rents. The Housing Specialist conducts unit inspections and conducts follow-ups to determine housing stability among those who were not assigned a FHA.

### ***Financial assistance***

Financial assistance is limited to three months of assistance, typically \$1,200 or less. Families are eligible to apply for subsequent assistance if unexpected job loss or illness causes them to fall behind again. Over 70 percent require only one period of assistance.

### **Outcomes and Results**

The Partnership meets monthly to review data on the program's performance, and front-line staff meets bi-weekly on shared cases. This open communication and analysis of performance information has created significant differences in understanding effective approaches and has proven to partners that prevention and rapid re-housing work, even with families in the most challenging circumstances.

Outcomes of the two-year period October 2009 - September 2011 include the following:

- Housing stability (determined by whether the household has maintained rental housing without being evicted, or without leaving prior to eviction but with rent owed) is measured at three, six, and twelve month intervals. At the three month interval, 99 percent of families engaged in supportive services remained stably housed versus 90 percent in the group who did not receive services. At twelve months, the figures were 91 percent and 86 percent, respectively.
- 1,104 households (3,934 people) avoided homelessness through eviction prevention.
- Family homelessness decreased by 2 percent despite record poverty and unemployment rates.
- Overall, after more than two years, only two households returned to shelter and 90 percent were stably housed 12 months after receiving assistance.
- The cost per family of the initiative (includes central intake, FHAs, and hotline) was \$2,535. This compares favorably to the cost of a transitional housing episode, which is \$13,000-\$19,000.

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

Community Alliance for the Homeless: [www.communityallianceforthehomeless.com](http://www.communityallianceforthehomeless.com). This includes a link to the Partnership's Year 2 report.