

Conferring on Homelessness

Success for Children, Housing for Families

Researchers at the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness regularly attend conferences of homeless-service organizations in order to keep abreast of developments in the field. Below, several ICPH staff members offer overviews and impressions of three important gatherings that took place this year in different parts of the country.

Hundreds of service providers, researchers, and advocates gathered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on May 20 and 21 for the 2013 “Young Children without Homes National Conference.” Organized by the nonprofit group Horizons for Homeless Children, whose mission is to improve the lives of young homeless children and their families, the annual conference aims to present new developments in research, policy, and practice impacting the very youngest experiencing housing instability. The theme of this year’s conference was “The Readiness Equation,” and workshops drew on interdisciplinary approaches to early education, child care, and family support services to explore how best to equip young homeless children for success.

The first of the conference’s two featured speakers was Jack P. Shonkoff, MD, who holds professorships at the Harvard School of Public Health, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Harvard Medical School, and Boston Children’s Hospital and serves as director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Drawing on advances in neuroscience, Dr. Shonkoff outlined the relationship between early experiences of adversity and children’s outcomes. The plasticity of the brain in early childhood makes a child’s earliest years the optimal period for combating the negative effects of toxic stress and an unstable environment.

Kenneth V. Hardy, PhD, professor of family therapy at Drexel University and director of the Eikenberg Institute for Relationships, delivered the second keynote address. Dr. Hardy described the various types of “invisible wounds” prevalent among children experiencing homelessness and discussed the role that adults can and do play in both inflicting and healing them.

On the second day of the conference, ICPH policy analysts Bailey Evans and Alyson Silkowski presented the initial findings of the organization’s ongoing research on the school readiness of young children in Head Start. The session explored the extent of differences between stably housed and homeless children in terms of socio-emotional, cognitive, and health outcomes and offered recommendations for ensuring that young homeless children are prepared for success in school; those recommendations include identifying children who may be experiencing homeless-

ness and increasing those children’s access to high-quality programs such as Head Start. Workshop attendees, representing various service-delivery systems and programs from across the country, discussed the implications of the research and shared their perspectives on promoting homeless children’s healthy development. ICPH’s findings are presented in full in a new research brief, *Head Start and Housing (In)stability: Examining the School Readiness of Children Experiencing Homelessness*, available at www.ICPHusa.org.

On June 6, 2013 the Supportive Housing Network of New York held its 13th annual New York State Supportive Housing Conference in New York City. Kristin M. Proud, acting commissioner of the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, gave remarks, and Svante Myrick, the mayor of Ithaca, New York, presented a keynote address about overcoming his personal childhood struggles with homelessness.

The workshops at the conference focused primarily on how a variety of supportive-housing models can benefit all of the tenants they serve, including families, the elderly, and at-risk youth. With shrinking budgets and traditional low-income housing in short supply, many offered creative ideas for providing robust services to a growing population in need. Several organizations presented new rapid-rehousing models they are testing as potential solutions to chronic homelessness; those include Home to Stay, a pilot run by the Center for Urban Community Services, which provides temporary, individualized and intensive support for families who have experienced homelessness on multiple occasions. While some pilot programs have set enrollment restrictions that can exclude some of the neediest clients, they have initially shown some success among the groups they target.

In addition, supportive-housing providers have also begun to recognize that housing models well suited to individuals often need to be adjusted to better accommodate families. Mary Adams of New York City’s Lantern Organization, which is devoted to providing affordable housing and personal-development services, explained how she restructured Lantern’s operations to deliver

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more holistic counseling, thereby treating the needs of each member of the family as well as the family unit as a whole. Carrie Michel-Wynne of the YWCA of Rochester and Monroe County discussed the organization's efforts to offer better trauma-informed care.

One session was dedicated specifically to mothers and their children who are caught up in the criminal justice system, are often barred for that reason from public housing, and lack employment skills that make retaining stable housing difficult. Innovative housing options such as two public/private Brooklyn-based programs—Drew House and JusticeHome—give mothers a chance to serve out sentences in their own communities while caring for their children.

Several workshops also addressed timely policy concerns. One panel held a discussion of potential solutions for New York City's next mayor to consider with regard to the homelessness crisis; another analyzed HUD's priorities for the implementation of the HEARTH Act.

On June 14, 2013 representatives of ICPH were invited to speak at the "Affordable Housing Conference," held by the Housing Consortium of Everett and Snohomish County, in Washington State. The conference covered local approaches to funding affordable housing and ways to foster the personal development of low-income residents or those experiencing homelessness. Conference participants included homeless-services and transitional-housing providers, representatives of foundations, local and state government officials, officers of local and national banks, and members of civic organizations. Among the attendees were representatives from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; the Seattle-based antihomelessness group Building Changes; the YWCA of Seattle/King/Snohomish; Housing Hope, based in Everett; and the Everett Housing Authority. ICPH director Dona Anderson delivered the morning keynote speech, and Ron Sims, former King County executive and deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, gave the closing remarks.

Anderson's address, entitled "Rapid Rehousing: One Size Fits All?," traced the history of rapid-rehousing policy, from its initial implementation with chronically homeless singles to its present-day application with homeless families. In its simplest form rapid rehousing relocates families in the emergency shelter system to residences with private landlords through the use of time-limited rental subsidies. HUD has urged community homeless-services providers to focus on families with "moderate" barriers to housing in their efforts to rapidly rehouse clients. This means that programs should not target the neediest of families, nor those



Attendees enjoy an interactive workshop at the 2013 "Young Children without Homes National Conference," held by Horizons for Homeless Children.

most likely to leave shelter on their own, but those most likely able to maintain housing independently after the cessation of rental subsidies.

Anderson asserted that despite the national focus on this type of program and the shifting of resources from transitional housing, there is limited evidence that rapid rehousing is an effective approach for families experiencing homelessness. She urged that transitional-housing programs not be defunded in lieu of rapid rehousing before the results of the Family Options Study are published in 2014. This randomized control study, conducted by Abt Associates and funded by HUD, is an investigation into the success of different housing models: project-based transitional housing (including support services) for up to 24 months; community-based rapid rehousing (with limited housing-focused services) for up to 18 months; permanent housing subsidies; or the usual care that is currently available in communities (which varies based on the budgets and nonprofit-sector activities in different locales).

Anderson's presentation spurred a vigorous discussion about the ability of rapid rehousing to solve family homelessness. Those participating in the exchange included funders, housing providers, and community service providers, who debated the influence of different local conditions on program success. These conditions include affordability of local housing markets, employment opportunities, and the ability to work while accessing services such as child care. ■

— Alyson Silkowski, Lauren Hudock, and Elizabeth Ezratty