

Closing the Front Door: Creating a Successful Diversion Program for Homeless Families

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INTRODUCTION

Diversion is a strategy that prevents homelessness for people seeking shelter by helping them identify immediate alternate housing arrangements and, if necessary, connecting them with services and financial assistance to help them return to permanent housing. Diversion programs can reduce the number of families becoming homeless, the demand for shelter beds, and the size of program wait lists. Diversion programs can also help communities achieve better outcomes and be more competitive when applying for federal funding. This paper will describe how communities can begin diverting families from entering their homeless assistance systems.

Distinguishing Diversion from Other Interventions

The services families are provided with when being diverted are services that caseworkers in most poverty and homeless assistance organizations are already trained and funded to deliver. They include:

- provision of financial, utility, and/or rental assistance;
- short-term case management;
- conflict mediation;
- connection to mainstream services (services that come from agencies outside of the homeless assistance system, such as welfare agencies) and/or benefits; and
- housing search.

The main difference between diversion and other permanent housing-focused interventions centers on the point at which intervention occurs, as *Table 1* below shows. Prevention targets people at imminent risk of homelessness, diversion targets people as they are applying for entry into shelter, and rapid re-housing targets people who are already homeless.

Table 1: Prevention, Diversion and Rapid Re-housing

Consumer's Housing Situation	Intervention Used	Services Provided (In All Interventions)
AT IMMINENT RISK OF LOSING HOUSING (precariously housed and not yet homeless)	PREVENTION	Housing Search Rental Subsidy Other Financial Assistance Utility Assistance Case Management Mediation Connection to Mainstream Resources Legal Services
REQUESTING SHELTER (at the "front door" or another program/system entry point seeking a place to stay)	DIVERSION	
IN SHELTER (homeless/in the homeless assistance system)	RAPID RE-HOUSING	

ASSESSING FOR DIVERSION ELIGIBILITY

Assessment and service delivery for the interventions referenced in *Table 1* would ideally begin at the system entry point for homeless families. In systems with a coordinated intake process, the entry point would be the designated intake center(s) or "front door(s);" in systems without coordinated entry processes, the system entry point would be whatever program the family comes to first for shelter assistance.

Once families come to the entry point, they should be assessed to determine what housing needs they have. To determine which families are appropriate for diversion, intake center staff will need to ask families a few specific questions, such as:

- Where did you sleep last night? *If they slept somewhere where they could potentially safely stay again, this might mean they are good candidates for diversion.*
- What other housing options do you have for the next few days or weeks? *Even if there is an option outside of shelter that is only available for a very short time, it's worth exploring if this housing resource can be used.*
- (If staying in someone else's housing) What issues exist with you remaining in your current housing situation? Can those issues be resolved with financial assistance, case management, etc.? *If the issues can be solved with case management, mediation, or financial assistance (or all of the above), diversion is a good option.*
- (If coming from their own unit) Is it possible/safe to stay in your current housing unit? What resources would you need to do that (financial assistance, case management, mediation, transportation, etc.)? *If the family could stay in their current housing with some assistance, systems should focus on a quick prevention-oriented solution that will keep the family in their unit.*

Families typically meet with a case manager to start housing stabilization planning immediately after being assessed and deemed appropriate for diversion. Housing planning involves both finding immediate housing and planning for longer term housing stability. If an immediate alternate housing arrangement cannot be made, a shelter stay is likely the most appropriate option.

Some families may not be good candidates for diversion programs due to a lack of safe and appropriate housing alternatives and require immediate admittance to shelter, e.g. families fleeing domestic violence. Families' safety should always be the top consideration when thinking through what intervention fits them best.

KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL DIVERSION PROGRAM

A diversion program will function best if it features the following elements:

Screening Tool and Process: Communities should formulate a screening process that can quickly determine whether a family is eligible to be diverted. Most communities do this through the use of an assessment tool. Adding the questions in the *Assessing for Diversion Eligibility* section of this paper to an existing assessment tool will likely be all that is necessary to create a sufficient screening process for most communities.

System Entry Point(s): Assessment for diversion eligibility, in addition to the provision of some crisis stabilization services, should take place at the “front door,” the initial access point (or points) to the homeless assistance system. Families that are not appropriate for diversion should also be able to come to the entry point to be admitted to shelter. Setting up a coordinated process for intake may ease the burden on individual agencies to provide this service and ensure more consistent decision-making regarding program eligibility. Columbus, Ohio is an example of a place with a coordinated intake process for families.

Community Example: Columbus, OH

Upon contacting the local YWCA, the centralized intake point for all homeless families, families in Columbus are asked what other housing resources they may have at their disposal. Families with places to stay in the community for at least two days are eligible for referral to the Stable Families Prevention Program, which offers diversion assistance. Within 48 hours of this referral, while remaining in their current housing situation, families are given a more intensive screen to guarantee program eligibility. If eligible, they are assigned a Stable Families case worker, who helps them with budgeting and crisis planning and connects them to community resources. Many families in the program also receive financial assistance to help them maintain their current housing situation.

Columbus was able to divert more than one out of four families seeking shelter in calendar year (CY) 2010, and the rate at which families enter shelter after participating in the Stable Families Prevention Program is less than 5 percent. Prevention and diversion efforts are paid for by the Community Shelter Board (the Continuum of Care lead agency in Columbus) using Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP) and United Way of Central Ohio funds in addition to other local public and private resources. To learn more about Columbus' coordinated entry and diversion efforts, please visit the "Front Door Strategies" section of the Alliance' website:
http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/training/front_door.

Cooperation from Other Providers: Provider organizations must be willing to direct families coming to them for services to the designated intake/assessment center(s) or assess the families themselves for diversion instead of admitting them automatically to their programs. Having providers commit to doing this will ensure that all families have a chance at being diverted and that shelter beds are reserved for families who literally have nowhere else to go.

Cooperation from Service Providers: Successful diversion often requires the involvement of service providers from outside of the homeless assistance system. Mainstream service providers can be pulled in to help families stabilize once they have been diverted or found a new unit and/or to refer families to the diversion program who appear to be eligible.

Flexible Funding: Successfully diverting families may require the provision of financial assistance to get them back into their former housing, to enable them to stay a bit longer in a doubled up situation while they look for permanent housing, to unify them with family members, or to help them move quickly into a new housing unit. More information on how to find sources for these funds is available in the *Funding Diversion* section of this paper.

Resourceful Staff Members: Diversion program staff should be familiar with the intake and assessment processes, have experience with landlord mediation and conflict resolution, and be knowledgeable about rental subsidies and financial literacy programs. The skill sets of the onsite staff proved invaluable in diverting families successfully during the Dudley Diversion Pilot Project in Boston, Massachusetts.

Community Example: Boston, MA

The Dudley Diversion Pilot Project, conducted in Boston over a two-month period in 2008, focused specifically on diverting the growing number of families coming to state-funded emergency shelters for assistance. Families that agreed during intake to participate in the diversion program were assigned to work with an assessment team and a resource team. The assessment team was made up of staff from homeless assistance provider agencies and a fellow client or former client of the homeless assistance system. The resource team was made up of housing experts and/or representatives from other mainstream service agencies. The assessment team gathered information on each family's crisis. The resource team then took the information from the assessment and worked with the family to find a possible non-shelter based solution to their housing issue, including staying with a relative. Resource team members were also responsible for referring the family to child care, health care, and food resources. The program diverted 42 percent of those who came in during the pilot period and 86 percent of those diverted had not sought shelter again after seven weeks. In addition to the assessment and resource teams, other important factors that contributed to the success of the pilot were the unprecedented coordination and collaboration between providers and \$50,000 in flexible funding from non-profit, public, and private sources. For more information about One Family, Inc. and the Dudley Diversion Project, please see this brief on the topic: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/2208>.

WHAT DIVERSION LOOKS LIKE

Here are a few examples of what diverting a family might look like:

Diversion Example #1

A couple and their two children come to the centralized intake center, or “front door” of a homeless assistance system. From the assessment process, the intake worker learns they were evicted from their apartment several days earlier because they used money they planned to use to pay rent to pay one of the children's medical bills. They are currently living with a friend, but indicate that they cannot stay any longer. They would like to go back to their old building because it is conveniently located to the father's job and the children's school, but fear their relationship with their former landlord is damaged beyond repair.

The mother says she might have a co-worker who would be willing to put them up for a week or so but had felt too ashamed to ask. The intake worker helps the mother strategize about how to ask the co-worker for assistance and the mother calls from the office to make the request. The intake worker also provides a referral to a low-cost health care clinic nearby where the family can take their sick child for continuing care and gives them information about affordable health insurance options.

Once the family has confirmed that they can stay with the mother's co-worker, the intake worker focuses on the family's longer-term housing plan. He collects contact information for the family's landlord and sets up a meeting to discuss the family's situation. At the meeting, the intake worker discovers that the family had a positive rental history and was previously well-regarded by the landlord. The intake worker tells the landlord that his agency

can cover most of the rental arrears if the landlord is willing to let the family return to the unit and make up the remaining costs over the course of the next few months. He also promises to continue to work with the family to ensure they have gotten back on their feet financially and help resolve any other issues that might arise. After a few days of staying with their co-worker, the family is able to move back into their previous unit.

Diversions Example #2

A single mother and her two sons, aged 13 and 7, go to a local family shelter because they have been evicted as a result of the mother's job loss. The family's current temporary housing arrangement with the children's grandmother is falling apart because neighbors have complained about the children causing trouble in her apartment complex after school. The grandmother's landlord has already spoken to her twice about the issue and has said if he gets one more complaint, he may have to take serious action against her.

After speaking with the mother and the grandmother, the case manager on duty at the shelter determines that the family could stay with the grandmother a bit longer if the children had a place to go after school. The case manager begins looking for after-school care for the children and funds to help the mother pay for it. Once the after-school care program has been found and the children's spots secured, the intake worker meets with the grandmother and the landlord to smooth things over and ensure it is acceptable for the family to continue living in the building temporarily. The intake worker then works with the mother to identify her housing goals and develops a plan with her to look at available rental units. Once they locate a willing landlord, the case manager provides funds for first and last months' rent upfront to secure the unit and uses HPRP funds to provide a six-month rent subsidy for the family. The case manager also helps the mother pay for a truck to move her furniture out of storage. The case manager continues to work with the mother to help her secure employment after the family has moved into the unit she can sustain it after her rent subsidy ends.

FUNDING DIVERSION

Diversions activities are funded using a variety of federal, state, and local resources. Three potential federal sources are discussed below.

Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP)

Relevant Activities Funded: Rental assistance, mediation, housing stabilization services, rental arrears, moving costs, legal services.

Communities that still have HPRP funds available can use these funds for diversion. For agencies using HPRP funds to pay for their programs, diversion is classified as a prevention activity.

Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG)

Relevant Activities Funded: Short-term rental assistance, housing relocation and stabilization services, mediation.

For most localities, a major source of federal funding for diversion will be the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG), which was modified by the HEARTH Act to include more robust prevention assistance. Eligible uses of funds will be very similar to those of HPRP, including rental assistance (issued to a third party), mediation, and other housing stabilization services (case management, legal services, etc.). Funds from the new ESG are expected to be available for expenditure late in 2011.¹ Though the regulations for the new ESG have yet to be published, it is clear that the new program will provide some of the flexible funding diversion programs need.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Relevant Activities Funded: Short-term rental assistance, financial assistance, moving assistance, subsidized employment, case management services, legal services.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds can be used to provide short-term rental assistance, case management, and other temporary non-recurrent benefits to homeless and low-income families. Communities can combine TANF and HPRP resources to better serve homeless families. Information on how to combine HPRP and TANF funds can be found here:

<http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3176>.

Many existing diversion programs are funded with state and local government resources in addition to these federal resources. State and local resources are often more flexible than federal sources of funding.

MEASURING PERFORMANCE

Like all aspects of a homeless assistance system, diversion programs should be evaluated based on their ability to prevent homeless episodes and help stabilize families in permanent housing. They should also be judged on their ability to help homeless assistance systems improve their outcomes. If done successfully, diversion can reduce the number of households becoming homeless, a key outcome for communities and for the federal government as stated in the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act.

Inputs and Outputs

Programs should assess whether or not they have all the necessary resources for a diversion program, as listed in the *Keys to a Successful Diversion Program* section of this paper. They should also ask themselves:

- Are all homeless families being screened for diversion eligibility?
- Is there an easily accessible entry point where families can be screened for diversion eligibility?
- Do other homeless assistance organizations refer good diversion candidates to the diversion program?

¹ This information is current as of August 2, 2011 – the date that ESG funding becomes available to communities may change.

- Is there enough flexible funding available to address problems that could salvage a housing situation?

In addition to these questions about the key elements of a successful diversion program, communities should ask:

- Are families experiencing a long wait time for homeless assistance services or shelter beds? If so, is it possible that some of the families waiting for services could be diverted?
- Is the assessment tool properly identifying the families who can benefit from diversion programs?

Outcomes

For diversion assistance, the primary outcome is the prevention of homelessness. This outcome can be measured two ways:

- Household level: Are households served by diversion assistance avoiding homelessness?
- System level: Are fewer households in the community becoming homeless because of the diversion program?

The second of these can be difficult to measure, but it can be assessed in a few different ways. You can compare outcomes before and after the implementation of a diversion program; compare outcomes in different locations (if your diversion assistance does not cover your entire geographic area); or compare outcomes for different populations (if the diversion program does not serve every population).

One important consideration in evaluating the results of providing diversion assistance is ensuring the measurement process does not give providers the wrong incentives with respect to screening households in or out of a diversion program. For example, even if a household has a low chance of success in a diversion program, it may still be advantageous and cost-effective for a community to serve that household. However, a provider may be discouraged from diverting that household because they fear it will hurt their outcomes. One solution is to risk adjust performance measures (set different targets for different households based on the difficulty of achieving a positive outcome). More information about risk adjustment can be found in the toolkit *What Gets Measured, Gets Done: A Toolkit on Performance Measurement in Homeless Assistance*, which can be found on the Alliance website here: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/2039>.

CONCLUSION

Diversion programs help families obtain temporary housing outside of the homeless assistance system while connecting them to the services and resources they need to secure stable permanent housing. A successful diversion program will improve the ability of a homeless assistance system to target shelter resources effectively, perform well on HEARTH Act measures, and, most importantly, help families safely avoid a traumatic and stressful homeless episode.