



# Supportive Housing for Homeless Families: Foster Care Outcomes and Best Practices

## SUMMARY

Completed for Cottage Housing Incorporated, Sacramento, California  
By Sonja Lenz-Rashid, PhD, LCSW  
San Francisco State University

Funded by Sierra Health Foundation

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**SIERRA HEALTH  
FOUNDATION**



Dear Colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that we share this research study, *Supportive Housing for Homeless Families: Foster Care Outcomes and Best Practices*, by Sonja Lenz-Rashid, PhD, LCSW, of San Francisco State University. The study was completed for Cottage Housing Incorporated and was funded by Sierra Health Foundation.

Dr. Lenz-Rashid studied nearly 300 children and youth who had a history in the foster care and child protective services systems. In the study, formerly homeless families received housing and comprehensive support programs at Serna Village, a residential facility in Sacramento operated by Cottage Housing. Dr. Lenz-Rashid's research shows that Serna Village's best-practice program model of permanent housing social support and case management services can break the cycle of abuse and neglect and significantly reduce re-entry into the foster care system.

As Dr. Lenz-Rashid notes, best-practice programs such as those operated by Cottage Housing demonstrate their ability to improve youth and family well-being at a lower cost to taxpayers. This study quantifies the fiscal savings associated with breaking the cycle of abuse and neglect among disenfranchised families. More importantly, it captures the efficacy of reducing re-entry into the child welfare system and the substantial social, emotional and developmental benefits housing stability provides to children who can maintain their connection to a healthy family and community.

This is one of the few studies that has examined child welfare outcomes for homeless families after their participation in a transitional living program. It suggests that additional public investment to increase the number of supportive programs that offer best-practice models for successfully reuniting and supporting families should be considered.

We hope this study will provide an impetus to public administrators, elected officials and private enterprise to make the investments necessary to replicate the success of Cottage Housing's Serna Village. This approach improves the lives of homeless parents and their children, utilizes our fiscal resources wisely and provides a better path for vulnerable children and families to contribute to the community.

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chet P. Hewitt". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Chet P. Hewitt  
President and CEO  
Sierra Health Foundation



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff Raimundo". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Jeff Raimundo  
Executive Director  
Cottage Housing Incorporated

## Introduction

The *Supportive Housing for Homeless Families: Foster Care Outcomes and Best Practices* report describes the outcome evaluation of Cottage Housing Incorporated's Serna Village program in Sacramento, California. Serna Village is a supportive housing program serving homeless families. Outcomes from the program illustrate that it is possible to end recidivism into the child welfare system for homeless families by providing them with permanent housing and comprehensive support services. Although homeless and marginally housed families have high rates of involvement in the child welfare system, this study found that permanent and stable housing, social support and case management services can prevent these disenfranchised families from re-entering the foster care system. The intervention of supportive housing — housing and services focused on the unique needs of adults and their children exiting homelessness — may break the cycle of abuse and neglect among these families.

Conducted in 2011, this study involved a sample of 293 children and youth from approximately 150 families who lived with one or more parents in Cottage Housing Incorporated's Serna Village between 2002 and 2009, the first seven years of the program. Following are outcome data from the sample:

- 10% re-entered foster care after graduating from Serna Village (compared with 20% to 40% from other studies)
- Although the Serna Village youth spent longer time in foster care at first entry when compared with other Sacramento County foster youth, the Serna Village youth spent less time in care at re-entry when compared to other Sacramento County youth (re-entry was examined after exiting Serna Village)
- Child welfare costs of sample before Serna Village was \$1,313,262 and after graduating from Serna Village was \$295,632
- Savings in county child welfare costs 2.5 to 5 years after leaving Serna Village was \$1,017,630

The findings from this study indicate that comprehensive supportive housing programs following a best-practice model can provide homeless parents and their children with stable living for a significant period of time. Supportive housing programs also may give homeless parents an opportunity to find and maintain employment, work on their education, save a substantial amount of money for move-out costs, learn daily living skills, experience a real-world living situation and prevent re-entry into the child welfare system. The outcomes from this study may help inform policymakers and child welfare administrators with recommendations to better assist marginalized families and save valuable funding dollars.

## Policy Recommendations

First, this study shows that county child welfare agencies should contract wraparound services to providers such as Cottage Housing Incorporated to offer housing, mental health and case management support, which can decrease county child welfare recidivism rates and expensive out-of-home placement costs.

Second, Sacramento County should obtain Family Unification Program funding available through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Application for Family Unification Program vouchers requires a signed memorandum of understanding between the local public housing agency and the child welfare agency. The public housing agency administers the vouchers and the child welfare agency provides supportive services to child welfare-involved families and youth. Housing Choice Vouchers can be used for payment for supportive housing programs like Cottage Housing Incorporated's Serna Village to pay for property and staffing costs.

## Homelessness and Child Welfare

Currently, the best estimate is that approximately 420,000 families, including 920,000 children, experience homelessness in any given year,<sup>1</sup> which is about one third of the total population of people who are homeless.

There are many ways that homelessness and the child welfare, or foster care, system are linked. Past research illustrates that there is a strong relationship between adult and young adult homelessness, and having a history of child welfare services.

Also, many studies illustrate the relationship between being in foster care or group home placements as children and youth, and being homeless later in life as an adult.<sup>2</sup> Researchers in 2010 found that childhood foster care is 34 times higher for families experiencing homelessness than the general population of the same aged children.<sup>3</sup> An earlier study examined the housing situation of birth parents of a sample of 195 foster care youth. The researchers found that 48.7% of the parents of foster care youth (ages 0-19) had a history of homelessness.<sup>4</sup> Another study found that parents of children who re-entered care had less social support, as well as less organizational participation.<sup>5</sup>

1 Rog, D.J., and Buckner, J.C. (2007). *Homeless Families and Children*. National Symposium on Homelessness Research. Accessed July 30, 2010, from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/rog/>

2 Park, Metraux, and Culhane, 2005; Piliavin, Matsueda, Sosin, and Westerfelt, 1990; Bassuk, Buckner, Weinreb, Browne, Bassuk, Dawson, et al., 1997

3 Zlotnick, C. (21 January, 2010). *The cycle of homelessness: The link between homelessness and foster care*. Presentation to the Institute for Children and Poverty, Philadelphia, p.6.

4 Zlotnick, C., Kronstadt, D., Klec, L. (1998). Foster Care Children and Family Homelessness. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88, 9, p. 1368-1370.

5 Festinger, T., & Botsko, M. (1994). *Returning to care: Discharge and reentry in foster care*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

6 Minnesota Study, 2009; Rog, D.J., and Buckner, J.C. (2007). *Homeless Families and Children*. National Symposium on Homelessness Research. Accessed July 30, 2010, from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/rog/>

## Best Practices with Homeless Families

The following is a comprehensive list of best practices from the few studies and monographs examining best practices for transitional housing program services for homeless families.<sup>6</sup>

**Table I. Best Practices of Serving Homeless Families in Supportive Housing Programs**

1. Housing complex of an adequate size to allow appropriate units to be available when needed, and a location that residents desire to remain in, close to public transportation
2. Adequate screening and holistic assessment of families at intake to ensure that available services match families' needs
3. Sobriety requirements; early recognition of active substance abuse and resources
4. Experienced case managers, and clear and consistent protocols when families fail to follow case management plans or the program rules (environment of mutual accountability); caseload size of 12-14 families per full-time case manager
5. Support for clients with healing from trauma/domestic violence
6. Focus on the needs of the whole family unit, not just the adults
7. Self-help model (client governance of program); support for self-advocacy with landlords, neighbors, and criminal justice and school systems
8. Organized informal social events for residents; activities that foster a sense of community at the housing site, particularly among residents
9. Adequate children's activities and services, including play groups, child care during groups, therapeutic care for children, and adequate interior and exterior play spaces for children
10. Tenant and financial literacy training, including the rights and responsibilities of tenancy
11. Support for families after exit from transitional housing, including the actual moving process and settling into a new neighborhood
12. Flexibility with two-year time limit of HUD-funded transitional living programs
13. Smooth partnerships among the housing provider, service providers, property manager and local housing authority; links to housing and income subsidies after transitioning out of transitional housing program services



## Study Methodology

### Setting and Services

About 25.6% (n=607) of the homeless population (either on the streets or accessing shelter services) in Sacramento is families with at least one adult and one child under the age of 18.<sup>7</sup>

Cottage Housing Incorporated's housing program, Serna Village, serves homeless adults and their children with supportive housing services in a residential program, and comprehensive case management services.

All Serna Village adult residents have one or more children under the age of 18. Approximately 80% of the adult clients have some sort of disability, such as substance use.<sup>8</sup> However, before being accepted into Serna Village and moving in, clients need to be six months free from use of any substances (e.g., drugs or alcohol). In addition, a large percentage of families at Serna Village have histories of domestic violence, mental health issues and physical disability.

After residents move into their units, they get assigned a case manager, or personal development coach, who conducts the intake paperwork and helps residents set their short- and long-term goals. Personal development coaches meet with residents on their caseloads once per week in a cluster, or group, setting to talk about goals, as well as one time per month one-on-one to talk about individual progress.

The program offers residents such real-world conditions as working full time, assuming personal responsibility for

themselves and their community, and paying rent. Residents pay 30% of their income toward "rent." Some units in Serna Village are tax credits (30% to 45% of income). Residents pay all of their own utility costs, including cable television.

There are no strict education or employment program requirements for Serna Village residents; they do not have to work. Yet, in June 2010, 46 of 94 adults were going to school (50%), 13 of 94 adults were seeking Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and 14% were receiving SSI.<sup>9</sup> Also, there are required community service hours for residents; all adult residents need to complete eight hours on site and eight hours off site of community service per month (in the winter, community service hours decrease to four and four).

The apartments at Serna Village have two outdoor playgrounds for the children, and there are approximately 160 children at any one time in residence. There are also activities for children including: the Skylab Youth Development Studio, youth coaches, youth groups, entrepreneur club, outdoor adventures, outings, van for outings, family connections and teen field trips to the San Francisco Bay Area.

For the Serna Village families that are involved in the child welfare system (approximately 71%, n=207), program case plans will often involve a Sacramento County child protective services worker. Many times the county child welfare agency

7 Schatz, M.K., Alonso, P., and Gale, K. (2011). *Sacramento Homeless County 2011: Summary Results, Methodology and Technical Report*. Sacramento, CA: Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance.

8 Littlewolf, 2010

9 Littlewolf, 2010



requires stable housing before family reunification can happen, especially with homeless parents.

When residents are ready to leave Serna Village, they complete an exit plan process with their personal development coach. They complete a budget and focus on the short- and long-term goals and objectives related to moving out. There is no formal aftercare, although graduates are welcome to come back. Serna Village has a program model and facility that adheres to all of the best practice guidelines listed in Table 1.

## Study Results

The sample was a total of 293 children and youth from approximately 150 families who lived with one or more parents in Cottage Housing Incorporated’s Serna Village between 2002 and 2009, the first seven years of the program. The mean age of the children and youth in this sample is 9 years, with the youngest being 9 months and the oldest 18 years.

The average length of time this sample of children resided in Serna Village was 23 months (the range was between four and 64 months and the standard deviation was 13.5 months). Approximately 71% of the children came from families who graduated from the program. Graduation is defined by Cottage Housing Incorporated as: 1) exiting the program with sobriety intact, 2) obtaining secure and stable housing (either independent housing or a more appropriate treatment center, and 3) having income stability due to income from employment, CalWORKS or Supplemental Security Income due to a disability.<sup>10</sup>

Seventy-one percent of the sample had a history of foster or group home care before entering services with Cottage Housing Incorporated and residing in Serna Village (see Table 2). This rate is high even when comparing it with other studies examining the rates of foster care in the homeless population; most of these studies have rates between 15% and 50%.<sup>11</sup>

Table 2 shows that of the 207 children who were involved in the child welfare system before living at Serna Village, only 10% (n=21) experienced re-entry two to five years after leaving care the first time (of parents who graduated from Serna Village).

**Table 2. Foster Care History Pre- and Post-Transitional Housing Services**

<b>Pre-Transitional Housing Program (THP) history of foster care (n=293)*</b>	
Yes	71% (207)
No	29% (86)
<b>Post-THP re-entry into foster care (with Pre-THP foster care history) (n=207)*</b>	
Yes (graduated THP)	10% (21)
Yes (did not graduate THP)	12% (25)
No	78% (161)

\* p<.05

Researchers conducted a qualitative analysis of child welfare case files and found that social support was a significant predictor of re-entry.<sup>12</sup> This transitional housing program outcome shows that by offering social support from personal development coaches, group case management meetings and a self-help model, Serna Village parents may have felt less isolated than if they were living in marginalized housing or in a homeless shelter for families.

**Table 3. Total Costs of Foster Care Services and Placements for Supportive Housing Program Clients**

Cost before Supportive Housing Program (SHP) services (first entry) (n=207) (mean months in care 16.22)	\$1,313,262
Cost after SHP services (at re-entry) (n=21, graduated) (mean months in care 13.4)	\$295,632
<b>Savings (2.5 to 5 years later)</b>	<b>\$1,017,630</b>

10 Cottage Housing Incorporated, 2010

11 Bassuk & Weinreb, 1997; Culhane et al., 2003; Jones, 1998; Park et al., 2004; Zlotnick, Kronstadt & Klee, 1998

12 Terling, T. (1999). The efficacy of family reunification practices: reentry rates and correlates of reentry for abused and neglected children reunited with their families. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 23, 12, 1359-1370.

The best-practices model of Cottage Housing Incorporated's Serna Village has created some significant outcomes in the area of foster care involvement, and costs related to that involvement. The rates of child welfare re-entry are the lowest among the families that graduated from Serna Village between 2002 and 2009, even when comparing those rates to the other populations studied by researchers. Transitional housing programs serving homeless families, following the best practices in Table 1, can have a positive affect on the children they serve, can lower the caseload of county child welfare agencies, and can therefore save costs by offering successful preventive services.

## Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that comprehensive supportive housing programs following a best practice model can provide homeless parents and their children with stable living for a significant period of time.

Supportive housing programs also may give homeless parents an opportunity to find and maintain employment, work on their education, save a substantial amount of money for move-out costs, learn daily living skills, experience a "mock" real-world living situation, and can possibly prevent re-entry into the child welfare system.

Findings from this study indicate that the children and youth who resided in the transitional housing program for homeless families, Serna Village, re-entered the child welfare system at lower rates than the general population of youth, low-income youth and other homeless youth (even two to five years after leaving foster care). This type of exploratory study is particularly relevant as it provides important information about effective practice methods with this population. This study also begins to examine an under-researched area of homeless services for families – cost savings from re-entry to the child welfare system.

It is evident that transitional living programs, like Cottage Housing Incorporated's Serna Village, can provide successful interventions when implementing a model based on best practices. This program clearly addresses the need for comprehensive case management, employment and

education preparation, sobriety and supervised practice living,<sup>13</sup> as each of these components is necessary for homeless families to make the transition to independence successfully and permanently.

This study illustrates that the children and youth in such families re-enter the foster care system at much lower rates, and for much less time. By having a safe, stable and supportive living environment, parents can receive the support they need to end the abuse and/or neglect that resulted in them being involved in the foster care system initially. Yet, given that the rates of homeless families being involved in the foster care system are much higher than that of the general population, it is clear that these services are greatly needed. Supportive housing programs with comprehensive models can provide the safety, resources and support necessary for these vulnerable parents to practice independent living and develop the skills to navigate a life of independence.

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13 Buehler, C., J. G. Orme, et al. (2000). The Long-Term Correlates of Family Foster Care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 22(8): 595-625.

“Coming to Serna Village is one of the best things that I could have done for my family. We have learned a different way of life that involves reaching out and getting a helping hand in return. My children and I have gotten closer and have overall improved our quality of life. I am very grateful for the opportunity to learn about myself and the disease that had pretty much taken over my life. Through these partnerships I am confident I will be a success and the mother that my children Eric 8, Ronnie 3, and baby Micaela deserve.”

*-Jasmine*”



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