

HOUSING IS FOUNDATIONAL TO CHILD & FAMILY WELL-BEING



ABSTRACT

In 2021 the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (NJ DCF) solidified its commitment to leveraging housing as an integral component of child and family well-being through the creation of an Office of Housing (OOH). One of the first of its kind nationally, in a child welfare agency, the office is focused on advancing the well-being of children, youth, and families in partnership with communities by providing a continuum of evidence-informed interventions, strengthening workforce capacity, and facilitating effective partnerships with various stakeholders.

As a child and family serving agency, DCF is expressly tasked with supporting the entire family, with any number of co-occurring complexities. On average, DCF serves 100,000 constituents monthly. Of these constituents, about 17,000 families receive child welfare services in their home; an estimated 3,500 of which face persistent housing challenges.

The inclusion of a housing focus within the child and family serving system is pioneering in scope for the child welfare field. The larger social service field may benefit from the lessons to be learned about successfully integrating housing assistance and supports within child welfare, increasing the capacity of the homeless serving system to better serve families – and more broadly systems integration among child and family teams and the homelessness serving system.

INTRODUCTION

As a child and family serving agency, DCF is expressly tasked with supporting the entire family system, with any number of co-occurring needs. DCF achieves these aims through a combination of direct service provision, supporting broad scale community-based prevention efforts through a network of provider partners and brokering relationships with various stakeholders.

Through these efforts, DCF serves about 100,000 constituents monthly, among which about 17,000 families receive child welfare services in their homes. Another 3,000 families have children in out of home placement. Of the families receiving in-home child welfare services, over 3,500 are facing persistent housing challenges¹. Furthermore, it's estimated an additional 250 youth aging out of care² each year will also likely face homelessness or housing instability.

It's important to note that over the last decade, the number of children

in out of home care in New Jersey (NJ) has declined to historic lows³. What this means for NJ's child welfare system - more accurately the child and family serving system- is that, on average, over 90% of children with active child welfare involvement receive support in their homes⁴.

With the number of NJ children and families being served in home at historic highs, public and private child and family systems must re-imagine and transform the ways each serves at-risk residents by rethinking the role of housing. This is especially true when we consider how to partner with communities in addressing housing challenges.

We know housing instability impacts just about every aspect of health and well-being, and the connection between housing and social determinants of health is well-documented^{5, 6}. To best support at-risk residents facing housing challenges, the approach

to mitigating barriers must be as integrated as the barriers themselves.

To comprehensively address the needs of children, youth and families experiencing homelessness and housing instability, an integrated, systemic response is crucial – one in which the child and family serving system ***advances evidence-informed interventions across the prevention continuum, prioritizes and deepens strategic partnerships beyond the child and family system, and bolsters the capacity of the child welfare workforce to best respond to the current charge.***

This brief is intended to highlight the ways NJ's child and family serving system plans to operationalize these aims. It outlines the approach being utilized that includes housing as a foundation for ensuring youth and families are safe, healthy and connected. The approach focuses on 3 key strategies:

- Investing in evidence-informed interventions
- Promoting an integrated community response to housing instability
- Enhancing staff capacity to best respond to community needs



BACKGROUND

Historically, child welfare systems have viewed the business of housing as being outside of their purview - an issue that other human service systems were charged with managing. However, we know from working closely with families that housing is an integral component of child and family well-being. The pandemic affirmed this knowledge even more.

The reality is child and family systems have always been in the housing business – albeit in fragmented and sometimes unintentional ways. We know there is strong evidence linking inadequate housing to child welfare involvement⁷. Some studies take this even further and highlight housing hardship as one of the most reliable predictors of child maltreatment⁸. In addition, research across diverse disciplines makes clear the connection between homelessness/housing instability and health problems⁹, developmental delays, academic achievement, behavioral and mental health conditions¹⁰, life

expectancy¹¹ and long-term earning potential¹². In short, housing status is a significant factor influencing many aspects of safety, health, and wellbeing.

On any given night in the U.S., over 1.2 million people¹³ experience homelessness. For this brief, we'll focus on New Jersey, in which over 10,000 people – in 7,800 households - experience homelessness on a given night. Roughly 17% of these households are families¹⁴. When contextualizing this data, it should be considered that many existing measures of housing need for youth and families are significant underestimates¹⁵. Various factors contribute to this undercount, including tally methodologies and the fact that most precariously housed families live in “doubled-up” households and are often missed in formal housing need counts.

Despite the well-established link between child well-being and housing, these two systems have

generally worked in silos to address this issue. Moreover, both systems historically employ strategies heavily focused on surveillance instead of an integrated community response driven by prevention. The current moment presents an extraordinary opportunity for systems to transform how they support youth and families – and even further, how they bolster the housing infrastructure to enhance community and family level protective capacity.

As NJ's first Cabinet-level agency devoted exclusively to serving and supporting at-risk children and families, NJ DCF's mandate expands beyond child protection to include the administration of a network of services and coordinated supports aimed at strengthening families, preventing child maltreatment, and promoting success of transition aged youth.

To this end, over the last decade NJ DCF has transformed the way it supports individuals, youth and families in close collaboration with stakeholder partners. NJ DCF is now recognized as a national leader in the child and family serving field – and as an innovator in leveraging housing to support positive community level outcomes¹⁶.



WHERE WE ARE NOW

NJ DCF restructured its internal environment in 2021 to better address the dynamic needs of communities in ways that advance equity, evidence-based practice, the integration of lived expertise and prevention. The result included centralizing the management of its housing programs and related services within a newly created Office of Housing (OOH); one of four program offices within the Department's Division of Family and Community Partnerships (FCP). As part of its strategic plan, NJ DCF's transformational priorities focus on primary prevention of child maltreatment by ensuring a continuum of high quality, evidence-informed core services. NJ DCF is committed to ensuring children, youth, families and communities have the support they need in order to prevent a call to the child welfare system. Access to housing, and related support, is foundational to this way of work. In the absence of safe and stable housing, children, youth, and families cannot focus on other basic needs or strive to reach

their fullest potential.

In service to NJ's most at-risk residents, the OOH is advancing a community-centric approach to helping children, youth and families secure and maintain housing with a continuum of high-quality interventions, by strengthening workforce capacity and through facilitating effective partnerships with various stakeholders.

As a child and family serving system, NJ DCF has access to various strategies that can change the trajectory for residents at risk, now and for generations to come. To ensure the work is approached in an intentional and responsible way, NJ DCF is focusing on the following key strategies:

INVESTING IN EVIDENCE-INFORMED INTERVENTIONS

NJ DCF cannot solely solve the State's housing crisis. However, for youth and families most at risk for adverse outcomes, who may benefit from more intensive support, the system must facilitate

evidence driven interventions that align with their needs. To effectively support thousands of NJ residents each month, NJ DCF continues to integrate evidence-based practices within the service array, where available and appropriate. To ensure the consistent delivery of evidence-supported housing interventions and related services, NJ DCF uses an implementation science framework.

Through a Statewide network of provider partners, NJ DCF facilitates a continuum of housing interventions aimed at strengthening youth and families by using the best available evidence. This includes employing practice models like [Keeping Families Together \(KFT\)](#)¹⁷, [Connect to Home \(CTH\)](#)¹⁸ and [My First Place](#). Taken together, the NJ DCF housing continuum is intended to increase access to a range of services and supports that include everything from transitional living to permanent supportive housing. DCF considers these smart investments with the ability to impact youth and families for generations to come.

The work ahead includes right sizing housing interventions to ensure that individuals who need support can access it in a timely way, partnering with youth and families to transform the service array into

one that reflects their needs, goals and dreams, and helping to build evidence about best practice in using housing to support youth aging out of care.

STRENGTHENING AN INTEGRATED HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE

In this brief, system integration is defined as changes in multiple service systems that reorient activities toward more effective achievement of shared goals. NJ DCF views working in this way as central to the achievement of positive community level outcomes¹⁹.

With a close-knit network of homelessness service partners, a myriad of housing resources and stakeholders dedicated to ending homelessness – NJ has a proven record of leveraging advanced system coordination in the housing space. A recent example of this can be seen in the multi system effort to deliver emergency rental assistance funding to households during the COVID-19 pandemic²⁰.

Even considering these factors, there remains room for growth as reflected in significant barriers to housing access for many residents. Some of these challenges - as expressed by residents and community members - include

lack of awareness about available housing resources²¹, historically low vacancy rates, high cost of living, cost prohibitive housing expenses and fragmentation of housing resources. While coordination efforts are changing for the better, system partners often still work in silos. There remains a clear gap between where we are and where we strive to be – coordinated systems integration. This is most evident in cross system data sharing. While this issue is not unique to NJ, a dearth in cross system data sharing poses significant challenge to fully understanding community needs, service utilization, efficiently allocating resources and targeting advocacy efforts. Households across New Jersey experience this lack of data coordination in various ways; most notably in the “run around” or having to contact multiple housing partners to access timely support.

Only by integrating system resources in service to a coordinated homelessness response will child and family systems, and communities at large, mitigate these complex issues. This approach offers the best chance at successfully tackling well-documented barriers to housing access, like declining affordability, racial and ethnic housing concentration, and lack of information²², among many others.

Considering this, NJ DCF seeks to deepen cross-system alignment between the child and family and the homelessness prevention system as part of a broader shift towards upstream prevention efforts²³. By focusing efforts on helping to move the needle from working in silos or surface-level communication to what Burt et. al describes as a coordinated community response²⁴; one that goes beyond system collaboration to include all community partners, working in concert to use resources more efficiently in service to communities. In practice, NJ DCF's efforts will include:

- Integrating with existing homelessness response efforts by teaming with local and Statewide public and private partners tasked with planning, developing and implementation. This includes creating new collaboration where gaps exist and deepening existing partnerships with key stakeholders like youth and families, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency (HMFA), Monarch Housing Associates, Public Housing Authorities (PHAs), the Continuums of Care (CoCs),

and community-based Provider Partners.

- Implementing cross-system learning opportunities that increase stakeholders' knowledge and awareness of resources and services; (Examples of previous peer learning sessions can be viewed here²⁵).
- Enhancing the use of data to support cross-system decision making and assessment of housing need. (Examples of this may include data match efforts to better understand the experiences of DCF involved households within the New Jersey Statewide Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).)

BOLSTERING WORKFORCE CAPACITY

NJ DCF employs a child welfare workforce of over 4,000 people; this presents a wealth of opportunity to facilitate connection to safe and stable housing for constituents who need this type of support.

In many ways, child welfare teams already support homelessness prevention efforts in the course of regular service provision; by helping to coordinate and link households to resources²⁶. As the housing crisis rages on, in recent years anecdotal data points to an increase in the

amount of time child welfare teams spend supporting youth and families in managing housing related needs. With this in mind, it's important to ensure the NJ DCF workforce is equipped with the knowledge and expertise necessary to navigate the homeless serving system and connect youth and families to resources in a timely way.

NJ DCF aims to bolster the ability of the workforce to better identify families who are housing insecure, quickly connect households to resources and work in tandem with homelessness providers to reduce barriers to support. In practice, these efforts will include:

- Strengthening housing need assessments with child welfare involved families.
- Streamlining regional learning collaboratives, specific to housing, to consistently include child welfare teams²⁷
- Co-designing and implementing professional development resources intended to improve the knowledgebase and capacity of child welfare teams, specific to housing.

CONCLUSION

Child and family serving systems play a crucial role in ensuring individuals and families have the resources necessary to thrive. Communities have proven time and again the ability to focus their efforts and solve seemingly unsolvable problems – like ending Veteran homelessness²⁸. The housing challenge for youth and families is no different. Strategies that include leading with evidence, using an integrated systemic response to homelessness, and strengthening the capacity of direct staff, all support the goal of safe, health and connected communities.

DCF welcomes written comments on this brief via email at DCF. OfficeofHousing@dcf.nj.gov by October 20th, 2023.

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