



STRENGTHENING
At Risk and Homeless
Young Mothers and Children

EVALUATION REPORT: YEAR 2

Executive Summary

Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children, Year 2: 2008 - 2009

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the *Strengthening At-Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children Evaluation Report: Year 2*.

Funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the *Strengthening At-Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children Initiative* ("the Initiative") serves young homeless and at-risk families. Under the guidance of a Coordinating Center consisting of The National Center on Family Homelessness (The National Center), the National Alliance to End Homelessness (the Alliance), and ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families (ZTT), the *Initiative* seeks to improve the housing, health and development of homeless and at-risk mothers and children. Specific project goals include the following:

- To ensure better family and individual outcomes for young homeless and at-risk families in the areas of child development, maternal well-being, family functioning, family preservation, and housing stability.
- To create lasting systems change between the housing/homelessness and child development service sectors by supporting replicable locally-based innovative collaborations.
- To influence policy and practice nationwide by evaluating and disseminating lessons learned from these local collaborations.

The *Initiative* includes four local program sites, each featuring partnerships between multiple agencies:

- Family Assertive Community Treatment (FACT): Chicago, Illinois

- Strengthening Young Families (SYF): Antelope Valley, California
- Hope & Home: Pomona, California
- Strengthening Our New Generation (STRong): Minneapolis, Minnesota

An on-going evaluation is being undertaken to understand and document the lessons of the *Initiative*. This evaluation utilizes multiple quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to develop a complete picture of the *Initiative*'s programs, successes, and challenges, as well as to better understand the clients that these programs serve. Findings from the evaluation are intended not only to improve the services of the *Initiative*, but to inform the broader field of human services on the needs and means of serving young, homeless and at-risk mothers and their children.

Some highlights of Year 2 are as follows:

- To date, the *Initiative* has served 272 families.¹
- Among currently enrolled *Initiative* clients, 76% were in some form of stable housing.
- 17 children have been reunified with a parent enrolled in the *Initiative*.²
- Clients feel their behavioral health is improving through *Initiative* services.
- Parents report positive changes in their relationships with their children as a result of their participation in the *Initiative*.

¹ This number *does not* include clients served under the original version of Hope & Home, which operated from April 2007 through March, 2009.

² The number of reunifications *does not* include children reunified under the original version of Hope & Home.

What do *Initiative* families look like?

An underlying goal of the *Initiative* is to determine if the needs of younger homeless and at-risk mothers are different than their older peers. The first step in this analysis is to fully understand the needs and characteristics of the clients served by the *Initiative*.

"At a detrimental point in my life I had children...[rather than] going to school. Pursuing schools and careers and stuff like that, I'm pretty sure that everybody else in [the program] would like to do that but you know there's issues with childcare."

Initiative Client

The “typical” *Initiative* client has the following characteristics:

- *Initiative* clients overwhelmingly represent racial and ethnic minorities, with a majority (60%) identifying as African-American.
- Approximately 41% of clients spent at least some time before the age of 18 in a foster home.
- The average annual income of a typical *Initiative* client is approximately \$9252 per year, over \$5000 less per year than a person living at the poverty guideline for a family of two (\$14,570).³
- Educational achievement is limited, with 45% of clients having never graduated high school or completed an equivalent such as a GED.
- Many have experienced multiple episodes of homelessness, both as adults and while growing up. Among those that have experienced homelessness since turning 18, the average number of episodes of homelessness is 3. Almost half (43%) experienced at least one episode of homelessness as a child.
- In the six months prior to entering a program, *Initiative* clients spent, on average, approximately 41% of nights “doubled up” with family or friends.
- *Initiative* clients have been exposed to many situations capable of causing traumatic stress, including 60% experiencing interpersonal violence from a family member.
- Many clients suffer from mental health disorders. Nearly one quarter experience moderate to severe symptoms of Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder; nearly half (49%) have diagnosed depression and 30% of *Initiative* mothers have made at least one suicide attempt.
- One-third (33%) of *Initiative* clients report at least one separation during their child(ren)’s lifetime(s) and just under 10% have at least one child not living with them at the time of the baseline interview.
- 43% of *Initiative* clients report that child protective services has been involved with their family. Further, 27% indicate that a report of abuse or neglect has been filed regarding one or more of their children.

This understanding of client needs provides both a description of those the *Initiative* is serving as well as a baseline for measuring project outcomes. Future reports will track client change over their period of enrollment on these and other indicators of well-being.

³ US Department of Health & Human Services, 2009.

What promising practices are emerging from the *Initiative*?

Families participating in the *Initiative* have a wide range of needs and challenges. Local program sites are working hard to meet these needs through a variety of innovative strategies. Some of the promising practices being utilized are highlighted below.

Economic Self-Sufficiency and Long-Term Stability

The profound degree of poverty among *Initiative* families is noteworthy. *Initiative* mothers are receiving benefits such as TANF and Food Stamps, but even with public supports, the financial resources of clients are dangerously low. Programs are working to alleviate poverty in a variety of ways including: benefits acquisition; education and training; assistance with concrete needs; and employment assistance.

Enhancing Employment Support

FACT is taking a systematic, multi-pronged approach to employment and economic self-sufficiency. A FACT employment specialist conducts a career exploration interest assessment or employability profile, staff conduct life skills sessions, and the program ensures that clients are receiving all of the benefits and concrete services to which they are entitled. By hiring an employment specialist, FACT demonstrated a real investment in helping clients to become independent.

Housing

Stable housing has a positive impact on the lives of client families and access to safe affordable, permanent housing is essential for all families. *Initiative* programs act quickly using multiple tools to attempt to stabilize housing for clients. Program services that respond to clients' needs for identifying permanent housing include: housing search; housing classes; apartment inspections; and a flexible funding pool that may be used for first and last month's rent. To help clients retain housing, projects provide tenant advocacy and flex fund assistance.

Making Housing Affordable

STRong has been able to obtain and manage 21 Long Term Homelessness Housing Vouchers lasting five years. STRong has made housing a cornerstone of its project by adapting a nationally recognized housing model, "Rapid Exit Program," for young families by intervening before they enter shelter. The purpose of this program is to provide rapid re-housing followed by supportive services. To further facilitate this goal, STRong was also able to obtain 11 Homelessness Prevention Rapid Re-housing Vouchers.

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Health and Well-Being

One of the most striking findings from the quantitative data is the high prevalence of diagnosable mental health problems among mothers served in the *Initiative*. Program sites are engaged in a number of promising practices designed to enhance the health and well being of young homeless mothers. These efforts include:

- Comprehensively identifying and addressing mental health needs through a clinically-driven service approach.
- Utilizing a team approach for service provision with on-going case conferencing. At programs with mental health professionals on the team, these strategies aid in identifying potential mental health issues. In less clinically sophisticated sites, these meetings might include a “clinical supervisor” to provide guidance to team members.
- Creating and enhancing social support networks.
- Planning for aftercare.

Building Social Supports

Strengthening Young Families is actively focusing on creating networks of support among their clients to provide mutual support and encouragement. The network arose out of a parenting group. The relationships established among participants were an unanticipated, but significant, product of the group. The staff is now seeking to expand opportunities to enhance social supports.

Supporting Families and Children

Services that promote family functioning include parenting education, family reunification strategies, child care, educational advocacy, socialization, and home and community visiting. It is in this domain that *Initiative* projects have invested a significant amount of energy. Practices developed by program sites to support the functioning of families and the well-being of children include:

- Parenting education.
- Preventing child abuse and neglect.
- Making connections to foster care systems.
- Making family unification a priority.
- Providing direct services for children.
- Home visiting.

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

Three projects received training in Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect (PCAN), a research-based approach to helping families promote positive parenting and healthy social-emotional development in their children. The model also teaches staff how to build program components that are protective against child abuse and neglect, such as creating a welcoming atmosphere. Upon receiving the training, all three projects are pursuing implementation—with the support of the Coordinating Center – of PCAN in their individual programs or communities. STRong is working with the Minnesota Department of Human Services to discuss ideas for implementing the curriculum in a more systematic way across the city. Hope & Home will use PCAN at monthly team meetings to identify program gaps and incorporate principles into practice. FACT has incorporated PCAN in parenting groups and individual sessions.

Integrating Services and Creating Successful Collaborations

Overall, projects have shown great progress in integrating their services to better meet the needs of the families they serve. In the next year, it will be important to continue to document the positive outcomes associated with enhanced service integration. Specific strategies for integrating services utilized by *Initiative* programs include:

- Team meetings.
- Case conferencing.
- Cross-training and co-location.
- Creating systems change.

Creating Systems Change

Evaluating client-based outcomes is critical to ensure community programs address residents' needs. But, identifying systems challenges and developing strategies to address them can generate broader change that is ultimately more sustainable and impactful. As part of FACT, a systems integration specialist was added to the project for just this purpose. The systems integration focus has resulted in a planning coalition comprised of public and private sector leaders who work together to address challenges such as the high number of youth aging out of foster care who become homeless. FACT has successfully fostered relationships with public sector officials in a variety of departments and is working collaboratively to improve program policies that will maximize the supports available to them.

What are the lessons learned from the *Initiative* so far?

Both the evaluation and the *Initiative* are on-going, so it is premature to draw definitive conclusions from data collected to date. Preliminary findings, however, suggest some important lessons for the field and for the projects themselves:

- The needs of young families in the *Initiative* are similar to those experienced by homeless families in general. However, qualitative data suggest that these needs may be exacerbated by parenting at a very young age and may place these families at greater risk of continued instability down the road.
- Across projects, parenting services are core program components that address multiple client needs.
- Clients' mental health needs are significant, yet individual projects' capacity to address these issues is variable and should be addressed.
- The cross-agency partnership model upon which the *Initiative* is predicated appears to benefit clients and the participating agencies themselves.

Conclusions

Baseline evaluation data indicate that the *Initiative* is reaching its intended consumers and that the needs of this population are broad. In response, programs are offering a comprehensive array of services. Families participating in *Initiative* programs report many positive changes associated with *Initiative* participation, including housing stability, family unification, and strengthened social supports. Future evaluation reports will provide more information on outcomes for clients and their children. Ultimately, successful strategies developed by the local project sites will be refined into replicable models and "best practices" to improve service provision nationwide.

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Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children is generating knowledge on improving the housing, health and development of young homeless and at-risk young mothers and their children.

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Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children is an *Initiative* of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.



For more information on this *Initiative*, please contact The National Center on Family Homelessness, 181 Wells Avenue, Newton Centre, MA; (617) 964-3834 or at www.familyhomelessness.org.



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