



# Housing First Puts Children First

Housing insecurity and homelessness is a growing crisis in the United States, and it is hitting children and families hard. On any given night in 2018, more than a half a million people were homeless in the United States; families with children make up about one third of the homeless population.<sup>1</sup> Most minority groups in the United States experience homelessness at higher rates than Whites; while representing 13 percent of the U.S. population, African Americans account for 40 percent of all people experiencing homelessness and 51 percent of people experiencing homelessness as members of families with children.<sup>1</sup> As of January 2018, Missouri had an estimated 5,883 citizens experiencing homelessness on any given day, and more than 32,000 public school students experienced homelessness over the course of the year.<sup>2</sup> **Children experiencing homelessness and unstable housing conditions are at significant risk for health and behavioral problems, truancy, and poor academic performance.**<sup>3</sup>

## Housing First Overview

A homelessness intervention known as Housing First seeks to house individuals and families experiencing homelessness as quickly as possible, without any conditions, and connects them with supportive services once immediate housing needs have been met. Housing First is being tested across the nation as a strategy for helping high need families transition out of homelessness, including throughout Missouri.

The Housing First approach first emerged more than two decades ago as a method for providing immediate access to permanent supportive housing to individuals who were homeless and experiencing mental health and addiction problems. As initial trials demonstrated success in moving people into permanent shelter, Housing First began influencing traditional homeless shelter models and was adopted both nationally and internationally.<sup>4</sup>

Housing First is founded on the idea that individuals and families who experience homelessness are more successful at improving their circumstances when they have a safe, stable place to call home. According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, “A Housing First system orientation recognizes that people experiencing homelessness—like all people—need the safety and stability of a home in order to best address challenges and pursue



**Children experiencing homelessness suffer a variety of negative effects, from health and behavioral problems to truancy and poor academic performance**

opportunities”.<sup>5</sup> This system orientation includes three major aims: 1) make occurrences of homelessness rare and brief; 2) help people who experience homelessness obtain permanent housing quickly; and 3) help people access the care and support needed to maintain their housing and achieve a better quality of life.<sup>6</sup>

Programs based on the Housing First approach are flexible, responsive and characterized by two main iterations: permanent supportive housing and rapid re-housing.<sup>7</sup> Rapid re-housing involves moving homeless families and individuals quickly into housing without imposing preconditions or requirements. Permanent supportive housing offers supportive wrap-around services to help maximize housing stability.<sup>7</sup> While rapid re-housing connects people in short periods of housing insecurity, permanent supportive housing is structured for those experiencing chronic homelessness and aims to maximize housing stability and prevent returns to homelessness.<sup>8</sup>

## Housing First for Families

Children need stable, safe housing. Homelessness and the lack of access to secure housing conditions can harm a child’s health and undermine their ability to succeed academically.<sup>9</sup> The rapid-rehousing component of Housing First has proven to be effective, with research showing that between 75%-91% of families remaining housed a year after their re-housing process.<sup>10</sup>

Research also indicates that domestic violence is frequently an immediate cause or precursor to homelessness and housing instability, particularly for women and children.<sup>11</sup> According to the Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness, U.S. Conference of Mayors (2012), domestic



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violence is the third leading cause of homelessness among families in the United States.<sup>12</sup> One study was able to show that housing instability related to domestic violence posed a host of significant negative impacts on survivors – the more precarious the housing situation, the greater the risk for: extreme danger, PTSD, depression, utilization of emergency hospital services, missed days of work and school, and negative outcomes for children.<sup>13</sup> The Domestic Violence Housing First pilot, a strategic initiative of the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, proved successful in eliminating housing as a reason for survivors to stay in abusive relationships, with 96% of its participants remaining in housing 18 months after entering the program.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the benefits to children and families, and its effectiveness in improving housing stability, the Housing First approach could also offset traditional homeless service costs, representing a more cost efficient approach to addressing homelessness.<sup>15</sup> Results from the 2016 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Family Options Study showed that families who participated in rapid re-housing received assistance at a lower cost than other interventions.<sup>16</sup>

## **Putting Children First in Missouri**

Homelessness remains an issue for Missouri children and families. Many states, including Missouri, have begun to explore the Housing First model as a means of responding to homelessness in their communities. While additional funding and research is needed, there is substantial evidence that Housing First could be more widely adopted as a method to address the needs of children and families experiencing homelessness in Missouri. By ensuring that children and their caretakers have stable, secure housing, the Housing First approach puts families first.

Hampton, J., Murphy, M., Thurman, A. (2019). Housing First Puts Children First. St. Louis, MO: The Clark-Fox Policy Institute, Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.

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