

## Homelessness Prevention: Lessons from Literature and the Field

On February 11, 2019, Abt Associates' Center for Evidence-Based Solutions to Homelessness held a webinar focused on what we know about homelessness prevention from research and community-level implementation.

**Marybeth Shinn (Vanderbilt University)** reviewed the research evidence on homelessness prevention, and community practitioners **Emma Hertz** (Montgomery County, PA), **Tom Albanese** (Columbus, OH), and **Sara Mahin** (Los Angeles, CA) shared their experiences developing local homelessness prevention programs on the ground.

**Shinn** discussed the importance of both *effectiveness* and *efficiency* in homelessness prevention. Effective programs are measured by how well they help to end homelessness, while efficient programs are measured by how well they allocate resources to those most likely to benefit from them. On a community level, efficient and effective programs should reduce overall homelessness, not shift who experiences homelessness from one group to another.

Through this lens, Shinn noted three evidence-based models that are *effective* at ending homelessness.

- First, permanent, deep rental subsidies effectively end homelessness for those who experience it, and they prevent it for those at risk. These subsidies also have a larger-scale impact of reducing the total number of people who stay in shelters.
- Next, various types of eviction prevention approaches can be an effective to prevent or end homelessness. Providing financial eviction prevention assistance definitely reduces homelessness, while providing legal representation and mediation can preserve housing status for those at risk and may ultimately reduce homelessness. However, it is important to note that eviction prevention targets people at relatively low risk. That is, those who are at risk of eviction inherently have a place from which they could get evicted, meaning they are at a lower risk level than those who may be doubled up or fleeing formerly stable living situations.
- Finally, programs such as HomeBase in New York City have demonstrated that community-based services can prevent shelter entry and reduce homelessness in the neighborhoods they serve.

Shinn also mentioned that a few other promising models that require further research to understand their broader applicability. These include: Critical Time Intervention (CTI), which has structured, time-limited services and has effectively prevented homelessness for people leaving psychiatric institutions; the Veterans Administration (VA)'s approach to screening all people receiving health services for housing stability, which may have contributed to overall reductions in veteran homelessness; and permanent shallow subsidies, which can take many forms and offer a variety of pay structures.

To ensure prevention resource *efficiency*, Shinn also encouraged communities to analyze local data in determining how they should allocate that assistance to those most likely to benefit. She noted that every study that has looked has found that services most significantly benefit those with the highest needs, rather than those deemed "most worthy" using some other metric. She also reminded participants that while communities should strive toward high "success"/low "failure" rates, they should fully interrogate how programs with such rates are implemented. High "success" rates can indicate that services are targeting low-needs people who would not have otherwise become homeless, rather than targeting those at highest risk of homelessness.

Each of the community practitioners then presented their own approaches to homelessness prevention, concentrating on how they have tried to design both *effective* programs that prevent and end homelessness, as well as *efficient* programs that allocate resources to those most in need of them.

**Montgomery County, PA** initiated its court-based homelessness prevention program through a partnership with a local foundation, which provided funding to identify where and how prevention services were needed. Local data indicated that 60% of evictions occurred within two of the 66 zip codes in their region – a rate that was mirrored in McKinney-Vento school liaison and 2-1-1 data. After identifying this high-need area and completing a national scan of other homelessness prevention program models, the county established the Eviction Prevention and Intervention Coalition (EPIC). EPIC provides free, onsite legal representation to tenants facing eviction, as well as temporary financial assistance to pay arrears and other wraparound services. To implement this program, Montgomery County partnered with their local bar association to get pro bono legal representation onsite for all days when eviction cases were being heard for people residing in the targeted zip codes. In the first year of the program, 85% of evictions of people in those zip codes were prevented for people who showed up for their hearings. EPIC serves both single individuals and families, including many young parents.

Hertz also noted that providing legal services has allowed her community to take a deeper look at other forms of discrimination, and they have continued to learn the importance of looking at factors like demographic representation and inequity in their data. Specifically, about 50% of all those served through EPIC have been black or African American. This is consistent with racial breakdown of all people who experience homelessness in their region, but Hertz pointed out that people who identify as black or African American only make up about 10% of the whole population of the county, indicating that they experience homelessness and risk at a highly disproportionate rate.

**Columbus, Ohio** has taken what Albanese calls a “two-pronged approach” to homelessness prevention, where they lead with non-financial and diversion-centered services before targeting financial assistance to those most in need. The first prong consists of a community-based system with defined access points, a standardized risk typology and assessment (still in development), and clear referral protocols – including intensive diversion screening and referrals for anyone who makes contact with the system to ensure that only those who absolutely require it end up entering shelter. The locally-specific, 6-question assessment tool Columbus uses is still in development, but it targets families based on their level and the immediacy of risk of homelessness. Columbus is in the process of piloting this prong of their approach in a specific neighborhood, which was selected based on local data pertaining to SNAP benefit utilization, eviction rates, and prevalence of shelter entries. The second prong consists of a targeted homelessness prevention “hub” at the front door to the crisis response system. Through this “constellation of resources” (modeled after Cleveland’s approach), Columbus has programs that target homeless prevention resources to help households who meet specific criteria to avoid shelter entry. Current funding allows the community to focus these targeted prevention resources on families, veterans, and pregnant women, though Albanese noted that it could be scaled to any household type (including single adults) if funding allowed. The homelessness prevention model, in targeting families, pregnant women, and veterans is resource driven, and parallel’s the homeless system’s commitment to those populations. He pointed out that there tend to be more mainstream social services and resources targeted to families than there are for any other population, thus easing any prevention program’s linkages to these supplemental supports.

While the build-out of this model is still a work in progress, the Columbus approach looks promising based on preliminary data. Between July and September 2018, 203 families (33% of those who made contact with the homeless crisis response system?) were successfully diverted. During this same time period, 159 families received an average of \$1,366 in targeted homelessness prevention financial assistance – and 71% of those families exited the program to permanent housing.

**Los Angeles County, CA**’s homelessness prevention work is steeped in the LA region’s current affordable housing and homelessness crisis. Mahin noted that, based on LA’s Point-in-Time (PIT) count this year, about

10,000 people (25% of all people experiencing homelessness in the county) had become homeless for the first time in the past year. Many cited that financial reasons cause their first episode. With this context in mind, Mahin described the Solid Ground Initiative pilot program, aimed at upstream homelessness prevention for families living in zip codes deemed highest-risk by local data. While this program offers temporary financial assistance, it is primarily non-financial in nature. It focuses on providing case management, legal services, and mediation, in addition to proactive outreach to both clients and landlords. It is housed in the city's mainstream family services system (the FamilySource Centers) rather than in the homeless services system and uses a screening tool adapted from the HomeBase and the VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. The community chose to pilot this homelessness prevention effort exclusively for families in part because the LA family system is farther along than the system for individuals or transition-aged youth, but Mahin said she thinks this model could be scaled to serve other household types. She also pointed out that fostering partnerships with a number of cross-system entities – including the county-elected Board of Supervisors, the FamilySource Centers, a community investment corporation, and local lead agencies for coordinated entry – has been key to the implementation of this work. Los Angeles County plans to evaluate the program's effectiveness and efficiency by comparing rates of family homelessness to other high-risk zip codes where this program was not available.

The Solid Ground Initiative was funded by one of Los Angeles' Board of Supervisors offices, in close partnership with LAHSA, which is the CoC lead agency. LAHSA designed and administers the program, contracting with FamilySource Centers, which are funded by the Housing Community Investment Department of the City of Los Angeles.

Panelists were asked about the populations targeted for prevention, given most focus heavily on families. In Los Angeles, the broader prevention program serves about 1,100 individuals and youth a year, but Mahin noted that the family system is further along in incorporating diversion into Los Angeles' systemic response to homelessness. In Columbus, there is interest in scaling the prevention model up to meet the needs of individuals. In prior prevention efforts, Albanese reported they experienced a 15 percent diversion rate for individuals which, while lower than that of families (due in large part to the stronger social support networks of families) is an improvement over not preventing homelessness for any individuals at all. In Montgomery County, the model largely serves families – and young families in particular -- but could be replicated for all populations.

Shinn expressed an interest in understanding more about proactive screening for particular populations, such as pregnant women without insurance and foster care-involved youth. For example, she suggested that using screening tools for people aging out of foster care in both an immediate timeframe and within 5-10 years could be helpful during discharge planning. Shinn noted that numerous studies show that foster care involvement is one of the top predictors of homelessness. Mahin reported that in Los Angeles, data show that homeless youth have high rates of child welfare involvement. LAHSA is working closely with the Department of Children and Family Services on discharge planning, helping to bring housing stability expertise to that process. They are also training child welfare staff on diversion techniques.