



Capacity, Burnout, and Trust:

Insights from Frontline Housing Crisis Responders

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family housing hardship can substantially interfere with youth wellbeing and educational experiences. It can be very difficult for families to engage with daily school activities while working to meet basic needs amidst highly constrained resources. The way families experience housing hardship is complex. Various precipitating factors intersect with individual family needs and impact an array of available supportive services. Further, school-based interventions operate in the broader context of specialized government and community-based services, creating layers of service provision to navigate. Multiple stakeholders are thus invested in the wellbeing of families who experience housing hardship, and given the complexity of family housing hardship, no organization can proceed alone.

United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley and Boston College School of Social Work established a research-practice partnership with a focus on improving outcomes for families and youth experiencing homelessness in Massachusetts. In 2021, we convened experts in the housing-crisis response sector to engage in Community Based System Dynamics (CBSD) to better understand the system of complex interconnections between housing and education. The CBSD approach is grounded in the perspectives and experiences of participants and facilitates emergent discussion using collaborative visualization mapping of the problem to identify opportunities for change.

Exploration began at the broad intersection of housing and education and quickly narrowed to three interrelated focal areas: organizational capacity, trust, and coordination. Participants resoundingly agreed that organizational capacity, foundational trusting relationships between program staff and clients, and coordination between organizations are intertwined to either help or hinder service provision and therefore shape the experiences of families. Further, we find that holistic progress is essential in these areas to initiate person-centered, long-lasting positive change at the intersection of housing and education. As further explained in our report, participants shared that:

- **Limited organizational capacity is a barrier to family and child wellbeing.**
Providers have limited resources and spend substantial time on interagency coordination to address clients' complex needs. They must distribute their limited time between directly serving families and coordinating services externally. Limited provider capacity therefore has a direct impact on the extent to which families can meet their housing needs system-wide.
- **Trusting relationships with clients are both foundational and at-risk.**
Participants identified the trust built between program staff and clients as key to improving housing and educational outcomes. Negative experiences with eligibility requirements, uncoordinated or siloed services, limited resources and other systemic barriers can erode trust and impede success. Further, times of severe organizational capacity constraints may result in tradeoffs that undercut providers' successes in strengthening trust or limit their ability to repair trust after negative experiences, despite recognizing the utmost importance of trust.

“Negative experiences with eligibility requirements, uncoordinated or siloed services, limited resources and other systemic barriers can erode trust and impede success.”



- **Staff are coordinating but burning out.**

Staff are often tasked with arranging and facilitating organizational collaboration, service coordination, and programmatic integration to workaround organizational constraints and bolster collective capacity. Given the amount of valuable staff time dedicated to these activities and frustration from repeated efforts to dismantle barriers to coordination, staff are burning out. Burnout can lead to turnover, further depleting organizational capacity and reinforcing the drivers of burnout.

Our collaborative research resulted in two immediate products. First, we captured participating housing providers' perspectives on the interconnections between organizational capacity, trust, and coordination in a visual representation (see Figure 1). Second, we documented participants' insights on how to mitigate the potential negative effects of the dynamics described above. As we expand upon in our report, providers recommended:

- **Self-care:** Despite how busy providers are, self-care is crucial.
- **Navigation expertise:** Providers should harness staff knowledge on how to navigate various systemic barriers to produce shared resources for wide use.
- **Triage systems:** Organizations may benefit from designating supervisory staff as responsible for triaging and troubleshooting resource navigation challenges.
- **Formal resource coordination:** Higher level staff can also take on responsibility for interorganizational resource coordination to alleviate frontline provider workloads.
- **Flexible funding:** Flexible funding pools help families meet their individualized needs.

Momentum is building around how Massachusetts stakeholders can work together to prevent and intervene early with family housing hardship to minimize harm to families. Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, for example, launched a Special Commission to End Homelessness. Local organizers, program administrators, and policy makers across Massachusetts are harnessing the moment. We close our report with a set of policy recommendations inspired by our system modeling research and informed by our understanding of the current climate for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to consider during this formative, groundbreaking period.

BACKGROUND

Safe, stable housing is a basic necessity and the foundation on which families can build all other aspects of thriving lives. Housing crises are traumatic experiences that very often involve high levels of stress associated with meeting basic needs amidst highly constrained resources (Duncan, Oby, & Larkin, 2019). Housing hardship can substantially interfere with youth educational experiences. School-based responses to family homelessness occur in the context of a heavily strained housing crisis response system (Marçal, Fowler, Hovmand, & Cohen, 2021; Mosley, 2021). The limitations of the housing crisis response system can have compounding detrimental impacts on those who experience housing hardship (Pruitt & Barile, 2022). Effective capacity building requires improved understanding of the interconnections between housing hardship, educational experiences, and the constraints of the services system. The purposes of this study were to draw on service provider perspectives to better understand family housing hardship in the context of the complex housing crisis response system and to identify ameliorative interventions.

Family housing hardship

Families with children represent a large portion of those who experience housing hardship in the United States. Around 300,000 children under age 18 live in shelters each year (Henry, Bishop, de Sousa, Shivji, & Watt, 2018). Shelter counts do not capture the full extent of family homelessness, however, since many more families with children are housed in precarious situations, doubled-up with others under financial duress. The extent to which families with children are living doubled up is difficult to estimate because of the lack of comprehensive record-keeping, but it was likely around 3.7 million in 2019 on any given night – that’s a point-in-time estimate of about 740,000 school-age children – according to analyses of American Community Survey population data (Richard et al., 2022). U.S. Department of Education estimates suggest that close to 1.4 million school-age children experienced homelessness, where homelessness is defined as lacking fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, over the course of the 2018-2019 school year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022a). Boston Public Schools alone identifies more than 4,000 students who experience homelessness annually (Marques, n.d.).

“Effective capacity building requires improved understanding of the interconnections between housing hardship, educational experiences, and the constraints of the services system.”

Education and the services landscape

Safe, stable housing is fundamental to student learning and to an effective educational system. Housing hardship can substantially interfere with students’ access to school, educational stability, capacity for engagement, and academic performance. Relevant factors include frequent moves and school changes, stressful household environments, financial turmoil, and trauma (Brennan, Reed, & Sturtevant, 2014; Tierney & Hallett, 2011; Hallett & Skrla, 2017). Students who experience housing hardship can be at even greater risk of negative outcomes than students in families with low incomes who do not experience homelessness (Brumley, Fantuzzo, Perlman, & Zager, 2015; Cutuli et al, 2013; Cutuli et al, 2017; Ingram, Bridgeland, Reed, & Atwell 2017; Low, Hallett, & Mo, 2017; Masten, Miliotis, Graham-

Bermann, Ramirez, & Neemann, 1993; Masten et al., 2014). The negative impacts of poverty and homelessness on child wellbeing and academic performance can persist over time, well beyond the period of homelessness (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Brumley, & Perlman, 2013; Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2016; Obradović et al., 2009; Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010; Stargel & Easterbrooks, 2022), with potential intergenerational impacts tied to future economic potential and well-being in adulthood (Van Ryzin, Fishbein, & Biglan, 2018).

While federal policy, such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, recognizes the connection between housing and educational stability and requires schools to identify and support youth in families that experience housing hardship (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022b), many needs remain unmet. Families face many barriers including stigma, insufficient funding and resources, lack of organizational infrastructure, siloed systems, lack of information, and high staff workloads (de Bradley, 2008; Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015; Ingram, Bridgeland, Reed, & Atwell 2017; Jones, Bowen, & Ball, 2018; Moore, Astor, & Capp, 2022; Teall, 2019). Some argue that partnerships between schools and social service providers to better meet the needs of children who experience housing hardship hold great promise (Ellis & Geller, 2016; Heerde & Patton, 2020; Gehlert, Hall, & Palinkas, 2017; Herrenkohl, 2019; Ingram, Bridgeland, Reed, & Atwell, 2017; O'Brien et al., 2021).

School-based responses to family housing hardship occur in the context of a broader spectrum of government and community-based supportive services. Communities must provide an array of individualized services to prevent and intervene with family housing hardship because of the complexity of underlying precipitating factors and case experiences. Interventions range from one-time financial assistance for expenses like utility bills to more comprehensive interventions like permanent supportive housing. Local continuums of care (CoCs) coordinate the distribution of some services and resources available for families (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2022). Unfortunately, CoCs are plagued with capacity constraints; qualitative data from 18 CoCs indicated that CoCs struggle because of too few staff, insufficient leadership, very limited funding, lack of agreement around how best to serve people who experience homelessness, and disagreements around which populations to prioritize (Mosley, 2021). In addition, because CoCs are not responsible for the distribution of all resources for families who experience housing hardship, they tend not to comprehensively function as core local organizing mechanisms for family housing hardship services.

Complexity of the housing crisis

Family housing hardship is a complex experience, given the variety of risk factors, individualized needs and impacts, and array of available supportive services. Previous history of living in a shelter is the greatest risk factor for homelessness. Other factors associated with risk of homelessness include: pregnancy, having an infant child, pending evictions, frequent recent moves, current involvement with child



protective services, unemployment, receipt of public assistance, interpersonal discord, and pending evictions (Shinn et al., 2013).

System dynamics is one approach to understanding and visualizing the interconnectedness of complex problems, like the housing crisis. System dynamics uses visual diagramming and simulation to explore how systemic factors change over time from the feedback perspective (Richardson, 2011). In the broader field of system dynamics, community-based system dynamics emphasizes participation and empowerment of those central to the problem in understanding systemic drivers and creating change (Hovmand, 2014). System dynamics has been used in the past to explore the complexity surrounding housing hardship and services. Ideally, families would be able to quickly access individualized services to meet their unique needs, and a coordinated partnership between invested government and human service entities would be able to respond flexibly and effectively. A systems perspective helps provide insight into the dynamics underlying coordinated responses and other challenges such as lack of targeting and prevention resources, weak leadership, insufficient backbone support, inconsistent implementation, and lack of monitoring (Fowler, Hovmand, Marçal, & Das, 2019; Fowler, Wright, Marçal, Ballard, & Hovmand, 2019). The family housing crisis response system is heavily strained and under-resourced (Marçal, Fowler, Hovmand, & Cohen, 2021; Mosley, 2021). In one study, stakeholders note the discrepancies between the ideal system and real world realities (Fowler, Hovmand, Marçal, & Das, 2019). Lack of capacity negatively impacts families (Marçal, Fowler, Hovmand, & Cohen, 2021). School-based interventions operate in the broader context of specialized government and community-based services. Multiple stakeholders are thus invested in the wellbeing of families who experience housing hardship. Given the complexity of family housing hardship, no organization has perspective of the broader landscape nor can one organization proceed alone and understanding the issue from a systems perspective holds value.

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The need for research-practice partnerships

Particularly in light of the complexity of precipitating factors and case experiences, multiple institutions are invested in the well-being of families who experience housing instability and homelessness. Universities have the opportunity to play a crucial role in preparing our workforce to better meet the needs of people who experience housing hardship (Koh et al., 2022) and partnering with government entities and community organizations to identify evidence-based strategies to prevent and end homelessness. The Council on Social Work Education (2022) is indeed calling on the social work academy to perform this important work in partnership with community-based stakeholders. Cross-sector partnerships have great capacity to collaboratively build lasting systemic change (Ellis & Geller, 2016; Herrenkohl, 2019; Mosley, 2021; Ward et al., 2018).

Current study

In 2016, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley and Boston College School of Social Work established a research-practice partnership with a focus on improving outcomes for families and youth experiencing homelessness in Massachusetts. Given the underlying complexity of housing hardship

and the ripple effects of housing instability on educational engagement, no institution can make holistic change alone. Our research-practice partnership aims to (1) improve the quality of research on the impact of early homelessness prevention on child wellbeing and educational equity; (2) equip service providers, schools, administrators, and policy-makers with research evidence; (3) facilitate provider and school use of research evidence; and (4) ultimately, promote child wellbeing and educational equity.

In the context of the research-practice partnership, United Way organized a learning community during 2020–2022 for practitioners serving families experiencing housing crises. Sessions focused on building a shared understanding of the complex interplay between stable housing, child development, and educational access and stability. Sessions also increased awareness of the school-based resources that can support housing response and the variety of existing program models that support both housing stability and healthy child development in tandem. Recognizing that these professionals have important perspectives on the factors that shape housing stability, educational stability, and educational performance over time, United Way and Boston College School of Social Work engaged learning community participants in critical discussion and mapping of the complex interconnections between housing and education.

WHAT WE DID

Community based system dynamics (CBSD) was used to engage learning community members in structured group model building activities to map the complexity of housing and education and explore places to intervene. CBSD sessions resulted in a causal loop diagram (see Figure 1), a type of map that helps visualize components in a system and their interconnections with one another using arrows to capture relationships between factors and feedback loops describing patterns of reinforcing or limiting changes over time. Activities were completed virtually over two, two-hour sessions. All sessions were facilitated by a facilitation team of 6 people from the research-practice partnership. CBSD uses group model building scripts as the building blocks for structured activities (Hovmand et al., 2012; Hovmand, Rouwette, Anderson, & Richardson, 2015). Activities used the following scripts: presenting the reference mode, variable elicitation, causal mapping in small groups, and model review). The facilitation team tailored scripts to the project and adapted the activities for virtual participation.

PARTICIPATION

We widely shared the opportunity to participate in modeling sessions via United Way's non-profit-facing resource newsletter and directly via email to approximately 175 United Way learning community members. A total of 59 housing services staff registered for the first modeling session, and 41 ultimately attended. Participants primarily represented organizations providing housing crisis response to families, such as prevention or shelter case management. Other attendees were program directors of housing stability programs or school personnel with roles focused on facilitating educational success among youth who experience homelessness.

Participants in the first session, as well as all other learning community members, were invited to return for a second session to validate and build upon the activities and discussion during the first session. A total of 56 housing services staff accepted the invitation to attend the second session, and 37 ultimately participated.

RESULTS

The facilitation team developed an initial visualization depicting the cycle of families losing and gaining housing stability. Families without stable housing experience more precipitating incidents, such as loss of employment, income disruption, and increasing rental costs, which reinforces instability. During our first session, we used the initial visual as a jumping off point for the group to explore the dynamics involved in the housing cycle, from the perspective of service providers. Participants confirmed that when families' basic needs are not met, families work to close the gap and may access services to help meet household needs, including housing (See Figure 1, B1 and B2). After validating these initial dynamics, the group gravitated toward discussing the dynamics of service provision, organizational capacity, coordination across organizations, and how these dynamics impact families. The following sections summarize their insights.

Limited organizational capacity is a barrier to family and child wellbeing

The group explored organizational capacity as a key constraint that needs to be addressed before providers can address housing's cascading impact on children's education and wellbeing. While frontline providers are primarily charged with helping families meet their housing needs, they also dedicate a great deal of time to building trusting relationships with families and to interagency coordination to address clients' complex needs (see Figure 1, B3, B4, and R1). When capacity is limited, providers make tradeoffs in how they distribute their limited time between these important and interconnected lines of work. Provider capacity has a direct impact on the extent to which families can meet their housing needs system-wide.

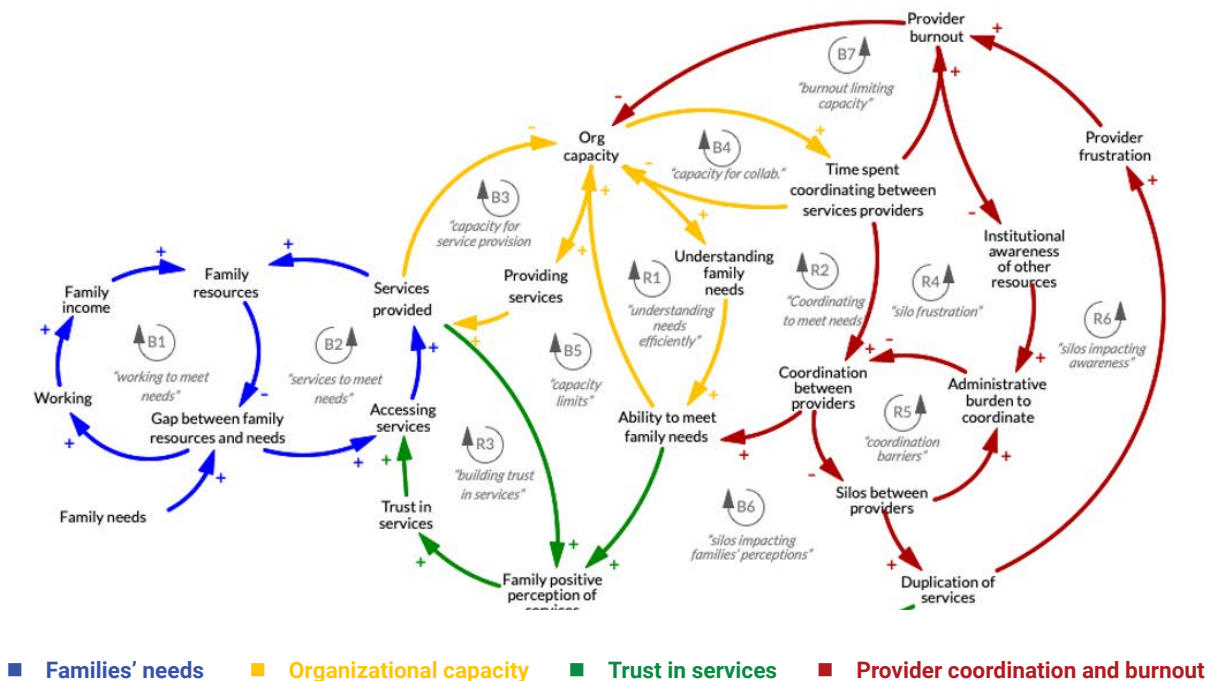


Figure 1. Causal loop diagram of capacity, burnout, and trust: Arrows with "+" indicate variables are changing in the same direction (an increase in the cause variable leads to an increase in the receiving variable or a decrease leads to a decrease). Arrows with "-" (negative polarity) indicate variables are changing in opposite directions (an increase in the cause variable leads to a decrease in the receiving variable or a decrease leads to an increase).



Families experience complex challenges that intersect with housing stability. Among them are health concerns, child development and education, immigration, and food security. These directly impact housing stability but extend beyond the expertise or service availability of a single organization or sector. This spurs housing providers to seek interagency collaboration or referral (R2). Ancillary supportive services are very often insufficiently available or difficult to find. For example, one participant noted persistent challenges locating therapists trained in trauma-responsive therapy, despite the pervasive experience of trauma among families without stable housing. Shocks to the system, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn, exacerbate these existing dynamics as providers adjust to new demand for housing assistance and supportive services.

Providers widely agreed that affordable housing, housing resources like vouchers, and crisis response services are constrained (B5) and access is controlled through eligibility criteria. Resource scarcity creates lengthy delays, leaving families waiting for resources and resorting to stopgap services, like emergency shelters or unsafe housing conditions. Given this reality, participants emphasized the importance of provider transparency – conveying honestly to families their own and their organization’s capacity limitations.

Trusting relationships with clients are both foundational and at-risk

Participants identified the trust built between program staff and clients as key to improving housing and educational outcomes. Staff spend time building trusting relationships with families to better understand their circumstances, aspirations, and challenges. That knowledge bolsters organizational capacity, as staff and families partner more effectively (R1). These relationships and positive service experiences build families’ trust in services and reinforce the likelihood that families will continue to engage with services that help them achieve their goals (R3).

This virtuous cycle can become a vicious cycle when negative experiences erode trust. Scarce and unpredictable resources can erode trust between providers and families, even when the resource is outside providers’ control. For example, one participant described cases where families waited for a long period of time to obtain a housing voucher, only to find the organization lacked capacity to support their search for housing or the housing search was unsuccessful in the timeframe allowed by the voucher program.

Most housing case management staff enter the field motivated to help families. As such, participants reported that systemic barriers such as the example given are unsettling to providers. Despite knowing the value of transparency and trust, staff are tempted to avoid sharing bad news so as not to disappoint families. Further, these situations undermine provider trust in the housing resources system, which, they observe, can be passed on to families. Thus, even as organizations recognize the importance of building trusting relationships with families, seasons of severe capacity constraint and external housing resource limitations may result in tradeoffs that undercut providers’ own success and limit their ability to repair trust after negative experiences (B3 and R1).

Participants described families' perceptions of system coordination and capacity limitations. Families experience eligibility rules and regulations, siloed access points, duplicative services, and inconsistent service delivery models as confusing and unpredictable (B6). When families find the system overwhelming to navigate or ineffective, they will be less likely to engage in services. Additionally, in the existing system, the burden of demonstrating eligibility for programs and services sits on the family who is experiencing a housing crisis. While public administrators may intend income eligibility restrictions, for example, as a way to preserve scarce resources for the most in need, families experience income eligibility requirements as systemic doubt in their ability to accurately report and manage their needs. Providers indicated that, over time, if families internalize the belief that the system does not trust them, they will naturally avoid disclosing information as a defense mechanism, which interferes with staff-client relationship-building. The lack of a comprehensive front-door to all available housing resources confirms the suspicion that the system is not transparent, equitably available, or built on trust.

“The lack of a comprehensive front-door to all available housing resources confirms the suspicion that the system is not transparent, equitably available, or built on trust.”

Staff are coordinating but burning out

Organizational collaborations, service coordination, and programmatic integrations are valuable tools for bolstering the sector's collective capacity (R2). These tools too often place the burden for navigating a siloed system on the shoulders of frontline staff. Participants described coordination of services as a slow, frustrating process requiring the investment of valuable staff time in helping families access the resources that can advance their stability (B7, R4, R5). For example, one provider noted negotiating for expanded childcare support for an extremely vulnerable family who was not categorically eligible for full time care, but needed it to sustain their housing. The provider noted increased risk of family reunification failing if the family was unable to work and participate in treatment and advocated for resources to be provided as a preventative measure, seeking to avoid a crisis that would undermine the family's stability.

Excessive time spent coordinating and advocating for resources is an often overlooked cause of provider burnout (B7). Program administrators undermine the very programs they rely on when they allow silos and administrative barriers to persist (R5). One participant described experiencing a sense of failure when unable to successfully resolve an administrative barrier, particularly given the provider's familiarity with the precarity of the family's living arrangements and the potential for further childhood trauma. Burnout presents a vicious cycle for organizations, as burnout leads to turnover and depletes organizational capacity (R6). When administrative barriers are high, providers invest more time navigating them, only to experience frustration when resource constraints limit their success, further driving burnout. Institutional knowledge related to resource navigation and barrier busting often lives with individual staff members and departs from organizations with staff turnover. Therefore, provider burnout presents a threat to organizational capacity and to effective and efficient coordination.

Participants reported that hiring and training adequate staff are also challenges. Time is spent hiring and training new staff, only to repeat the process when staff leave, which limits the time available to serve families. At an individual level, participants described how difficult it can be to combat burnout, particularly during periods of significant staff turnover.

Organizational Approaches to Mitigating the Threats

Participants shared the approaches their organization or team was taking to mitigate the potential negative effects of the dynamics described above.

SELF-CARE: Providers noted the importance of insisting on self-care for staff, despite how busy they are supporting families who lack stable housing. Constant crisis management and related burnout can lead providers to lose sight of the purpose of their work. The collective trauma staff experienced in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic has left widespread effects. While self-care may seem less urgent than resolving a crisis in the short-term, neglecting self-care is a looming threat in the long-term.

NAVIGATION EXPERTISE: One participating program director reported formally identifying areas of systems navigation expertise among staff. These include expertise in resolving eligibility requirements for rental assistance, how to access childcare resources, and resources available for specific populations. This practice contributes to fostering a team-based approach to service delivery and coordination that allows provider staff to build expertise and share it with one another.

TRIAGE SYSTEM: Another program director reported deploying a triage system for resolving complex resource navigation challenges and administrative barriers that presented greater potential for contributing to staff burnout. This involved assigning the highest risk tasks to supervisors and directors to resolve, protecting frontline staff from burnout.

FORMAL RESOURCE COORDINATION: One senior leader described allocating their own time to focus on establishing formal resource coordination between organizations, including data and programmatic integration. This was described as an effort to lift the burden for coordination off frontline providers and an effort to ensure the coordination would not be at risk to turnover.

FLEXIBLE FUNDING: Another participant noted deploying flexible funding as a strategy to help families meet their needs and address specific resource gaps. Staff use those funds to bridge a family to a new level of stability by, for example, rapidly paying a security deposit when a housing unit becomes available or securing a short-term hotel stay while a family waits for a housing placement. A secondary benefit included the trust that was built when providers used such flexible funding to acknowledge a family's immediate needs and alleviate stress.

DISCUSSION

Housing hardship is traumatic. Families who experience homelessness and other forms of housing instability can suffer dire consequences. Children in families that experience housing hardship face threats to their socioemotional wellbeing and educational stability. Schools respond to family housing hardship in the context of a highly strained and very often chaotic housing crisis response system. Effective capacity building requires better understanding of the interconnections between housing hardship and educational experiences in the context of the complex housing crisis response system. We convened housing service providers to explore these interconnections and identify ameliorative interventions.

Participants in our community-based system dynamics modeling sessions resoundingly agreed that organizational capacity, foundational trusting relationships, and coordination between organizations are intertwined to either help or hinder service provision and therefore shape the experiences of families. This suggests that investment and policy change in one area could lead to impacts in all areas, but that changes in one area alone may be limited by complex interactions across the system. Furthermore, housing provider staff strongly believe that improved resource accessibility, greater transparency, and the centering of family experiences will not only result in better family outcomes but will also lead to higher levels of staff retention and effectiveness.

The multitude of interrelated challenges housing crisis responders shared during our modeling activities call for holistic change, as opposed to hyper-focused change in isolation. Upon reflecting on the findings from our sessions and recognizing the unique circumstances in the Greater Boston area, we devised the following recommendations for local and state policymakers and stakeholders to consider:

→ RECOMMENDATION 1:

Invest in infrastructure to facilitate coordination among organizations and networks that support families experiencing housing instability.

Barriers to communication and data sharing across organizations, unclear guidelines, and chaotic, decentralized intake processes drain organizational capacity including bandwidth for trust-building, which is foundational to family engagement in the housing services sector. Some organizations find that multi-agency partnerships and integrated service delivery models can more holistically and effectively facilitate family success. However, ad hoc organizational collaborations alone cannot solve overarching systemic issues. Innovative infrastructure investments should focus on holistically facilitating coordination. Such investments might include a combination of Coordinated Entry Systems, common screening tools, and cross-system leadership teams to alleviate burdens at the provider-level, improve cross-system coordination, and streamline access to resources. We subsequently describe these as examples to illustrate this recommendation.

“...ad hoc organizational collaborations alone cannot solve overarching systemic issues. Innovative infrastructure investments should focus on holistically facilitating coordination.”



Well-resourced Coordinated Entry Systems

To make homelessness brief and non-recurring, communities use Coordinated Entry Systems (CES) to provide access to resources. Backbone organizations can be used to provide support, coordination, communication, and policy and funding mobilization (Turner, Merchant, Kania, & Martin, 2012). Participants in our sessions emphasized the promise of a well-resourced “front door for all housing programs” with a mandate to make housing resources more transparent and accessible. They also discussed a “no wrong door” approach to service delivery that would allow for housing risk screening in schools, healthcare, childcare, and other community settings, followed by direct linkage and referral to a CES for prevention and intervention services. Equitable and effective coordinated entry also requires high quality assessment and service prioritization and matching (Ecker, Brown, Aubry, Pridham, & Hwang, 2022; Dickson-Gomez, Quinn, McAuliffe, Bendixen, & Ohlrich, 2020; Shinn & Richard, 2022).

An inspiring state-level example is Connecticut – Connecticut developed its Coordinated Access Network infrastructure to implement a statewide CES through regional hubs called CANs, which are funded by state-level Community Investment Account proceeds (Partnership for Strong Communities, 2022). The main point of entry into the Connecticut homeless services system is 2-1-1, a government funded hub accessible daily. The geographic regions use the

Coordinated Access Network infrastructure dollars in a variety of ways. For most, it is the primary source of funding for backbone support, coordination of outreach services, cold weather planning, facilitation of the meetings to match individuals and families with housing, and administration of discretionary flexible fund requests and rental assistance.

Central intake models vary across localities, and different arrangements hold promise (Focus Strategies, 2014). For example, a dedicated center in Hennepin County, Minnesota, manages intake, assessment, and referral for families experiencing homelessness. Similarly, San Francisco’s Connecting Point program serves as a centralized family shelter access point. Los Angeles’s approach is slightly different; families there access shelter, rapid rehousing, diversion and other services via eight regionally based Family Solution Centers. These varied approaches require capacity and infrastructure investments.

Common Screening Tools

Housing response systems can partner with other systems that serve children and families to establish common screening tools and procedures that can be used to identify families at-risk of or experiencing housing hardship. For example, Boston Medical Center assesses primary care patients for unmet social needs using a Thrive Screening tool (de la Vega et al., 2019). The tool assesses patients' housing and other needs and is integrated seamlessly into the clinic's workflow by prompting diagnosis and generating referral guides. Researchers at the California Policy Lab recently developed a tool to screen families for risk of homelessness in Los Angeles (Von Wachter et al., 2021). Such tools and procedures can be used to reduce duplication of effort across systems and to facilitate connections with housing services and supports, including prevention.

Cross-system Leadership Teams

Representatives from community-based and state-level child welfare, early childcare, housing, CoC, behavioral health, school, and social service entities can meet regularly on leadership teams to support and oversee cross-agency coordination, set shared targets, and monitor progress on shared measures. Some localities develop cross-agency procedures to maintain real-time lists of families experiencing homelessness and match families with housing and other resources (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), 2016). Some localities also use Community Care Teams to identify high-need members across a variety of providers, settings, and systems of care and efficiently match members with relevant community resources (United Way of Connecticut, 2022).

→ RECOMMENDATION 2:

Coordinate funding and create nimble funding approaches.

Participants noted that administrative barriers and resource silos are reinforced by funder-driven definitions, eligibility criteria, and performance standards. For example, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development and the United States Department of Education define homelessness differently (Sullivan, 2022). Public and private funders and administrators can increase accessibility, efficiency, and coordination by aligning to dismantle these barriers. For example, funders and other stakeholders should consider systematically deemphasizing transitional housing and prioritizing Housing First interventions using the USICH (2016) Housing First Checklist. Frontline providers are valuable sources of expertise to identify these barriers and advise on the impact of eligibility definitions, limitations, and requirements on families. This is a necessary step to cultivate a climate with less destructive organizational competitiveness, to foster service integration models, and to build environments where trust can be passed along to staff and ultimately to families. Two particularly promising illustrative innovations are cross-agency financing models and flexible funding.

“Public and private funders and administrators can increase accessibility, efficiency, and coordination by aligning to dismantle these barriers.”



Cross-Agency Financing Models

Some states and communities use interagency models or funder collaboratives to align contracts and performance metrics, and issue joint funding opportunities or request for proposals. For example, Washington state uses cross-agency state planning and financing to address homelessness for people with high acuity needs. The Permanent Supportive Housing Advisory Committee was created in statute to provide guidance and recommendations on alignment and best use of funding for permanent supportive housing, including for the state's recently legislated Apple Health and Homes initiative that pairs persons eligible for Medicaid funded tenancy support services with housing (Washington State Department of Congress, 2023). In Connecticut, the state's Interagency Council on Supportive Housing and the Reaching Home Campaign were used to align state resources with policy, planning, and advocacy efforts aimed at ending homelessness. Having a structure and process for coordinating and aligning local, state, and federal level investments led to clearer and more impactful leveraging and utilization of dollars. The Reaching Home Campaign used a public-private collective impact approach to create a unified state-wide agenda bringing multi-system partners together to coordinate and advance funding and technical assistance applications in order to achieve shared goals (Building Movement Project, 2023). By 2019, the approach supported the leveraging of well over \$100M of state investment in housing services, as well as over \$10 million in federal grants and technical assistance, not including over \$80 million in CoC funds. At the national level, Funders for Housing and Opportunity (FHO) brought together a diverse group of funders with varied funding priorities to focus on ensuring safe, stable housing for households that are severely cost burdened (Thomas, 2023).

Flexible Funding Mechanisms

Funders can also provide flexible funding either directly to families for individualized needs or to service organizations to assist families in navigating barriers. Core components include flexible dollars for housing assistance and stabilization, health and mental health services, and intensive case management services. Organizations can draw on flexible resource pools to quickly address individualized family needs and shore up housing (Sullivan, Bomsta, & HacsKaylo, 2019). Braiding and blending are two promising techniques with varied associated benefits and considerations (Butler, Higashi, & Cabello, 2020). Flexible Housing Subsidy Pools (FHSPs) can be used to centralize the management of homeless system resources and allow for a more strategic and nimble funding. In Los Angeles County, California, cross-sector partners launched a FHSP for those experiencing homelessness and with complex physical and behavioral health conditions. In addition to a rental subsidy, clients received intensive case management, supportive service and move-in assistance. The County significantly accelerated the rate of housing placements for the target population (Homelessness Policy Research Institute, 2018).

→ RECOMMENDATION 3:

Recenter family voice in the design of organization and service experiences.

The lived experience of families is a fundamental component of effective program and system design. Recentering lived experience and family voice should occur at the individual and collective level. Individual families should have a say in shaping their own experience with services. The collective experience of how families and providers navigate the service landscape should inform holistic change. Developing structures and processes that provide family members the means to share their stories and challenges with provider staff and decision makers is one way to learn from families and inform programs and policies. Providers and their vast experience with coordination, service provision and current systemic barriers also have a unique perspective to offer in how to make family-first experiences and systems work. Two illustrative strategies are person-centered planning to transform the individual experience and human-centered service design to create change at the collective level.

“Recentering lived experience and family voice should occur at the individual and collective level. Individual families should have a say in shaping their own experience with services.”

Person-Centered Planning

Person-centered planning places the individual or family being served in charge of strategizing, decision-making, and goal setting. Stakeholders might draw on lessons learned in the conceptualization and implementation of person-centered planning techniques in the housing services response system and beyond (e.g., Canfield et al., 2016; Chenoweth et al., 2019; Gřundělová & Stanková, 2020; Herbers, Cutuli, Keane, & Leonard, 2020; Kogan, Wilber, & Mosqueda, 2016; Lo et al., 2021).

Human-Centered Service Design

Human-centered service design places the “end user” at the center designing the service experience. Popularized by businesses to improve customer experience to achieve their business outcomes, human-centered design is an approach to understanding real people’s perspectives, preferences, and pain points in designing more desirable products or services. It can also include engaging those who will provide the solution to ensure implementation considerations are incorporated. There are early signs of the approach gaining traction in human services to engage people utilizing services to improve the experience and redesign the supporting infrastructure. For example in San Francisco, the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing partnered with a human-centered design firm to improve the experience of people aging in place in permanent supportive housing (Phillips, 2023). In Seattle, WA, the King County-based Lived Experience Coalition centers the voices and decision making of people who have experienced homelessness in all systems change and coordination efforts, including in the creation of the King County Housing Command Center, “a central emergency operations system to coordinate and streamline the actions needed to house people” (United Way of King County, 2022). The Action Hub model is another promising human-centered design approach. Youth who have experienced housing hardship in Connecticut are leaders, researchers, and policy advocates via the Institute for Community Research Youth Action Hub (2023).

→ RECOMMENDATION 4:

Streamline, coordinate, and enhance administrative data collection and utilization to improve system performance and outcomes.

Data is central. Data enables us to understand the needs of families experiencing homelessness, identify and prioritize families for housing and services, evaluate impact, and design the most effective strategies to meet family needs. Better utilization of data on family homelessness, including demographic characteristics and service needs can validate and build on family voice to identify opportunities to meet service needs in ways that drive capacity, trust, and coordination. Communities might consider further harnessing information currently collected, as well as developing new performance metrics and systems.

Harness Administrative Data to Facilitate Cross-System Communication

Existing administrative data can be utilized to support a variety of data-driven cross-system communication strategies, such as public data dashboards to track shared measures, and the development of By Name Lists that identify households experiencing homelessness in real-time to target specific support or interventions. Major funders and administrators of state and local public systems and services can also facilitate cross systems coordination and data sharing. For example, the Massachusetts state Medicaid agency engaged in a one-time data match with the City of Boston's CoC who shared its By-Name List of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness (Medicaid Innovation Accelerator Program, 2018). Information pertaining to members' Medicaid coverage status, service use, and costs was used to help the state identify high utilizers of health care service and engage healthcare representatives in partnerships to facilitate high quality service. Innovative privacy-preserving data matching techniques (e.g., Fu et al., 2022) are available for consideration.

Develop New Performance Metrics and Evaluation Systems

Practitioners and agency administrators can work with stakeholders, including those with lived experience, to cocreate monitoring and evaluation plans, understand gaps and needs in data collection systems, implement new information gathering tools, and set in motion utilization plans. Data can be utilized at the individual, family, program, and system levels to understand experiences, monitor service plan activity, inform decision making, and track success. Data can also facilitate assessments of equity in access to resources to remove bias. The "report card" method is one promising way for system-level planners and administrators to monitor progress (Austen & Pauly, 2012).





CONCLUSION

In 2021, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley and Boston College School of Social Work convened experts in the housing-crisis response sector to engage in mapping the complexity of housing, education and child wellbeing using a community-based system dynamics approach. What began at the broad intersection of housing and education quickly focused on three key areas: organizational capacity, foundational trusting relationships, and coordination between organizations. Participants agreed that progress must be made in these areas holistically in the pursuit of virtuous, person-centered change. This report synthesizes insights from housing-crisis responders and delineates a set of recommendations situated in our findings, as well as in the current Massachusetts policy and program environment. Future studies will engage education staff and stakeholders more directly and revisit the role of the education system.

The authors want to thank the providers who contributed their insights. Some participants shared that they are rarely asked for their insights in the context of program planning or public policy development. They expressed gratitude for the opportunity to map the resource landscape from their perspective. Providers' on-the-ground knowledge of families' experiences across systems represents an invaluable resource for enhancing program quality and clarity, fostering trust and engagement when sustained over time.

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