

No Place Like Home



By Carrie McVicker Seth and Ruth White

As a child, Lynn faced an array of unseemly options. Her neighborhood offered all that her overwhelmed, single mother tried to shelter her from—crime, poverty, and drugs. By the time she was 15, Lynn had dropped out of school and left home, angered by her mother's inability to provide enough money for rent, food, or clothes.

On the streets, Lynn developed a drug and alcohol addiction that would continue for years. She also gave birth to three children, each of whom was quickly removed by the child welfare agency and placed in her grandmother's care. But when her grandmother died suddenly, the children were moved into three separate foster homes.

Remarkably, Lynn retained a sense of hope, tempered only by the realization that her poor choices might be irreversible. A pastor at her mother's church detected this spark of hope and offered to bring Lynn to a detoxification program. After 12 years of addiction and six months of the pastor's prodding, Lynn entered detox and, ultimately, a residential treatment program.

At 30, Lynn had six months of sobriety, a job, and a relationship with her three children, ages 5, 7, and 12. Still, reunification with her children was in jeopardy because of her inability to provide for their needs. To obtain permanent custody of her children, she would need a job, supportive services, and a housing subsidy.

Lynn found a part-time job at a local dry cleaner. Soon, an opportunity to regain full custody of her children presented itself. But there was still the issue of housing stability—how

could she afford a three-bedroom apartment on minimum wage? Would a judge reunify her children without adequate housing? Would she now be responsible for getting the family to school, appointments, and parenting classes? Could all of this progress be undone because of a housing barrier and lack of supportive services?

Thousands of families in the child welfare system experience this dilemma annually. Three separate studies have shown that as many as 30% of children in foster care could be reunited with their parents if safe, affordable housing were available.¹

The separation of families due solely to a lack of supportive housing is costly both in human terms and to taxpayers. The average family in the child welfare system has two to three children. Keeping the children of one family of this size in foster care costs \$47,608 annually. Nationally, the average cost of a permanent housing subsidy and supportive services for the same family is about \$9,000 per year.

Through innovative local partnerships, communities nationwide have acted upon this funding disconnect, shifting more resources toward combating the economic barriers to reunification such as child care, transportation, and housing.

Thankfully, this was the case in Lynn's community. Through a partnership between the treatment program, the local child welfare agency, and the local public housing authority, the community offered Lynn a housing subsidy and the supportive services she needed to make reunification with her children a success. In a few weeks, Lynn's oldest child will graduate from high school—and so will Lynn.

Supportive Housing for Families, Hennepin County, Minnesota,



EMERGING PRACTICE

Quasi-experimental study, a correlational or ex post facto study, posttest only, single group pre- and posttest, comparison group.²



CFPSR OUTCOME AREA—CHILD PERMANENCE

- Permanency and stability in children's living situation
- Preservation and continuity of family relationships and connections³

Can supportive housing and intensive case management ultimately decrease families' use of crisis services? Would costs shift from crisis to preventative services? These were questions Hennepin County (Minneapolis), Minnesota, wanted to explore. A November 2001 county housing survey showed alarming trends: One-third of families in contact with child protection were not living in their own homes.

Housing barriers for these families included prior evictions, many children in the family, criminal histories, and no local rental history, making it difficult for families to compete for limited housing. Families without stable housing were more

likely to use crisis services such as substance abuse treatment, child protection intervention, and foster care.

Hennepin County wanted to offer families supports like child care assistance, mental health treatment, early childhood services, and guidance in living skills that would reduce the need for crisis services and lead to greater stability.

"Our mission in Hennepin County is to enhance the health, safety, and quality of life of our residents and communities," says Gail Dorfman, Vice Chair of the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners. "Supportive housing is a creative, successful, and cost-effective way to end homelessness for individuals and families. The stability and success of our residents is in everyone's best interest."

In 2002, Hennepin County contracted with RS Eden, a private agency that offers substance abuse recovery, accountability, and support services. RS Eden's Portland Village, a 24-unit sober, supportive housing complex in Minneapolis, provides onsite case management and support services for families experiencing homelessness and substance abuse. Specific services include case management, relapse prevention, family and individual counseling, and educational and vocational referrals. Youth programming includes an onsite Head Start center, help with homework, field trips, and activities for teens.

The county's Children, Family, and Adult Services Department funds half of Portland Village's services. The other half comes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Supportive Housing Program. Families living at Portland Village receive Section 8 rental subsidies.


The first 24 families moved into Portland Village in December 2000 and January 2001. In the first year, 15 remained for the entire year or longer, including one family who left after securing their own housing. Nine families left due to relapse or other reasons; five families replaced them, and four more arrived too late to be included in the research.

Hennepin County's evaluation of Portland Village concentrated on service use and shifts of county funds from crisis to preventative services. Five families had extremely high costs for crisis service (substance abuse treatment, child foster care, and child protection services) a year before moving into Portland Village.

In the first year at Portland Village, crisis service costs declined \$142,000, from \$204,000 to \$62,000, while costs for preventive and supportive service (besides the cost of the contract) increased \$81,000, from \$57,000 to \$138,000. The most dramatic savings was in the reduction of child foster care payments, which declined from \$99,787 to \$26,205 while the families lived at Portland Village.

Economic assistance for families in the program increased somewhat, which might be attributed to an increase in the

number of children in individual households (through pregnancy or family reunification, for example). Overall, the biggest savings came from those same five families who had the highest crisis service costs when they entered the program.

Summing up Hennepin County's program, Dan Engstrom, Assistant Administrator for Human Services, says, "A safe and stable living environment is a basic need and serves as a foundation for a strong community. Portland Village is a successful example of using supportive housing resources to increase stability for families who have had difficulty maintaining housing in the past, while improving child well-being." 

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1. Yvonne A. Doerre and Lisa Klee Mihaly. (1996). *Home Sweet Home*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press; John M. Hagedorn, J.M. (1995). *Forsaking Our Children: Bureaucracy and Reform in the Child Welfare System*. Chicago: Lake View Press; Emerich Thoma. (1998). *If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home Now: The Business of Foster Care. Issues In Child Abuse Accusations*, 10. Retrieved November 6, 2003, from the Institute for Psychological Therapies website at www.ipt-forensics.com/journal/volume10/j10_10.htm.
2. Each program highlighted by the Research to Practice Initiative (R2P) is supported by research. For more information on the levels of research, visit the R2P website at www.cwla.org/programs/r2p, or e-mail R2P at R2P@cwla.org.
3. By identifying practices and programs that research has shown to be successful in the outcome areas associated with the federally mandated Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), R2P seeks to help states explore the evidence base for improving their programs. For more information, see "Many Efforts, One Voice," *Children's Voice*, January/February 2004, or visit the R2P website at www.cwla.org/programs/r2p or e-mail R2P@cwla.org.



Scenes from Portland Village (clockwise from left): Residents mug for the camera, kids receive homework help, housing built around playgrounds.