

HOMES FOR FAMILIES HOUSING FIRST CAMPAIGN:

PREVENTION AND DIVERSION

January 17, 2008



INTRODUCTION

Homes for Families is a statewide advocacy organization committed to ending family homelessness through permanent and emergency solutions. We are a collaborative of families who have experienced homelessness, service providers, and advocates. Together we educate, organize, and advocate for improved public policies to address the root causes of family homelessness with holistic and community-based solutions. Homes for Families believes that family homelessness is caused by the high cost of housing and incomes that do not keep up with housing costs. We also believe that family homelessness is solvable.

The Housing First Campaign is a collaborative effort among Homes for Families, Family to Family, One Family, and the United Way of Massachusetts to find permanent solutions to family homelessness. The campaign addresses all factors contributing to family homelessness, hoping to make formerly *reactive* solutions *proactive* to ensure that more families are able to create stable lives for themselves – and enjoy stable housing.

Prevention and Diversion Strategies is the first in a series of three forums designed to look intently at different issues surrounding family homelessness. The Prevention and Diversion Strategies forum focuses on the shift from reactive to proactive measures. Some of the effects of these strategies include educating people about the resources available to them before they enter shelter, intercepting shelter admission to find more appropriate or long-term arrangements, and addressing the issues of people seeking shelter – jobs, education, children, marital or family problems, illness, etc. The forum looks at homelessness prevention strategies currently being used in New York City as a model. The research, experiments, and outcomes of the New York City model are all applicable to other homelessness prevention groups, adapted to the unique needs of different cities.

Opening Address

“The homelessness issue is far more complex than most people think.” - Tina Brooks

Tina Brooks is the Undersecretary for Housing and Community Development in Massachusetts. She serves as the senior housing policy advisor to Dan O’Connell, Secretary for Housing and Economic Development. Tina leads the work of the MassHome team and serves on the boards of MassHousing, Massachusetts Housing Partnership and CEDAC. She also serves as Director for the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), managing a budget of over \$680 million. DHCD provides leadership, technical assistance and financial support to advance the development of affordable housing and the economic vitality of communities statewide.

Tina uses the “**House Metaphor**” to re-imagine the shelter system. Currently, the shelter system is the most common governmental response to homeless individuals. The shelter system is like a big house with lots of rooms and no front door. There is a fence around the house with no gate. Homeless families or individuals can walk in any time they want, and are allowed to stay if there is an empty room.

The problem with this system is that it treats every situation as if it were the same as the others. **But every situation is different – and the goal is to find the right response for each one.** In the House Metaphor, this means putting a gate on the fence, a door on the house, and a person saying, “Hello, and welcome. What is your situation and how can we best help you, either here or with other supports?” This metaphor shows a more effective approach – diagnosing individual problems to find the best housing solutions. Often the alternative solutions are more appropriate and permanent than basic shelter care.

In the metaphor, the person asking the question represents **prevention and diversion**. This means addressing a wide range of economic issues: gas, utilities, rent/income disparity, barriers to affordable housing, eviction. **People can’t overcome homelessness until they are economically self-sufficient.** The Department of Housing and Community Development is striving to see families with greater economic stability and access to benefits for which they are qualified but do not received because they are uninformed.

The way to end family homelessness as a state is through collaboration. Models and programs can be tailored to suit the needs of different regions and cities. Agencies can integrate their responses and improve awareness of what each agency does and how they can better direct people seeking help. An inter-agency council could help monitor the work of government and private aid organizations.

New York City Department of Homeless Services

Sara Zuiderveen is Assistant Commissioner for the Prevention Services division of the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS). She is the Director of Program Analysis for Prevention, managing data collection, reporting, quality assurance, and ongoing program development for HomeBase and other prevention efforts.

Jaclyn Moore is the Program Manager for Community-Based Prevention at DHS. She has worked with Sara to analyze, interpret, and present the outcomes of an intensive study that tracked agencies across New York City.

In New York City, Mayor Bloomberg proposed “Uniting for Solutions Beyond Shelter,” a five-year plan to end chronic homelessness. The plan demands a data-driven approach, including a geo-coded agency tracking system, data matches with multiple city agencies, and analysis of the findings of the Vera Institute of Justice Study. The VIJS sought to identify prior housing sources, conditions, and precipitating events that lead to family homelessness – most notably, “doubling up,” prior homelessness, and families who do not seek help. A geographic analysis of the city revealed trends and correlations in shelter entrants, poverty, and public assistance.

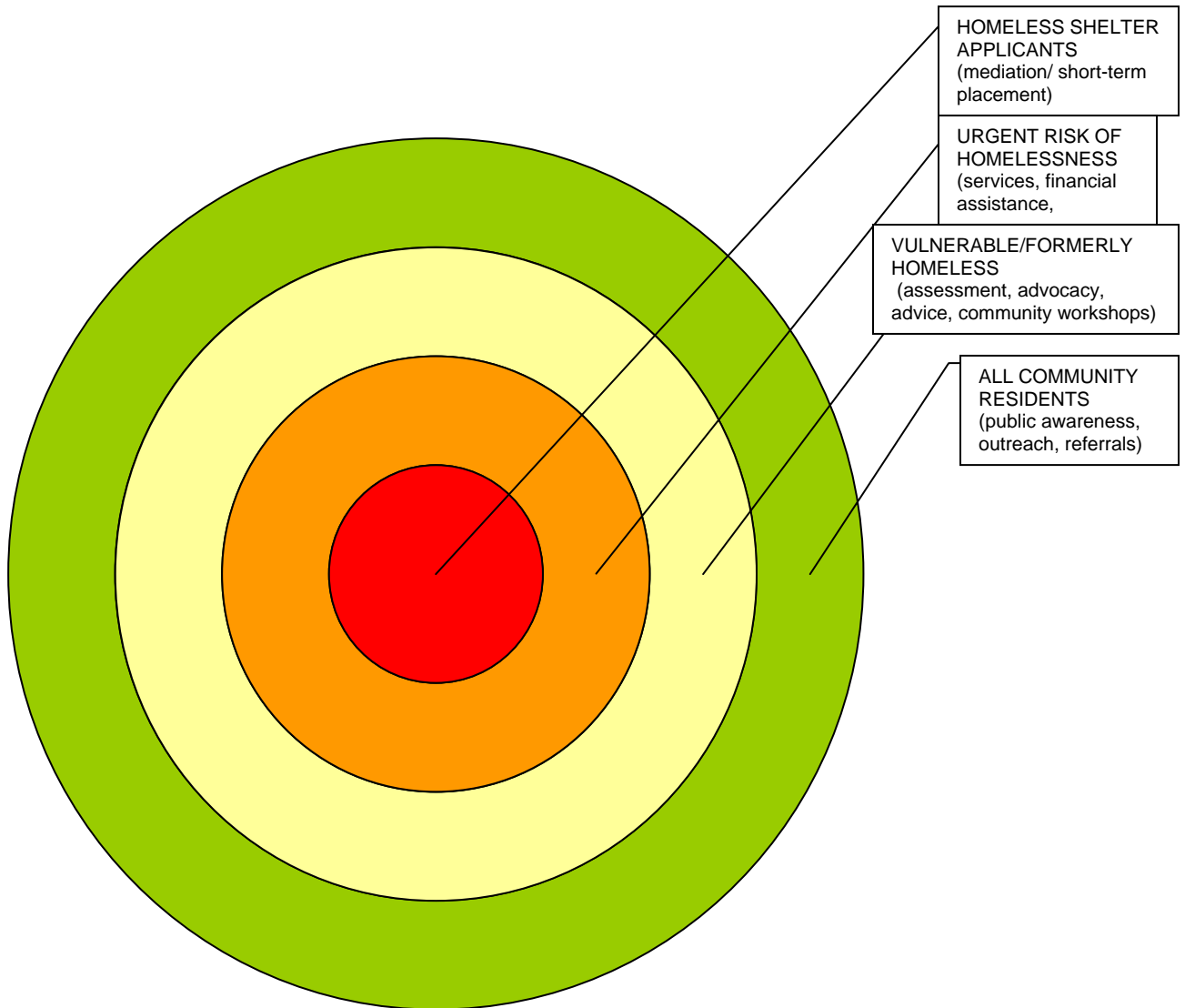


This type of intensive research, data collection, and tracking would work anywhere. Studies can be scaled to appropriate sizes for specific cities, and different factors contributing to homelessness in a specific area can be identified. What matters is that the data is used to change the current use of the shelter system, and progressively move to prevention and diversion strategies.

The New York City Human Resources Administration deals with **both financial assistance and diversion units**. Diversion units include the NYC Housing Court, Landlord Services, Job Centers, and shelter intake. The Housing Court appointed a “Special Masters Panel” to make recommendations based on their studies as to how to improve service options and intervention strategies.

FRAMING HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

The New York City DHS created this diagram to frame the way they classify, assess, and address community needs.



HELP USA HomeBase Program – Data Model

HomeBase was created around the idea of preventing homelessness and stabilizing housing before crisis situations. The first six HomeBase centers targeted people in New York City communities who were in unsafe home situations, people with shelter history, young mothers, families in overcrowded housing, and individuals with limited work and education. People immediately eligible for services were those with extremely low income and/or in imminent risk of homelessness. HomeBase helps people transition back into their communities or other stable housing environments without experiencing homelessness.

The program receives a \$12 million commitment per year from the city of New York, but is a performance-based contract based on **client outcomes, community impact, and process measures/score cards**. Community impact is assessed by comparing prevention communities to control communities (control communities = communities without a HomeBase center), and the process measures included home visits, enrollment tallies, and client follow-up.



This data-driven approach to prevention advances the work of programs like HomeBase by being able to give hard evidence that prevention and diversion reduces overall homelessness of a given area. While traditionally it has seemed difficult to quantify the efforts of agencies and shelters, the data has guided prevention advocates to the communities, targets, and services that have been and will be most effective.

HomeBase outcomes from 2005 – 2007 reflect a **positive community impact**:

- In 2005, HomeBase communities saw a 12% decline in shelter entry from 2004. Control communities saw only a 7% decline.
- In 2006, HomeBase communities saw a 9% increase in shelter entry from 2004, while the rest of New York City saw a 20% increase.
- In 2007, HomeBase communities saw a 4.5% decrease in shelter entry from 2004, while the rest of New York City saw a 16% increase.
- 93% of the served at-risk population has remained in stable housing

Quantifying the data not only helped to guide the future of homelessness prevention, but provided helpful lessons to the HomeBase team:

- Targeting: Target **people who were not necessarily seeking services at that time, but were at risk for doing so in the future.**
- Service strategy: Focus on stronger “aftercare” (following up) for clients once they have been relocated to stable housing situations.
- Performance contracting: Need to provide stronger evidence of targeting.
- Money: Dollars should be **allocated according to center demand**, instead of a flat amount for each center.
- Scope of services: Should include shelter diversions, aftercare, staff to **divert at front door and send people to stable living situations without having to enter shelter.**

Shelter diversion is appropriate for applicants who need assistance, but not necessarily shelter. These applicants are mandatory referrals to the HomeBase diversion team. HomeBase diversion strategies include relocation, awareness of resources, and access to additional assistance programs.

Aftercare is the HomeBase follow-up system to track the progress of clients. It stresses regular contact, an early warning system, and direct transfers to community HomeBase providers. The “Open House” services model includes short consultations, with transition to full services if necessary. HomeBase is alerted if aftercare clients return to shelter through the tracking system.

Advantage is a HomeBase program designed to promote work, independence, and long-term self-sufficiency. It includes a guaranteed rent benefit and a portfolio of rental assistance to address varying client needs. Clients are also eligible for a matched savings program to insure financial stability and independence.

- Work Advantage is available to clients who work at least 20 hours/week at minimum wage or more and have an income below 150% of the federal poverty level. They receive shelter for 90 days (families) or 180 days (singles). Clients give \$50/month towards rent (HomeBase pays the rest), save 10-20% of their rent per month in the matched savings program, and are eligible for a one-year extension after a year-end report on how often they have worked and how much they have saved.
- Fixed Income/Children Advantage is available to clients who receive a federal benefit or have an open ACS case. They receive one-year rental assistance while they apply for Section 8, and their aftercare is tailored to make sure they are receiving Section 8 assistance.

- Short-Term Advantage is available to clients who earn between 150 and 200% of the federal poverty. They have a shorter shelter stay and once relocated receive 4 months of paid rent.



Even though follow-up occurs after services have been received, it is an important part of prevention. If a client receives services but ends up in the same place a year later, then the services have been merely temporary and responsive. Tracking systems help shelters and assistance programs work together to determine whether or not their services have been effective. Ensuring that people remain stable once they are independent prevents their return to shelter or crisis situations. Every prevented homeless situation is one step closer to the end of homelessness.

Future goals of the HomeBase program include:

- Bringing in consultants to help with bank accounts and credit repair
- Making time in shelter productive to moving into permanent housing
- Securing evaluation methods for targeting, client outcomes, community impact, and the cost-benefit analysis
- Improving Advantage Aftercare services for employment, Advantage savings, and renewal assistance

Data Model

Question & Answer Session:

Q: How does HomeBase deal with undocumented non-citizens?

A: HomeBase provides legal assistance to acquire documentation, and has funds to return people to their home countries if they have family or stable circumstances elsewhere but have been stranded.

Q: How does HomeBase handle individuals who are released from prison without identification?

A: Mayor Bloomberg's 5-year plan included data matching in the prison discharge process. HomeBase is equipped with staff to work with the Department of Correction for special cases, and assists others in the discharge process to get addresses and IDs, contacting the family if possible.

Q: How is employment integrated in the Advantage program?

A: At the Housing Court's weekly meetings, the mayor finds out how many people have moved out of shelter, how many are employed, and how long they have kept employment. HomeBase has also set up specialized job centers for research and coaching.

Q: What about disabled families in Fixed Advantage? What happens if families are not receiving Section 8 after one year?

A: Because of the data it consistently provides, HomeBase has a commitment from the Housing Department to provide Section 8.

Q: Does HomeBase continue tracking clients after short-term subsidies end (typically 1-2 years)?

A: Yes – HomeBase will be alerted if clients return to shelter.

Q: Does DHS criticize the process of releasing clients with money and a monthly rent commitment?

A: The yearly aftercare ensures that the client will not go unchecked. Within the year, HomeBase will know what has happened with employment, savings, and rent – and can deal with problems as soon as they are detected.

Q: How does HomeBase track and address risk factors like substance abuse, violence, and shelter history?

A: An investigative process at the beginning includes questions about all risk factors, including reasons the client is applying to shelter.

Q: How are teen parents/foster systems helped by HomeBase?

A: HomeBase has a contract with Child Protective Services. Many clients are young moms, and will be referred to the diversion team. HomeBase centers have a resource room with licensed social workers to work with moms and mediate with families.

Q: Are disapproved applicants tracked and followed?

A: Even if a client is not approved for shelter or specific programs, he/she can still receive services from HomeBase and other less-intensive services.

Q: What is HomeBase's relationship with the Public Housing Authority?

A: HomeBase investigates and clarifies rules and regulations, and tries to encourage PHA to communicate with HomeBase and understand specific situations. PHA has contracts with similar assistance programs, and can work with HomeBase on a referral basis.

HELP USA HomeBase – Outreach Model

Thomas Hameline is the Senior Vice President of Program Development for HELP USA, overseeing program development and design, managing client services, and serving as Co-Director of HELP's "Fresh Start for Families" project, an inter-agency collaboration with the Ackerman Institute for the Family and City College of New York. He has developed affordable housing and new supportive housing facilities for HELP in New Jersey and Philadelphia.

Renee Fueller is the Director of HomeBase, supervising the overall operation. Since the introduction of HomeBase in 2004, she has developed models for intervention which will provide prevention, diversion, case management, and support services to individuals and families likely to seek shelter services.

Marisol Toledo-Liz is the Assistant Director of HomeBase. She has directly supervised case management staff, and has co-designed, implemented, and supervised the shelter diversion model for the program. She ensures that prevention, diversion, case management, and support services are provided to individuals and families who come to HomeBase to avoid seeking shelter.

HomeBase primarily acts as a prevention services outreach organization. Prevention helps reduce family disruption in situations where homelessness may be imminent, minimizing trauma and sense of loss for children, teens, and young mothers. HomeBase has been New York City's strongest example of public/private collaboration (NYC DHS and HELP USA).



Collaboration has been successful because HomeBase stresses the following three principles:

- Work with funders throughout the course of the program, instead of just presenting an evaluation at the end of a project or program.
- Present data month-to-month. Targets, outreach strategies, and clientele may change along the way – keeping up with data entry helps the program adapt to changes
- Flexible financial assistance - set amounts and limits may not serve the clients well. Programs do not work well as generic types – they must adapt to best serve the immediate physical and financial needs of the clients.

Because HomeBase strives to reach people at imminent risk of homelessness, outreach is crucial in targeting the population who will best benefit from HomeBase's services. Clients are eligible for services if they:

- 1) Are in risk of facing shelter
- 2) Reside in a designated district in NYC or currently live in an alternate or supportive living environment and are returning to one of the NYC districts
- 3) Have a household income of less than 200% of the federal poverty level
- 4) Have a documented threat to their housing stability

Before outreach begins, HomeBase conducts surveys to get information on the most likely places to find the target population. The survey process included asking questions to people on the street in targeted neighborhoods.



“Are you about to be homeless?” is not an effective question when targeting an area and presenting information about available resources and programs. Instead, HomeBase outreach staff asked, “Do you know someone about to become homeless?” This question did not make people defensive, and they were more willing to hear the information about services available in their area.

HomeBase outreach staff members posted fliers and brochures in the following areas, where target populations were likely to see them:

- Residential buildings
- Parks and playgrounds
- Stores and street vendors
- Hospitals and clinics
- Local income maintenance centers and social service provider centers
- Schools, day care centers, and after-school programs

Outreach staff organized a mass mailing effort to local residential buildings, made presentations to local groups and organizations, and held meetings with community leaders and elected officials.

HomeBase purchased a van, the HomeBase Mobile Unit. Having transportation enhanced outreach efforts as staff could travel further and carry more material. In addition, the van is used to deliver household items to at-risk families, as well as picking up clients at conventional shelters as a means of diversion.

HELP USA HomeBase – Intake and Assessment Model

There are several ways clients can receive prevention services from HomeBase:

- Calling for information or making an appointment
- Walk-ins
- Referrals by other people/clients/service providers
- Diversion from a shelter application

Once a client has made contact with HomeBase, he/she meets with an **Intake Case Manager**. The Intake Case manager:

- Ensures that the applicant meets the eligibility criteria
- Assesses the risk of homelessness and shelter entry
- Verifies the housing crisis by calling primary tenants/landlords
- Reviews documentation presented by the client.

Ineligible clients are not turned away. Rather, they are directed to resources available to their specific needs. HomeBase employees are familiar with other programs and types of assistance so that they can best serve clients not eligible for HomeBase services.



All of these assessment steps lead to the prevention of homeless situations, as each step might reveal ways to intervene and assist with different resources. The goal is to best serve the clients, and the way to best serve them is to fully understand each situation. An Intake Interview at the beginning also engages the client, and begins to establish trust in the program.

There are several roles at HomeBase. The **Intake Case Manager** and **Supervisor** determine the applicant's need for services. The Intake Case Manager conducts an Intake Interview with eligible clients. Eligible clients are assigned to a **Permanent Case Manager**. A **Housing Specialist** and a **Subsidy Coordinator** work to handle the housing and Section 8 processes.



TEAM APPROACH: All HomeBase employees are cross-trained to assist in all roles if necessary. The flexibility of the staff to be trained in all departments allows the whole program to function more cohesively.

There is a long list of services available to HomeBase clients.

Financial: money management and budget training, credit repair, bank account set-ups, rent payment programs, short-term financial assistance (once per family), rent arrears, deposit/broker fees, moving expenses

Educational: GED, ESL classes, job training, job placement assistance



HomeBase has found that it is not productive to refer homeless adults to employment services because many clients can't meet traditional human resource requirements for jobs. Instead, it is better to have internal employment capacity – people within the program who have job development contacts.

Legal: legal services to rectify situations that keep clients from moving forward

All of these issues contribute to economic stability, which in turn leads to more stabilized housing situations before homelessness becomes an option. Other services are provided to ensure that housing remains stable. These include:

- Household repairs and improvements
- Child health, education, and safety support
- Day care referrals
- Domestic violence referrals
- Mental health and substance abuse services

For clients whose current living arrangements are no longer viable, HomeBase provides housing relocation assistance. Assistance includes meetings with housing specialists, applications for public subsidized housing, and home matching. This is all done with the Housing Specialist and Subsidy Coordinator.

The responsibilities of the Housing Specialist include:

- Providing the best possible housing matches for clients
- Building positive relationships with landlords and brokers
- Developing a lucrative housing pool for the program
- Negotiating and advocating with landlords and brokers
- Keeping clients informed of available housing opportunities
- Assisting clients with housing applications
- Escorting clients to view apartments
- Inspecting apartments to ensure they meet subsidy standards
- Providing housing workshops to prepare clients for moving

One of the most important functions of HomeBase is diversion services to shelter applicants who are in need of immediate housing assistance, but not require shelter stay. This is a multi-step process:

- 1) Shelter applicants are encouraged to meet with diversion staff to consider HomeBase services as a possible alternative to shelter stay.
- 2) HomeBase staff then screen interested applicants and direct them to appropriate HomeBase providers.
- 3) HomeBase providers make arrangements for applicant intake and assessment
- 4) Eligible clients accept HomeBase services and withdraw shelter applications

HomeBase diverts **families and individuals who are able to return to safe doubled-up situations, can be restored to their own homes, or have resources (employment, existing housing subsidy, etc.) but no other housing options.**



Good diversion candidates may have income or the ability to obtain employment, demonstrate eligibility for housing subsidies (no felonies or recent criminal history, ability to have suspended/terminated subsidies reinstated), and have a positive, motivated attitude.

Once a client is diverted, he/she becomes a priority HomeBase client and is placed on the program's "fast-track," immediately meeting with a case manager, housing specialist, subsidy coordinator, and employment specialist/job developer. This ensures that immediate needs are addressed.

HomeBase

Question & Answer Session:

Q: How big are case loads?

A: Case Managers handle up to 30 cases, Intensive Case Managers (special cases) handle up to 40 cases, and the Housing Specialist works with everyone.

Q: Diversion – how does HomeBase handle a dire situation?

A: Clients stay in DHS housing until a better situation can be found.

Q: What is the difference between a Case Manager, Intensive Case Manager, and Outreach?

A: Outreach Case Managers engage people on the streets, and work on HomeBase awareness. Case Managers deal with a client from intake to resolution. Intensive Case Managers handle special cases with ACS issues, mental health issues, and clients who need more hands-on help and guidance.

Q: What is “at-risk” criteria?

A: An “at-risk” client is one who, if not for HomeBase, would be in shelter. HomeBase finds out how dire the circumstance is.

Q: How do volunteers play a role?

A: Outreach, financial advising, social work interns, families who were previously in shelter, anonymous or corporate donations.

Q: Has HomeBase ever been perceived as blocking shelter entrance?

A: HomeBase tries to be clear about its intentions, and only selects truly collaborative people on the diversion staff. Everyone’s goal is to end homelessness.

Q: How does HomeBase handle people who return because of mismanaged funds, mistakes, etc.?

A: Aftercare continues for one year, but everyone has a “lifetime membership.” HomeBase keeps up with people, is receptive when they come back, and tries to be productive with resources to avoid dependence.

Panel Discussion: Moving Toward a New Model of Prevention Services

Julia Kehoe serves as the Commissioner of the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) in Boston. She has also served as Executive Director of the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, the Director of Rental Assistance at the MBHP, the MBHP Chief Program Officer, the Budget Director for the Commonwealth's Department of Housing and Community Development.

Julia's comments:

- Increasing economic opportunity while providing housing is key to prevention – “change the way we do business” with food stamps, shelter service, and cash assistance.
- Goals: increase economic opportunities, reduce homelessness, and improve the way services are delivered.
- Prevention = get through current crisis and prepare for the next one.
- Prevention demands a regional approach. Needs differ by community – change/tailor services to fit the needs of each regional community.
- Utilize resources more effectively to help people earlier – engage existing organizations.

Donna Haig Friedman is the Director of the Center for Social Policy and an Associate Research Professor within the McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She is the author of *Parenting in Public: Family Shelter and Public Assistance*.



Donna's exercise:

Close your eyes. Think of the creative energies of the New York City group. Move from the generic system to a flexible system. Imagine a responsive, integrated network. Imagine five years from now, engaged with creative energies in a different way of working – smaller shelters, diversion networks, stabilized families, access to other resources. Imagine the process of change for your own organization. Imagine new collaboration. Imagine new working relationships with state agencies.

Donna's comments:

- Now is the moment to turn the system on its head, to align administration, service providers, and lawmakers. Enough of "business as usual."
- Organizational change processes are difficult, but in order to see change we will have to embrace the discomfort and tumultuous process of taking this opportunity.
- TEAMWORK feeds the spirit of the team.
- Data is not a luxury – systems like the NYC model are essential.
- Engage families who have experienced homelessness and respect them as the experts.
- Make a time/way for reflection on change.

Norm Suchar is a Senior Policy Analyst at the National Alliance to End Homelessness. He promotes effective policies and practices related to supportive housing, mental health, substance abuse treatment, health care, and other services for homeless people as well as programs that facilitate rapid rehousing for families and individuals.

Norm's comments:

- Prevention needs to happen on a national scale.
- Prevention is finally being recognized at the federal level as a cheaper and more effective process than shelter stay.
- There is limited information on prevention, so prevention programs are relying on and looking for programs like HomeBase for guidance.
- Two proposals on the table at the national level: 1) prevention to become a major part of the emergency shelter grant and 2) FUP – Family Unification Program – to combine with child welfare and provide vouchers
- Data is a core part of what happens at the federal level – people who show better data will receive better resources, more money for rapid rehousing of homeless families
- If a community shows progress over time and reduces homelessness, resources should be shifted toward prevention and stabilization.



Overarching theme of DATA – data is essential for change to show that work is effective!

Panel

Question & Answer Session:

Q: How do we engage service providers who are doing business as usual and support families who are being turned down?

A: (Julia) Right now it is crucial to understand where the resources are and bring people to the table from different service providers.

(Donna) Promote professional practice – people at the front door or on the phone need to be trained, motivated, and engaged in the process of change.

Q: How do we get state and federal resources working together?

A: (Norm) The Federal system doesn't always know about issues, organizations, and problems. Inform leaders and policy makers about problems so we can work together to solve them.

Q: Can we combine the help of all different organizations so people know there is some kind of help, even if they don't know the specific organization?

A: (Julia) We are working on an Inter-Agency Council. What is essential is that every situation is considered flexible, and that all resources are considered.

Comment on panel:

- “We need to keep long-term service and supports for families on the state and national agendas. Short-term is great, but we need to focus on long-term stabilization.”

Julia: That is the commission's goal.

Norm: The McKinney Reauthorization has already changed from funding activities in the short term to funding permanent stable housing.

