

HOUSING  
FIRST!  
*for*  
HOMELESS  
FAMILIES

GUIDELINES AND FINDINGS FOR  
SAN FRANCISCO

Coalition on Homelessness, SF  
May 10, 2005



## Housing First for Families Now!

In San Francisco, there have been a lot of media stories about homeless people and the City's new initiatives to deal with homelessness. In these broad policy discussions, homeless families have been left out, ignored and forgotten. The Coalition on Homelessness is attempting with this report to rip through that silence. We talked directly to homeless families about what was going on with homeless policy in San Francisco and across the nation. We could not talk to or even find every homeless family in San Francisco, but attempted to talk to as many as we could. We sought family's expert opinions as to what direction San Francisco policy makers should take and attempted to preserve their collective voices in this report.

### Background

Across the nation, there has been growing momentum for a "Housing First" model and yet another new buzzword - "chronic homelessness." Housing First is a policy the Coalition on Homelessness has called for consistently during the past 10 years. What it means is that homeless people can be placed in housing directly off the streets, without first going through a "readiness process," shelter, or transitional housing program. This idea challenges popular beliefs in the social work field that you must have a "continuum" whereby homeless people must be "housing ready" before placement in housing. Of course, at the Coalition on Homelessness, we have always believed that all homeless people are housing ready!

However, as good ideas mixed with politics often go awry, so does Housing First in San Francisco. There are two problems with the way Housing First is being implemented in San Francisco. First, the City decides without input or choice from homeless persons that housing is paid for by cutting poor people's programs and benefits. It has been used as a way to garner political points, justify budget cuts and implement paternalistic welfare reform policies.

Secondly, this "Housing First" policy has, for the most part, focused on a very narrow portion of the population - those dubbed "chronically homeless." This is defined as an unaccompanied disabled individual who has been sleeping in one or more places not meant for human habitation or in one or more emergency homeless shelters for over one year or who has had one or more periods of homelessness over three years. It typically refers to single adults, and chronic homeless initiatives funded from the federal government are not meant for homeless families. In San Francisco, we were able to get families included in the definition of chronic homelessness, so at least on paper, this is our policy. This has yet to be reflected in most homeless housing developments.



## Introduction

Housing is clearly the primary solution to homelessness, along with homeless prevention. However, families see their homelessness within the context of poverty, which they can escape with living wage employment, education, childcare, decent public benefits, and health care.

We are calling for Housing First! to be applied to homeless families in San Francisco. Housing First! for families in San Francisco must prevent homelessness, place homeless families directly in housing, and stop the merry-go-round homeless family's face in San Francisco. This housing must not be paid for by cuts to fundamental poverty abatement programs such as treatment and employment. It must not be off the backs of other poor people's welfare benefits as we have seen under Care Not Cash. In other words, it must bring us new solutions, rather than relying only on cuts to the already severely undermined existing services for poor people.

Homeless children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population (U.S. Conference of Mayors on Homelessness, 2004). Children who experience homelessness are devastated; homeless children are more likely to experience developmental problems, educational delays, behavioral issues and learning disabilities. The stress of instability leads to lapses in education, and feelings of shame and low self-esteem. The effect on the family is equally discouraging.

*Nationally, 600,000 families are homeless (Based on NSHAPC, Rog, Shin and Culhane, 2003)*

Homeless families are poorer, younger, more likely to be pregnant, from an ethnic minority and less likely to have a housing subsidy. Homeless families are not more likely to be mentally ill, depressed or less educated. (Sources: Shinn & Weitzman, 1996; Bussuk et al., 1997). As a group, homeless families are poorer, not more "troubled". In fact, studies show subsidized housing cures homelessness! (Rog et al.) A 9-city study finds 88% remained housed 18 months post placement. Two New York City studies find 93% remain housed two years post-placement whereas 38% of families without a subsidy returned to homelessness. Taken collectively, the data points very clearly to housing as the first solution to homelessness. (Based on NSHAPC, Burt et al., 2002; Rog, Shinn and Culhane, 2003)

Here in San Francisco, more than five hundred children, under 17 years of age, live in San Francisco Emergency and Transitional Shelters on any single day. In addition, a report by the San Francisco City's Controller found that by 2002 the City "lacks sufficient shelter beds for homeless families" and families usually wait three to five months for space in a full-service shelter. In 2005 the wait list to get into a full service shelter continues to be as high as 100 and the wait continues to be three to five months. San Francisco's housing crisis is in part due to the fact that it cost a family of three over \$69,000 annually to live in the City. Most homeless families do not earn enough money, even those that are employed, to be able to pay for "affordable" housing.



Homeless families have not taken center stage during policy discussions in recent years; instead the mention of families tends to be relegated to passing comments or footnotes. The Mayor has called for 3,000 units of supportive housing for homeless people by 2008. Fifty percent of those units are planned to be "master leased" units, where a block of rooms in a privately owned single room occupancy hotel is leased for a number of years. So far, almost all those units have been master lease units under Care Not Cash. The over 800 housing units frequently talked about by the city are actually Care Not Cash units, paid for by lost welfare benefits and include not one housing unit for families with children. The eligibility criteria are limited to the County Adult Assistance Program, of which families do not qualify.





## **Summary of Recommendations**

All funding for homeless initiatives must not be paid for by cuts to programs, poor people needs to exit homelessness and poverty.

### **Housing**

Housing First should apply to families in San Francisco. Families should be placed directly in housing, without any requisite stays in shelter or transitional housing.

Families must be considered part of the "chronic homeless" population. Planning should include units large enough for families. Specifically, we recommend that all local housing initiatives for homeless people should accommodate at least 25% more families.

Move homeless families into vacant units at the Housing Authority. If they need fixing up, develop a sweat equity program, whereby families could do some of the work in exchange for decreased rent.

Create local housing subsidy program for homeless families. This subsidy would be approximately \$500 a month for 120 families. The program would cost \$390,000 the first year. The annual cost is if all families continue with the full subsidy would be \$720,000.

Place housing advocate in each shelter to help families overcome credit issues, identify housing resources, and navigate Housing Authority.  
Create local housing fund by taxing major property developments.

Reinstate funding, rental subsidy level and income eligibility for section 8 vouchers released nationally.

Double the number of Section 8 certificates released nationally.

### **Homeless Prevention**

Increase homeless prevention funds by at least 75%. These funds run far short of meeting the need, and have strict criteria attached to them. This new funding should be more flexible in its possible use, and directly link the homeless shelter system with Catholic Charities, the primary agency that manages prevention funds.

Ensure homeless parents have access to higher education. This can be accommodated not only through the welfare system, but also through special scholarship funding that pays for books, childcare, tuition, and living expenses for homeless families.

Create access to living wage jobs for homeless families.

### **Shelter Reform**

Ensure families participate in a meaningful way in the running of shelters. New policies should be brought to families before being implemented, and families should be sought out to create ways to improve the shelter.



As long as shelters exist, maintain clean and hygienic bathrooms and common living spaces.

Ensure all shelter residents are treated equally, regardless of legal status, gender, race or ethnicity. Shelters must be held accountable to following their own rules and applying them in a fair and unbiased manner.

Ensure tutoring and mentoring exists for children in all city-funded shelters.



## Methodology

The Coalition on Homelessness conducted a survey of 61 homeless families living in shelters and Single Room Occupancy Hotel rooms. We wanted feedback directly from the families on some overarching policy issues of today. As policy makers are forgetting families – we wanted to ensure that not only were they remembered but that their voices, opinions and experiences were heard!

We attempted to survey every family in every city-funded shelter. We were not able to capture each family, but many of them had a chance to respond. We also surveyed some families in SRO's in the Tenderloin, because they are considered homeless by the city. Lastly, we interviewed some formerly homeless families now in permanent housing.

Where were surveys conducted:

### Sites Surveyed

# respondents	% respondents	Site
7	11%	St. Joseph's
0	0%	260 GG Hamilton
12	20%	Hamilton Emergency - Waller St
5	8%	Compass
0	0%	OSHUN
19	31%	Hamilton Transitional
3	5%	3Richmond Hill
12	20%	SRO Hotels
3	5%	Treasure Island
0	0%	No Answer

## Basic Demographics

We did not focus on demographic information, as this is already well documented. We did ask how long individuals have been homeless and how many children they had.

### Number of Children

On average, families have 2.3 children. This is close to national averages of families in general.

# respondents	%	# children
15	25%	1
17	28%	2
9	15%	3
9	15%	4
1	2%	5
1	2%	6
8	13%	No Answer



## Length of Homelessness

When asked how long families had been homeless, we found that most qualified as “chronic homeless” – in light of the fact that little of the housing developed for chronic homeless people could accommodate a family.

**Sadly, 62% of homeless families in San Francisco had been homeless for more than 2 years!** This also calls attention to the fact that families are stuck in what we have dubbed the “merry-go-round”, where they move from shelter to shelter, to SRO hotel, to shelter again, and do not exit the shelter system as quickly as they should.

How long have you been homeless?	
14	23% 1-6 Months
6	10% 6-12 Months
22	36% 2-3 Years
10	16% 4-5 Years
6	10% More than 7 years
2	3% No Answer

Recommendation: Include families as part of the “chronic homeless” population. Planning take place to include units large enough for families. Specifically, we recommend that 25% of all local housing initiatives for homeless people accommodate families.

## Effect of Homelessness on Families with Children

*“Homelessness has effected my kid’s social life, grades and especially made them more depressed.”*

Mother of two whose family has been homeless 2 – 3 years.

Families were asked how homelessness affected their families. Families voices were powerful, thoughtful and insightful. Not surprising, homelessness has a devastating effect on families. Families reported that homelessness caused their family tremendous stress and often sickness. Lack of privacy also was a common concern of families. Homelessness not only affected the whole family, but also had negative impacts on children specifically. Families reported that their children’s social, educational development had been impaired by homelessness. Some families also reported how grateful they were to have a roof over their head.

*“It’s very hard being homeless. You are treated different from the rest of the world. Meaning you are treated like less of a human being”*

Mother of one child who has been homeless for less then 6 months.





How has living in a shelter affected your family?		
# of respondents	% of respondents	Response
6	10%	Negative effect on children's social development, education, behavior
26	43%	Negative effect on family, increased stress and sickness
12	20%	Loss of privacy
1	2%	Separation of family
2	3%	Positive - ability to save money
9	15%	Positive - roof over head
2	3%	No Answer

Recommendation: Funding for homeless initiatives must not be paid for by cuts to programs, poor people need to exit homelessness and poverty.

### Barriers to "Homefulness"

*"Rents are too high and wages are too low"*

Mother of two who has been homeless for 4 years

Families were asked what barriers were keeping them homeless in an attempt to identify these walls that need so badly to be torn down. The responses relate to each other closely, and several themes emerged from these discussions. The most common response was housing. **30% reported that rents were too high and they simply did not have enough money to afford rent.** The second most common response, highly related to the first, was employment. **26% reported that the inability to find a job was keeping them homeless.** Other barriers families reported were bad credit or criminal history, not earning high enough wages, as well as disability and lack of information.

What barriers are keeping you from leaving homelessness?		
# of respondents	% of respondents	Response
18	30%	Rent too high, no affordable housing
5	8%	Wages too low
16	26%	Don't have/can't find a job
3	5%	No information/resources
9	15%	History - past eviction, bad credit, criminal record
4	7%	disability, children with disability, mental illness, substance abuse
1	2%	Domestic violence in past
4	7%	No Answer

Recommendation: Create local housing subsidy program for homeless families. Subsidy would be approximately \$500 a month for 120 families. The program would cost \$390,000 the first year. The annual cost is if all families continue with the full subsidy would be \$720,000.

Recommendation: Move homeless families into vacant units at the Housing Authority. If they need fixing up, develop a sweat equity program, whereby families could do some of the work in exchange for decreased rent.



Recommendation: Place housing advocate in each shelter to help families overcome credit issues, identify housing resources, and navigate Housing Authority.

## Federal and Local Housing Policy

### Housing First

San Francisco is now focusing on a "Housing First" policy, as reflected in its 10 Year Plan to Abolish Chronic Homelessness", and changes in public health budgeting and McKinney grant making. The "Housing First" policy is that homeless people should be placed directly into housing, instead of first having to go through the shelter and transitional housing systems. While we agree with the policy, but disagree with how it is being funded, we have been opposed to how it is being selectively implemented by focusing on only the most visible portion of the homeless population. Homeless families have been virtually absent from this planning. We decided to give families a chance to weigh in on whether they should be included in this new policy by asking them directly. **When asked whether this policy should be applied to families with children, an overwhelming 84% said that it should!**

# of respondents	There is a national trend ... directly into housing to homeless families in SF? % of respondents	Response
51	84%	Yes
5	8%	No
5	8%	No Answer

Recommendation: ¡Housing First! should apply to families in San Francisco. Families should be placed directly in housing, without any requisite stays in shelter or transitional housing. . This housing must not be paid for by cuts to cornerstone poverty abatement programs such as treatment and employment.

Recommendation: Create local housing fund by taxing major property developments.

### Section 8

The federal government has implemented Section 8 cuts to current recipients, and is considering further cuts to Section 8 overall. When we asked families how this would affect them, 80% responded that these cuts would negatively affect them. Most families responded that they would not be able to afford an apartment without the subsidy, or would lose the possibility of getting housing. Some were on the wait list, and felt this would hurt them, while others believed this would diminish their hope of ever finding an apartment of their own. Some felt it would not affect them.

Recommendation: Reinstate funding, rental subsidy level and income eligibility for section 8 vouchers released nationally.



## Seeking Housing

We also asked if families had applied for housing through the Housing Authority. This is the local arm of the federal agency that provides housing for poor and low-income people. **We found that 79% of those who responded to the question had indeed applied for housing.** This is good – as it is a nice high proportion, however, barring immigration issues, all 100% of respondents should be applying for housing. This question was not asked to non-English speakers.

## Wait List

**We also asked how long people have been on the waiting list, and we found that 48% have been on the wait list for one year or less.** 28% have been waiting for two years, and the remaining 21% for three years or more. Given that families have often been homeless for more than two years, we found that to be a disturbing discrepancy. Families should be put on the waiting list as soon as they become homeless or better yet, when they are at risk of homelessness. The wait list for housing in San Francisco is 2 – 4 years.

Recommendation: Double the number of Section 8 certificates released nationally.

## Homeless Prevention

*“Subsidized childcare or low cost daycare for all families with children under 5 years old for working families. Readily available affordable housing and good paying jobs that have dignity”*

Mother of two who has been homeless for 3 years

Of course all the pain and injury to families that homelessness causes could be avoided if families were prevented from being homeless in the first place. Homeless families were asked how to prevent homelessness among families. The responses were consistent with our other findings in this report. The top responses were affordable housing, jobs, and keeping people in their housing, with 16% responding this way in each category, respectively. 15% responded that having families included in policy making would prevent homelessness. Other families stated additional advocacy and case management would help prevent homelessness, while others believed lower transportation costs would do the job.

What efforts should be made to prevent families from becoming homeless?		
# of respondents	# of respondents	Response
10	16%	More housing w/affordable rent
8	13%	More assistance - resources, advocates, caring case managers
10	16%	More jobs, higher minimum wage, job training
10	16%	Prevention offer help before people become homeless, education
9	15%	Give respect to poor people, show us we are deserving, think about us when forming policy
6	10%	Stop raising transportation costs



1	2% More legal help to keep people in housing
3	5% Childcare
1	2% Help with mental illness/substance abuse
1	2% Stop cuts, esp. to funds
2	3% No Answer

Recommendation: Increase homeless prevention funds by at least 75%. These funds run far short of meeting the need, and have strict criteria attached to them. This new funding should be more flexible in its possible use, and directly link the homeless shelter system with prevention funds.

Recommendation: Ensure homeless parents have access to higher education. This can be accommodated not only through the welfare system, but also through special scholarship funding that pays for books, childcare, tuition, and living expenses for homeless families.

### Changes to the Family Shelter System

Families were also asked what changes should be made to the family shelter system. The most common response was that families wanted physical changes to the shelter itself. This included 16% of families wanting bigger rooms, more amenities, and a cleaner environment. Families (13%) also wanted more services inside the shelter, such as education assistance for children. The third most common response (11%) felt shelters should consult residents and have families participate on policy decisions within the shelter. 10% reported the need for more attentive staff.

What other changes should be made to the family shelter system?		
# of respondents	% of respondents	Response
2	3%	More resources to find low income/permanent housing
10	16%	Clean up/re-model - more amenities, bigger rooms
6	10%	Better, more attentive, more staff
1	2%	Support after leaving shelter
7	11%	Participate/include/talk with residents
8	13%	More services, assistance - education for children
2	3%	Get politicians to listen to/care about us
4	7%	None - either haven't been in or loved it - only good comments
3	5%	No discrimination
5	8%	Create more shelters because not enough
3	5%	Improve safety
9	15%	No Answer

Recommendation: As long as we shelters exist, maintain clean and hygienic bathrooms and common living space.

Recommendation: Ensure all shelter residents are treated equally, regardless of legal status, gender, race or ethnicity. Shelters must be held accountable to following their own rules and applying them in a fair and equal manner.

Recommendation: Ensure families participate in a meaningful way in the running of shelters. New policies should be brought to families before being





implemented, and families should be sought out to create ways to improve the shelter.

Recommendation: Ensure tutoring and mentoring exists for all children in all city funded shelters.

### Create Social Change

Lastly, families want to get involved in creating social change. When asked if they wanted to join our campaign for ¡Housing First! for Families, **70% responded that yes, they did!**





