

Shelter Diversion for Homeless Families: *New London County, Connecticut*

Shelter diversion is a strategy that prevents homelessness for people seeking shelter by helping them identify immediate alternate housing arrangements and, if necessary, connecting them with services and financial assistance to help them return to permanent housing. Diversion programs can reduce the number of families becoming homeless, the demand for shelter beds, and the size of program wait lists. The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and the National Alliance to End Homelessness encourage communities to include shelter diversion as an important part of Coordinated Access efforts, particularly for families.

In this brief, we will report on:

- Shelter diversion: A strategy that works
- The traumatic impact of homelessness on families and children
- New London County's implementation of shelter diversion: Process, results, and impact.

Family homeless service providers in New London County, Connecticut, have been working together since 2012 to implement shelter diversion at the front door of their local homeless system. These efforts have significantly reduced the number of families entering shelter in New London County: **During FY2015, New London County providers diverted to alternative housing solutions 80% of the families who presented seeking emergency shelter intake.** Further, initial evidence suggests that only one in six families diverted in New London County return at a later date to seek shelter in Connecticut.



Diverted from Homelessness

Shelter Diversion for Families

Shelter diversion is distinct from homelessness prevention in that diversion efforts occur at the front door of shelter – when a family is seeking emergency shelter. Experience across the United States indicates that even at this point, families may have immediate housing options available to them. The goal of shelter diversion is to work with these families to explore all possible options. This strategy enables communities to reserve scarce emergency shelter units for those families who truly have no alternative to shelter.

Shelter diversion can include: help to maintain current housing; assistance to secure permanent housing that a family may have already identified before they seek shelter, but could not secure due to lack of security deposit, first month's rent, or like costs; and assistance to locate and secure housing through financial assistance and advocacy. Services also include help to create a plan for stabilization, including connecting families with mainstream benefits and services such as food assistance, medical and/or mental health services, energy assistance, budget counseling, and other available community supports.

Some families may not be good candidates for diversion programs due to a lack of safe and appropriate housing alternatives. Families fleeing domestic violence, or living in a place unfit for human habitation and lacking resources and community supports for alternatives may require immediate admittance to shelter. A family's safety should always be the top consideration when identifying the best intervention to assist them.

Trauma of Homelessness on Children and Families

Homelessness, even for those who are placed in adequate emergency shelter, can negatively impact family relationships on emotional, physical, social, and psychological levels and can damage family cohesiveness and well-being. Emergency shelter providers do the best they can with the resources available to create stable and comfortable shelter environments. However, families in emergency shelter may experience or witness family conflict, abrupt separation, lack of privacy, and loss of control over their immediate environment. These stressors – in addition to the difficulties and challenges of homelessness itself – can impede recovery and compound other aspects of trauma for all family members, and particularly for children. A successful shelter diversion program can help avoid the trauma and stress of homelessness for families served.

New London County Shelter Diversion Pilot Program: Process, Results, and Impact

Since July 2012, New London County family shelters have implemented shelter diversion as part of a Coordinated Access Network (CAN). United Way's 2-1-1 phone referral system serves as the single point of entry to the three area family shelters (Mystic Area Shelter & Hospitality, Thames Valley Council for Community Action, and Covenant Shelter of New London). These shelter providers also partner with Safe Futures, the local domestic violence services provider, and Thames River Family Program, a local transitional housing provider.

Families seeking shelter in New London County start by calling 2-1-1. They are then referred to the CAN for an in-person intake/assessment with a case manager if that family's needs cannot be met through non-housing resources. The case manager at the local-level intake appointment will explore all possible housing alternatives.

Diversion is an exciting and effective alternative to shelter. Instead of referring every homeless family to shelter, we source immediate housing solutions wherever possible.

Only those families who have absolutely no alternative enter shelter. This is a better outcome for the families, the service providers, and the community.

– Denise Collins, Executive Director,
Mystic Area Shelter & Hospitality



New London County shelter diversion services are tailored to each family's needs, and can include:

- Conflict mediation (with a landlord, family or friends);
- Financial, utility, and/or rental assistance;
- Short-term case management focused on housing stabilization;
- Connection to mainstream services and benefits;
- Housing location and advocacy.

Mediation is an important component of shelter diversion efforts in New London County. Many families in this region face homelessness because landlords may not accept them as tenants due to low income compared to the cost of rent, or due to family eviction history. Diversion includes a housing stabilization plan and provision of a provider contact for the tenant and landlord in the event of a future housing crisis. Mediation can also entail working with family members, or with the landlord of a presenting family's friend, in order to arrange shared living accommodation or resolve conflict.

1,056 families presented for shelter intake from FY2013 through FY2015: New London County providers were able to divert 627 of them. Only about one-third of families required financial assistance as part of the diversion effort. Providers funded financial assistance through a combination of state funding and private foundation grants. 159 families (a total of 526 individual adults and children) received state-funded financial assistance from FY2013 to FY2015 (average assistance per household \$1,750)*:

- 69% received security deposit assistance;
- 32% received past-due rent assistance;
- 65% received temporary rent subsidies;
- 6% received help with past-due utility payments;
- 5% received relocation assistance (train/plane/bus tickets to be housed with family members elsewhere).

To serve as many families as possible, case managers are creative in working with all sources of possible support in the community. With some clients, case managers were able to work with a faith community to which the client had a connection. Some faith communities were able to provide security deposit and first month's rent, in addition to providing other supports for the client family.

Shelter diversion in New London has substantially reduced the number of families served in shelter, reserving the resource of shelter for those families with absolutely no alternatives. In New London County, **the average cost of shelter diversion was one-third the cost of sheltering and re-housing a family who became homeless** in that region.

Initial results show a low rate of diverted families returning to seek shelter: according to Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data, 88% of the families diverted in New London County in FY2014 had not returned to seek shelter in Connecticut by the end of FY2015.

* Data for state-funded financial assistance is more easily accessible due to centralized management, while foundation and other diversion assistance funds are largely managed in separate channels by individual agencies.

Further Reading

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