

February 11, 2010
Appropriations Committee Testimony

Dear Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, and Members of the **Appropriations Committee**, Connecticut General Assembly:

We are pleased to offer testimony with respect to the **Supportive Housing for Families Program**, funded by the State and coordinated with the Department of Children & Families. This testimony is informed by 15 years of combined professional association with supportive housing and child welfare programs. We are faculty at the University of Connecticut. Preston Britner lives in Hampton and is an Associate Professor and the Associate Department Head of the Department of Human Development & Family Studies. Anne Farrell lives in Ridgefield and is an Assistant Professor in Human Development & Family Studies. For the past several years we have evaluated The Connection, Inc.'s Supportive Housing for Families (SHF) program. We recently published the results of our research¹ in a widely disseminated professional journal devoted to youth and families.

SHF began as a program for women in recovery and their children. Today, the program aims to prevent the placement of children in foster care and hasten family reunification. SHF includes intensive case management to address economic, social, educational, and health needs, along with access to scattered-site permanent housing. The program serves families who are engaged in recovery and related services, and who are working with the Department of Children and Families (DCF). SHF helps clients create safe, stable, and nurturing family environments and attain self-sufficiency.

We interface regularly with other researchers and practitioners and have examined carefully the professional literature on child welfare and housing. Housing instability, homelessness, and limited supports increase child risk, threaten family unity, and impede reunification.^{2,3,4} Connecticut is among the most expensive housing jurisdictions in the nation⁵, and the current economic crisis is producing more housing instability. Yet, housing and child protection are intertwined systems that can play a significant role in preventing costly out-of-home placements and facilitating family reunification, resulting in cost savings.² SHF represents exactly the kind of collaboration that is needed to support vulnerable families; indeed, the SHF model has been highlighted at several national conferences as an innovative, effective cross-system partnership.

Beginning in 2001, staff from the University of Connecticut's Center for Applied Research in Human Development evaluated The Supportive Housing for Families program. We examined client and staff experiences and analyzed client characteristics, program components, and outcomes. SHF serves families headed mostly by single women (on average: in their early thirties, with two children). The majority of clients are from diverse racial and ethnic

¹ Farrell, A. F., Britner, P. A., Guzzardo, M., & Goodrich, S. (2010). Supportive housing for families in child welfare: Client characteristics and their outcomes at discharge. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*(2), 145-154.

² Courtney, M. E., McMurtry, S. L., & Zinn, A. (2004). Housing problems experienced by recipients of child welfare services. *Child Welfare, 83*, 393-422.

³ Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). (2005). *National data analysis system*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

⁴ Dorre, Y.A., & Mibaly, L.K. (1996). *Home sweet home*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

⁵ National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2008). *Out of reach 2007-2008*. Washington, DC: National Low Income Housing Coalition.

backgrounds. At entry into SHF, most had completed some high school education, were in debt, and had lost housing due to family break-up or eviction. Our independent inquiries indicate that clients feel respected and engaged in case planning. Clients place great value on SHF case managers, job training programs, and housing subsidies. A number of positive outcomes were documented. Most clients attained permanent housing, and approximately 80% moved into improved housing situations. Of clients with substance abuse, nearly 85% were drug free at exit. Access to health care improved in approximately 75% of cases. From intake to discharge, a larger proportion of clients were employed. Families demonstrated significant, positive changes in the environment of care for children. Children whose families participate in SHF have shorter stays in foster care.

Evidence suggests that the SHF model is cost-effective in comparison to “business as usual,” in which families often receive fragmented services from several community and governmental agencies. Completing the SHF program is associated with good outcomes, particularly when one considers the likely alternatives and their financial and human costs: more homeless families, higher utilization of shelters and transitional housing, more children in foster care, more time in out-of-home care, and disrupted education, employment, and health and mental health care.

We are encouraged by DCF’s collaboration with SHF and its support of program evaluation. SHF is to be commended for commitment to quality, ongoing attention to program evaluation, and for their impressive efforts in recruiting, retaining and supporting Connecticut’s high-risk families. A recent report from the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee⁶ stated that SHF had “better management and evaluation capacity” and “more and higher quality data” than other programs. The report recommended ongoing research into family and program characteristics associated with success. Children whose parents were successfully discharged from SHF were less likely to be re-placed in foster care.

The Legislative Program Review report also stated that SHF’s ability to accept new clients and move existing ones to self-sufficiency was hampered by the very limited number of housing vouchers available. Funding for this program is critical to the well being and permanency of children and families. In short, SHF is a good investment. Turning families away from this program may ultimately be quite costly, as families turn to less efficient and long-term forms of state-dependent care and lose their self sufficiency. **In conclusion, we urge you to support to The Connection, Inc.’s SHF Program and to fund Rental Assistance Program vouchers. This program sets the standard for “best practice” and, we argue, it is good policy.**

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⁶ Legislative Program Review & Investigations Committee. (2010, January). *RBA pilot project study of selected human services programs*. Hartford, CT: Legislative Program Review & Investigations Committee, Connecticut General Assembly.