

EVALUATION OF THE SOUND FAMILIES INITIATIVE

HOW ARE THEY FARING?
FINDINGS ON 51 FAMILIES ONE YEAR
AFTER EXITING TRANSITIONAL
HOUSING PROGRAMS

JANUARY 2007

SOUND *families*



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Summary Findings

As of June 2006, 134 of the families enrolled in the Sound Families evaluation had exited transitional housing. The findings presented here represent the 51 families who had completed a follow-up interview one year after exiting their respective programs.

Housing Stability

- 88% of families secured permanent housing at exit; 78% were using a Section 8 voucher to do so. Nearly all maintained stable housing over the subsequent year even though nearly 40 percent of all 51 families had moved—including those who had transitioned in place. Most moves were from one permanent housing location to another, though many movers temporarily lived with friends or families between residences. Only six percent, or three families, became homeless again.
- Housing subsidies proved critical for families to obtain and maintain housing: Among families in the subgroup who did *not* receive a voucher at exit, only 60 percent secured permanent housing at exit; 30 percent moved in with family or friends at exit. By one year after exit, 73 percent of the group without Section 8 at exit were in permanent housing.
- One year after exit, families were paying a median of \$271 per month in rent while the median fair market rent (FMR) in Washington is \$745 per month—a large gap in families' ability to afford housing independently.

Income and Employment

- By one year after exit, 74 percent of all families had increased their household incomes compared to that at intake. These income gains came from many sources: working more hours or new employment, wage gains, and new sources of income, most frequently SSI, Medicaid, child support and food stamps. TANF as a source of income declined from 60 percent at intake to 29 percent one year after exit. The percent of primary caregivers employed full-time tripled from intake (8 percent) to one year post-exit (24 percent). The percent employed part-time remained relatively constant over the same period. Average hourly wages increased from \$8.40/hour at intake to \$11.50/hour one year after exit.

Financial Stability

- Families had varying abilities to afford basic needs and manage bills with half “very able” to regularly manage basic living expenses. Far fewer families were able to set aside money for emergencies, with only half being able to do so at all. Among those who could, 28 percent had savings of more than \$300, and 32 percent had less than \$50 saved. One-third of families used a food bank within the past six months to stretch their food budget. One-fourth of families reported being late on their rent payment at least once in the year following exit. One-third had received a disconnection notice or had interruptions in their utility services.

Services Following Exit

- After exit, supportive services were infrequently received, particularly when one compares the percent of families who reported having needs for which they could use specific services to those actually receiving them. The most commonly received services after exit, with at least one in five families receiving one year after exiting, were mental health services and counseling/ support groups. Of needs identified by at least one-fourth of families, the *least* frequently met needs were: school (college, GED), job training, parenting skills classes, counseling or support groups, and help with credit. Prior transitional programs remained one source of support: one year after exit, one-third of families had contacted their transitional housing case manager for help in the past six months.

Family Assets

- While in transitional housing, families made many gains in less tangible areas such as knowledge gained and stronger social support networks. Many families expressed learning a lot in areas such as obtaining and maintaining permanent housing and creating and using household budgets. Other families described ways in which the programs helped them to develop routines and structure for their families and to learn to take care of their responsibilities such as paying the rent on time.
- Gains in social support networks were evident in higher reported levels of support after transitional housing than before, with 49 percent feeling “very supported” one year after exit compared to 14 percent feeling that way while homeless. One year after exit, 78 percent of primary caregivers reported that they had someone to whom they could turn if they were about to lose their housing again. However, this leaves one in five families with no one to turn to and vulnerable in the face of losing their housing.

Quality of Life

- One year after exiting transitional housing, families reported improvements in their overall quality of life: 69 percent of primary caregivers reported that their families’ lives are “a lot better”; 18 percent “somewhat better”; 8 percent “about the same”; and 4 percent “somewhat worse.” When asked what has improved, there was a definite sense of being more in control of their lives, more stable, and optimistic for continued gains.

Services that Mattered

- When asked one year after exit what had made the biggest difference for them while they were in the programs, families responded overwhelmingly and nearly equally that having a safe and stable place to live *and* having a case manager to provide support and guidance were most critical. Many families described the importance of the overall support and belief in them by their case managers and other program staff. Families also noted that many services made a difference for them; most frequently mentioned were child care, parenting classes, budgeting, counseling and “the entire program.”

Introduction

The Sound Families Initiative

Launched in 2000, Sound Families is a multi-year, \$40 million investment by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to develop 1,500 service-enriched transitional housing units for homeless families in Pierce, King and Snohomish Counties in the state of Washington. The initiative involves many collaborative relationships among non-profit and for-profit housing developers, service providers, and local housing authorities.

Families are screened by individual programs for entry into the transitional housing units. Many programs have a maximum two-year stay, though the average length of stay is just over 13 months. Several strategies to obtain permanent housing are available to families at exit: Through agreements with local housing authorities, families may receive portable Section 8 vouchers, a housing subsidy that caps their rent at 30% of income, or they may receive a public housing unit. Since its inception, the Initiative has also encouraged a transition-in-place strategy at program sites where such a model is feasible. This allows families to remain in the same housing complex, if not the same unit, once they have finished receiving services as participants in the transitional program. This model offers additional stability to families since it eliminates yet another move and possibly a school or child care change for the children. Recently, in response to many of the early evaluation findings, the Initiative has developed a strategy that allows grantees to house homeless families in permanent supportive units in which services are provided to families until they are no longer needed.

All Sound Families programs provide intensive case management, broadly defined as in-home weekly case management, plus phone contact, often more than once per week. The average caseload is 15 families per full-time case manager. Families needing specialized services, such as drug and alcohol treatment, education, job training, mental health services, are usually referred to off-site providers. Typically there are no formal service plans following a family's exit from the transitional program. Previous evaluation reports (listed in the Appendix) provide more information on the program models.

The Sound Families evaluation has produced several reports on preliminary findings and two reports on special topics, families who were asked to leave transitional housing and children's issues. All reports are available at www.soundfamilies.org. This report is the first to provide longitudinal findings on a subgroup of families who have been out of Sound Families transitional housing programs for at least one year.

Methodology

Ten programs were selected as case study sites. They are distributed across the three counties and represent nine separate service providers. The case study sites began serving families between November 2001 and December 2003. They were selected to represent the range of housing and service models as well as geographic distribution. The case study sites were chosen to be *reflective* of all funded programs, but they are not representative of all Sound Families programs from a research standpoint since they were selected before all programs were funded. More detailed descriptions of the sites and more demographic information on the families are found in the 2005 evaluation report, *A Closer Look at Homeless Families' Lives During and After Supportive Transitional Housing*.

Each family who enters a transitional unit is invited to participate in the evaluation; 203 families were enrolled in the evaluation. The primary caregiver in each family is interviewed by the evaluators after six months in the program and at exit. Follow-up interviews are then conducted at 6 months, and at one, two and three years following exit.

As of June 2006, 134 of the families enrolled in the evaluation had exited transitional housing. The findings presented here represent the 51 families who had completed a follow-up interview one year after exiting their respective programs. Data collection will continue through June 2006 so future reports will represent findings from a larger group of families who have exited transitional housing.

Four years into this longitudinal study, the retention rate (families' whose contact information is known and who respond to requests for interviews) is approximately 80 percent. The appendix includes information on what is known about the housing stability of those families with whom we have lost contact in order to acknowledge the bias toward positive findings inherent in this type of longitudinal study—in other words, we are more likely to maintain contact with, and therefore interview, families whose lives are more stable.

Families in this study

The 51 families focused on in this report have characteristics very similar to that in the overall study sample. Those characteristics and families' experiences in transitional housing are discussed more fully in previous evaluation reports. The most salient differences are the higher percentage of veterans in this subsample and a higher percentage of families who were homeless for the first time. A brief overview of characteristics is found in Table 1.

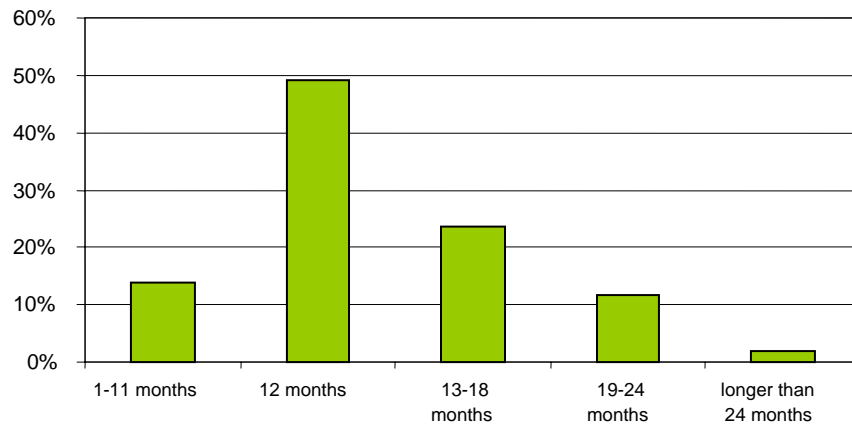
Table 1. Brief characteristics of families in the subgroup

Single parent	80%
Average age of primary caregiver	33 years
Families with one child living in transitional housing	41%
Families with 3 or more children living in transitional housing	39%
Families with children <i>not</i> living in transitional housing	24%
Immigrant/refugee families	4%
Primary caregiver is Caucasian	49%
Primary caregiver is African American	29%
Primary caregiver is any other race/ethnicity	22%
Primary caregiver has a physical disability	14%
Primary caregiver has an identified mental illness at intake	14%
Primary caregiver is a veteran	16%
Family is homeless for the first time	54%
Family has been homeless longer than six months	38%
Family lived in a shelter just prior to transitional housing	51%
Family lived with family or friends just prior to transitional housing	26%

N=51

Families resided in transitional housing for average of 13.4 months; half of the families were in their programs exactly one year (Figure 1). Considering the changes described in this report, then, one realizes that for the majority of families those changes have occurred within 24 months of last being homeless—not a long period of time given the multiple and often daunting challenges the families are striving to address.

Figure 1. Length of time families resided in transitional housing, N=51



Twenty percent of families were evicted or asked to leave their transitional programs. This group of families is discussed in more detail in the Sound Families Report, *Early Exits: Lessons Learned from Families Asked to Leave Transitional Housing* (2006).

Housing Following Exit

Since achieving permanent housing is a primary client level outcome of the Initiative, housing outcomes are examined here from several angles. First, of the 134 families at case study sites to exit a program as of June 2006, 70 percent secured some type of permanent housing—Section 8 vouchers, public housing, private or fair market rate, and home/trailer ownership (Table 2, column I). Two-thirds of these permanent housing exits were using a Section 8 voucher. Those who did not exit to stable housing most often went to live with family or friends; fewer entered treatment or prison, or returned to homelessness.

If, however, we examine housing outcomes by those families who successfully completed the transitional services versus those who were asked to leave or evicted from their transitional units, we see that 85 percent of the successful ‘completers’ secured permanent housing compared to 11 percent of those asked to leave (Table 2, columns II and III). It also becomes clearer that the majority of less desirable outcomes are among those families asked to leave.

Table 2. Housing outcomes for all exits, N=134

Where are families moving after exiting transitional housing?	I. ALL families N=134	II. Not asked to leave N=107	III. Asked to leave N=27
Permanent housing*	70%	85%	11%
Moving in with family or friends	14%	10%	30%
Emergency shelter	2%	1%	7%
Inpatient drug or alcohol treatment facility	2%	-	11%
Places not meant for habitation (street, car, motel)	2%	-	7%
Prison	1%	-	4%
Unknown	9%	4%	30%
<i>Transitioning in place</i>	24%**	29%	0%

*Includes fair market, public housing, Section 8, other subsidized housing, and home/trailer ownership.

** Not all program models have a transition-in-place option. In those that did, 41% of families transitioned in place.

The transition-in-place model was an option in seven of the ten case study sites—at these sites, 41 percent of families transitioned in place, with rates at individual program sites ranging from 6 to 67 percent. Rates varied largely due to the desirability of the housing location, sense of neighborhood safety, availability of an appropriate unit at the needed time, and availability of Section 8 to support the family’s rent payments.

If we examine housing outcomes from a third angle, by receipt of portable Section 8 vouchers, since this is an integral exit strategy for Sound Families programs, we can better understand how permanent housing is achieved for families *not* receiving Section 8—and what happens when permanent housing is not achieved.¹ Among families not asked to leave, and not receiving a Section 8 voucher, 56 percent were able to secure permanent housing—mainly fair market rate rental housing that the family could afford, but also public or other subsidized housing (Table 3). One-third moved in with family or friends at exit. This underscores the difficulty of finding affordable housing in this region without a subsidy to augment a family’s income. No families were able to transition in place without Section 8—indicating the importance of portable Section 8 vouchers to this particular program model.

¹ Families who were asked to leave transitional programs were excluded in order to fairly compare outcomes between the two groups since families not completing the service component were not eligible for Section 8 vouchers.

Table 3. Impact of Section 8 on permanent housing achievement for families not asked to leave* transitional housing programs

Where are families moving after exiting transitional housing?	With Section 8 voucher (n=73)	Without Section 8 voucher (n=34)
Permanent housing	100%	56%
<i>Fair market rate housing</i>	-	35%
<i>Public housing</i>	-	9%
<i>Other subsidized housing</i>	-	9%
<i>Homeownership</i>	-	3%
Moving in with family or friends	-	32%
Emergency shelter	-	3%
Unknown	-	9%
<i>Transitioning in place</i>	23%	0%

* Families were neither evicted nor asked to leave their programs. They were excluded since they would not have been eligible for a Section 8 voucher at exit.

N=107

Housing stability over time

To examine the maintenance of permanent housing over time, we turn to the subset of families who have one-year post-exit data. Among the 51 families interviewed one year after exiting, nearly all maintained stable housing (Table 4).² In that year, six percent, or three families, had become homeless again. Of these three families, two re-entered transitional housing or a shelter within the first six months of exiting and the third re-entered transitional housing or a shelter within one year of exit. Only four percent of families had been evicted or asked to leave their new residence since exiting the program.

² It must be noted that the families with whom we are able to remain in contact are more likely to be doing better than those with whom we have lost contact, resulting in a positive bias in our findings. The Appendix shows what was last known about the “lost contact” families who no longer remain in our sample and, indeed, they exhibit higher levels of negative outcomes. However, nearly half did exit to permanent housing and many appear to have maintained it.

Over three-fourths of these families received a Section 8 voucher at exit, and most continued to use the voucher one year later. No families without a voucher at exit had obtained one in the intervening year.

Table 4. Housing over time for one year follow-up subgroup, N=51

Where are families living?	Following exit	At 6-month follow-up	At 1-year follow-up
Permanent housing	88%	90%	94%
Living with family or friends	6%	6%	4%
Inpatient drug or alcohol treatment facility	2%	-	-
Emergency shelter or non-housing (street, car, motel)	-	4%	2%
Unknown	4%	2%	-
<i>Using Section 8 voucher (also counted in perm. hsg. above)</i>	78%	78%	71%

Rental housing costs

That a housing subsidy is critical for families to obtain and maintain housing is evident in two findings: First, among families in the subgroup who did *not* receive a voucher at exit (n=11), only 60 percent secured permanent housing at exit—30 percent moved in with family or friends at exit. By one year after exit, 73 percent of the group without Section 8 at exit were in permanent housing, most still without Section 8.

Second, six months after exit families were paying a median of \$172 per month in rent while the median fair market rent (FMR) in Washington is \$745 per month—a large gap in families’ ability to afford housing independently. One year after exit, families were assuming a larger portion of their rent, \$271 per month, as their incomes increased, though this rent is still far short of the median FMR. A former resident described her situation:

I have been off TANF for 18 months. I didn’t think I could ever get off it. I have a full-time job, but I still need Section 8 to afford housing. I feel more comfortable knowing it’s there. I am a lot more independent now than I was.

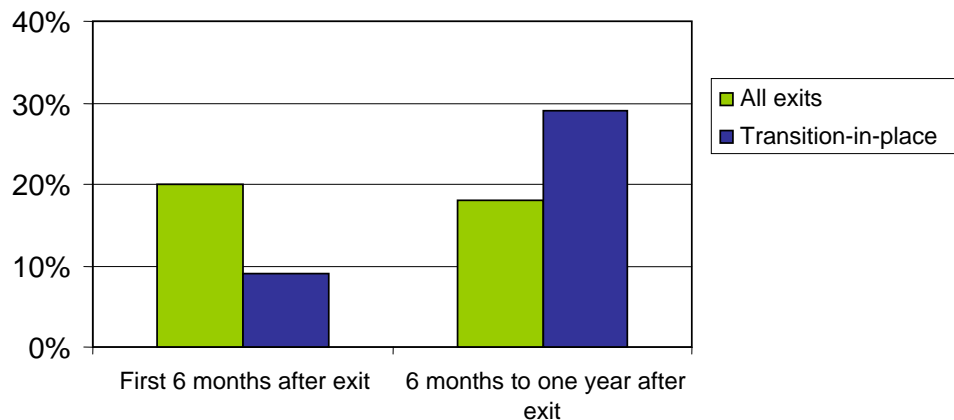
Mobility after exit

Less expected was the high level of mobility after exit among families who had secured permanent housing at exit, including families who had transitioned in place (Figure 2). Six months after exit, 20 percent of families had moved, nearly all to a new neighborhood. Only 10 percent of these movers had moved *again* in the subsequent six months. At one year after exit, 18 percent of all families had moved, again most to a new neighborhood. By the end of the first year following exit from transitional housing, nearly 40 percent of all 51 families had moved. For families who exited to new housing, these moves represent a *second move* within a year while for families who transitioned in place, these moves represent *one move* during the year. Most moves were from one permanent housing location to another, though many movers temporarily lived with friends or families between residences. Among all families, 24 percent temporarily lived with family or friends in the year following exit.

Rates of mobility were also high among families who originally transitioned in place (Figure 2). Within six months of exit, 9 percent of families who transitioned in place had moved. In the next six months, 29 percent of families who had transitioned in place moved, meaning that by one year after exit over one-third had moved. The group who transitioned in place were less likely, however, to live with family or friends between moves, implying better timing or more intentionality in their moves than non-TIP families. Qualitative data indicate that transitioning in place allowed families to wait for an appropriate unit to become available to move into or for them to finish school or a training program before moving. Additionally, the moves for families who had transitioned in place were less likely to cause a change in the children's school when compared to other families, implying that there may have been more intentionality in the decisions as to when and where to move. One mother describes her decision to transition in place then move later:

I decided to stay here until I finish school. With my school schedule it works best to be here given the extra support. I would like to move but not until I am done with school.

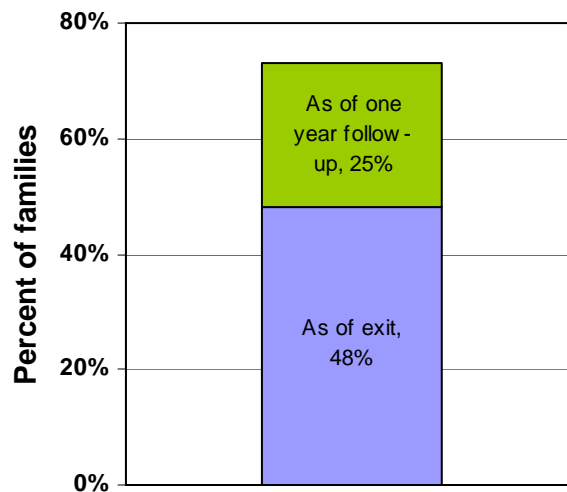
Figure 2. Families moving in the year following exit



Income and Employment

By exit, 48 percent of families had increased their household income compared to that at intake. Many families' incomes also increased in the year following exit, with 57 percent having higher incomes than at exit. By one year after exit, 74 percent of all families had increased their household incomes compared to that at intake (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Increases in monthly household income



These income gains came from many sources: working more hours or new employment, wage gains, and new sources of income (Table 5). New income sources were most frequently SSI, Medicaid, child support and food stamps—many of which were obtained with help from case managers to navigate lengthy application procedures. TANF as a source of income declined from 60 percent at intake to 29 percent one year after exit.

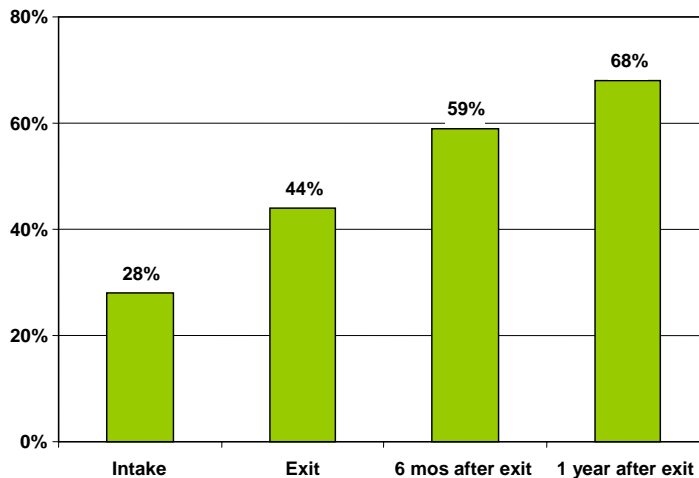
Table 5. Sources of monthly income over time

	Intake	Exit	6-mo f/u	1-year f/u
Employment income	28%	46%	50%	60%
TANF	60%	45%	40%	29%
SSI; SSDI; Social Security	8%	12%	17%	22%
Food stamps/WIC	48%	67%	56%	63%
Child support	24%	28%	25%	33%
Unemployment benefits	10%	4%	4%	2%
Medicare/Medicaid	18%	37%	35%	61%
Veteran's benefits	6%	8%	13%	10%
Other	6%	14%	13%	8%

N=51

Figure 4 shows the increase in families with incomes greater than \$1,000 from 28 percent at intake to 68 percent one year after exit.

Figure 4. Monthly household income greater than \$1,000



The percent of families with little or no income (less than \$500 per month) at intake declined from 32 percent at intake to 6 percent one year after exit (Table 6). Despite these significant gains, the majority of families' incomes remained less than \$2,000 per month. Comparing this to the monthly self-sufficiency wage of \$3,000 per month for a single parent with two children shows the gap between families' incomes and what is necessary for self-sufficiency.

Table 6. Household income over time

	Intake	Exit	6-mo f/u	1-year f/u
\$ 0 - 250	2%	2%	-	-
\$251 - 500	32%	10%	11%	6%
\$501 - 1,000	38%	45%	30%	28%
\$1,001 - 1,500	22%	28%	35%	28%
\$1,501 - \$2,000	6%	10%	7%	24%
More than \$2,000	-	6%	17%	16%

N=51

Employment rates increased as well. Table 7 shows the number of primary caregivers employed full-time tripled from intake (8 percent) to one year post-exit (24 percent). The percent employed part-time remained relatively constant over the same period. Employment patterns are difficult to generalize. Some caregivers moved from part-time to full-time, some from unemployed to part-time or full-time, and some experienced a loss or decrease in employment. Many of the jobs held were not long-term as they were a result of job-seekers needing to take "any job," not finding one that was a good fit for their interests or skills. Qualitative data indicate that for many families their jobs are often a source of additional stress, straining an individual's capacity and readiness for work. For others, taking a low-paying job has led to a loss of benefits that have a financial value greater than their earnings, creating further financial strains on the family. As one mother explains:

My life is a little worse since leaving the program. I am paying more bills here and I am struggling more because of this. I quit a job that paid better because it was too stressful. I was working weekends and not able to see my kids much...then they raised my rent to \$300 and they cut my medical coupons. It just wasn't worth it.

Increases in employment were matched by declines in receipt of TANF: 60 percent of families received TANF at intake while half as many (29 percent) did one year after exit. The percent of primary caregivers with disability status increased after exit in part due to the length of time it takes to receive SSI; case managers are typically integral to helping families make their way through the complex eligibility process. Some disabilities are related to health issues that are not permanent, thus the decline in percent disabled at one year follow-up.

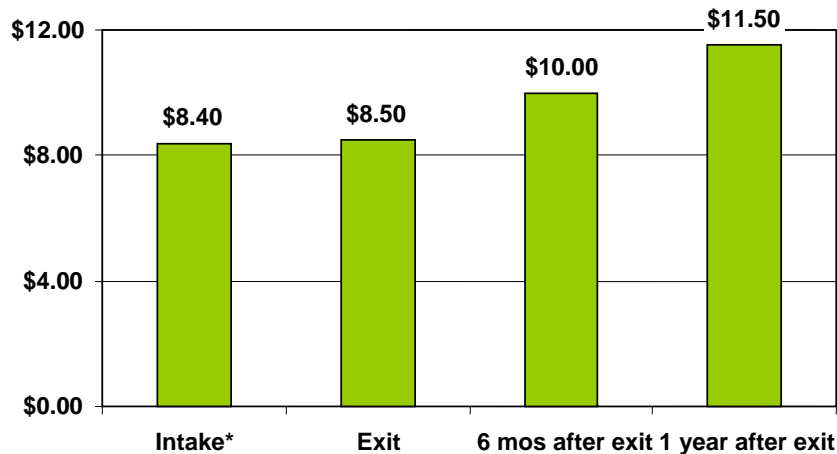
Table 7. Primary caregiver employment status at each time point

	Intake	Exit	6-mo f/u	1-year f/u
Employed full-time	8%	16%	19%	24%
Employed part-time	24%	24%	17%	22%
Not employed	60%	43%	33%	31%
Disabled/Unable to work	6%	12%	25%	18%

N=51

The average number of hours worked increased slightly over time, hovering near 30 hours per week. The average hourly wage increased over time from \$8.40/hour to \$11.50/hour (Figure 5), though not significantly from intake to exit, which is not surprising since the typical length of time in a program is 12 months. Some primary caregivers also complete education or job training programs after exit, hence receiving the wage gains after exit. Even with employment, only 25 percent were receiving health insurance for themselves through their employer, and 20 percent were receiving health insurance for their children.

Figure 5. Median hourly wage



Financial Stability

The fragility of being poor remains evident among these families despite the positive outcomes in housing, income and employment. The evaluation asks questions in several areas to gauge how tenuous families’ housing stability and financial solvency are. Families had varying abilities to afford basic needs and manage bills with only half “very able” to regularly manage basic living expenses (Table 8). Far fewer families were able to set aside money for emergencies, with only half being able to do so at all. Among those who could, 28 percent had savings of more than \$300, and 32 percent had less than \$50 saved. One-third of families used a food bank within the past six months to stretch their food budget. Furthermore, one-fourth of families reported being late on their rent payment at least once in the year following exit. One-third had received a disconnection notice or had interruptions in their utility services. Sometimes families have become aware of resources while in transitional housing that help them make ends meet:

I have my bills pretty much covered except for my electricity. I get help from (my previous transitional program) for this.

Table 8. Families’ abilities to afford basic expenses

	Not at all	Not very	Somewhat	Very
Able to buy food and other necessities	2%	4%	31%	63%
Able to manage bills	4%	4%	49%	47%
Able to buy clothing for children	6%	22%	35%	35%
Able to allow children to participate in activities that cost money	10%	14%	22%	47%
Able to set aside money for emergencies	49%	25%	14%	12%

N=51

Caregivers’ Education

While it is difficult to determine exact changes in individual education levels from the data, about one-third of primary caregivers appeared to increase educational attainment during or after the programs (Table 9). In many cases, the families’ length of stay in transitional housing was too short to complete many educational or training programs so completion occurred after exit. The 14 percent of caregivers who exited a transitional program without a GED/diploma

were somewhat more likely to be in families who were asked to leave their program, but still many families successfully completed programs without securing this basic level of education. This represents a lost opportunity for these families, even those with many barriers, to be supported while achieving this critical milestone.

The emphasis on higher education or job training varies with a program’s client population, service model and philosophy, with most programs emphasizing compliance with WorkFirst and basic job preparedness and fewer supporting families in completing more comprehensive vocational training or higher education to secure higher-paying jobs. As several clients describe:

I received a lot of support and a lot of resources and information through the program. The program gave me the chance to go back to school and get my CNA.

The program wants you to go through school and create a savings, but by the time you finish school, they told us it was time to leave.

Education should be a priority vs. just getting any job. You need to help people get jobs that have livable wages and people need help with paying for childcare. They should provide more funding for this.

Table 9. Primary caregiver highest education levels over time

	Intake	Exit	6-mo f/u	1-year f/u
Less than high school diploma	22%	14%	15%	14%
High school diploma/GED	32%	24%	18%	22%
Some college	22%	37%	37%	36%
Technical/vocational school	18%	20%	24%	18%
College degree	8%	6%	7%	10%

N=51

One of the primary problems with the education and training available to many families is that it does not often lead to careers in fields in which they are interested, and thus more likely to remain in over time. In some cases, the training is unlikely to lead to jobs that have significant opportunity for wage gain over time and families find themselves at a minimum-wage dead-end. Some families also lack basic job skill behaviors such as arriving for work on time, resolving problems, or appropriately using sick time, and without support and training in these

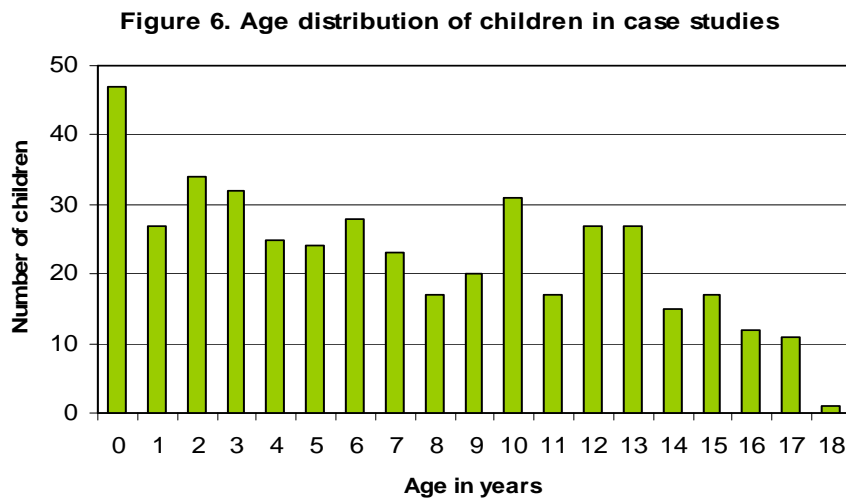
areas, are likely to have problems maintaining their employment. Two families describe their experiences:

I wish I would have been trained in a different program, one that I wasn't pushed into... I was devastated and I was doing it just to get them (DSHS/WorkFirst) off my back. This was a five month program and I completed all of it but a few weeks. I really wanted to get my Associates Degree, but they didn't want me to do that. Now I'm trained in something I don't want to do. It's a job that requires sitting—a desk job—and I can't even sit with my back problems.

Web-design was an interest, but I chose it because I had to go to school. What I really wanted to was to take business classes because I always wanted to own my own business and combine this with social work. What good is it to go to school for something you don't really want to be? They steered me this way because it had to be something I could complete in 18 months. I went to school for 9 months and I still have 2 years ahead of me to get what I want.

Children

The subgroup of 51 families includes 113 children, an average of 2.2 children per family. Forty-one percent of families have only one child with them in transitional housing, 22 percent have two children, 19 percent three, and 18 percent four or more. Additionally, one-fourth of families had at least one child who was not living with them when they entered transitional housing. Households also became larger over time: 16 percent of parents had more children in their care at the follow-up interviews than at entry into transitional housing. The average age of children in Sound Families case study programs is 7.1 years, though one-third of children are three years or younger (Figure 6).



Interviews have shed light on what caregivers identify as important in the lives of their children, how transitional housing has benefited the children, parents' hopes for their children, and how programs can enhance services for this next generation. Follow-up interviews are helpful in capturing what changes, if any, have occurred in the children's lives and the role that Sound Families programs played in fostering these changes. These findings are covered in greater depth in *Breaking the Cycle: Serving Homeless Children in Supportive Housing Programs* (2006).

During their initial interview with the evaluators, caregivers were asked to name three ways they would like their children's lives to change while in the program. Responses (Table 10) most frequently centered on developing better relationships with peers and improving the parent-child relationship, followed by increasing stability and security in children's lives:

"Stability...somewhere to have a set schedule and a place to eat."

Table 10. Most common ways caregivers wanted their children's lives to change while in transitional housing

Emotional and relational development	36%
Sense of stability and security	22%
Childcare and improvement in schooling/educational	15%
Able to participate in extracurricular activities	11%
Concrete needs	5%
Physical health improvements (medical care, nutrition, exercise)	3%

N=134; reported at six-months in the program.

When asked what services were necessary to support these changes in their children's lives, caregivers often acknowledged that their children's needs would likely be met by maintaining their current housing in the transitional program and subsequently securing permanent housing. Housing was seen as the necessary foundation for achieving other goals. As one mother explained, "The fact that I got here to build a place for me and my kids," was a huge step forward. Another explains:

Having the help with this unit (is most important). I couldn't manage to do what I already have to do and work a job. Having to manage my daughter's special needs is enough.

Beyond stable housing (Table 11), caregivers' responses largely depended on characteristics of their programs. For example, the housing location, whether or not there was access to counselors and children's advocates, and the availability of adequate play space for children influenced caregivers' thoughts on what else was needed. Responses also tended to vary

depending on the children’s ages in the household. Parents of very young children voiced a need for help locating daycare and having play space, whereas caregivers of older children desired counseling and tutoring. Notably, responses did not always suggest the absence of such services, as many were in place at the time of the interview and caregivers wanted them to continue. One mother sums it up as follows:

I’d like to have a case manager who understands all situations: domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, all types of crisis... and understand how this impacts the kids. We need them to be our advocates.

Table 11. Services needed in addition to housing stability to support desired changes in children’s lives

Counseling and/or mental health services	35%
Extracurricular activities	29%
Services relating to educational success	26%
Parenting classes	10%
Concrete assistance	9%

N=89; reported at six-months in the program.

One-third of caregivers said that counseling and/or mental health services were important. Many children were currently involved in counseling, some of whom were receiving counseling directly through their transitional housing program, and others through local community mental health centers using medical coupons. Caregivers who had previously received counseling services raised concerns about the quality and continuity of children’s mental health, most often when received from the local community mental health centers, where turnover and poor experiences frequently disrupted service for many families. Mental health cuts at the state level have impacted the availability of such care especially in areas that have fewer existing resources: *“(We need) a good mental health program or psychiatrist that takes medical coupons...no one wants to take them (the coupons).”*

Child welfare system involvement

Rates of child welfare involvement among families in the case studies were somewhat lower than expected, possibly because active substance abuse precludes eligibility from most programs, and the incidence of substance abuse issues and child neglect are highly correlated. Approximately 18 percent of families had some type of CPS involvement at intake, slightly decreasing by follow-up interviews (Table 12). Nearly all families who had a child placed out-of-home were reunified with them, most often between intake and six months into the program.

Table 12. Family involvement with child welfare services

	Intake	Exit	6-month follow-up	1-year follow-up
Families with CPS involvement in past year	18%	14%	8%	10%
Families who had a child placed in a foster or relative home in past year	5%	5%	1%	2%
Families who were reunified with some or all of their children	64%	50%	100%	-

Children’s Education

The number of schools children attended declined significantly while in transitional housing, as would be anticipated with stable housing. Even with 40 percent of families moving during the year following exit, school stability remained high. The number of families with school age children who attended *one school* during the past school year increased from 49 percent at intake, to 80 percent at exit and 86 percent at the one year follow-up interview (Table 13).

Table 13. Number of schools oldest child attended in the past year

	Intake	Exit	6-month follow-up	1-year follow-up
1 School	49%	80%	78%	86%
2 Schools	31%	17%	22%	14%
3 Schools	11%	3%	-	-
4 or more schools	9%	-	-	-

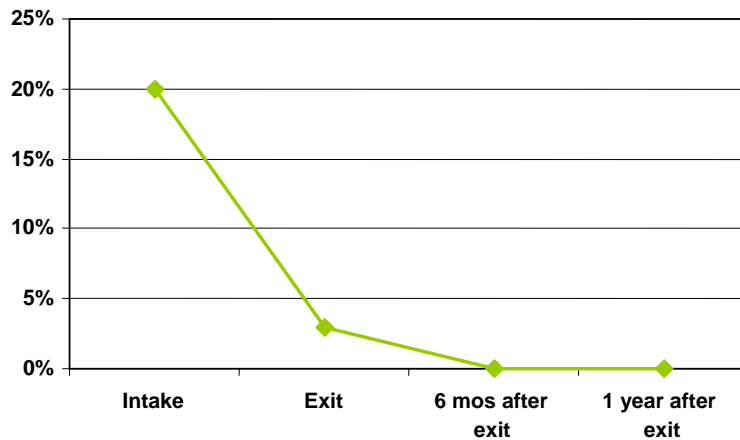
N=35 families with at least one school age child.

The transition-in-place model in several programs gives families the ability to remain in the same housing and thus keep the children at the same school. One mother decided to transition in place in order to allow for her children to remain in the same school:

I want my son to attend the same school again this year. I can't imagine having to move... it bothers me to think about what it would be like to move us all again. This mostly impacts the children and I have made the decision to stay and transition in place because it would disrupt us.

In contrast, transitional housing had a very positive impact on the percentage of children with multiple school changes within one year (Figure 7). At intake, 20 percent of children had been in more than two schools in the past year; this declined to 0 percent after exit.

Figure 7. Children attending more than 2 schools in the past year



Obtaining stable housing also appears to positively impact children’s school attendance. At intake, 35 percent of children had missed *at least a few weeks* of classes in the past year, declining to 19 percent at exit and 11 percent at one year after exit. Table 14 shows the most common reasons children missed school. Once stabilized in their transitional housing unit, ‘moving too much’ no longer appeared as a reason for absenteeism. Lack of transportation increased as a cause for children missing school while families are in transitional housing, perhaps because the location of some programs in rural or outlying areas made getting children to school difficult. After exit, children most frequently miss school because of illness or doctors’ appointments.

Table 14. Most common reasons children missed school

	Intake	Exit	6-month follow-up	1-year follow-up
Illness	58%	39%	73%	66%
Moving too much	19%	-	-	-
Overslept	4%	3%	7%	6%
No transportation	7%	36%	-	3%
Not enrolled	4%	3%	3%	-
Doctor’s appointments	-	6%	11%	13%
Other	7%	17%	6%	12%

N=35

Ways Programs Were Good For Children and Ways Programs Could Improve

Caregivers most frequently reported having stable housing as the primary benefit of transitional housing for their children, since it enabled them to provide a sense of routine and security for their children. Stable housing also allowed for stable schooling and gave children both positive community experiences and provided better home environments. Case managers and children's advocates or counselors, when on staff, were valuable in helping families to access services as well as in providing activities for children of different ages. Many parents felt supported in their parenting and gained valuable skills while in transitional housing.

Conversely, caregivers were asked about ways they felt programs could improve services to children. The most common suggestions were for more age-specific activities for children, especially after school and during summers. Play spaces, when not provided, were also often mentioned. Access to service resources such as counseling, financial assistance for children's extracurricular activities, on-site child care and tutoring, were other suggestions for improvement.

Services Following Exit

While in programs, the majority of families reported that their needs were met (Table 15). After exit, services were much less frequently received, particularly when one compares the percent of families who report having needs for which they could use specific services (Table 15) to those actually receiving them. That so many needs went unmet in the community raises questions about the level of support these families have once they have left the supportive housing.

The most commonly received services after exit, with at least one in five families receiving one year after exiting, were mental health services and counseling/support groups. Of needs identified by at least one-fourth of families, the *least* frequently met needs were: school (college, GED), job training, parenting skills classes, counseling or support groups, and help with credit.

Signifying the importance of the relationship between client and case manager as part of many families' ongoing support systems, one year after exit one-third of families had contacted their transitional housing case manager for help in the past six months. They sought out their former case managers for advice, support, resources, and concrete goods such as school supplies: *"If I needed anything, I could always go there (the program). Even still, if I need help, my old case manager will help me out."* Families who transitioned in place had higher level of contact with their transitional housing case manager following exit from services, as might be expected since the case managers are often encountered at the housing site.

Table 15. Services needed and received during and after transitional housing

	Needed <i>during</i> program	Received (if needed)	Ongoing need	Receiving at 6 mo f/u	Receiving at 1 yr f/u
Mental health services	45%	91%	42%	28%	29%
Alcohol abuse services	12%	83%	11%	4%	2%
Drug abuse services	10%	100%	10%	2%	2%
Domestic violence services	26%	92%	15%	6%	10%
Child care	67%	88%	64%	31%	*
GED or school classes	51%	81%	44%	17%	18%
Job training	42%	81%	33%	11%	2%
Pre-employment training	30%	100%	17%	6%	0%
Parenting skills	57%	100%	35%	6%	4%
Life skills classes	52%	93%	27%	0%	2%
Help in accessing health or dental care	51%	73%	37%	11%	4%
Counseling or support group	61%	90%	52%	19%	22%
Legal services	45%	78%	32%	15%	14%
Help with credit	63%	63%	52%	4%	2%

* Question not asked.

N=51

When asked what services they would like to have for themselves given ample time and money, caregivers by far most often mentioned further education or vocational training. Other responses were money to participate in activities that would enhance their lives such as nutrition or cooking classes and gym memberships. Numerous caregivers also mentioned desiring access to ongoing support groups or parenting classes, counseling, and help improving their credit.

Family Assets

While in the transitional housing programs, families made many gains in less tangible areas such as more knowledge and stronger social support networks. What is evident from the interviews is that many families have learned a lot from their experiences in transitional housing—much of which they may not recognize or appreciate until after they have been out of the programs for a while. Many are more hopeful about their lives and their children’s lives, an outcome that is hard to quantify but very important nevertheless.

Knowledge gained

More families know how to obtain and maintain permanent housing and create and use a household budget. One year after exit, a number of families were continuing to use budgets developed in transitional housing with the help of their case managers. Families are also more aware of available resources and how to access them. Some describe ways in which the programs helped them to develop routines and structure for their families and to “learn to take care of their responsibilities” such as paying the rent on time. Other lessons learned as described in the interviews:

You have to have a budget and live within your budget.

I think those weekly meetings made me accountable then, and I’m even applying that now.

Determination—you have to be determined and use all possible resources or either have tons of money. Keep putting one foot in front of the other, and you have to be honest.

I think I basically learned that without a stable home, you can’t do anything... it really impacted the kids too, and their emotional well-being. I’ve always been stable, but at the same time as I got divorced, I also was injured at work... I spent almost a year in bed. I learned a lot in the past year re-establishing things on my own like child support and how to work with the welfare system, and the department of vocational rehabilitation, and also medical care.

Social support

One year after exit, 78 percent of primary caregivers reported that they had someone to whom they could turn if they were about to lose their housing again. However, this leaves one in five families with no one to turn to and vulnerable in the face of losing their housing. Of those with someone to turn to, the majority named family, most often their parents or their partner’s parents. One interviewee said, “My mom or my sisters...they might give me some money or let me stay with them for awhile.” Several could count on their siblings.

Friends were the next most oft-mentioned group, followed by a social service agency or shelter, or more specifically their old case manager or transitional housing program. One interviewee said, “Some social service agency because I don’t have family or friends that could accommodate a family of five.” Another responded, “[My transitional housing program]. I don’t know where else to go.” Less frequently mentioned were churches, a housing authority, a child’s father, fiancé, and employer. This person said, “[My employer]. When I had my ‘five day pay-or-vacate’, they gave me the money.”

Families reported higher levels of support after transitional housing than during and before (Table 16), with nearly half feeling “very supported” one year after exit compared to 14 percent feeling that way while homeless. Conversely, only four percent felt “not at all supported” after exit while nearly one-third felt way while homeless.

Table 16. Self-reported levels of social support

	Not at all supported	Not very supported	Somewhat supported	Very supported
Before transitional housing	29%	41%	16%	14%
During transitional housing	6%	29%	37%	29%
One year after exit	4%	18%	29%	49%

N=51

When describing ways in which their lives are better after transitional housing, many families also indicated that they have reconnected with persons in their support networks or developed new supportive relationships:

(The program) helped me believe in myself—that I can fix my problems. Also, I met some good friends and incredible case managers.

I have more resources and support than I ever had before.

We had a good sense of community and spirituality was high and good. I just had support and people who cared around me.

While the perception of the level of social support does indeed seem to be increasing over time, when looked at in a more compartmentalized way, the breadth of families’ social support networks do not appear to be significantly changing over time nor do they appear to be very extensive (Table 17). The majority of persons had one or two persons on whom they could count for help in several domains (a \$100 loan, transportation to an appointment, and emotional support).

Table 17. Number of persons who can be relied on for various types of support

Type of support needed	At 6 months in program	At 6 months after exit
Loans	1.9 persons	1.8 persons
Transportation	1.8 persons	1.8 persons
Emotional support	2.1 persons	2.2 persons

N=75

Quality of Life

One year after exiting transitional housing, families reported improvement in their overall quality of life: 69 percent of primary caregivers reported that their families' lives are "a lot better"; 18 percent said "somewhat better"; 8 percent said "about the same"; and 4 percent "somewhat worse." When asked what has improved in their lives, there was a definite sense of being more in control of their lives, more stable, and optimistic for continued gains (Table 18). This compares to responses six months prior in which housing stability was the top answer by a fair margin, perhaps indicating that housing stability has come to be a normal experience. One year later, more families mentioned financial stability and better jobs, and more also talked about the independence they felt and the sense that they have "moved on."

Table 18. At one year follow-up, what has improved in your family's life?

Independence and self-efficacy	37%
Improved housing conditions (space, privacy, safety, location)	31%
Children's well-being	29%
Housing stability	25%
Sense that they are continuing to make gains or work on issues	22%
Better employment	20%
More supported (new or re-established relationships)	20%
Peace of mind (improved mental health, decreased stress)	18%
Financial stability	18%

N=51, one year after exit; respondents could provide up to three responses.

Some of the families describe their life changes:

I'm able to focus on the kids more versus where we will be living.

We're not depending on relatives. I have a better job and I'm in a better position to get better things—before it was survival.

I don't have to compromise who I'm living with.

My outlook on life is better. It has to do with me going back to school and feeling more confident that I can take care of my family if I had to.

I feel blessed to still be able to live in my apartment and to have the time to be consistent with my doctors and to learn more about myself. The stress is so much lower. I have a chance to take care of myself. I think I would be dead if I would have kept on ignoring my body and not taking care of myself. I was ignoring things I shouldn't have.

Housing Satisfaction

Sixty-one percent of families are overall “very satisfied” with their housing after exit (Table 19). Satisfaction was lowest with housing conditions and landlord responsiveness when issues arose. Since many of the transitional programs were new or renovated units, many with excellent amenities, housing families reside in after exit often pales in comparison. Similarly, many transitional housing programs have on-site property or resident managers able to resolve issues as they arise. The move away from programs, while bringing independence, can also bring mixed emotions, as described by one resident:

I wish we could have transitioned in place. It was hard to move from a nice home to this little trailer. I understand that they put you in a nice house and it gives you something to strive for.

Table 19. Satisfaction with current housing

	Not at all	Not very	Somewhat	Very
Housing safety	6%	2%	32%	60%
Amount of space for family	8%	8%	22%	63%
Housing cost	2%	4%	31%	63%
Housing condition	4%	10%	31%	55%
Landlord responsiveness	19%	7%	31%	42%
Overall level of satisfaction	4%	4%	31%	61%

N=51

Satisfaction levels were similar with current housing *location* (Table 20). Safety is often an issue for the families, but overall the locations were deemed as good as the housing itself.

Table 20. Satisfaction with current housing location

	Not at all	Not very	Somewhat	Very
Neighborhood safety	6%	8%	45%	41%
Nearness to public transportation	12%	7%	7%	74%
Quality of local schools	14%	8%	22%	57%
Nearness to stores	2%	4%	26%	69%
Overall location	2%	8%	31%	59%

N=51

Services that Mattered

When asked one year after exit what had made the biggest difference for them while they were in the programs, caregivers responded overwhelmingly and nearly equally that having a safe and stable place to live as well as having a case manager to provide support and guidance were most critical. Programs most often had a positive impact on the families' lives by influencing the direction of their lives by encouraging structured, supportive step-by-step progress and goal attainment facilitated by the case managers. Many caregivers described the importance of the overall support and belief in them by their case managers and other program staff. Program staff often plant the seed for change in families as they help families create positive plans for their futures. Caregivers also noted that many services made a difference for them; most frequently mentioned were child care, parenting classes, budgeting, counseling and "the entire program." Lastly, some caregivers pointed to the importance of forming new support networks, friendships and the sense of community in the programs as making a difference in their progress. Families describe what worked well for them in transitional housing:

Time and space to heal and deal with some very emotional things was as important as housing... and a sense of community with the other women.

I was glad that there was a place out there that gave us a place to live instead of going into a shelter. Looking back on it, it was hard but it was better than having to sleep outside.

I would never have got my GED without the program. They give the initiative to get out and make something of you. I learned to cope with my depression. I know who to count on now. It makes a big difference.

I found new personal strengths. I didn't think I could finish school or turn things around. I have hope now that things can get better.

It helped a lot with getting permanent housing. The classes and the programs they offered for the children were very helpful. I would definitely recommend the program to someone who was homeless.

(My program) gave you the tools to go on with your life. It depends on how you use them.

The program has been great. The situation I lived in was horrible. The case manager is one of the greatest people I've ever met. She's wonderful - I don't think they could have picked a better case manager. I wish I could take her with me.

The staff have been very patient. It gave me a good foundation to make good life choices and resolve complex issues that normally I would not address.

Families' Suggestions for Programs

Caregivers are encouraged by interviewers at several different time points to think about how programs could improve their services to families. At one year follow-up interviews, caregivers are asked to reflect on what they would do if they were director of a transitional housing program in order to better prepare families for permanent housing. Caregivers' responses most frequently related to the intensity of case management and program requirements. Many responses were supportive of the amount of case management involvement (typically once a week) as well as other program requirements. Others expressed reluctance with the high degree of rules and obligations for residents. Many caregivers advocated for programs that would better individualize family goals, allowing the level and intensity of case management services to better reflect each family's needs. In their words:

They did it just right. She [my case manager] checked up on you once a week. She makes sure she's following your goals.

It's hard to handle a case manger coming every week. It wasn't the greatest coming to community meetings and sign up for things.

For one, they need to have a different approach with each family to be more effective. People come (needing) different services. I was not drug addicted but some of other women were.

They did a lot. They screen you and help you set goals. Not everyone needs the same things. Mandatory classes made people feel on edge; we were all thrown in them together.

Families have very different problems and the program should allow for time to get to know the family and treat them differently, or hold them accountable to different standards.

Caregivers also stressed the importance of connecting families to local resources during their time and prior to leaving the program. As one suggested,

Regularly meet with families and make sure they know their local resources. You have a lot of people that don't know what to do even if they have a list in front of them. These are the people who need more intense time. They just need a little bit more.

Services that families would ensure are in place if they were the director of a transitional housing program:

- Credit counseling and budgeting guidance
- Life skills classes, including cooking, nutrition, cleaning

- Information readily available on permanent housing
- On-site childcare
- A place for kids to play
- Job assistance
- Food assistance and concrete help
- Counselors
- Legal assistance
- Transportation, assistance with cars
- Community meetings

Families also emphasized providing children’s services and a safe place to play, counseling and mental health services, and better support for education and employment training. Other ideas shared included having support groups on-site for single parents, community gatherings about how to stay safe in the neighborhood, more connections to alcohol and drug counseling, and follow-up services after families leave. Some of the many suggestions:

They did a pretty good job of getting people started down the right path, like with credit counseling. Ensure that staff understand the needs of homeless women. A place where women are empowered.

On-site childcare. I would really encourage giving people some transition time when first in the program. Support people in finishing school so they can access better-paying jobs.

I would involve (residents) in WROC (Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition) and Tenants Union. I would empower the women to be more involved.

I would have outside job assistance. Help them with food and other necessities so they could create savings for when they leave. On-site counselor to help people deal with the root cause of what made them homeless in the first place.

If they had the ability to follow up with families and provide ideas and ways for them to be connected with the program.

Final words

For my family, the program worked great. The overall outcome of it— when I think of everything I went through—that was probably the best path I could have taken.

It was the best thing. I would recommend someone (to the program). In the beginning, some told me it was tough. I look back, and it wasn’t tough. I’m in this pretty house and look at me now.

Appendix

A. Client level outcomes for the Sound Families Initiative

- 1 - Homeless families receive and sustain transitional housing for up to two years.
- 2 - Clients are able to sustain long-term stability in employment and housing.
- 3 - Develop assets in clients.
- 4 - Clients receive services desired and/or needed during and following transitional housing.

B. Lost contact group

Of the 204 enrolled families, contact has been lost with 37 (18 percent) of them. Of these families, the following exit outcomes were known either through interviews with the families while we were still in contact or by data provided by the case manager:

- 46 percent were moving into permanent housing;
- 22 percent were moving in with family or friends;
- 3 percent each to shelter, inpatient treatment and 'place not meant for habitation';
- 41 percent were evicted or asked to leave;
- 11 percent fled transitional housing;
- 36 percent received a Section 8 voucher;
- 42 percent were employed; and
- 44 percent had higher household incomes at exit than at intake.

At last known:

- 33 percent were housed;
- 11 percent were living with family or friends;
- 15 percent were in transitional housing, shelter or prison;
- 19 percent had moved out of Washington State; and
- 15 percent no longer had their children with them.

C. Distribution of sample and retention rate by program

Program location	Program start date	Enrolled in study	1 yr follow-up*	Retention rate	Active sample
Puyallup	Nov 2001	22	6	77%	17
Renton	Dec 2001	23	5	74%	17
Edmonds	Feb 2002	30	10	80%	24
Tacoma	May 2002	25	13	88%	22
Everett	Aug 2002	11	1	73%	8
Seattle	Dec 2002	27	8	81%	22
Everett	Mar 2003	15	2	80%	12
Arlington	Apr 2003	23	8	87%	20
Tacoma	Sep 2003	17	2	76%	13
Tukwila	Dec 2003	11	0	82%	9
TOTAL		204	55	80%	164

*Completed as of June 2006.

D. Additional evaluation reports available at www.soundfamilies.org

Evaluation of the Sound Families Initiative: Preliminary Findings (2004)

A Closer Look at Homeless Families' Lives During and After Supportive Transitional Housing (2005)

Early Exits: Lessons Learned from Families Asked to Leave Transitional Housing (2006)

Breaking the Cycle: Serving Homeless Children in Supportive Housing Programs (2006)