



University of Connecticut  
*Human Development and Family Studies*

College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

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**Supportive Housing for Families: Research Position Statement**

We are writing to echo the concerns raised by The Connection, Inc. (TCI) about proposed changes for the Supportive Housing for Families (SHF) program, funded by the State and coordinated with the Department of Children & Families (DCF). The proposed transfer of funds from DCF to the Department of Economic & Community Development (DECD), although well intentioned, would severely compromise the effectiveness of SHF.

The points we will raise are informed by 20+ 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 a Professor in the Department of Human Development & Family Studies (Storrs). Anne Farrell lives in Ridgefield and is an Associate Professor in Human Development & Family Studies (Stamford). For the past several years, we have evaluated TCI's SHF program. We have published one study on the results of our research<sup>1</sup> and another<sup>2</sup> is forthcoming in widely disseminated professional journals 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 when children are in care. 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 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.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Connecticut is among the most expensive housing jurisdictions in the nation<sup>6</sup>, and the current economic crisis compounded 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.<sup>2</sup> SHF represents exactly the kind of collaboration that is needed to support vulnerable families; indeed, Connecticut's SHF model has been highlighted by multiple organizations and at several national professional conferences as an innovative, effective cross-system partnership. **In fact, Connecticut's model has been influential at the federal level (as we have met with executive and legislative branch representatives in Washington, DC) in recent shifts from services and funding streams existing in agency silos (child welfare, parenting, adult mental health, adult substance use, housing) to more integrated, holistic approaches with the family in the center. The proposed change in Connecticut runs counter to this trend, to best practice, and to the data.**

Beginning in 2001, staff from the University of Connecticut's Center for Applied Research in Human Development evaluated the SHF program. We examined client and staff experiences and analyzed client characteristics, program components, and outcomes. SHF serves families headed mostly by single women. The majority of clients are from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Most have completed some high school

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Farrell, A.F., Lujan, M., Britner, P.A., Randall, K., & Goodrich, S. (in press, 2012). "I am part of every decision": Client perceptions of engagement within a supportive housing child welfare program. *Child and Family Social Work*, 17(2).

<sup>3</sup> Courtney, M. E., McMurtry, S. L., & Zinn, A. (2004). Housing problems experienced by recipients of child welfare services. *Child Welfare*, 83, 393-422.

<sup>4</sup> Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). (2005). *National data analysis system*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

<sup>5</sup> Dorre, Y.A., & Mihaly, L.K. (1996). *Home sweet home*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

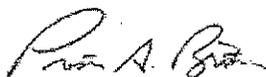
<sup>6</sup> National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2008). *Out of reach 2007-2008*. Washington, DC: National Low Income Housing Coalition.

education, are in debt, and have lost housing due to family break-up or eviction. Approximately one third of all clients (34%) come in with clinically significant levels of global psychological distress. When children are in the home, a similar percentage of clients (33%) show clinically significant levels of parenting stress. Our independent inquiries indicate that clients are highly engaged in case planning, even as compared to similar programs. Clients place great value on SHF case managers, job training programs, and housing subsidies. Positive outcomes were documented. Most clients attained permanent housing, and approximately 80% moved into improved housing situations. 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 across community and governmental agencies. Completing the SHF program is associated with good outcomes, particularly when one considers the 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 have been 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 accomplishments in engaging families. A 2010 report from the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee<sup>1</sup> 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 replaced 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 limited number of housing vouchers available. If new Rental Assistance Program (RAP) vouchers may be available to clients (with lesser case management needs) through the Department of Economic and Community Development, that would be beneficial. However, the primary DCF funding for this program is critical to the well being and permanency of children in some of the state's most vulnerable families.

SHF is a good investment. Turning families away from this program may ultimately be quite costly, as families rely on less efficient and long-term forms of state-dependent care and lose their self sufficiency. **In conclusion, we urge the Administration and the Legislature to maintain the current funding and DCF coordination with The Connection, Inc.'s SHF Program. This program sets the standard for "best practice" and, we argue, it would be good policy to continue to support it.**



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<sup>1</sup> 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.