

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



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Background

According to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2018), 552,830 people experienced homelessness on one night in January 2018. Among this number were 180,413 people who constituted 56,342 families with children. The average family size was 3.2 people, with children making up 60% of all families. African Americans were disproportionately represented among families experiencing homelessness. Although the number of these families declined slightly (by 3%) between 2017 and 2018, there is still much work to do to meet the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness's (2019) goal of ending homelessness among families with children and making homelessness "a rare, brief, and one-time experience" (p. 7).

Fathers sometimes find that they are not permitted to stay in family shelters (Barrett-Rivera, Lindstrom, & Kerewsky, 2013). In these cases, one of two things typically happen—both of which break up families. In two-parent households with one mother and one father, the mother and children can reside together in the family shelter and the father can stay in a single men's shelter. In single-parent households with one father and in two-parent households with two fathers, the family cannot stay together in a shelter. The family can stay together on the streets, doubled-up with another family, or in a hotel, or the family can break up to obtain shelter. The father(s) can enter a single men's shelter, and the children can enter the child welfare system.

Keeping fathers in their children's lives is beneficial to child health and well-being. Children whose fathers (or father figures) are involved with them in positive ways score higher than others on measures of social, emotional, and cognitive growth (Cabrera et al., 2000; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004a; Garfield & Chung, 2006; Lamb, 2004; Linn et al., 2015; Revell, 2015). They are also less likely than others to drop out of school, use drugs, engage in risky behaviors, become involved in the criminal justice system, and become young parents themselves (Allen & Daly, 2007; Booth & Crouter, 1998; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). When fathers contribute financially to the household, the entire family prospers.



Context for the Study

Families experiencing homelessness enter the Philadelphia homeless services system through a centralized intake process. They are then directed to one of 10 publicly funded, family emergency shelters that operate in Philadelphia. Three of these shelters have a long (15+ year) history of admitting fathers as residents. Historically, if a family included



an adolescent or adult man and space was not available in one of these three shelters, the family would face a difficult choice: remain together outside of the shelter system or break up and enter the shelter system.

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 one 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.

In 2016 and 2017, the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services began developing a new nondiscrimination policy. In November 2017, the Philadelphia Continuum of Care Board adopted the new policy, which became effective January 23, 2018 (Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services, 2017). This new policy prohibits discrimination against persons requiring shelter based on 15 protected classes: race, ethnicity, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national origin, ancestry, disability, marital status, age, source of income, familial status, and domestic or sexual violence victim status. This ensures that all people are afforded equal opportunities, as stipulated in the Fair Housing Act, the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, HUD's Equal Access Rule, and Philadelphia's Fair Practices Ordinance. The policy states that "providers may not exclude potential participants based on their sex" (Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services, 2017, p. 1). In other words, each family emergency shelter would be required to admit fathers as residents. The Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services started encouraging the seven family shelters that did not admit fathers as residents to alter their policies to admit them.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore why and how this system change occurred and to identify the benefits and challenges of shifting policy from father exclusion to father inclusion in family emergency shelters. This study investigated the motivation and preparation for, short- and long-term consequences of, and commitment to the system change.

Methods

Recruitment and Procedure

The voices of a total of 127 study participants were included in this qualitative study. Interviews were completed with 13 Office of Homeless Services (OHS) staff, the City of Philadelphia's office that oversees publicly funded shelter services. Three focus groups were run with a total of 20 shelter staff who worked at nine out of the 10 family emergency shelters. Ten focus groups were run with 94 parents (mother and fathers) who resided in the 10 Philadelphia emergency shelters.

All interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed. All names were replaced with participant-selected pseudonyms. Family participants were paid \$35 in cash for focus group participation. The City Institutional Review Board disallowed any payment for OHS staff interviews or shelter staff focus groups.



Measurement

Shelters were classified into one of three groups (early adopters, late adopters, or laggards) regarding the timing of their inclusion of fathers as residents. Early adopter shelters (n=3) permitted fathers to reside in their shelters prior to the Office of Homeless Services requirement that all family emergency shelters admit fathers as shelter residents. Late adopter shelters (n=5) changed their policy from excluding fathers to including fathers as residents within eight months of the Office of Homeless Services policy change. Laggard shelters (n=2) had not yet or were very late in enacting a policy change to include fathers as residents in their shelters.

Each stakeholder group was asked a slightly different set of questions. OHS staff were queried about the origins of and motivations for the policy change; how they developed, prepared for, and disseminated the policy change; how they supported shelters through the change process; and any challenges they had seen during the transition. Shelter staff in the early adopter group were asked when and why they decided to include fathers, how they prepared for the transition, how intended and unintended consequences played out, how they included fathers in their current work, and recommendations for shelters embarking on this transition. Shelter staff in the late adopter and laggard groups were asked when they first learned about the policy change, how it was communicated, and any training or support they received. They were also asked questions regarding their original rationale for excluding fathers, how they prepared for the transition, challenges that occurred during the transition, and benefits they have seen from the inclusion of fathers in their shelters. Parents residing in the shelters were queried about how much they want fathers involved in their lives, the ways in which fathers are involved in their lives, how shelter policies facilitate or inhibit father involvement, and any communal benefits or drawbacks they see from having fathers in (or out of) the shelter.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using the constant comparison method.

Results

Motivation for System Change: In 2016, HUD adjusted the scoring system for the national competition for Continuum of Care dollars to strongly reward applicants who could provide evidence that they complied with HUD's nondiscrimination policy. Simultaneously, multiple complaints—which focused on men having difficulty accessing the family shelter system—were filed through the OHS complaint hotline. Two OHS staff (who were male and African American) were involved in reviewing these complaints. These two OHS staff began to communicate about and advocate for father inclusion in the family emergency shelter system. OHS then invited one of these staff to draft and develop the nondiscrimination policy. OHS leadership decided to require that every family emergency shelter admit fathers as residents.

Preparation for System Change: OHS informed providers of the policy change through emails, memoranda, and presentations at monthly provider meetings. They problem-solved with shelters through smaller shelter team meetings at OHS, phone calls, and visits to individual family emergency shelters. OHS provided small amounts of funding to some shelters to hire additional male staff. OHS developed a training on the nondiscrimination policy, but they have not yet rolled it out completely. Some late adopter shelters sought guidance from early adopter shelters about how to integrate fathers smoothly. Shelter administrators held discussion forums with shelter staff and shelter parents to prepare them for the change. Shelter administrators altered their paperwork to be more gender-neutral. OHS trained intake staff to inform families entering the homeless shelter system that they may be placed at a shelter where a father resides.



Short-term System Change: Nine out of ten family emergency shelters now admit fathers as residents. The transition was easier for shelters that had a private room for each family and segregated bathrooms. OHS staff, shelter staff, and parents were asked about the challenges of including fathers as residents in family emergency shelters. Participants reported fears about violence/safety within shelters (for both families and staff), concerns about privacy (especially in sleeping quarters and bathrooms), the risk of re-traumatization of mothers and children who have experienced or been exposed to domestic violence, conflicts of interest in service provision, and being respectful of various parenting styles within the shelter setting. OHS staff, shelter staff, and parents were asked about the benefits of including fathers as residents in family emergency shelters. Participants reported that fathers serve as role models for children, fewer families are separated (and further traumatized), fathers learn and grow through shelter programming and by seeing other fathers interacting with their families, and increased income (i.e., from two parents instead of one parent) at time of discharge from shelter.

Long-term System Change: Some policies had unintended negative consequences. For instance, mothers are automatically assigned as head of household upon entry into the shelter system. This can undermine the father's voice and power. Some fathers do not enter the shelter system because of the stigma associated with shelter living. Living in a shelter can affect family dynamics. Parents may experience additional tension in their marital/partner relationship, families may have difficulty de-escalating after an argument due to lack of personal space, families have limited privacy, parents may feel demeaned by staff in front of their spouse/partner/child(ren), and families may perceive some staff as having negative attitudes.

Commitment to System Change: OHS, early adopter shelter staff and parents, and late adopter shelter staff and parents are committed to maintaining the integration of fathers in the family emergency shelter system. They report that shelters should always serve "families," not only mothers with children. The two laggard shelters agree with father inclusion in theory. One laggard shelter is finding ways to make it work. The other laggard shelter is applying for an exemption/waiver from father inclusion (in order to protect women and children who have a history of trauma). The mothers in the laggard shelters expressed great compassion for fathers and appeared to be open to finding ways to integrate fathers.



Discussion

All shelters—early adopter, late adopter, and laggard—share a belief in the fact that fathers, in most cases, are important to their families. The early adopter shelters, all of which have private rooms for families, have long held this belief for years and, therefore, made a commitment to father inclusion decades ago. The late adopter shelters believe in father inclusion, too, and the two that had private rooms for families made the transition relatively easily. The three late adopter shelters that lacked private rooms and relied heavily on communal living space encountered more difficulty. Yet, two elements were important in making the transition for all late adopter shelters. First, the partnership between OHS and the late adopter shelters was critical. OHS listened to shelter concerns, problem-solved with shelters, and provided some resources to assist in the transition (e.g., funding for hiring male shelter staff). Second, some late adopter shelters sought consultation from early adopter shelters regarding how they make things work. Although the laggard shelters appreciate the importance of fathers in the lives of children, they had more difficulty making the transition. According to one of the laggard shelters, OHS “forced” the shelter to admit a father as a resident one night and the shelter was completely unprepared for the admission. However, the shelter has since admitted fathers as residents. The other laggard shelter has a staunch philosophical disagreement with the policy of requiring all family emergency shelters to admit fathers. They argue that the policy prevents mothers with children who want to avoid men (because of a history of abuse, rape, or trauma) from feeling safe in any family emergency shelter. They believe the policy creates systemic discrimination against these women and their children. This laggard shelter has applied for a waiver/exception to the requirement of admitting men as residents in their shelter.

Additional themes raised through the study included the role of communication across channels (city employees, shelter staff, and families), the role of attitudes as they may have impacted how stakeholders accepted or denied the change in policy, the benefit of learning from early adopter shelters that can come from the decades of experience in serving families, family dynamics that are impacted by shelter living, and the reality of racism and its impact on shelter access and experiences.

Recommendations

This study’s results lead to several practical recommendations for serving mothers, fathers, and children residing in shelters. Additional opportunities are offered for policymakers and researchers.

Direct service

- As fathers are admitted to family emergency shelters, the shelters need to find ways to become more family friendly. This includes hiring more male staff (particularly African American male staff) to reflect the demographics of the shelter residents. All staff need to be trained to work with fathers in ways that fathers experience as supportive, respectful, and productive. Shelters need to strategically prepare families for entry into family shelters by sharing common rules and emphasizing the need to focus on their families. Shelters should also adapt programming to be more inclusive of fathers within their families in order to meet the total needs of the family.
- Shelters should consider acknowledging parents as stakeholders, possibly creating parent advisory boards to solicit ongoing relevant input and recommendations. Both mothers and fathers appreciated the opportunity to participate in the focus groups and have their voices heard. At the end of the parent focus groups, parents requested future opportunities to share their thoughts and opinions. This speaks to a need for all family voices to be heard on a regular basis.



Advocacy/Training

- Shelter staff across all shelters (early adopter, late adopter, and laggard shelters) should be encouraged to support one another, exchange information, improve problem solving, and enhance advocacy. Early adopter shelters have experience and knowledge to share with late adopter and laggard shelters. Late adopter shelters that are structured with community living spaces have experience and knowledge to share with each other and with laggard shelters. Some sharing of information occurred organically, but a more formalized system could be more inclusive and have greater impact.
- OHS and shelter administrators should seek opportunities to build partnerships among city government, institutions, and community nonprofits to find solutions for problems encountered in implementing the nondiscrimination policy. This might include partnering with agencies (e.g., Habitat for Humanity) that could possibly conduct building renovations.
- Because fathers have been recently integrated into six family emergency shelters that have historically served only women and children, OHS and shelter staff would likely benefit from cultural competency training. This training should be designed to decrease biases and increase knowledge about and comfort with serving (particularly African American) fathers. Additionally, training staff to work more effectively with families could help staff support families better as they reside in family emergency shelters. Longer-term trainings focused on other protected classes of people (e.g., people with disabilities, people of non-Christian faiths, etc.) could be beneficial. Providing trainings that are responsive to real-time needs (perhaps identified through the OHS complaint hotline) might be most beneficial.

Research

- Future research areas could include studying this inclusion/integration process over time, exploring the experiences of married or partnered couples in family shelter settings with single families, exploring the children's perceptions and experiences of having their fathers included in the shelters, and exploring the types of services and methods of service delivery that best address the needs of men (in addition to women).

Policy

- OHS should consider monitoring the integration of other protected classes of individuals in shelter settings. Participants raised concerns about the integration of people with disabilities, people who identify as LGBTQI, and people of non-Christian faiths. Additionally, policy leaders should consider the role of race in the experience of homelessness.

Conclusions

Philadelphia has continued to demonstrate its leadership role in serving those experiencing homelessness. OHS's bold action of developing and implementing a nondiscrimination policy that fully integrates fathers into all family emergency shelters shows evidence of this continued leadership. Their desire to share their process and progress with others will make a tremendous contribution to the field. Acknowledging that homelessness does not affect all races equally is an important declaration and a precursor to seeking solutions to address issues surrounding family homelessness that require discussion and problem-solving within a racial equity lens (Olivet et al., 2018).

This study explored the process of making system change in Philadelphia with respect to the adoption and implementation of new policy requiring the inclusion of fathers as residents in family emergency shelters. OHS and all family shelters—early adopters, late adopters, and laggards—acknowledged being part of a service system that is inherently biased against fathers, yet they simultaneously believed in the positive value fathers can contribute to



their families during this housing crisis. Shelters that had building set-ups that allowed for private rooms for individual families were quicker to adopt this policy of father inclusion, while shelters in buildings with congregate living spaces encountered more difficulty in adopting this policy change. The most substantial concerns around implementing this policy change focused on safety and privacy issues. Communication was a challenge in this endeavor. However, change occurred in a period of approximately 24 months and the Philadelphia OHS now has nine of its 10 family shelters admitting fathers as residents. All stakeholders plan to continue to work to make the shelters more father-inclusive and “family centric” beyond just fathers living in the shelters. The ultimate goal is to decrease system biases and barriers that hinder advancing the overall quality of families’ experiences in the homeless shelter system.

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