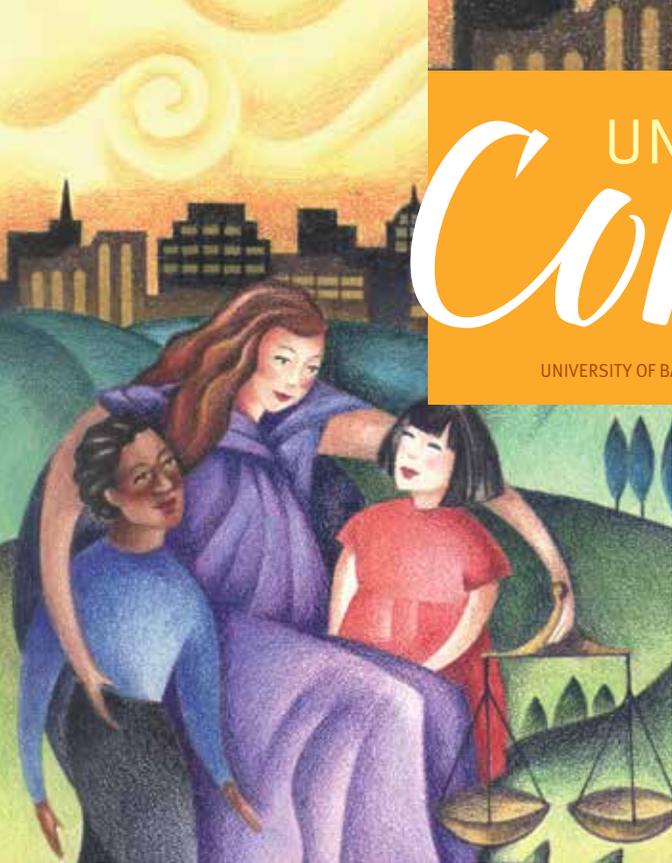


Connection

UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE SCHOOL OF LAW ■ SAYRA AND NEIL MEYERHOFF CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND THE COURTS



Homelessness and housing insecurity threaten the health, well-being and long-term success of urban children and youth.

A recent study has found that on any given night, 17 percent of the U.S. population is experiencing homelessness, including an estimated 1.4 million students enrolled in school. The overall number of homeless people has increased almost one percent between 2016 and 2017, with the largest percentage increase among unaccompanied children and youth.

In this issue of the Unified Family Court Connection, we offer a variety of perspectives on the issue of homelessness and children.

- **Peter Edelman, Esq.**, the Carmack Waterhouse Professor of Law and Public Policy and the faculty director of the Center on Poverty and Inequality at the Georgetown Law Center, discusses how homelessness advocates must join to create justice for the homeless.
- **Rexanah P. Wyse, Esq.** serves as the policy and program analyst for the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and writes about how homelessness is a solvable systemic issue.
- **Rebecca Lorick**, the program director of My Sister's Place, a day resource center for homeless women and children in Baltimore City, offers a first-person perspective on homelessness.
- **Barbara Samuels**, the managing attorney of the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland's Fair Housing program, writes about importance of safe and stable housing for early child development and lifelong well-being.

The Time to Rally for Homeless Children Is Now

BY PETER EDELMAN

These days, we wake up all too regularly to learn about more horrible mistreatment of children who are with their family or unaccompanied and seek to come to our country from Mexico or elsewhere. Human rights attorneys and others call out the shocking abuse, the media cover it, and people respond with outrage and sympathy, as they all should.

How about outrage regarding homeless children? Not so much. Despite the dedicated people who work with homeless children, the daily number is much larger than what is happening on the border. Has our country lost our outrage about it? Have we let the problem get out of hand as the decades have gone by? It is troubling.

Homeless children should be canaries that tell us of the gas in the mine, as should the children at the borders. But they are not functioning that way.

Homeless children. We know the damage. The research that has been done, if any, was needed. With no home, it is nearly impossible for a person to get or keep a job, cope with health issues, or participate in school. The result: continuing poverty, trauma, mental and physical illness, unsatisfactory education, and lives often damaged for life. Not having a home wrecks everything.

The fate of homeless children is too often the prototypical perfect storm. In too many places, every system falls short.

It's far from a 100 percent disaster everywhere. Some states and cities do work hard to prevent evictions before they happen, with preventive services and attorneys to defend people to fight the evictions. Some communities do pursue "Housing First" - supportive housing - which is crucial. Some school systems do keep children in their home schools if at all possible. Some places do provide accessible health and behavioral health services and other family supports.

We know what works for those already homeless: first, above the rest, is housing stability. Without it, nothing works. With it, the chances of making things better are substantial. And even more effective would be preventing the eviction from taking place at all.

That said, I cannot imagine that anyone reading this does not know everything I have said. Take the suggestions from the National Alliance to End Homelessness: "A community-wide approach to delivering services, housing, and programs is needed. Programs designed to assist low-income people increase their income are critical to supporting housing stability." Or this from the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness: "Reduce the risk of housing crises," with housing, health and behavioral health resources, education, employment, economic mobility, child care, and legal assistance. These are all correct.

And yet, there is a sense of flatness to these suggestions. Certainly, the ideas - fully developed and financed - would make a difference, and some states and communities do well and would do more if they could get more resources. In too many places, however, the suggested steps are more rhetoric than three-dimensional working action plans. Doing what the best does, and doing it fully funded, would make a great difference.

There is a bigger frame that we need to pursue. While strategic approaches do exist concerning homelessness and are making a difference, they are not going to create change at the scale necessary unless we find a way to do two things - a national campaign to end poverty and near-poverty themselves, and the accompanying politics to go with that campaign.

In addition, I wonder whether some of the current suggestions of the National Alliance to End Homelessness are actually helpful. The Alliance offers the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as a strategy to help with financial problems and the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) helps with employment and says that “child care and transportation assistance can also have a big impact on whether or not a household can sustain employment.”

I do not want to fault anyone because of what they said on their websites, but these programs are significantly underfinanced down to nearly useless. TANF reaches fewer than three million people, fewer than 1 percent of the population. More than half of the states serve less than 20 percent of children living in families in poverty. Four states—Texas, North Carolina, Wyoming, and Mississippi—serve fewer than 5 percent of children living in families in poverty. TANF barely exists in most states. Consequently, seven million people have no income other than SNAP. Federally-funded child care reaches only one in six people who qualify for it. WIOA reaches a modest number of people who receive jobs with its funds. We should be shouting from the rooftops that these programs go from serious underfunding to downright awful.

Perhaps I’m taking this point out of context, and I know that state and local coalitions work hard for resources that make a difference, but I wonder if we are setting our goals high enough. Without diminishing efforts for funding specific to reducing homelessness, I would suggest a bigger tent as well.

For example, the pending American Family Act is a bill that would give cash assistance, beginning with families without income. With the change in the majority of the House of Representatives, we are seeing important new proposals, and this is one of them. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, (D-Conn.), Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), and Sen. Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) have sponsored the bill. The legislation creates an income floor, using the Child Tax Credit, and it provides \$3,600 for each child from birth to six, and \$3,000 a year for each child aged six to sixteen. Coupled with SNAP, a family of three would get a little over \$15,000. That is not over the poverty line, but it is a major improvement over the current situation.

It has 181 sponsors in the House and 37 in the Senate. It would remove 40 percent of the children now in poverty. People concerned with homeless children should urge their Senators and Representative to join as co-sponsors of the bill.

Another important bill, the ELEVATE Act, which is sponsored by Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Rep. Danny Davis (D-IL), provides six months of subsidized employment to help people with a transition on their way to long-term work. Again, this would be a significant help to the homeless.

Two major bills on child care have been introduced, one by Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) and Rep. Bobby Scott (D-Va.) and the other by Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.). Interested people should express their support for both bills.

These and many other relevant new bills constitute an excellent set of possibilities for change. Homelessness advocates should jump in if they have not already.

The bigger point is to tie together everything that relates to income - from low wages to people who have no income—and include the homeless. Economic justice for all. Tying all of that together encompasses more than 100 million people. With proper packaging and messaging, I believe there are people who could become a major bloc to help move this mission forward. With leadership, unions, faith-based entities, identity, and other groups should join forces to support fair and just economics, an approach that fully includes those who are at the economic bottom.

This is a time of opportunity for change. More than ever in recent decades, homelessness advocates need to join with a new power to create justice for the homeless.



Peter Edelman is the Carmack Waterhouse Professor of Law and Public Policy and the faculty director of the Center on Poverty and Inequality at the Georgetown Law Center. His most recent book is “Not a Crime to Be Poor: The Criminalization of Poverty in America,” for which he received the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award.

Ending Homelessness Involves Systematic Collaboration

BY REXANAH P. WYSE

As we look to the future, where is the hope to end homelessness - especially among youth, young adults, and families with children?

Over 1.3 million students experienced homelessness during the 2016-17 school year, according to the National Center for Homelessness Education’s Federal Data Summary of Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) report. (<https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Federal-Data-Summary-SY-14.15-to-16.17-Final-Published-2.12.19.pdf>). This is an approximate increase of 92,400 students over a three-year period. During the 2014-15 school year, there were over 1.2 million students reported as experiencing homelessness.

These numbers are astounding. Thankfully, homelessness is a solvable systemic issue.

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) leads national efforts to prevent and end homelessness across the country. USICH drives action among the 19 federal member agencies that comprise our Council and fosters the efficient use of resources in support of best practices at every level of government and the private sector. USICH leads interagency working groups to design and implement federal strategies and provides expert guidance that empowers communities to end homelessness.

In July 2018, *Home, Together: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* was published. *Home, Together* provides the blueprint for how federal Council member agencies are prioritizing work toward ending and preventing homelessness across the country during the next four years.

POLICY-LEVEL SOLUTIONS

Home, Together outlines strategies communities and partners can focus on to ensure individuals and families have the critical stability of home. Success in doing this work involves:

1. Building robust, coordinated systems, where everyone is communicating and sharing with stakeholders;
2. Preventing homelessness where we can through social supports, eviction prevention, etc.;
3. Diverting people in crisis back to stability when able;
4. Identifying people who are experiencing homelessness and getting those individuals quickly connected to housing;
5. Garnering support across systems such as education, health care, justice, behavioral health, etc.; and
6. Increasing affordable housing opportunities.

These elements together will allow for homelessness to be a rare, brief, and one-time experience.

Additionally, after hearing from our state and local partners, we alongside our federal member agencies decided to focus our actions on the following priorities in 2019:

- Identifying and implementing strategies to better align affordable housing with efforts to end homelessness.
- Supporting communities to test and scale the strongest practices for addressing unsheltered homelessness while retaining focus on permanent housing outcomes.
- Strengthening skills and capacity to center racial equity across efforts to prevent and end homelessness, both within USICH and in communities.
- Strengthening connections and coordination between homelessness services systems, workforce systems, and employment opportunities.
- Supporting increased access to and retention within high-quality education programs, including quality child care and early childhood education through elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education.
- Expanding our efforts to partner with and learn from the expertise of people with lived experiences of homelessness.

<https://www.usich.gov/news/school-year-2016-2017-data-shows-majority-of-students-experiencing-homelessness-sharing-housing-of-others-but-unsheltered-numbers-increasing>

SYSTEM PARTNERS

System partners also are integral to the work to ending homelessness at the policy-level. Our federal and national partners have been working collaboratively to create space for innovative solutions that prevent and end homelessness among youth and young adults. An example of this collaborative effort is the creation of the Criteria and Benchmarks for achieving the end of youth homelessness. <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/criteria-and-benchmarks-for-ending-youth-homelessness>

Modeled after the Veterans Criteria and Benchmarks, this tool provides a complete picture and an ongoing assessment of a community's response to homelessness. This tool is intended to assist communities to drive down the number of unaccompanied youths experiencing homelessness. During the 2018-2019 period, more than 20 communities participated in the pilot of the Criteria and Benchmarks for the youth homelessness and family homelessness space combined.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has been implementing the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) since 2017. YHDP is a HUD funded demonstration program that provides a pathway for communities to bring together traditional and nontraditional partners in planning and implementing a coordinated community approach to address and end youth homelessness. HUD will award \$75 million dollars for a two-year grant to support up to 25 communities this year under FY 2018 funding. Congress allocated this money as a result of the data demonstrating that communities know what they are doing and can undertake innovative work to build a coordinated response to end youth homelessness.

In 2016, the United States Health and Human Services, Family and Youth Services Bureau provided funding to nine organizations through the Transitional Living Program Special Population Demonstration Project https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/federal-national-youth-initiatives-APRIL-2018.pdf to engage in work for transitioning age youth and young adults to self-sufficiency. This program focused on LGBTQ youth between the ages of 16 and 21 and young adults who left foster care who needed alternative housing and services.

As part of A Way Home America's movement to prevent and end homelessness among youth and young adults, the launch of the 100-Day Challenge was created. The Rapid Results Institute facilitated this challenge, which consists of opportunities for communities to set reasonable goals, harness innovation, and execute plans to rapidly connect youth and young adults to housing and supportive services within a 100-day period. Currently, more than 20 communities have participated in this challenge including Baltimore, Maryland and Prince George's County, Maryland.

In September 2019, A Way Home America will also be launching its Grand Challenge to support communities to end homelessness experienced by youth. <http://awayhomeamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Grand-Challenge-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

The fact that so many organizations are taking the initiative to provide guidance, resources, and programs toward preventing and ending youth homelessness across the country demonstrates the importance of collaboration across systems to ensure this work continues to move forward.

COMMUNITY-LEVEL PRACTICES

Ending homelessness does not stop at the policy level. Communities and partners have been supporting this work in their localities. Within the U.S., more than 70 communities in 30 states have effectively ended Veterans homelessness. To date four communities have also ended chronic homelessness. New Orleans, Louisiana was the first major city to end Veterans homelessness. This involved an intense six-month campaign, where community partners connected every veteran living on the street or in an emergency shelter, with supportive services scaled to the veteran's needs. It was a huge success, where many more communities followed suit, including Montgomery County, Maryland. Similar work is now at the beginning stages within the youth homelessness and family homelessness space.

These are some examples illustrating how critical it is for communities to understand: 1) who they are and are not serving, 2) where people are showing up in the homelessness service system, 3) how to better address the needs of the people being served in a person-centered manner, 4) the gaps between people being served and the needs actually being met, and 5) the array of interventions that are available.

FAMILY JUSTICE SYSTEM

In the Family Homelessness arena, a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention demonstrated that as the frequency of residential moves increased for families with children, the likelihood of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) also increased. (Dong, M. et al "Childhood residential mobility and multiple health risks during adolescence and adulthood: the hidden role of adverse childhood experiences." Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine (Dec 2005); 159(12):1104-10) In the study, there was a strong correlation between residential mobility and the likelihood of reporting health outcomes such as depression, attempted suicide, alcoholism, and teenage pregnancy. https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Homeslessness_in_America_Families_with_Children.pdf

This is an important context to keep in mind for stakeholders involved with the family justice system. Once families are interacting with the family justice system, the fabric that ties the family together has already begun to unravel. For decision-makers in the family justice system, whether you are in a position to represent a family member, represent an entity, a judicial official, court staff, service providers, etc., it is important to consider the circumstances of housing stability. Strategies that can be implemented at the community-level, within the family law justice arena, to better assist families include:

- Getting involved with the coordinated entry system with the capacity to assess needs and connect families to targeted prevention assistance where possible;
- Strengthening housing solutions specifically for families;
- Deepening partnerships with domestic violence service providers;
- Implementing effective transition planning that links families to appropriate services using a person-centered holistic approach based on the families' identified needs;
- Referrals to employment and other economic mobility supports to reduce the risk of homelessness upon transition or end of service provision;

- Solidifying connections to family support networks and school-based supports; and
- Ensuring that family preservation and reunification can be explored when safe and appropriate to address the disproportionate impact of homelessness on single mothers and youth of color.

WHAT IS NEXT?

No one entity has all the answers to ending homelessness. Communities are still testing the right housing opportunities and services to address the varied needs of the populations they serve. We know that there is a much larger housing problem to grapple with in the United States. We also know, however, the framework for ending homelessness. It is absolutely essential to have it built and ready in every community for the housing options this country has available now, and to capitalize on new housing opportunities that are developing. Having a place to call home is the lynchpin of life activities. We, here at USICH, do this work because we believe that ending homelessness - making it a rare, brief, and one-time occurrence - is possible.



Rexanah P. Wyse, Esq. serves as the policy and program analyst for the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. She previously served as a policy analyst for the Baltimore Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and led efforts to reduce truancy as an assistant state's attorney for the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office.

The Face of Homelessness Often Is Not What You Think

BY REBECCA LORICK

The next time you are in a crowd, look around. Ask yourself: *Who has experienced trauma? Who has a mental illness or substance use disorder? Who is in an abusive relationship? Who looks homeless?*

I once posed similar questions while speaking at an elementary school. The children were eager to answer, and all chimed in to tell me how they'd know if someone is homeless. I received a variety of predictable answers: "They have all their bags with them. They have dirty clothes. Some of them drink a lot and talk to themselves. They stand outside asking for money. They eat at soup kitchens."

I then asked if anyone thought I looked homeless. A hush came over the classroom. I got a few thoughtful answers. "No, because you have a job and you're dressed in nice, clean clothes. You probably have a car

because you had to get here today. You said you went to college and homeless people don't go to school."

The last child who answered said, "We don't know that you haven't been homeless before, but you don't look homeless today."

Bingo. That was the answer I was looking for. The faces of homelessness are many and varied.

I grew up in a seemingly normal, middle-class family. We were a church-going, PTA-attending family, were well-educated and practiced superb Southern hospitality and manners. We had it all together, or so it seemed. The truth was, we were dysfunctional and hiding behind a picture-perfect façade. I was battling extreme anxiety. When I was 11, I disclosed to my family that I had been sexually abused by someone close to me. While some believed me, others questioned my sanity. "Why would you say such a thing? How could you make something like this up?" The abuse was investigated by the local Department of Social Services (DSS) and my claims were unfounded. Learning the results of the investigation, I thought, "Something is wrong with me."

At age 16, I was dating someone older who I thought was my savior. He heard my voice, my anger. Showering me with attention, he listened and validated my pain, promising to protect me. He convinced me to stop communicating with my family and the few friends I had. I latched on to him, became pregnant, and ran away from home. He would take care of me; I didn't need anyone else. We first lived with family, bouncing from place to place. Then, we lived in an abandoned house with no electricity or water. We cooked and heated with kerosene. This is not what I had expected, but I couldn't go home. I knew my family was disappointed with my "poor" decisions. They thought I was an incorrigible, belligerent delinquent who was very disturbed.

Soon, my trusted boyfriend became verbally and physically abusive. First, he grabbed and pushed me without leaving marks, but it quickly turned into extremely violent attacks that often ended in forced sexual acts. I would do anything to survive. At six months pregnant, I was hospitalized with a dangerously high fever, double pneumonia, dehydration, and loss of amniotic fluid due to repeated sexual assault. I felt stuck and alone. How could I leave when he was threatening to kill my family and take my child when I least expected it? He said he eventually would kill me after I watched everyone else die because of "my choices."

I was still in high school but missed more classes than I attended. I should have been reported for truancy. I was so cut off socially I assumed no one noticed when I was not at school. They only noticed when I was there. I slept in class, had poor hygiene, smelled of kerosene, and never dressed appropriately. I was mortified. I had done this to myself. Maybe I was mentally ill and had fabricated everything. Both people who abused me said they never remembered doing "those things," and the authorities did not believe me either. Depressed and anxious, I further isolated myself. I questioned my perception of reality. This could not be real.

While most people avoided me, a guidance counselor continued to ask how she could help. I was fearful she was trying to learn more, so she could report me for truancy or to DSS. To my surprise, she did not judge or blame me; instead, she listened. I shared with her that I was not allowed to eat more than twice daily because my boyfriend said I would get "too fat." She signed me up for free school lunch immedi-

ately and began counseling me. This simple gesture of kindness began to build trust. All of our interactions were uplifting and empowering. This was foreign to me. I began to have a glimmer of hope.

In the evenings, my abuser called me a failure, saying I would never go to college because I was not college material. When attending school during the day, my guidance counselor reminded me that I was smart, a fighter, someone who was *still* trying despite everything I had been through. My perception of reality was not flawed; I was a victim of unthinkable abuse. I began to believe I could make it; I did deserve better. More importantly, my child deserved better.

Eventually, my abuser and I found a small apartment where we had utilities. I gave birth to a beautiful seven-pound, nine-ounce baby boy. He was healthy despite all the trauma I had been through. I still refer to him as my miracle child. My hope was that the abuse would cease, or at least become less violent, after he was born. It was better for a while, but one day, my abuser erupted into a violent rage and attacked again. Dishes were thrown, the television smashed, baby pictures and gifts from my son's baby shower were destroyed. After there was nothing left to demolish, he came after me. Threatening to break my arm, he threw me on the bed. My son was terrified, screaming loudly.

During all of this, I was nursing my son, trying to protect and comfort him. My abuser then grabbed me by the throat holding me against the wall. He choked me until everything went gray, then black. All I could do was pray. We were going to die. By some miracle that I cannot explain, he stopped choking me and I was able to flee. I took my child and ran, my abuser chasing me, saying he was going to report me for neglect because I took my son out in the rain. I kept running. Running to freedom. I left the state for our safety.

Three months later, I graduated with my high school diploma. I began working a minimum-wage job. I took some college courses but stopped when I got pregnant with my daughter. After giving birth to her, I returned to college, so I could provide a better life for my family. Despite the trauma and barriers, I pressed on. I earned an associate degree in criminal justice, graduating with honors; a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, graduating summa cum laude, and a Master of Public Administration, graduating with distinction. I am college material. Knowledge is power, and no one can take that power from me. No one.

I wish I could say my children had a stable upbringing, but honestly, they did not. We moved frequently due to poverty and more, although less severe, incidences of domestic violence.

I never realized how the multiple housing displacements and the homelessness impacted my children, until recently. I moved into my own home in 2018 and my son, who is 22 now, did not unpack for quite some time. When I asked him why he had not put away his things, he simply said, "I feel like we're just going to have to pick up and leave again." Our homes had not been places of refuge, but places we frequently had to flee from. My daughter shared the same feelings. Today, I am proud to report my children have a stable home without violence—one where there is love, respect, and laughter.

I challenge you to look beyond first perceptions. Dig deeper to find the truth. At first glance, I was an incorrigible, pregnant runaway who lacked motivation and bucked authority. I was a voiceless victim suffer-

ing from untreated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who would do anything and everything to survive.

Without the support of that guidance counselor and others like her along the way, I would not be where I am today. Now I try to give back as the director of a women's shelter. I encourage you to be that person in someone's life. Listen without judgment; give unconditional love. It was life-changing for me and can be for so many others.



Rebecca Lorick is the program director of My Sister's Place, a day resource center for homeless women and children in Baltimore City. With more than 16 years of professional experience in the non-profit sector, she has held positions working with vulnerable populations including those experiencing trauma, homelessness, addictions, and mental health disorders. Giving a voice to victims of trauma who often feel voiceless is her passion.

A Child-Centered Housing Policy Is One Solution to Homelessness

BY BARBARA SAMUELS

Families with children have never been prioritized in housing policy. Yet, from medicine to economics to early childhood education, experts are acknowledging and gaining a deeper understanding of the importance of safe and stable housing for early child development and lifelong well-being.

Housing instability (and at its extreme homelessness), poor quality housing, and neighborhood violence are just some of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) to which low-income children are exposed during the most formative early months of life. ACES are known to cause high stress levels, impacting a young child's cognitive and emotional development, with repercussions for both physical and mental health during adolescence and adulthood. Factors like resilience and parental care are not enough for children to overcome the structural disadvantages imposed by poverty. The economic, social, and human costs are staggering and fall disproportionately on children of color.

Housing assistance is not an entitlement, unlike SNAP (formerly food stamps) or the programs on which the elderly rely (e.g. Social Security/SSI and Medicare/Medicaid). Only about one-in-four households that qualify based on income and other criteria actually receive housing assistance. Currently, the share of federal housing assistance received by families with children is declining and is the lowest it has been in more than a decade.

Maryland and Baltimore City reflect the national trend. Statewide data show that 15,113 children under age six experienced homelessness

during 2015, but the share of housing assistance used by families with children had dropped to just 46.5 percent from 58.8 percent in 2004. Families with children comprised 59 percent of the households using rental vouchers issued by the Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) in 2000, but by 2013 they comprised only 44 percent. In addition, affordable housing complexes built with federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) have many one-bedroom units and few family-sized three bedroom units.

This article will argue that policy makers across agencies and at all levels of government need to increase and reorient housing assistance to better serve families with children, especially young children. For this purpose, we have an often overlooked, sometimes maligned, but potentially very powerful tool—the Housing Choice Voucher (“HCV” or “voucher”).

This federal program works by enabling families to rent private housing at market rents, paying 30 percent of their income for housing costs, with the voucher filling the gap.

If a family experiences a loss of income due to job loss or illness, the amount of assistance increases, providing stability and preventing eviction. Conversely, if income rises, the amount of assistance is reduced.

The HCV program is the mainstay of federal housing assistance, serving more than two million families. Yet it has never lived up to its potential. Waiting lists in our large cities and suburbs number in the tens of thousands with waiting times of five to ten years. If a family is fortunate enough to receive one of these coveted vouchers, they often face rejection by landlords. Large property management companies often discriminate against voucher holders, especially in thriving neighborhoods. In other cases, the rent is too high to qualify. Only about 60 percent of voucher holders successfully find and lease housing with their voucher. Most often, that housing will be limited to neighborhoods with already high levels of poverty, racial segregation, crime, and struggling schools. Nationally, only 14 percent of HCV families with children live in low poverty areas, and fully 30 percent live in areas of concentrated poverty.

It doesn't have to be this way. The housing voucher is one of the central tools we have to combat child poverty. The National Academy of Sciences, in its *Roadmap to Reduce Child Poverty in Half*, estimated that extending housing vouchers to 70 percent of eligible families, and combining that housing assistance with increased SNAP and child care subsidies, would reduce child poverty in half. The Children's Defense Fund found that child poverty could be *ended* with a suite of housing policies, among which housing vouchers could be the most effective (but not the costliest).

The “buying power” of the voucher relieves much of the financial stress on parents and enables them to access good quality housing. If they lose a job, the amount of assistance rises so that rent still gets paid and the family doesn't have to move. While not designed specifically to alleviate homelessness, vouchers reduce housing instability and homelessness among even the lowest income and most vulnerable families. Rigorous research has shown that among families experiencing homelessness, housing vouchers had more positive impacts on family stress, housing stability, and child well-being than other approaches such as shelters, transitional housing, and even rapid rehousing (which uses time limited rental assistance).

For those lucky enough to survive long waiting lists and win the voucher lottery, the Housing Choice Voucher program is a powerful

tool. The program, however, has never fulfilled its potential. If combined with the right package of services to help families secure housing in safe and thriving lower poverty communities, housing vouchers can go beyond housing stability to address many of the “social determinants” known to result in poor health, low educational attainment, lack of upward mobility, and similar outcomes. These services, known as “housing mobility services,” package housing search assistance with a bundle of services that help to overcome barriers that exclude voucher families from better housing in low poverty neighborhoods with strong schools.

The support services provided by housing mobility programs are not rocket science; often they just bring together under one roof the same type of services that would be offered by different organizations. For instance, mobility programs offer workshops and one-to-one counseling in areas such as financial literacy, building credit, and landlord-tenant rights and responsibilities. After a family secures housing, mobility counselors provide home visits and follow-up support to help them settle into their new home and school and to remain stably housed. Some mobility programs also offer guidance and encouragement to parents who want to find a new job or go back to school, or who need financial help with drivers’ education or summer camp for children.

Evidence shows that outcomes for children improve across a range of domains when families use both vouchers and mobility services to find and lease better housing in lower poverty neighborhoods. To cite just two examples, Harvard economist Raj Chetty and his team examined data on the now adult children whose families participated in 1990’s-era housing mobility experiment, Moving to Opportunity. They found that children who moved to lower poverty areas with vouchers while young (12 or less) were more likely to attend college, less likely to become teen parents, and increased their adult income by 30 percent (or \$300,000 over the course of a lifetime), as compared to a control group. The taxes those children pay on that additional income is enough to offset the cost of the mobility counseling services the family received. Cutting edge public health research is also showing that children with asthma whose families use vouchers to move to better housing in healthier neighborhoods experience fewer hospitalizations and trips to the emergency department.

Despite the myriad of benefits, housing mobility services have not been funded by the federal government, except as a result of litigation settlements. Outside of Chicago, Dallas, and Baltimore, the services are rarely available.

That is about to change. With bipartisan support, Congress included \$25 million in the FY 2019 appropriations bill for a Housing Mobility Demonstration Program, consisting of regional mobility services and vouchers targeted to families with children. They also included \$3 million for research to document outcomes of these efforts. This is enough to fund mobility services in about ten cities, and with an additional \$25 million approved in the FY 2020 House markup, many more regions are preparing to apply.

The model for the program is the housing mobility program in Baltimore, which originated as a legal remedy and, since 2013, has been operated by a non-profit group, the Baltimore Regional Housing Partnership (BRHP). The program is child-centered. It consciously prioritizes families with young children, and nearly 2/3 of its vouchers are used to rent family-sized three-bedroom (or larger) homes.

To date, nearly 5,200 Baltimore City families have used the program to move from areas of concentrated poverty (over 30 percent poor), to safer, better-resourced communities around the city and five surrounding suburban counties with an average poverty rate of less than 9 percent. To promote stability for children, families are required to stay in their new communities, or in similar areas, for two years. They are then free to use their voucher anywhere in the region or nation, but when parents see their children thriving in their new schools and communities, most choose to stay in these high-opportunity areas. Few return to impoverished, racially segregated neighborhoods and schools.

A voucher offers greater purchasing power and financial and housing security for any family who receives one. Even with the purchasing power of the housing voucher, low-income families of color are rarely able to find and secure housing in safe neighborhoods with the strong well-resourced schools that children need. Due largely to the BRHP program’s 4,400 vouchers, accompanied by crucial mobility support services, the Baltimore region outperforms the rest of the country with one-third of all voucher families with children living in low poverty areas, compared with 14 percent nationally. Further, despite high housing costs in low poverty areas of the Baltimore region, over time the stability provided by mobility counseling and the voucher has enabled hundreds of families to purchase a home, or pay market rent without assistance, giving another family an opportunity to use the voucher.

BRHP and the voucher programs in Dallas and Chicago achieve these results by helping voucher families overcome the bureaucratic and market barriers that constrain their housing choices and keep them in high poverty areas.

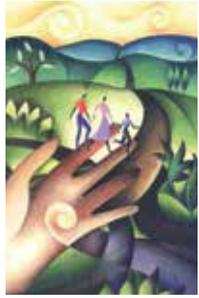
Not every family with a voucher is ready or able to move to a new community to maximize the full advantages the voucher can provide, but many are. In every place where housing mobility services have been offered, demand for housing search assistance and other mobility services far outstrips program capacity and the availability of vouchers. BRHP reluctantly closed its waiting list in 2017 when the number of eligible applicants exceeded 14,000.

Congress has now recognized the potential of the Housing Choice Voucher program to provide one effective solution to not only enhance family stability in the short run but also reduce inter-generational poverty.

All those who interact with vulnerable children and their families—from courts to health care providers to educators and social service agencies—should be working together to implement housing mobility programs to unlock the full power of housing vouchers for the children in their communities.



Barbara Samuels is managing attorney of the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland’s Fair Housing program. She has been the lead ACLU counsel in cases challenging governmental housing policies. She helped found and serves on the board of directors for the Baltimore Regional Housing Partnership, a non-profit providing housing opportunities in low poverty and racially integrated neighborhoods for Baltimore City families.



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