

# Executive Summary: Exploring Systems Change: Adoption, Implementation, and Consequences of the Inclusion of Fathers as Residents in Family Homeless Shelters

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Fathers can make important contributions to the improved health and well-being of children, specifically in the areas of social, emotional, and cognitive growth (Ball & Moselle, 2007). Often, homeless shelter policies prohibit fathers from entering shelters with their families resulting in the separation of mothers, fathers, and children. There is a dearth of literature about father involvement in the lives of their children who reside in homeless shelters.

This study examines the adoption, implementation, and consequences of a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, policy shift from excluding fathers as residents in family emergency shelters to including fathers as residents in family emergency shelters. The study focuses on five general areas related to the policy change: motivation for system change, preparation for system change, short-term system change, long-term system change, and commitment to system change. This study explores this change through the eyes of three stakeholder groups: the City of Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services Staff (which oversees publicly funded shelter services), shelter staff, and parents (mothers and fathers) residing in family shelters.

One hundred twenty-seven people participated in this study. The research team conducted individual interviews with Office of Homeless Services Staff (n=13) and facilitated focus groups with shelter staff (n=20) representing nine out of the 10 family emergency shelters and with parents in shelter (n=94) representing 10 out of the 10 family emergency shelters. Participants were queried about all aspects of the nondiscrimination policy: its origins, roll-out, implementation, positive outcomes, and negative outcomes. All transcripts were audiotaped and transcribed. The data were analyzed using standard qualitative data analysis techniques.

Philadelphia has been a national leader in providing services to people experiencing homelessness. Three developments gave rise to the father inclusion initiative in the Office of Homeless Services. The first was an organic movement of local leaders focusing on fathers experiencing homelessness. The second was support for greater father inclusion in shelter services by agency staff. The third was the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's 2016 grant requirement to demonstrate nondiscrimination across several protected classes, including sexual orientation and gender identity.

The Office of Homeless Services made the bold decision to require that each family emergency shelter would be required to admit fathers as residents. Three shelters with individual rooms for families had been admitting fathers as residents for many years prior to the policy shift. Two shelters—both of which have the physical structure to support families with two parents (i.e., individual rooms with doors)—made the transition to include fathers relatively easily following the policy shift. Four shelters—all of which have communal living spaces—found the transition to include fathers more challenging. One shelter—that has communal living space—has not yet made the transition. This report explores the process through which these changes occurred.

Both shelter staff and parents in the shelters report benefits and drawbacks to having fathers residing in family emergency shelters. While keeping families together strengthens families, living in a shelter alters some family dynamics, which can present new challenges. Recommendations for direct service, advocacy/training, research, and policy are presented.

