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Offering Vouchers to Families Experiencing Homelessness Has Benefits That Extend Beyond Housing, Study Finds

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[[para]]Major Study Provides Clear Strategy for Helping Families Who Experience Homelessness[[/para]]

BETHESDA, Md., July 7, 2015 /PRNewswire/ -- Providing priority access to permanent housing subsidies to homeless families helps keep families from becoming homeless again and has a variety of positive benefits -- from keeping families out of shelters and off the street to preventing food insecurity and intimate partner violence and reducing school absences for children in homeless families -- according to a new study from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Abt Associates. The results provide the first clear evidence about the best policies to help families who experience homelessness.

Under the Family Options Study, researchers from Abt Associates and Vanderbilt University gathered evidence about which types of housing and services interventions worked best for homeless families. From September 2010 through January 2012, a total of 2,282 families enrolled in the Family Options Study across 12 communities after spending at least seven days in emergency shelter.

The random-assignment study compared the effect of offering families permanent housing subsidies, project-based transitional housing and community-based rapid re-housing, which involves short-term subsidies to help families lease market-rate housing. Researchers looked at these efforts compared to one another and to usual care, when families are not given priority access to one of the services.

The study found that offering permanent housing subsidies to families experiencing homelessness had substantial positive impacts relative to other methods of support, reducing the percent of families returning to homelessness by more than half. Permanent housing subsidies also had positive impacts on other measures of family well-being including family preservation, adult well-being and child well-being. For example, compared to families assigned to usual care, children in families given priority access to permanent housing subsidies moved among schools less frequently, families were less likely to experience food insecurity and experienced less economic stress.

"These findings are striking. Providing permanent housing subsidies keeps families off the street and out of shelters. It underscores that homelessness is a challenge of housing affordability that can be remedied with permanent housing subsidies," said Michelle Wood, one of the report's authors and a principal associate at Abt Associates.

In addition, the short-term benefits of priority access to permanent subsidies have been achieved at substantially lower cost than project-based transitional housing, comparable cost to usual care and slightly higher costs than community-based rapid re-housing.

"This study provides further support to the theory that providing people who are experiencing homelessness with a stable home can have positive, radiating impacts on family preservation, adult well-being, and school stability," said Mary Joel Holin, division Vice President for Social and Economic Policy at Abt.

The study did find that only about a third of these highly vulnerable families were working and that heads of families who were offered permanent housing subsidies were somewhat less likely to work than other families. This finding is consistent with other studies of permanent subsidies.

The study team will conduct another follow-up survey approximately 36 months after the study began to measure the longer-term impacts of housing and services offered to homeless families.

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http://www.huduser.org/portal/publications/affhsg/family_options_study.html

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