



ISSUE BRIEF

# SAFE STRONG SUPPORTIVE

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## How do homelessness and housing instability impact families involved with child welfare?

“Families can stay together if they receive services at the time of need. Families experiencing homelessness have needs that aren’t met at the community level because there are not enough providers in the community and very few tailored services to help.”

—Kimberly Mays, Parent and Parent Advocate, Washington

In 2024, [more than 771,000 people in the U.S., including more than 148,000 children](#), were thought to be experiencing homelessness on a typical night.<sup>1</sup> There is a great deal of crossover between youth homelessness and involvement with the child welfare system.<sup>2,3</sup> Homelessness and housing instability are associated with higher rates of child welfare involvement, including investigation and foster care placement.<sup>4,5</sup>

Many families experiencing homelessness and seeking housing stability services have previous involvement with child protective services (CPS). In Los Angeles, for example, 55% of parents receiving homelessness prevention services had child welfare involvement prior to seeking services.<sup>6</sup> Federal data from 2023 show [inadequate housing as a precipitating factor in 9% of child removal cases](#), contributing to almost 16,000 foster care placements annually. This may be a significant undercount, however. In **New Jersey**, for example, [more than 40% of families](#) with a child in foster care in 2019 reported having experienced housing challenges.

Homelessness and housing instability also can delay — and reduce the likelihood of — family reunification.<sup>7</sup> Even if not present at the beginning of a child welfare case, housing-related issues may arise during a family’s involvement with the system. One study found that 1 in 6 families needed housing

support when first coming to the attention of a child protection agency, but that the proportion grew to 2 in 5 families after the child was placed into foster care.<sup>8,9</sup>

A family experiencing housing stability may be facing multiple challenges, including substance use, mental health, domestic violence, parental stress, and poverty. While most states do not allow children to be removed from their families solely because of housing issues, [almost every state still includes inadequate shelter in their definition of child neglect](#). By itself, however, family poverty — often a precipitating factor to housing instability — is *never* a justification for reporting suspected maltreatment to a child protection hotline or a subsequent CPS investigation.

Children and families bear the consequences when they are the subjects of unwarranted reports to CPS, including experiencing [traumatizing investigations](#) and even family separation. Child welfare systems should identify families experiencing housing instability and create pathways that lead to those families receiving [economic and concrete supports](#) that can address poverty, stabilize their housing situation, and therefore reduce the number of unnecessary CPS investigations and entries into foster care. All too often, however, child welfare policies and practices cast a wide a net, and families experiencing homelessness get pulled into the system under the [broad and varied definition of child neglect](#).

Families experiencing homelessness nevertheless do face adversities that sometimes can threaten their children's safety, which can prompt child protection agencies to intervene. Instead of an intrusive coercive response, agencies need to offer those families timely, effective, tailored, family-centered services to address their housing needs and related causes.

Child and family well-being should be central to all human service agency interactions and support, and **families must feel safe requesting and accessing housing services without the risk of child removal.**

“I tapped into a homeless shelter to get support and ended up with more problems than before.”

—Pasqueal Nguyen, Parent and Parent Advocate, Louisiana

## Addressing the need and the role for child protection

In many communities across the United States there is a broad — albeit under-resourced and too often inaccessible — continuum of services for homeless families. Services may include:<sup>10</sup>

- Temporary housing solutions, such as emergency shelters and transitional housing.
- Short-term support to locate and secure permanent housing, including financial support with security deposits, rent, and utilities.
- Time-limited support to maintain permanent housing, including financial support to prevent evictions.
- Permanent housing options, such as public housing, the [Housing Choice Voucher program](#) (also known as Section 8), and the [Family Unification Program](#), which provides housing subsidies specifically for families receiving services from the child welfare system.

Communities also need to be supported in developing and offering services that are responsive to local needs. The [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#) aims to empower communities by implementing services, including Housing First, Rapid Re-Housing, and outreach teams. A [2023 report](#) by CSH outlines how to better provide housing supports to American Indian families that are facing housing instability or homelessness and are at risk of child welfare involvement.

Many child protection agencies are using their own resources and working with a variety of partners to address housing needs for families. A [Child Welfare Information Gateway report](#) describes housing resources and potential housing partners for child protection agencies, and provides tips for developing

effective partnerships and examples of successful collaborations. Another [CSH brief](#) describes the impact of evictions on families and provides strategies to prevent them.

Strategies to address the housing needs of families involved with child welfare revolve around:

- Identification of need.
- Coordination with other agencies.
- Financial supports.
- Non-monetary supports.
- Temporary housing solutions.
- Permanent housing solutions.
- Maintaining federal housing assistance.

### Identification of need

Child protection agencies should take steps to [ensure that families are screened](#) as early as possible for homelessness and housing instability. The **Connecticut** Department of Children and Families [screens families for housing issues](#) during initial intake and assessment rather than when the case is transferred to ongoing services. Findings indicate that this approach, along with providing supportive housing, have led to [better outcomes for children](#). In partnership with the CSH, Hennepin County, Minn., also has instituted [housing stability screening](#) using an estimator tool developed with families experiencing homelessness and families with lived experience in the child welfare system.<sup>11</sup>

### Coordination with other agencies

It should not and cannot be the sole responsibility of a child protection agency to provide housing supports to families. Rather, those supports should be [provided by the entire human services system](#) as a coordinated public health approach to child maltreatment prevention. This may require formal partnerships (including memoranda of understanding) with agencies in the housing sector and other related systems. To promote coordination, some jurisdictions have designated staff liaisons who connect the child protection agency with housing and homelessness agencies.

In **New Jersey**, the Department of Children and Families created an [Office of Housing](#), which implements and oversees the agency's housing-related programs, and works across systems to advocate for and promote access to affordable housing. The **Los Angeles County** Department of Children and Family Services' Supportive Housing Division ([One Roof Los Angeles](#)) consolidates housing services for families and transition-age youth in foster care, helping people access services, providing resources to caseworkers, and supporting the implementation of best practices throughout the agency. The Department of Housing and Community Development in the **District of Columbia** is proposing to serve as an access point for families experiencing housing instability to access Title IV-E prevention services without requiring any formal child welfare system involvement.<sup>12</sup>

### Leveraging cross-system partnerships

In collaboration with county and local government, schools, and providers, the [Family Resource Network Regional Council](#), coordinated by Boulder County (Colo.) Housing and Human Services, integrates, aligns, and improves services and resources for families. The network leverages a common application and assessment to identify needs and triage families for housing supports. Providers making referrals include family resource centers, schools, and government entities (including the child protection agency). Families are matched to appropriate federal, state, and local housing resources (including Family Unification Program housing vouchers) and have access to wraparound supportive housing case management services. The network has demonstrated shorter lengths of stay in foster care and reduced re-referral rates.

### Financial supports

[Economic and concrete supports](#) can prevent child welfare involvement. Temporary financial assistance can help families avoid a housing crisis (such as preventing a late utility or rent payment, or an eviction), de-escalate an existing crisis (such as getting utilities turned back on or fixing a safety hazard), and shorten the amount of time a family experiences homelessness (such as ensuring enough money for a security deposit).

While child protection agencies have limited funding to address housing needs, many use a portion of their funding, such as from Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, to provide housing-related services. The Supporting America's Children and Families Act, enacted in 2025, permits state agencies and tribes to use Title IV-B funds to address families' housing needs. Additionally, some agencies also work with local housing or social service organizations to help families obtain support.

**Wisconsin** launched its [Family Keys](#) pilot in 2022, which provides flexible funds to families where inadequate housing may lead to risk of child removal or prevent family reunification. Additional outcome data will be analyzed, but preliminary results suggest caseworkers are finding alternatives to removal and reunifying families more quickly, and that the approach allows for [more families to stay together at a reduced cost](#) (compared to foster care placement).

“If you want to help families, pay their rent or their light bill for three to six months to give them a breather.”

—Churmell Mitchell, Parent and Parent Advocate, Alabama

### Non-monetary supports

Many families need non-monetary assistance, such as peer support, criminal or eviction record expungement, and help navigating the housing market and support programs (such as housing, general benefits, and other financial support). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's [Housing Search Assistance Toolkit](#), designed to help housing case managers and advocates assist clients with identifying, securing, and maintaining housing, can support child protection agencies with housing search and placement activities.

### Temporary housing solutions

Communities have a limited supply of permanent and affordable housing inventory for families experiencing homelessness. As a result, families may rely on transitional housing programs that provide emergency services but allow longer temporary stays. Some child protection agencies oversee and/or fund transitional housing programs. [Strengthening, Preserving, and Reunifying Families](#), a child protection agency housing program in **Oregon**, was established as a partnership with a local substance use disorder treatment program, a local crisis relief nursery, the juvenile court, and other community stakeholders to address family stability and substance use issues for parents involved with child welfare. The program provides a continuum of supports to help families move from transitional to permanent housing. An evaluation of the program showed that participating families experienced fewer child welfare reports and removals, and higher rates of reunification.<sup>13</sup>

### Permanent housing solutions

Stable, long-term housing can help improve child welfare outcomes. The federal [Family Options Study](#) used a randomized controlled trial to test the effects of multiple housing interventions, including long-term subsidies, Rapid Re-Housing, and a transitional housing program. The study found that when families were provided priority access to long-term rent subsidies, their likelihood of experiencing one or more nights of homelessness was reduced by more than half at both 20- and 37-month follow-ups. The families also were significantly less likely to be separated from one or more children at the 20-month follow-up.<sup>14</sup>

[Supportive housing programs](#), which combine long-term, affordable housing with intensive case management and wraparound services, have been shown to be highly successful for families experiencing homelessness and involvement in the child welfare system. Though a relatively costly solution which may not always be feasible in communities with limited resources, studies indicate families that receive supportive housing fare better on a range of outcomes, including higher rates of reunification, timelier reunification, greater housing stability, and better housing conditions.<sup>15,16</sup>

## Maintaining federal housing assistance

[Federal statute](#) stipulates that when children are placed in foster care, “the temporary absence of a child from the home due to placement in foster care shall not be considered in determining family composition and family size.” This requirement applies to federally funded housing programs, such as housing choice vouchers. Some public housing authorities may not know about this statute or how to implement it. When a public housing authority does not count a child who is part of a child welfare case with the goal of reunification to be part of a household, the family may be relocated to a smaller housing unit, which violates the statute and can negatively impact home visits and reunification decisions.

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- <sup>1</sup> This brief focuses on families with children (under age 18) that are experiencing homelessness or housing instability. It is important to acknowledge, however, that homelessness and housing instability also affect a disproportionately high number of [older youth \(ages 19 to 21\) in foster care](#) and [alumni of foster care](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Foust, R., Nghiem, H. T., Prindle, J., Hoonhout, J., McCroskey, J., & Putnam-Hornstein, E. (2019). [Child protection involvement among homeless families](#). *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 14(5), 518-530.
- <sup>3</sup> Marcal, K. E., (2018). The impact of housing instability on child maltreatment: A causal investigation. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 21(4-5), 331-347.
- <sup>4</sup> Bai, R., Collins, C., Fischer, R., Groza, V., & Yang, L. (2022). Exploring the association between housing insecurity and child welfare involvement: A systematic review. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 39, 247-260.
- <sup>5</sup> The term “homelessness and housing instability” represents the full spectrum of circumstances that fall under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development definition of homelessness, as well as under the definition in the McKinney-Vento Act, which includes students living doubled-up and sharing housing due to the loss of housing or an economic hardship. It also includes families with high rent burden (paying more than 30% of household income on rent) and families that reside in inadequate or unsafe housing.
- <sup>6</sup> Foust, R., Nghiem, H. T., Prindle, J., Hoonhout, J., McCroskey, J., & Putnam-Hornstein, E. (2019).
- <sup>7</sup> Bai, R., Collins, C., Fischer, R., Groza, V., & Yang, L. (2022).
- <sup>8</sup> Fowler, P., Henry, J., Schoeny, D., Landsverk, B., Chavira, M., & Taylor, J. (2013). Inadequate housing among families under investigation for child abuse and neglect: Prevalence from a national probability sample. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 52(1), 106-114.
- <sup>9</sup> This brief was informed by conversations with and feedback from Andrew Johnson and Theresa Tanoury at CSH, and by interviews with Kimberly Mays, Churmell Mitchell, and Pasqueal Nguyen from Children’s Trust Fund Alliance.
- <sup>10</sup> The U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development and its partners administer the larger, national housing programs, but many child protection agencies can use their funding to provide short-term housing assistance, as well as coordinate services and resources with other national and local efforts.
- <sup>11</sup> Lindstrom Rhea, L., Stetzel, A., Johnson, A., Bartos, K., & Alexander, F. (2023). Identifying family housing stability: Exploring the intersection of social determinants of health, housing and child welfare involvement. *Child Welfare*, 100(6), 111-138.
- <sup>12</sup> Rollins, K., Anderson, C., Grewal-Kök, Y., Widding, J., Thomas, K., Heaton, L., & Landes, H. (2024). Meeting family needs: A multi-system framework for child and family well-being. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, p. 24.
- <sup>13</sup> Rivera, M., & Sullivan, R. (2015). Rethinking child welfare to keep families safe and together: Effective housing-based supports to reduce child trauma, maltreatment recidivism, and re-entry to foster care. *Child Welfare*, 94(4), 185-204.
- <sup>14</sup> Gubits, D., Shinn, M., Wood, M., Brown, S. R., Dastrup, S. R., & Bell, S. H. (2018). What interventions work best for families who experience homelessness? Impact estimates from the Family Options Study. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 37(4), 835-866.
- <sup>15</sup> Pergamit, M., Cunningham, M., Hanson, D., & Stanczyk, A. (2019). [Does supportive housing keep families together?](#) Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- <sup>16</sup> Rog, D., Henderson, K., & Greer, A. (2015). Family stability and child welfare involvement among families served in permanent supportive housing. *Child Welfare*, 94(1), 189-208.

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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