



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog
www.dcfpi.org

March 31, 2016

Guest Blog: New Prevention Program Helps Families Avoid Homelessness

By Jamey Burden, Vice President, Housing Programs and Policy, Community of Hope

A new DC program is helping residents avoid homelessness, keeping families stable and saving the city money. More than 1,000 families have been helped so far, and 90 percent have stayed out of shelter! And Mayor Bowser's latest budget allows the program to serve even more families.

John (not his real name) is one of the success stories. When Community of Hope's Homelessness Prevention Program staff first met John, he had no ongoing, stable place to live with his four-year-old daughter. His grandmother said they could stay with her for just two more weeks. He was receiving \$347 per month in TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) benefits and working odd jobs while pursuing his HVAC certification. Additionally, John had a bankruptcy in his credit history, so it was difficult to find a landlord who would rent to him.

Community of Hope helped John develop a long-range plan, which included continuing his education and pursuing steady employment. Our prevention partner, Lydia's House, provided him with credit counseling and budgeting training. After increasing his income through some maintenance contracting work, he recently found an apartment he could afford. Community of Hope provided the first-month's rent and a security deposit, and John moved in with his daughter just last week.

Without this program, families in DC in similar situations often enter the overcrowded and expensive emergency shelter system. DC's program, modeled on a New York City effort, incorporates a screening tool to identify families most likely to enter the shelter system. There are four non-profit agencies administering prevention assistance: Capitol Hill Group Ministry, MBI, Wheeler Creek, and Community of Hope. A variety of services are offered, including mediation aimed at resolving family conflicts, case coordination, housing search, connection to employment and community services, budgeting, financial assistance, and utility assistance.

We are now able to hone in on the most effective strategies available to prevent homelessness with help from the Program's research partner, Westat. So far, more than 1,000 families have participated in this new program. Of those, 104 have moved into their own apartments, and only about 10 percent have entered the shelter system. The average cost per family is under \$1,000. By comparison, the average cost of just a one-month shelter stay is about \$3,500. And in human terms, we know that the cost is much greater, as emergency shelter has such a negative effect on the stability of families, especially children.

We are excited about our work of the last 5 months and heartened to see the results so far. We are grateful to the Mayor, the DC Council, and the Department of Human Services for their efforts to bring this program into existence. And we are thrilled that the Mayor's proposed fiscal year 2017 budget includes an additional \$1 million so 390 more families can receive needed services. We also look forward to the learning opportunities this work continues to offer in order to further improve and expand our efforts to prevent homelessness across our community.

Families encountering a housing crisis that they cannot resolve on their own can access homelessness prevention advice and program assistance referrals exclusively through the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center.