

on the Record

Experts Describe Positive and Negative Developments in Homeless Services

UNCENSORED asked three people in different parts of the country who work in the field of homeless services: “What are some interesting developments taking place at the local level in your area with regard to combating poverty and homelessness? By ‘interesting,’ we mean either good or less than good.” Jim Buckley is president of the board of directors at Transition House, which provides shelter, housing, and support services to homeless families in Santa Barbara, California. Patsy Rethore-Larson, M.Ed., is director of Children’s Services at the Phoenix, Arizona-based Homeward Bound, which, as its Web site states, works to break “multi-generational cycles of homelessness, welfare dependence and domestic violence” and create “self-reliance through housing and compassionate client-centered services.” Nassim Moshiree is a staff attorney with the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, in Washington, D.C.

BUCKLEY: The biggest news in fighting homelessness in our area has been a renewed focus on cooperation. An existing collaboration of government agencies, local nonprofits, hospitals, and law enforcement is revising its infrastructure and strategic goals to provide better and more efficient service to all segments of the homeless population. The goal is to avoid repetition, to reduce competition among similar agencies for funding, and to create a better way to help those most in need. A not-so-positive development is the significant growth in family homelessness in our county. With more than 90 percent of our clients still coming to us from our local area, we’re seeing more and more families needing our services. In 2009, for the first time, we had to start a waiting list, a list that has continued to grow ever since. Will a new countywide focus on better services help alleviate that a bit? We sure hope so.

UNCENSORED: What are examples of functions that might have overlapped in the past that are now delegated to one body or another?

BUCKLEY: Agencies in Santa Barbara County are working to improve service through better information sharing. Duplication has come about in the past not so much because there are multiple agencies providing the same service, but because there were multiple contacts a homeless person or family had with either providers in the system or with agencies such as public health, law enforcement, the Veterans Administration, etc., and these agencies had no knowledge of what the others were doing to serve the household. Now these entities are working together as a team to help the household stabilize and get rehoused.

RETHORE-LARSON: A critical issue for families is access to safe and affordable child care. In 2009 Arizona imposed sweeping funding cuts for child-care subsidies. These cuts have impacted

thousands of families throughout our state, but have had the greatest impact on low-income families. The amount of child-care subsidy funding for children of low-income working families has been reduced by 70 percent since 2009.

Here at Homeward Bound, the majority of our families rely on child-care subsidies. Our clients are learning to manage their resources, and the cost of child care is just one piece that they must consider. Even working full-time, our families face enormous challenges due to the cost of child care; without subsidies, families cannot afford quality child care and are then forced to place their children in situations that may not be safe (such as unlicensed centers or with individuals who are not prepared to adequately supervise young children) so that they can work. Homeward Bound has gotten some supplemental funds through the City of Phoenix and First Things First (a statewide early childhood program funded through tobacco taxes) to offset child-care costs for families; however, such funding is unpredictable from year to year, and still does not address the overwhelming need.

on the Homefront

MOSHIREE: The past several years—marked by the recession and a severe shortage of affordable housing—have seen a significant rise in family homelessness in the District of Columbia (up 73 percent from 2008), leading to an increased demand for emergency shelter assistance.

Unfortunately, this increase in shelter need has not been met with an increase in funding for shelter or affordable-housing resources for families in D.C., and has instead prompted several troubling local policy shifts that are purported to be budget-conscious and help move families out of shelter more quickly, but actually make it much more difficult for D.C. families to access emergency services when they are most in need.

District law mandates a right to shelter when the temperature falls below freezing (under 32 degrees) for all D.C. residents who are homeless. Over the years, this law has been narrowed with regard to families, such that only families who can prove they have no other safe place to stay (so-called “priority 1” families) can gain entry into the shelter system at all. Until the spring of 2011, the policy of the District’s Department of Human Services (DHS) was to shelter those “priority 1” families even outside of hypothermia season if government-funded shelter space was available. Citing budgetary concerns, DHS ended this policy and instead, for the past three years, has sheltered families only when legally required to do so. (Once a family has been deemed eligible for and admitted to shelter, they are allowed to maintain their placement and are not forced to reapply each day.) This shift to fewer resources and less support by the government has resulted in more families literally sleeping on the street or in other extremely unsafe situations—including in condemned buildings, cars, laundromats, and emergency rooms—or returning to homes where they have been abused.

The most recent manifestation of this shift is the D.C. mayor’s proposal to make significant changes to the law governing homeless services in the District. The mayor introduced the Homeless Services Reform Amendment Act of 2013, in response to the heightened demand for homeless services over the past several years. The stated policy goal for the legislation is to get families out of shelter and into stable housing sooner and more efficiently, which on its face is a laudable goal that advocates, providers, and the affected community all support. No one contests the notion that a shelter is a terrible place for children to grow up, which is why community advocates in D.C. have been pushing for increased investments in long-term affordable-housing programs that will allow families to move out of shelters and regain housing stability.

Unfortunately, the concern shared by many is that the proposed legislation does not accomplish this goal, is regressive and punitive in nature, and threatens much of the progress made in the fight to end family homelessness in the District over the last decade. Some provisions of the proposed amendments include 1) placing families in shelter “provisionally” for undetermined periods of time, during which families would not have the right to contest findings at hearings prior to losing their placements (as the current law requires) if the providers determine that the families have other safe places to go; 2) mandating escrow as a condition of receiving shelter or supportive-housing resources and possibly terminating those who don’t meet their saving requirement; and 3) increasing the grounds for which families can be terminated from shelter or supportive housing, including refusing certain placements the family believes to be unsafe or untenable.

Some of the mayor’s proposals (at least the stated goals) may be echoing the emerging practice of “progressive engagement,” the goal of which is to provide varying levels of assistance to families on

a case-by-case basis to ensure that families are getting just the amount of services they need to return to stable housing. However, a key component of progressive engagement is to actually *engage* families and to really assess their needs, which is something that is not happening at the level necessary to successfully address families’ needs in D.C. In practice, what families have been experiencing is a system that has grown increasingly difficult and unfriendly to navigate. Just this last winter, our lawyers represented about 50 families (roughly 100 children), who had no safe place to sleep and were illegally turned away on freezing nights by the District’s family-intake system—the very same system that is to be in charge of deciding whether families have a safe place to go before terminating them with no due process.

If enacted into law, the proposed legislation would further constrict the already narrow front door to services for families and limit the due-process rights of those families who do manage to gain entry into the system. How these policies will result in more D.C. families’ regaining stable housing is difficult to see.

On June 26, 2013 the D.C. Council voted in favor of the Homeless Services Reform Amendment. However, according to the blog of the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, “The Act that passed yesterday is substantially better than the original version thanks to the efforts of a diverse coalition of advocates, service providers, community members, and ultimately the elected officials who actively listened to their constituents and responded to the public’s concerns. Many of the harmful sections of the mayor’s proposed law were removed entirely from the final version, including time limits for housing placements, an expanded definition of ‘provider’s premises’ that would have increased terminations from supportive housing, and the provisional placement scheme that contemplated families losing shelter placements with no pre-termination hearing for a variety of grounds. Other sections were vastly improved from the original.” ■