



RESEARCH REPORT

# Helping Families Involved in the Child Welfare System Achieve Housing Stability

## Implementation of the Family Unification Program in Eight Sites

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February 2015

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# Acknowledgments

This report was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We are grateful to our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. It is important to note that funders do not determine our research findings or the insights and recommendations of our experts. The authors thank the staff at the child welfare organizations, public housing agencies, and community service organizations who participated in this study.

# Executive Summary

Since 1992, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has awarded Family Unification Program (FUP) funding to more than 300 communities across the country. The program provides low-income families involved in the child welfare system with housing vouchers. FUP is implemented locally through a partnership between public housing authorities and public child welfare agencies. From a policy and research perspective, FUP is an important vehicle for understanding three issues: (1) the overlap between the child welfare system, housing, and homelessness; (2) how to provide housing to vulnerable, high-need families; and (3) how to facilitate cross-system partnerships between public housing agencies and child welfare agencies. The Urban Institute studied FUP design and implementation in eight sites and interviewed key staff and stakeholders to answer questions about the program's implementation and impact, highlighting common challenges, innovative practices, and system-level impacts. This report describes our findings.

## Targeting, Identification, and Referral

FUP is a scarce resource: there are not enough vouchers to meet the needs of all families involved in the child welfare system. To use the resource efficiently, FUP targets families for whom inadequate housing is a primary factor in the placement of their children in out-of-home care or a delay in the release of their children from out-of-home care. FUP also serves youth (ages 18 to 21) who left foster care at age 16 or older and who do not have adequate housing as they transition to adulthood and independent housing.

Child welfare caseworkers in each site (or another partnering organization in a few sites) can refer anyone in their caseload who they believe is eligible based on organization-defined criteria. Most sites require families to have an open child welfare case, but how sites operationalize “housing is a primary factor” varies across sites and even within agencies. Caseworker judgment factors heavily into selecting eligibility. Many caseworkers select families who are “housing ready” and use access to FUP as a reward to help motivate families to complete steps in their case plan. Few caseworkers refer their highest-need families—those who, without a subsidy, would have little chance of finding housing on their own.

## Program Model

FUP is, at its core, a housing program. FUP provides a deep housing subsidy: tenants pay 30 percent of their income towards rent and the federal government makes up the remaining portion. Each program we studied also provides some sort of additional housing search services to help families navigate the private housing market and supportive services once families are leased up, but service intensity levels vary. Most commonly, families search for housing and find units on their own after receiving a list of eligible properties from a case manager and landlords. In a few sites, community workers, partner agencies, and caseworkers take a hands-on approach in the housing search—finding units or introducing families to landlords who participate in the program. Some sites offer FUP families financial support for security deposits and additional lease-up expenses (e.g., utility hookup costs). The funds come from various public and private sources and are often administered through the child welfare or partner agencies. The FUP program does not provide funding for ongoing supportive services and the eight sites vary in the length and intensity of the case management they offer to FUP families. In some sites, community-based organizations provide services; in other sites, the child welfare agency provides some ongoing assistance as long as the child welfare case remains open. Child welfare caseworkers raised questions about their capacity (because of time constraints) to provide supportive services beyond the child welfare case plan and after the family’s child welfare case is closed.

## Administrative Data and Tracking Outcomes

Sites also vary in their ability to collect data and track the outcomes of the families who participate in the program. The program is a partnership between public housing agencies and child welfare agencies, but most agencies are not jointly tracking outcomes or sharing data to do so. None of the child welfare agencies are tracking how participation in FUP relates to families’ child welfare outcomes (family preservation, expediting reunification, and re-reports of abuse or neglect). Agencies need to identify common goals, designate what data to use to measure progress toward those goals, and devise data-sharing agreements to facilitate measurement.

## Child Welfare Agency and Public Housing Authority Partnership and Systems Change

Sites vary widely in the strength of their partnerships, from informal collaboration and information sharing to sustained, regular meetings and service coordination. Every site has a FUP liaison as a point person in each agency (as required by HUD). The child welfare agencies identify and refer eligible families, and the public housing authorities provide housing. In some sites, the program has provided an opportunity for collaboration and the development of a sustained working partnership as measured in regular meetings, the creation of a data dashboard and the sharing of program data, and the collocation of a staff member in more than one site.

## Implementation Challenges and Promising Practices

Some sites have struggled to systematically target high-need families with housing programs, align system timelines and goals, identify resources to provide housing search assistance and ongoing supportive services, and measure reentry into the child welfare system. These difficulties all contribute to challenges in program implementation. However, several FUP sites have demonstrated many promising practices that contribute to a successful program, such as screening in high-need families, providing housing search assistance and financial resources for leasing and moving expenses, and linking families to a self-sufficiency program.

# Introduction

Research shows that inadequate housing is linked to child maltreatment. It threatens the safety and well-being of children and is frequently at the root of child welfare involvement, out-of-home placement, and reunification delays among low-income families. To address the problem, policymakers created the Family Unification Program (FUP), a housing subsidy targeted to families who are receiving services from the child welfare system. Does the provision of safe, affordable housing reduce child maltreatment? This study examines that question by evaluating the impact and costs of the program.

## Overview

This report highlights themes that emerged from document review and analysis and interviews conducted at eight FUP sites across the country. It is the first of two reports describing results of the ongoing study of the FUP program. The goal of this brief is to provide an overview of how FUP was implemented, highlighting common challenges, innovative practices, and system-level impacts.

The overall child welfare and housing impacts and costs study asks the question: How does housing matter for families? To answer this question, we are investigating the role of housing in child welfare outcomes by evaluating the impact of FUP, a small US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) initiative that provides housing vouchers to child welfare-involved families. FUP is implemented locally through a partnership between a public housing authority (PHA) and the public child welfare agency (CWA). Our hypotheses are that the provision of housing through FUP vouchers will reduce the need for child welfare services, will reduce homelessness among high-need families, and that these improvements will generate cost offsets or savings to the child welfare and homelessness systems. To test the stated hypotheses, the Urban Institute launched a multisite study that includes tracking outcomes for families and examines program implementation and a quantification of costs associated with the program services and benefits that flow from them.

The study has implications for two service systems: child welfare and homelessness. The child welfare field has a great need for evidence on what strategies work to prevent child maltreatment; this study could make a significant contribution in that regard. In addition, housing and homelessness practitioners are currently struggling with how to provide services to high-need homeless families, who are often child welfare involved. This study explores how housing matters to these families and the two

service systems, filling critical gaps in knowledge by helping policymakers, practitioners, and advocates understand the full and potentially valuable impacts of housing vouchers on low-income families.

The eight sites discussed in this brief are the state of Massachusetts; Salt Lake County, Utah; and the cities of Chicago, Illinois; Hartford, Connecticut; Portland and Salem, Oregon; San Diego, California; and Seattle, Washington. We draw primarily from information gathered during site visits and interviews with key program stakeholders, such as PHA staff and CWA staff. In-person and phone interviews were conducted between March and May 2012. A separate report will focus on programmatic outcomes and cost analyses at four FUP sites (Portland, Salt Lake County, San Diego, and Seattle), based on administrative data collection and a second round of site visits conducted in spring and summer of 2014.

The report is organized as follows. First, we describe the FUP program and related research. The second section discusses the research questions and methods of this implementation study, and the third section provides an overview of how FUP operates across the eight sites, including a general synopsis of the client referral and eligibility process and the housing services provided. In the fourth section, we discuss partnerships and the systems-level implications of FUP implementation. Promising practices and remaining challenges are discussed in the fifth section. Throughout, we highlight similarities and variations in implementation approaches across the sites. Individual case studies for each of the eight sites are provided in appendix A. A table of organizations that participated in site visits and interviews is included as appendix B.

## Child Welfare Involvement Is Linked to Lack of Housing

In 2012, 3.2 million children were reported to CWAs as suspected victims of abuse and neglect. Of these, 702,000 children were confirmed as victims (DHHS 2013). About 78 percent of these child victims suffered neglect, 18 percent suffered physical abuse, 10 percent suffered sexual abuse, and about 8 percent suffered psychological maltreatment (DHHS 2013). Some children reported as suspected victims of abuse and neglect remain in their homes and receive services to increase family stability, while others (about a fifth of all reported cases) are removed and placed in out-of-home care for safety reasons. In September 2012, approximately 400,000 children were in foster care, and about half of those cases had a goal of reunifying children with their families (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013).

The reasons for abuse or neglect are complicated. Researchers have grouped risk factors for child maltreatment along four domains: parent or caregiver factors (i.e., history of childhood abuse, substance abuse, attitudes and knowledge), family factors (i.e., family structure, marital conflict and domestic violence, stress), child factors (i.e., behavioral challenges, disabilities, age), and environmental factors (i.e., poverty and unemployment, violent communities, and social isolation or lack of support) (Goldman and Salus 2003). These risk factors often interact and are difficult to disentangle.

Child maltreatment occurs across socioeconomic groups, but research suggests strong links between poverty and child abuse or neglect (Coulton et al. 1995; Gelles 1992; Jones and McCurdy 1992). Because rent is often the largest expenditure in household budgets, families trying to make ends meet often struggle with housing stability. Courtney, McMurtry, and Zinn (2004) found that problems with housing affordability, eviction, doubling up, and homelessness are common among child welfare-involved families, particularly among those whose children have been placed in out-of-home care. However, we cannot say how many of the families involved in the child welfare system experience inadequate housing. In 2012, “inadequate housing” was identified as one of the reasons for removal for about 11 percent of children who were in foster care (as cited in Dworsky, 2014). Although these data at the time of investigation provided a limited accounting of housing problems, data quality is often poor, and not systematically collected.

To piece together a picture of the housing situation of child welfare-involved families, homelessness researchers have begun to link administrative data from shelter records and child welfare databases. These data matches show how many families move through shelters and the child welfare system. Although these data matches do not supply a full picture of housing instability among child welfare families, they provide some insight on how many of these families experience homelessness as defined by entry into homeless shelters. From this body of research, we know there are high rates of child welfare involvement among the nearly 70,000 families (totaling approximately 220,000 people) who experience homelessness each year (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2014). A study of 8,251 homeless children in New York City found that overall 24 percent had some record of child welfare involvement, with 18 percent placed in out-of-home care during the five years after shelter admission and 6 percent involved in child welfare services before entering shelter (Park, Metraux, and Culhane 2004). In a Philadelphia study of a cohort of 23,227 women who had given birth, Culhane and colleagues (2003) found that 37 percent of mothers with at least one homelessness experience were child welfare involved compared with 9 percent of other low-income mothers.

Does inadequate housing lead to child maltreatment? The research clearly shows a link between housing instability, homelessness, and child welfare, but the direction of the relationship is unclear.

Many of the factors that lead to child welfare involvement, including deep poverty, substance use, domestic violence, and mental health problems among parents, are associated with homelessness and child welfare involvement, so correlations are confounding and causation is difficult to disentangle (Coulton et al. 1995; Gelles 1992; Jones and McCurdy 1992; Vondra 1986).

Inadequate housing may indirectly or directly lead to child maltreatment in many ways. The stress that lower-income caregivers face in meeting the rent each month, facing eviction, or, perhaps most devastating, dealing with homelessness may lead to child neglect and abuse (Cowal et al. 2002). More directly, in some cases, homelessness may lead to mothers voluntarily placing their children in foster care while searching for housing or to family separation because of shelter policies (often shelters have rules that exclude teenagers, particularly boys). Further, homelessness or unsafe housing conditions are, in some cases, reason enough to justify out-of-home placement or prompt an investigation by the local CWA. Lastly, low-income families often suffer from the “fishbowl effect” or what is sometimes called the scrutiny hypothesis—that is, poor families may simply have more contact with service professionals (e.g., emergency room staff, program eligibility workers) who report suspected abuse or neglect, while middle- and upper-income families may have resources (e.g., private doctors, a suburban home) to conceal maltreatment (Cowal et al. 2002; Korbin 1997; Park et al. 2004; Vondra 1986). Housing instability may also keep families in the child welfare system longer than necessary, particularly for those families whose children have been placed in out-of-home care. Lack of stable housing clearly prevents child welfare judges from reunifying families, and housing may be particularly problematic for those leaving residential substance treatment. Without assistance, many caregivers will lack the resources to find housing on their own.

Whatever the reasons for entering the child welfare system, the consequences of child maltreatment and foster care involvement can be tragic. Abused or neglected children are at greater risk for experiencing delays in multiple developmental domains. Cognitively, the experience of abuse or neglect can adversely alter the brain’s development, making a child more vulnerable to early learning problems and later disabilities (Gunnar 1998; Perry and Pollard 1998). Maltreated children are also more likely to experience language delays (Culp et al. 1991), and children’s social and emotional development can also be impaired. Child maltreatment has been linked to problems with aggression, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Guterman 2001). Maltreated children also experience physical delays. The youngest maltreated children are often exposed to HIV or prenatal drug abuse (Dubowitz 1999; Halfon, Mendonca, and Berkowitz 1995). Later in life, maltreated children may be more likely to struggle with substance abuse, eating disorders, obesity, depression, suicide, and sexual promiscuity (CDC 2014).

## Research on Reducing Child Welfare Involvement

How do policymakers prevent child maltreatment and out-of-home removals? CWAs typically provide services to families while they remain intact—“preservation services”—or services for families with children in out-of-home care—“reunification services.” A review of the literature on these programs in the mid 1990s concluded that there was little evidence to suggest that family preservation programs prevent placement, although they may produce modest, short-term gains in child and family functioning. Similarly, the few studies on family reunification show mixed results; some evidence suggests that intensive in-home services speed family reunification, but long-term effects are largely unknown (Littell and Schuerman 1995). To generate more evidence on the effectiveness of these programs, a large evaluation of family preservation and reunification programs was directed by Congress and conducted between 1994 and 2002. The evaluation explored the effectiveness of the popular HomeBuilders model, which provides intensive services to families over a six-week period, including the provision of services and counseling up to 20 hours a week. The model also holds caseload sizes to one or two families per worker. It is based in part on crisis intervention theory, which posits that families will be more open to receiving services after the removal of a child. Results one year after program entry were not promising. Participating families received a broader and deeper set of services, but foster care placement was not reduced, and family functioning did not generally improve (DHHS 2002).

Preventing child maltreatment is also a priority for CWAs. Child maltreatment prevention activities operating in communities today can be classified into six categories: public awareness activities, skill-based curricula for children, parent education programs and support groups, home visitation programs, respite and crisis care programs, and family resource centers (DHHS 2003). These programs have been developed and operate in a wide range of settings, including prisons, places of worship, hospitals, and schools (DHHS 2003). Most evaluation efforts have focused on home visitation programs, parent education programs, and school-based programs for the prevention of child sexual abuse (DHHS 2003). Home visitation programs show significant promise as an effective approach. In particular, several evaluations of David Olds’s Nurse Family Partnership, which regularly sends trained nurses into families’ homes to help parents develop positive parenting skills, suggest the intervention reduces the incidence of abuse or neglect, improves mothers’ prenatal health, reduces the likelihood of an early second pregnancy, and improves the language development and behavior of children of more psychologically vulnerable mothers (Goodman 2006). Evaluations of parent education programs suggest these programs may prompt short-term gains in knowledge, skills, or abilities, but little is known about the impact of these programs on child maltreatment (DHHS 2003). Similarly, evaluations of

school-based programs to prevent child sexual abuse suggest these programs can successfully impart information, but there is little evidence that they prevent child sexual abuse (DHHS 2003).

Future directions in child abuse and neglect prevention were highlighted by a recent survey of individuals familiar with the field. Respondents reported that families in poverty, parents with substance abuse problems, and new parents should be the highest priorities for prevention efforts. The majority (63 percent) of respondents also thought children from birth to age 2 should be a high priority. Home visiting, parent education, and early child education and care were thought by respondents to be strategies that held the greatest promise. A majority (57 percent) also thought that funding for prevention efforts had weakened in the last few years (Shaw and Kilburn 2009). Of resources earmarked for child maltreatment in the United States, only a small portion is devoted to prevention (DHHS 2003).

## **Housing as a Platform to Reduce Child Maltreatment**

The provision of housing as a protective strategy against child maltreatment has not been widely explored by CWAs. Most of the programs described above do not address some of the core challenges families face, such as poverty or unstable housing. The Family Unification Program, signed into law in 1990 by President Bush, was one of the first housing programs targeted to child welfare-involved families. The goals of the program are to increase housing resources for families involved in the child welfare system, minimize or prevent the separation of children from their parents, and encourage partnerships among CWAs and PHAs. FUP targets (1) families for whom inadequate housing is the primary factor in the imminent placement of their children in out-of-home care, (2) families for whom inadequate housing is a factor in delaying the discharge of their children from out-of-home care, and (3) youth (ages 18 to 21) who left foster care at age 16 or older and who do not have adequate housing as they transition to adulthood and independent housing.

Local PHAs administer the program in collaboration with CWAs. The CWA identifies FUP-eligible households, refers the households to the PHA, commits staff time and resources to providing follow-up services, and follows through with the child welfare service plan, which is a plan of services created by the case manager and the family to remedy the condition that brought the family into the child welfare system. The PHA coordinates with CWAs to identify eligible households and provides the family with a voucher.

HUD modeled FUP on the Housing Choice Voucher program, which provides housing to approximately two million households nationwide. HCV program participants use the vouchers to rent housing from private-market landlords. Participants contribute up to 30 percent of their income toward rent and utilities, with the program making up the difference up to a locally defined rent cap. The vouchers are tenant based, meaning that the subsidy follows the tenant, rather than stays with the unit, giving the household greater choice about where to live. Tenants are responsible for locating suitable housing within a specific time frame (typically 60 to 120 days), recertifying their incomes each year, and following the requirements of the lease.

Congress funded FUP from 1992 to 2000 and then from 2008 to 2010 (figure 1). Vouchers are awarded by HUD through competitive grants. According to the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare, over 300 communities have received funds yielding approximately 47,000 vouchers nationwide. In 2012, approximately 20,000 FUP vouchers were in circulation; most of these vouchers were used by families, not youth (Dion, Dworksy, Kauff and Klienman 2014). The last round of FUP vouchers, funded in fiscal year (FY) 2010 and awarded by HUD in 2011, provided 1,931 housing vouchers (valued at about \$15 million). When awarding the FUP vouchers, HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan noted, “It’s heartbreaking to realize that thousands of children live in foster care or [are] forced to live with other families simply because their parents can’t afford a home. The funding provided today will keep thousands of families together under one roof.”

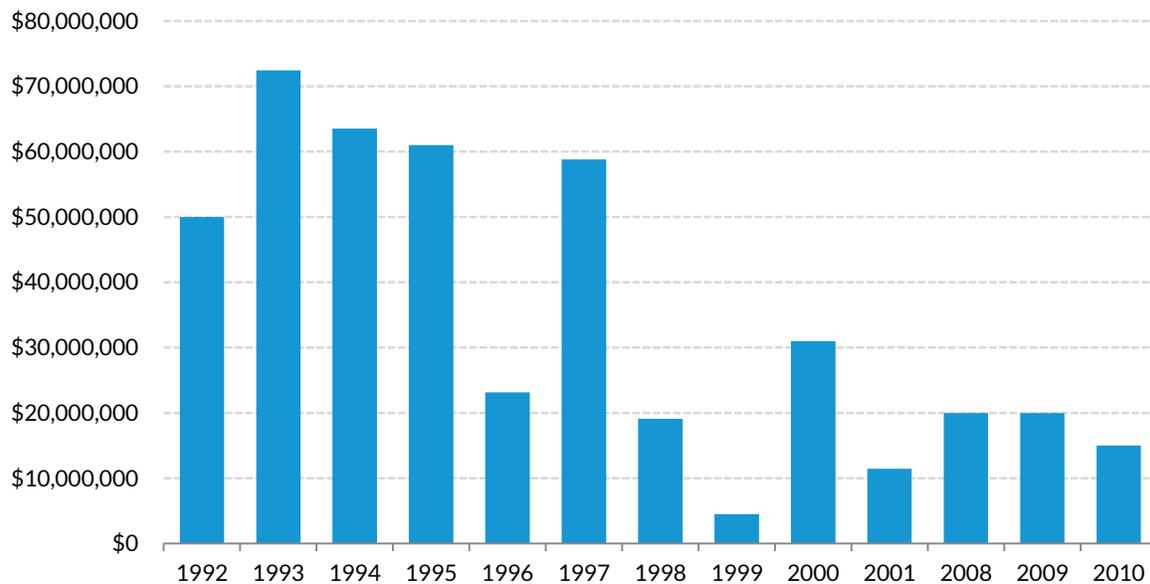
As noted by the HUD secretary, the purpose of FUP is to help families stay together. By stabilizing families’ housing situations, FUP is intended to prevent the removal of children from their homes and expedite reunification for families with children already placed in out-of-home care. Proponents of the program, including the Child Welfare League of America, argue that FUP is cost-effective and may save taxpayer dollars through fewer, and shorter, out-of-home placements in foster care. Research on early FUP grantees shows promising results on these outcomes. A study of 31 sites (including 995 households) that received funding in 1993 found positive outcomes for FUP participants: FUP helped 90 percent of at-risk families avoid out-of-home placements and helped reunite about two-thirds (62 percent) of separated families (Rog, Gilbert-Mongelli, and Lundy 1998). FUP also helped with housing stability, with 85 percent of study households remaining housed 12 months after lease-up (Rog et al. 1998). Although the Rog study suggests that housing subsidies have a strong impact on family reunification outcomes, the study did not include a control or comparison group. The study authors note that limitation, concluding that program outcomes could be due to selection bias; in some sites, FUP participants were selected based on their ability to quickly reunite with their children, so the

families who received FUP vouchers may have already been better off than the families who were not selected (Rog et al. 1998).

FIGURE 1

**Family Unification Program Federal Grant Funding Availability**

*By fiscal year, in dollars, 1992–2001 and 2008–10*



**Source:** National Center for Housing and Child Welfare and Child Welfare League of America

In addition to positive outcomes for families, FUP has the potential to create cost offsets or savings. A 2004 cost analysis found that an investment of \$15 million in FUP resulted in more than 3,500 children returning home or avoiding foster care, yielding the CWA savings of \$74 million annually or \$56,892 per family (Harburger and White 2004). These are immediate potential savings from direct costs to the CWA. Over the long term researchers estimate that child maltreatment has huge costs to society—by some estimates as much as \$94 billion in costs to hospitals, mental and public health agencies, law enforcement, the judicial system, special education, and lost productivity due to unemployment (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, and Kennedy 2003).

# Research Questions and Methods

## Research Questions

Since 1992, HUD has awarded FUP funding to more than 300 communities across the country. Little is known, however, about what the program looks like at the local level.<sup>1</sup> From a policy and research perspective, FUP is an important vehicle for understanding a number of issues: (1) the overlap between the child welfare system, housing, and homelessness; (2) how to provide housing to vulnerable, high-need families; and (3) facilitating cross-system partnerships between PHAs and CWAs.

This report focuses on the following research questions:

- **Targeting, Identification, and Referral**

Which families are being targeted for FUP by the CWA? What are the eligibility criteria? How is the CWA identifying eligible families? Is there an assessment to identify those at risk of child welfare involvement and housing need? How is eligibility verified?

- **Program Model**

What types of additional services are attached to the FUP housing subsidy? Housing search assistance? Services aimed at reunification? Services aimed at housing stability or self-sufficiency? Which agency provides these services? What is the intensity level of the services?

- **Administrative Data and Tracking Outcomes**

What data are the PHA and CWA collecting as part of the FUP program? What is the quality and coverage of the data? What types of outcomes are the agencies measuring?

- **Child Welfare Agency and Public Housing Authority Partnership**

How is the partnership between the CWA and PHA structured? What is the division of responsibilities in administering FUP? How strong is the partnership? Are other community-based nonprofits—for example, the local Continuum of Care—involved?

- **Systems Change**

Is FUP leading to improved, sustainable coordination between the CWA and the PHA? If so, what types of changes have led to this “systems change”? What types of improved outcomes can we see or expect for families?

- **Implementation Challenges and Facilitators**

What are the major implementation challenges? What are the key facilitators that contribute to a successful program?

## Methods

All PHAs receiving 100 FUP vouchers in HUD's FY 2009 and FY 2010 allocations (59 PHAs in 21 states) were contacted for possible inclusion in the study. Many housing authorities, particularly in the FY 2009 allocation, were not able to provide an adequate comparison group or declined participation for various reasons. Our final sample included eight study sites: Massachusetts; Salt Lake County, Utah; and the cities of Chicago, Illinois; Hartford, Connecticut; Portland and Salem, Oregon; San Diego, California; and Seattle, Washington. San Diego received its FUP award in 2009, when HUD selected FUP sites by lottery, and the remaining seven sites were awarded FUP vouchers in 2010, when applications were scored based on various factors involving community need, program design, and strength of the PHA and CWA partnerships.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 provides an overview of each site.

The research team conducted 58 interviews (in person and by phone) with key staff and stakeholders, including staff from the CWAs, PHAs, the Continuum of Care, and other local partners in each location (see appendix B for a table of organizations that participated). Based on information gathered from the key informant interviews, the study team drafted case studies for each site (appendix A). The majority of the interviews were conducted one-on-one and in person by Urban Institute research staff. For each key informant interview, the research team developed semi-structured interview guides with specific modules for different staff positions and agencies. The research plan was to conduct one set of site visits early in the implementation of the program with a follow-up set of visits after the program was implemented. The first set of interviews was conducted in March 2011. For first-time FUP recipients this was their first year of implementation, but the program had been in progress for 6 to 9 months. Four sites had received FUP vouchers in previous years and had already established programs. At the time of the first set of site visits, all the sites had started enrolling families.

TABLE 1

FUP Voucher Numbers and Populations Served

Site	FUP voucher awards 2009 and 2010	Reunification families	Preservation families	Youth aging out of foster care
Portland, OR	100	✓	✓	✓
San Diego, CA	100	✓		
Chicago, IL	100	✓	✓	
Hartford, CT	100	✓	✓	
Massachusetts	100	✓	✓	✓
Seattle, WA	100	✓	✓	✓
Salt Lake County, UT	100	✓	✓	✓
Salem, OR	100	✓	✓	✓

# Implementation

Each site is required to follow HUD’s program policies, but there is some flexibility in how the programs are implemented at the local level. Ultimately, it is up to sites to decide how to allocate their vouchers across the three eligible groups. The FUP program model includes three major components (1) family identification, referral, intake, and enrollment; (2) housing search and identification; and (3) child welfare case closure and supportive services. Table 2 provides an overview of each site’s program model.

TABLE 2

Overview of Site Program Models

Site	Identification and eligibility	Housing search	Supportive services
Portland, OR	Housing is the last barrier to reunification (must be within 90 days of reunification) or a primary need to preserve the family	Unit availability list Landlord recruitment Help with security deposit	12 months of supportive services from community-based nonprofit focused on housing stability, employment, and self-sufficiency
San Diego, CA	Housing is the last barrier to reunification (must be within 90 days of reunification) or a primary need to preserve the family	Unit availability list Some help from CWA caseworkers searching for units and help with security deposit	CWA caseworker provides three to six months of case management
Chicago, IL	Housing is the last barrier to reunification (must be within 90 days of reunification)	Housing advocate provides help with search, including unit identification and help with security deposit	CWA caseworker provides three to six months of case management
Hartford, CT	Housing is the last barrier to reunification or a primary need to preserve the family	Unit availability list Landlord recruitment Help with security deposit	18–24 months of supportive services from community-based nonprofit focused on housing stability, employment, and self-sufficiency
Massachusetts	Housing is the last barrier to reunification or a primary need to preserve the family	Unit availability list Help with security deposit if resources are available	CWA caseworker provides three to six months of case management
Seattle, WA	Housing is the last barrier to reunification (must be within 90 days of reunification) or a primary need to preserve the family	Unit availability list Some search assistance depending on referring organization	Referring agencies provide six months of supportive services after family signs the lease
Salt Lake County, UT	Housing is the last barrier to reunification (must be within 90 days of reunification)	Help navigating the application process Unit availability list Landlord recruitment Visits to available units Help with security deposit	CWA caseworker provides three months of case management
Salem, OR	Housing is a part of a constellation of challenges to reunification or preservation	Unit availability list Some help with security deposit when needed	CWA caseworker provides supportive services until families are considered safe and stable

To describe how families move through the program, we divided the client flow into nine steps:

- Step 1. Family identification
- Step 2. Program referral
- Step 3. Eligibility determination
- Step 4. Voucher briefing and issuance
- Step 5. Housing search and unit identification
- Step 6. Unit inspection
- Step 7. Lease signing
- Step 8. Moving into unit
- Step 9. Child welfare case closure, case management, and supportive services

## Steps 1 and 2: Family Identification and Program Referral

FUP is a scarce resource. Not all communities receive these special vouchers, and even among the communities that win FUP awards, there are not enough vouchers to meet the needs of all families involved in the child welfare system. According to HUD guidelines, communities must target FUP vouchers to “families for whom the lack of adequate housing is a primary factor in the imminent placement of the family's child, or children, in out-of-home care; or the delay in the discharge of the child, or children, to the family from out-of-home care.”<sup>3</sup> It is up to the CWA and PHA to certify that families meet these conditions. These guidelines appear straightforward, but they are difficult to define and operationalize. The only key terms that are further defined are “lack of adequate housing,” which HUD defines as a family who is living in substandard or dilapidated housing, homeless, in imminent danger of losing their housing, displaced by domestic violence, living in an overcrowded unit, or living in a unit that is not accessible to the family’s disabled child or children. The other key terms and phrases—“housing is a primary factor” in the “imminent” placement or “delay” in discharge—are left to the CWA and PHA to define further.

At each site, it is up to the CWA and PHA to prioritize the allocation of the vouchers by defining eligibility criteria. For the most part, the study sites require that the family have an open case with the

CWA to qualify for a FUP referral. Thus, the initial step of identifying eligible families generally falls to the CWA. Seattle, where community agencies as well as CWAs make referrals to the program, and Salt Lake City (which lies within Salt Lake County), where the homeless shelter also makes referrals, are the exceptions.<sup>4</sup>

The child welfare caseworkers who have immediate contact with families in the system identify and refer families for the program. How caseworkers operationalize the “housing is a primary factor” criterion varies by site and even within CWAs. Seven sites (Seattle, Hartford, San Diego, Portland, Chicago, Massachusetts, and Salem) use HUD’s definition; that is, “a lack of adequate housing” is the last or one of the last barriers to reunification when the family is close to reunification (usually 90 days), or housing is a primary factor in helping preserve the family. For the reunification cases, CWA caseworkers and administrators noted that they wait to provide a voucher until the family is close to reunification because parents whose children are not returned home still get to keep the voucher.

In addition to using HUD’s definition of “lack of housing,” Salt Lake County developed a referral form that asks about four risk factors (lack of adequate housing, domestic violence, chronic homelessness, and impact of housing on child’s health and/or safety) aimed at quantifying housing need. The site originally planned to use these criteria to develop a score to prioritize families based on need, but they did not use the score because their focus was on meeting their enrollment goals; instead, they processed referrals on a first come, first served basis.

Caseworker judgment plays a large role in eligibility, and caseworker decisions vary significantly. In each site, caseworkers can refer anyone in their caseload they believe is eligible. Some caseworkers err on the side of referring everyone. Others take a more conservative approach, referring only families they believe to be in most need or who will benefit the most. From our interviews, it was clear that many caseworkers select families who are “housing ready” and use access to FUP as a carrot to help motivate families to complete steps in their case plan. Fewer caseworkers said they would refer their highest-need families—those who would have little chance of finding housing on their own, without a subsidy—to the program.

After caseworkers identify eligible families, they typically send a referral form to the CWA, which verifies eligibility and determines whether the family should be referred to the PHA. The majority of the sites (San Diego, Salt Lake County, Chicago, Massachusetts, Seattle, and Salem) use a *gatekeeper model* in which an individual or team verifies FUP eligibility. If there are more eligible families than open vouchers, the gatekeeper determines which families are referred to the housing authority. The gatekeeper is usually a staff person (a FUP or housing liaison) within the CWA. For example, in

Massachusetts a FUP liaison at the Housing Stabilization Unit (HSU) meets with the family to determine eligibility and then sends a referral to the housing authority or housing agency or places the family on one of nine regional waiting lists. When a voucher in the region becomes available, the HSU head contacts a caseworker at the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) about the next family on the waiting list. If the caseworker verifies that the family still meets the voucher criteria, then the family is referred to its regional housing authority.

Alternatively, Portland uses a *committee model* in which referrals go to one of three Department of Human Services branch offices, each with a committee that reviews the applications and determines eligibility. In this model, caseworkers present their cases and advocate for their referred families at committee meetings. Compared with most FUP liaisons or other supervisors, the committees push the caseworkers more to defend their referrals, discussing the family's current living situation, potential alternative living situations, criminal background, substance abuse history, and income. Unlike workers in most FUP programs, caseworkers in Portland's program conduct a criminal background check and verify income to ascertain whether the family will pass the housing authority's voucher eligibility criteria. By doing this check, the agency avoids referring families who cannot obtain a voucher or work with the family to prepare for what they will need (e.g., verification of completing drug treatment or letters of support) to be approved for a voucher.

Hartford has a slightly different housing process. In Hartford, the FUP program is tied to a supportive housing program managed by a nonprofit, The Connection, Inc. Families referred by social workers are placed on a waitlist. When a family reaches the top of the supportive housing program waiting list, The Connection's assessment team conducts a clinical assessment to confirm family eligibility for the supportive housing program and identify family assets and needs. After a family is deemed eligible for FUP, they are assigned a case manager from The Connection in addition to their CWA social worker. The Connection case manager works with the family on a service plan to achieve housing stability before the family is issued a housing voucher by the PHA. Families are granted a transitional subsidy that works like a permanent voucher while they wait for the FUP voucher to be available. The transitional voucher can be removed if the family does not comply with their service plan or if their parental rights are terminated. The caseworker and family work to prepare the voucher application, and once it is completed and approved by The Connection's central office, the family is put on the regional supportive housing waiting list for a permanent housing voucher. Families receive support to find housing and, once they find an appropriate apartment, the process of inspection and rent reasonability is the same as the other FUP sites.

## Step 3: PHA Eligibility Determination

Once the CWA has identified a qualified family, they refer them to the PHA. Usually a staff person at the PHA acts as a coordinator or liaison to intake referred families. All the PHAs in the study have some additional screening process, which at its most basic level ensures the referred household meets standard Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program eligibility criteria.<sup>5</sup> For many sites, this process begins with a HUD HCV application and an initial intake meeting with PHA staff. Some families work with a case manager (from child welfare in some sites and in others with a PHA FUP liaison) on completing the application, though in many instances families are left on their own to fill out the application.<sup>6</sup> PHA staff report that completing the HCV application can be challenging for families, many of whom do not have easy access to basic documents like birth certificates and Social Security cards.

During the intake meeting or after the HCV application has been submitted, the housing agency checks for HCV eligibility by verifying each household's income, assessing each family's standing with the PHA, and conducting a criminal background check. Specifically, the housing authority assesses whether the household owes any rent or utility payments to a housing authority or has been evicted and whether adults in the household appear to be ready to maintain housing (e.g., have completed drug rehabilitation and have not recently relapsed). In some sites, the CWA or other agency may pay a family's outstanding debts with the housing authority. However, the ability to access funds to help families pay off PHA debts (or negotiate past charges with landlords) varies by site (see step 5 and table 3 for more details). If a family's outstanding debt is too large the referring agencies may not have the funds to pay off the debt, and the family is deemed ineligible for the FUP voucher. The requirements for passing a criminal background check vary by PHA. Under HUD regulations, families with registered sex offenders or a history of illegal drug distribution or manufacture are ineligible for housing assistance. For criminal history that is older or minor, particularly for drug use offenses, some PHAs are more lenient and willing to work with families. If a family is denied for any reason they can appeal at a hearing within a specified amount of time and explain any mitigating factors (such as the completion of a drug treatment program) that could be considered in support of their application.

## Step 4: Voucher Briefing and Issuance

After a family is found eligible for FUP by both the CWA and the housing authority, the housing agency works with the family to issue a voucher and initiate the housing search process. The housing authority

first contacts families, typically by e-mail, and schedules an intake appointment. Every site anticipates some families missing the initial intake meeting and has systems in place to reschedule meetings or ensure contact with families. After the intake appointment the family attends a voucher briefing session, during which the family is usually provided the voucher so they can begin their housing search. Some sites offer FUP-specific voucher briefings. Other sites have FUP families attend regular voucher briefings (which may occur as often as every two weeks) and may have them arrive early or stay longer to receive additional information. Some case managers attend the briefing with the family. Massachusetts and Seattle suggest or require the case managers to attend the briefings with the families.

At the briefings, families receive information on voucher rent guidelines, program rules and responsibilities, the housing search process, housing inspections, and the leasing process. Several sites offer additional assistance, such as a list of available properties and landlords who accept vouchers or with whom the housing authority has worked in the past (Salem, Seattle, and San Diego); information on other programs that are available to the FUP families, such as Family Self-Sufficiency (Chicago); or a portion of the Ready-to-Rent curriculum<sup>7</sup> that includes a credit review and advice on overcoming personal history barriers, reading a lease, and filling out a rental application (Seattle).

## Step 5: Housing Search and Unit Identification

Once they have been issued a voucher, families typically have from 60 to 120 days to find suitable housing. Finding housing can be a difficult process. Families have to find housing from a landlord who accepts vouchers and is renting a unit that is below the rental cap (fair market rent). Most sites mentioned that the housing search was notoriously difficult in their areas due to low vacancy rates and high rents, particularly in metropolitan areas like Boston and Seattle. Further, even though the family has passed the housing authority's criteria to receive a voucher, some landlords may have stricter screening standards. A landlord may not accept a family with a certain criminal background, poor credit history, or a history of evictions from private-market landlords.

HUD requires FUP sites to “provide housing search assistance” and “provide technical assistance, through referrals to local fair housing and equal opportunity offices, to owners interested in making reasonable accommodations or units accessible to persons with disabilities.”<sup>8</sup> HUD also requires that memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between PHAs and CWAs include agreements to provide “counseling on compliance with rental lease requirements and with HCV program participant

requirements, including assistance/referrals for assistance on security deposits, utility hook-up fees, and utility deposits.” Beyond this basic guidance, specific services are not described or mandated by HUD.

Most sites provide additional, but limited, guidance and support to the families to find housing: the housing agency or case manager provides families with a list of eligible properties and landlords or directs clients to free online housing listings. Typically, families then search for housing and find units on their own. Unfortunately, child welfare caseworkers reported that lists of landlords who accept vouchers are often not useful as the landlord may not have an opening. Furthermore, lists of openings are frequently out of date, making these lists less useful and leading to wasting time traveling to units that are not available.

In San Diego, CWA caseworkers refer families to other community workers to help find housing. In both Seattle and Massachusetts, all voucher recipients have access to education programs provided by external partners, such as housing readiness classes sponsored by agencies such as the YMCA. Public health nurses in Seattle will help with the housing search, including taking families to visit properties, and the housing authority in Seattle cosponsored the development of a free housing search website for HCV recipients that has a database of landlord postings in King County. This website allows clients to indicate that they have a voucher and narrow a search to show only those landlords who do not run a credit or criminal background check. Salem caseworkers communicate frequently with families to provide information on listings and help with negotiation or problems.

Some sites take a hands-on approach to help the FUP families find suitable housing and troubleshoot when necessary. Sites that provide individualized housing search assistance tend to help families with landlords. In Portland, families receive assistance from three partners: a nonprofit provider, their CWA social worker, and a leasing staff member from the housing agency. Families receive a list and map of available housing units, transportation to units, assistance in the appeals process, help negotiating with landlords regarding past property debts and application fees, and assistance filling out the application. The public health nurses in Seattle also help negotiate with landlords, including writing letters to landlords on their family’s behalf.

Hartford provides intensive support during the search process. Families meet at least weekly with their housing case manager to prepare for receiving a permanent voucher. This preparation includes work to pay off debt so the family is eligible to receive a voucher, referral to apartment search specialists, transportation to and counsel in looking at different units, and coaching on how to communicate with landlords. Hartford also describes a deliberate effort to address the barrier of

landlords who do not want to rent to families with bad credit or criminal backgrounds. The housing organization builds relationships with landlords, and statewide housing development employees often reach out to landlords to explain program details such as highlighting that the family puts only 30 percent of their income toward rent (the PHA is reliably paying the remainder) and that the family has a case manager who can be contacted if there are any issues.

As a result of the Norman Consent Decree, in Chicago the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) uses a contracted housing advocate to help child welfare clients locate housing. Under this decree, clients cannot receive assistance (which can include cash assistance on security deposits, start-up necessities, and related services) from a housing advocate without an open DCFS case. These advocates are contractually obligated to contact a family and set up an intake reappointment within one business day of a DCFS referral.

Noting that many families were dropping out at different points along the way, Salt Lake County hired an additional contract worker from the local homeless agency to help families navigate the application and search process. PHA staff attribute the work of this person to helping them meet their lease-up goals.

In addition to finding units, many families have a hard time coming up with the money for a security deposit. All the sites have a system in place and a source of funding to help the families with additional expenses. The funds come from various sources such as local government (Portland and San Diego), federal programs (Salem, Seattle, and Salt Lake County), and state policy requirements (Chicago) (table 3). Massachusetts works with external partners that provide deposit assistance. In all cases, the funds are limited, have stipulations, and may depend on the advocacy and referrals conducted by caseworkers. Many PHA staff reported that this resource is critical to leasing families.

TABLE 3

**Additional Funds Available for FUP Families**

Site	Additional funds
Portland, OR	Up to \$1,000 per family of county-provided funds. Refer to utility assistance or other resources to pay application fee.
San Diego, CA	Child Welfare Services can usually provide money for first month's rent. Norman Consent Decree provides start-up money (up to \$1,200) for household items and initial expenses and previous utility debt. This money cannot be used for rent.
Chicago, IL	The transitional voucher is paid for by Supportive Housing funds. Sixty percent of families get assistance with security deposit.
Hartford, CT	Some resources available from partner housing agencies that have money for deposit assistance.
Massachusetts	Family Preservation Services funds help pay a deposit. Casey Family Programs funds available for application fees.
Seattle, WA	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families provides deposit assistance or effort to stabilize family (drug treatment, car repairs, strollers), up to \$2,000 to each family per fiscal year.
Salt Lake County, UT	HOME funds for security deposits or local community action center. Funds for deposit and rental application fees. No funds for utility costs or previous bills.
Salem, OR	

## Steps 6, 7, and 8: Unit Inspections, Lease Signing, and Moving into Unit

Once a family has found an apartment that will accept a voucher, they submit the unit to the housing agency for a housing quality inspection and rent reasonableness assessment. If the unit passes, the family signs a lease with the landlord and the housing agency signs a contract with the landlord.<sup>9</sup> After the lease is signed, the family can move into the unit.

## Step 9: Child Welfare Case Closure and Supportive Services

Stability, particularly housing stability, is a key outcome for the FUP program. However, FUP vouchers do not come with funding to offer ongoing case management. Instead, HUD requires the PHA to bring partners to the table that can provide services. Usually sites rely on the CWA to provide supportive services to the family after lease-up, but three sites (Seattle, Portland, and Hartford) have partnered with community-based supportive services providers.

The eight sites vary in the intensity and duration of the supportive services they offer to FUP families.

Hartford and Portland, which have contracted with partner nonprofits, provide the most intensive supportive services. In Hartford, The Connection's case managers provide services that include guidance on home care, employment, and case plan progression. Case managers can request funds for items the family may need to achieve stability in a new home, serve as a resource to mediate with landlords, and help the family to receive a permanent voucher. Supportive services are offered for up to two years.

In Portland, FUP families are served by an Action for Prosperity (AFP) provider who, at a minimum, contacts the family weekly and meets with them face-to-face monthly. The AFP provider first helps the family find housing and address housing stability and then works to address barriers to employment. Services include resume assistance, computer classes, intense employment training, internships, and job placement. Portland originally planned to provide 12 months of supportive services, but has since extended it; many families are now in their third year of support. The funding, provided by the county, does not cover all FUP families. The remaining FUP families receive standard case management from the child welfare caseworker, who may or may not be able to identify an existing service provider who is willing to provide additional case management.

In Seattle, where FUP referrals may come from multiple agency partners, the degree of supportive services depends on the referring case manager and organization: CWA social workers offer case management and connect families with community services or appropriate contract services; public health nurses attempt to stay involved and visit as long as the family is receptive; and YMCA social workers provide minimum monthly phone check-ins and quarterly in-person meetings to discuss budgeting, employment, and education.

In San Diego, Massachusetts, Salt Lake County, Chicago, and Salem, CWA caseworkers provide some case management up to three to six months after the family leases up. In Chicago, families are primarily served by CWA caseworkers who provide regular post-reunification services. The caseworkers are able to refer families to counseling, treatment, and other state or local resources, and possibly to housing advocates who visit families once a month and sometimes help families find employment and education opportunities. In San Diego, the child welfare case manager can refer families to Community Family Services; however, the specifics of that process or the services the organization provides are undefined. In Salem, case management services are offered until the families are considered safe and stable.

A CWA caseworker may not be the most appropriate or effective choice for providing ongoing supportive services. The caseworkers have heavy caseloads and struggle to find time for longer-term case management. Further, CWA caseworkers have little incentive to provide supportive services, especially if the children are returned home, because they are measured by child safety and closed cases, not housing stability or other measures of child and family well-being. As one CWA caseworker said, “I can close a case with someone living in a homeless shelter.” In addition, many of the families may have an adversarial relationship with the CWA caseworker and would benefit from working with a service provider who is not associated with past family instability (e.g., removal of a child). Caseworkers noted that it was difficult to remain connected after FUP families sign a lease, and they cannot require families to participate in supportive services after the legal case has been closed. Finally, keeping the child welfare case open so that the caseworkers can provide services makes it difficult for the sites to meet their goals of providing housing to expedite case closure and has negative implications for potential cost savings resulting from the program.

# Partnerships and Systems Change

FUP is intended to bring together child welfare and housing service providers to provide combined supportive services and housing to vulnerable families. HUD requires FUP agency applicants to submit an MOU with their grant application that outlines the partnership between the CWA and the PHA. The MOU identifies a FUP liaison to act as a point person in each agency and outlines each agency's responsibilities in administering the program. As noted above, the CWA is charged with identifying eligible families and making referrals to the PHA, and the PHA is responsible for helping the family identify housing.

In practice, the strength of these partnerships varies widely, from informal collaboration and information sharing to sustained, regular meetings and service coordination. Because FUP is a HUD program, the lead agency is typically the PHA. In Seattle, the Seattle Housing Authority led the development of their FUP application, including developing partnerships with the local Children's Administration and other local agencies and nonprofits. However, sometimes the lead comes from the child welfare side. In Chicago, DCFS largely spearheaded the partnership with the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and initiated the application process for FUP vouchers. DCFS approached local PHAs in Chicago and other localities around Illinois and encouraged them to apply for FUP vouchers. Similarly, the Connecticut Department of Children and Families approached housing authorities around the state to encourage them to apply for FUP vouchers. How sustainable these partnerships are and if they lead to greater systems change was one focus of the follow-up interviews conducted in summer 2014.

To understand the scope and strength of these partnerships we asked the sites to describe their partnerships. We noted some key indicators of partnerships, including meeting regularly; using dashboard statistics for management and sharing data; dedicated and cross-trained staff, particularly CWA caseworkers; and colocation of staff.<sup>10</sup> HUD has cited some of these indicators as promising practices (HUD 2011).

- **Meeting Regularly**

To ensure smooth program operations, some form of regular communication is key. In-person FUP-related meetings occur across all sites, although their frequency varies. In Chicago, the CWA and PHA convene regular cross-agency meetings<sup>11</sup> at the CWA central office that are attended by CWA and PHA FUP liaisons, PHA housing specialists, and housing advocates (and sometimes their supervisors). Meeting participants review active FUP housing cases (including

FUP voucher recipients who have not yet leased up, who have recently signed a lease, or who are going into eviction) and ensure that all parties understand each family's next steps. The meetings also provide an opportunity to identify cross-agency discrepancies in record keeping for each family. Each meeting lasts approximately 90 minutes, depending on how complicated and numerous the active cases are. In Portland, all partners including Home Forward, the housing authority, the CWA liaisons, the AFP providers, and the county meet monthly, holding similar discussions about FUP families and voucher availability. Seattle's PHA keeps lines of communication open with DCFS and other partners through regular (often weekly) FUP update e-mails and quarterly meetings to discuss individual cases and opportunities. The Seattle PHA also hosts a biannual meeting with the FUP partners, Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing, and the Committee to End Homelessness to discuss updates and get feedback.

- **Dashboard Statistics and Sharing Information**

In Salt Lake County, PHA and CWA leaders meet regularly to share data on family identification, referrals, voucher issuance, and lease-up. This data sharing helps the site identify and troubleshoot when things go wrong. For example, during these meetings staff noted that families were having trouble finding housing, so the PHA contracted with a local homeless organization, the Road Home, to provide housing search services. With this support, the PHA was able to achieve a higher success rate with lease-up.

- **Dedicated Staff**

Several sites identified having a central point of contact for FUP-related questions within each agency (CWA and PHA) as important. To that end, all sites have designated FUP liaisons to communicate with the other agency. For families who have leased up, some housing authorities have designated one housing specialist to handle all the FUP cases and become an expert on the program. Having had FUP in place since 1992, Massachusetts's program has been improved systematically and institutionalized within a special office. The Housing Stability Unit (HSU) was created in 2005 to centralize the FUP process within DCF, increase communication, and decrease the number of ineligible referrals sent to the housing authority. Four regional workers coordinate and are the single points of contact for the housing authorities throughout the state of Massachusetts that have FUP vouchers to distribute to families. HSU workers have also looked beyond their program to refer FUP families to other housing resources should the program be inappropriate for them.

- **Colocation**

Partnerships are strengthened when staff from organizations are colocated at more than one site or information sharing about clients between staff of both agencies is systematic and

regular. In general, sites do not colocate staff in the partner agencies. Salem used to have a housing authority staff person located at the CWA, but budget cuts no longer allow for this. CWA staff and caseworkers all noted that things worked more smoothly when they had someone they could easily access. Salt Lake County provides an exception to the lack of colocation. The PHA found that families weren't moving through the voucher process quickly enough. In response, the PHA reached out to the Road Home and provided funding for a Road Home staff member to help families move through the voucher process and improve communication between the two agencies. The colocated staff member is able to provide better information to Road Home caseworkers on how their clients are managing the housing search and lease-up process.

The sustainability of these partnerships and whether they lead to services or systems integration is a valuable policy question. For some sites, the FUP program led to sustained collaboration from the initial FUP notice of funding availability (NOFA) forward. For instance, in Seattle, FUP led to improved coordination between the CWA and local housing authorities at the state level. Building Changes, a housing advocacy organization, facilitated conversations between the CWA and local housing authorities to develop a common MOU to apply for FUP vouchers. Since developing this MOU, Building Changes has facilitated conversations between DCFS, housing authorities, and nonprofits about piloting a program similar to FUP to provide housing for families awaiting reunification or to prevent a child's removal. The pilot program promotes self-sufficiency and tenant services beyond the end of DCFS services at case closure. Seventeen housing authorities in Washington State expressed interest in piloting the program, and DCFS successfully applied for a Title IV-E waiver to provide funding flexibility for the pilot.<sup>12</sup>

# Promising Practices and Implementation Challenges

The eight sites included in this brief have successfully implemented a partnership between child welfare providers and housing providers. However, some of the sites have struggled to clearly define eligibility criteria, identify eligible families, and carry out supportive services. Additional guidelines, such as a clear FUP model, and assistance in coordinating the public housing and child welfare systems may potentially improve operations and possibly family outcomes. These challenges will need to be considered when assessing the quantitative impact of FUP services on child welfare system outcomes.

## Promising Practices

### **PHAs Screening Families In Rather than Screening Them Out**

A large share of families involved in the child welfare system have poor rental histories (e.g., evictions, owing back rent or money for property damage, vacating without notice) and bad credit, and many have criminal records. Families, in general, have a hard time meeting PHA screening criteria. However, as noted earlier, PHAs have a lot of discretion in whom they select for their housing programs. Many of the PHAs participating in this study have taken a “screening in” approach to eligibility. Using this approach results in few factors that would prevent a family from program participation. Salt Lake County, for example, reviews each criminal background check on a case-by-case basis and evaluates it based on time since last offense, the nature of the offense, and the circumstances. If denied, the family has the opportunity to appeal the decision. In addition, if the family owes back rent to the housing authority, the PHA allows the family to clear their history by allowing them to pay back the amount owed, sometimes in payments if necessary.

### **Providing Housing Search Assistance**

Several FUP implementation sites are unique in the specialized services they provide clients, most commonly during the housing search progress. For instance, in Seattle, the [HousingSearchNW.org](http://HousingSearchNW.org)

website provides detailed assistance to HCV and FUP voucher holders searching for rental apartments. A number of sites, including Seattle and Portland, mentioned that caseworkers would specifically work with landlords as advocates for their clients as part of neighborhood mobility and housing counseling efforts. In Chicago, each FUP family has their own designated housing advocate who can accompany them to apartment visits. Connecticut's housing search workers form connections with agencies and community-based organizations in their region and refer families to local housing programs, expanding the resources for DCF families beyond FUP. Salt Lake County has a dedicated staff person for helping families navigate the housing search process and identify units.

### **Providing Financial Resources for Voucher Lease**

One of the key challenges to leasing up is the upfront money that households need to pay for application fees and a security deposit. Low-income families frequently cannot afford the \$1,000 to \$2,500 it may cost to secure an apartment. In all of the sites, one of the agencies, either the CWA or PHA, puts money on the table to use for these purposes. Staff reported that this assistance makes a tremendous difference in identifying units to lease. In Portland, in addition to funds the CWA can use, the county allots AFP providers \$1,000 per family for use on an array of purposes, including many of these upfront costs.

### **Providing Ongoing Supportive Services and Links to Self-Sufficiency Programs**

FUP is more than merely housing vulnerable families. In order for the families to reach stability and independence, they need more services that are relevant and are delivered by an effective provider in a way that resonates with the families. Services should respond to the multiple competencies required for family and housing stability, such as employment, education, and physical and mental health. The program is not intended as a permanent solution, but rather a support as the families land on their feet and move into self-sufficiency. Providing the additional services is crucial to help this movement and enables the program to serve additional families in need. Only a few sites (Portland and Hartford) identified self-sufficiency programs that provide ongoing services.

# Implementation Challenges

Despite the promising partnerships and systems changes enacted by some FUP sites, challenges to a smooth implementation of the program remain.

## **Not Systematically Targeting High-Need Families**

Targeting, or the ability of FUP sites to accurately and quickly identify eligible families and allocate resources effectively, poses a number of problems. First, the targeting guidance provided by HUD is broad, and as a result, the targeting is not systematic across sites. Some sites operate on a gatekeeper model, and others operate on a committee model to determine which families referred for FUP should ultimately be referred to the housing authority. The lack of institutionalized process or criteria causes wide variance in criteria or confusion at some sites as to what constitutes an eligible referral.

Ultimately, much is left to caseworker judgment. Because FUP is a scarce resource, only a small fraction of families involved with the child welfare system will receive it. It is unclear if the families who would benefit the most are receiving FUP.

## **Difficulty Aligning System Goals and Timelines**

The timing for the housing search process is not aligned between CWAs and PHAs. For example, most, if not all, of the families referred to FUP by CWA caseworkers are in need of immediate housing.

However, the voucher application, apartment search, and lease-up process for FUP can take months of effort. Depending on the PHA's waitlist, a spot may not be open for a family until months after their CWA caseworker would like to refer them to FUP. As such, child welfare families who are experiencing housing crises need some type of emergency housing to help them bridge the time from referral to issuance of a FUP voucher and lease-up. A family's flow in and out of the CWA system and the PHA's timeline for allocating vouchers through their own system may not be aligned with the immediate needs of the family to avoid removal of the child.

## **Complications of CWA Provision of Ongoing Services after Case Closure**

Supportive services across sites are uneven and a big challenge due to lack of funding. The CWA is required to bring services to the table, but, as noted, the CWA caseworkers have extremely high

caseloads and their work with the family is focused on safety and permanency for the children. Going beyond these basic outcomes and helping families with housing stability and self-sufficiency are often beyond their capacity. Because CWA caseworkers have relationships with the families that are often adversarial, especially in the cases of child removal, they may not be the best personnel choice to provide supportive services around housing stability and long-term goals like employment or self-sufficiency. Finally, CWA caseworkers are often required by agency policy, judges, or state law to close cases once children are reunified with the family; this requirement may not permit additional months of services after the family leases up with FUP.

### **Lack of Capacity for Housing Search and Resources**

Sites vary in their capacity to help clients navigate common barriers such as eviction histories, payments due to the housing authority, and criminal backgrounds. Some sites are able to have individual caseworkers accompany families to view prospective apartments and negotiate with potential landlords, but others cannot. CWA caseworkers are not housing experts and are often not familiar with how housing programs work or with available private-market housing where families can use their vouchers. They are not experienced in working with private-market landlords, so filling out applications, negotiating rents, and troubleshooting problems with the family, which are often necessary for families who need extra help, are outside their regular duties and skills. Differing levels of housing search assistance and financial support may affect clients' ability to lease up successfully. Although most sites help clients with paying a security deposit, many sites lack the financial resources needed to pay back rent or utility bills. And although sites like Massachusetts or Connecticut have substantial organizational resources devoted to FUP and the housing search, most site staff persons who were designated FUP liaisons do this work in addition to their regular caseload and job responsibilities.

### **Measuring Reentry into Child Welfare System**

Sites vary widely in their ability to collect data and track the outcomes of families who participate in the program. FUP is intended as a partnership between the PHA and CWA, but the agencies are not jointly tracking outcomes and sharing data to do so. Agencies need to identify common goals, designate what data to use to measure progress toward those goals, and devise data-sharing agreements to facilitate measurement. For example, agencies could track child welfare case outcomes and reentry into the child

welfare system. They could also track housing stability at the PHA and develop a data-sharing partnership with local homeless shelters.

# Conclusion

This report describes implementation of the FUP program at eight sites. We found that the sites have implemented some promising practices that should spark further exploration for possible replication. These practices include loosening up PHA screening criteria to “screen in” families who have troubled backgrounds, providing housing search assistance and financial assistance for security deposits, and linking families to self-sufficiency programs. Remaining implementation challenges include systematically targeting families, aligning system goals and timelines, refining uneven supportive services and housing search assistance, and measuring reentry into the child welfare system. The next step in this study is to examine outcomes for families by analyzing administrative data and to quantify costs associated with the program.

# Appendix A. Case Study for Each Site

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Inadequate housing threatens the safety and well-being of children and is frequently at the root of low-income families' involvement in the child welfare system. An initiative of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Family Unification Program (FUP) offers supportive services and housing choice vouchers to families whose inadequate housing either places children in immediate risk of being removed from the home or delays their return. (Youth aging out of foster care without adequate housing are also eligible.) Local public housing agencies, in collaboration with local child welfare agencies, administer FUP. For 2008–10, Congress awarded HUD funding for approximately 7,000 new FUP vouchers covering almost 250 communities. To study FUP design and implementation in eight sites serving 800 families, the Urban Institute conducted interviews with key staff and stakeholders to answer questions about the program's impact.

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## Family Unification Program Case Study: Chicago, Illinois

The Chicago FUP is a partnership between the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Chicago has 600 FUP vouchers in circulation, 100 of which were awarded in 2011.

The Chicago FUP leverages the housing services and cash assistance program DCFS implemented in response to the Norman Consent Decree, which requires that Illinois DCFS provide housing advocates to help child welfare-involved families find suitable housing. The decree also created a position that oversees housing need and support within DCFS and requires DCFS to provide cash assistance to help DCFS-involved families with initial housing start-up costs (e.g., security deposits, utilities, basic household items). To meet these requirements, DCFS created the Office of Housing and Cash Assistance (OHCA). The OHCA director is also the DCFS FUP liaison for Chicago.

## Intake: Targeting, Identification, Eligibility, and Referral

DCFS identifies FUP-eligible families through a process involving DCFS caseworkers, their supervisors, and the DCFS FUP liaison.<sup>13</sup> To be considered for a FUP voucher, families must have an open DCFS case, which may include voluntary services stemming from a report of alleged child abuse or neglect or mandated involvement when DCFS determines child abuse or neglect has occurred. Families receiving voluntary services can leave DCFS at any time, as long as no new child abuse or neglect reports have been made and the court has not become involved with the case.

To qualify for FUP, families with an open case must also have inadequate housing that is a primary factor in either putting them at risk of having their children removed or preventing them from having their children returned. In general, DCFS targets reunification families (i.e., families with a child in out-of-home placement) whenever possible, because these families are often in most immediate need. The need to quickly use all FUP vouchers sometimes supersedes these priorities. When there are many vouchers available (e.g., in summer and fall 2011, when the vouchers were first awarded), DCFS refers at least as many preservation families (i.e., intact families at risk of having a child removed from the home), because many more intact families are in the DCFS system than reunification families at any given time. When vouchers are scarce, DCFS generally only refers reunification families or families who are on the CHA housing choice voucher (HCV) waiting list.

Although families enter the FUP referral process from various points in the DCFS system, they all first enter the DCFS system after being reported to the DCFS child welfare hotline. DCFS assesses each report and may either dismiss it or open a case; cases are referred either to an intact team for voluntary services or to the court for formal involvement. After a case is opened, a child will sometimes be removed from the home. A caseworker may identify a family as a FUP candidate, perform an initial screening (including an initial criminal background screening), and then, with the family's sign-off, refer the family for a voucher.<sup>14</sup> Screening for criminal background before the referral helps DCFS avoid referring families who do not meet HUD background requirements for housing voucher eligibility.

The three-page FUP referral form is completed by DCFS caseworkers and supervisors and sent to the DCFS FUP liaison. DCFS staff must specify how the family's housing is inadequate (the form provides guidance on defining and rating inadequate housing)<sup>15</sup> and whether reunification families are within 90 days of reunification.

The DCFS FUP liaison reviews the form. If any information is unclear or missing, the liaison will follow up with the referring caseworker. The liaison also uses this opportunity to assess housing need

and risk of delayed or unstable reunification or risk that the child will have to be moved to or remain in out-of-home placement if the family does not receive a FUP voucher.

The DCFS FUP liaison serves as a gatekeeper, determining which referrals to send to CHA, and only doing so when vouchers are available. The program does not maintain a waiting list in order to ensure that families will be referred when they need the service and also when DCFS can provide OHCA support to the family. Both DCFS and CHA believe these additional supports are an essential element to the program. In addition to new FUP vouchers, DCFS also makes referrals periodically in response to regular turnover from previous batches of vouchers (approximately 6 percent of total FUP families per year). For a portion of the most recent 100 vouchers (which did not include reunification families), the FUP liaison implemented a lottery system to accommodate another study examining program impacts.

The DCFS FUP liaison's goal (shared by many CHA staff) is to serve the "most difficult to serve" families with the highest level of need, which the Chicago FUP defines as reunification families. The liaison does not use a fixed definition or scoring system to determine level of need, whether housing is a primary factor in risk of removal or delayed (or deferred) return, or the likelihood that a family will benefit from the voucher. To qualify, reunification families must be within 90 days of having their children returned, which is often difficult to assess. Caseworkers, supervisors, and the DCFS liaison also have difficulty predicting the true risk that a child may be removed from a home if adequate housing is not immediately found.

Some DCFS caseworkers and supervisors feel the FUP liaison's criteria for forwarding referrals to CHA are unclear. The FUP liaison describes the process as "first come, first referred," as long as the families are eligible and may meet CHA criteria (e.g., vouchers will not be granted to families with certain crimes on their records).<sup>16</sup> Criteria for referral to the DCFS FUP liaison seem to vary by caseworker and supervisor. DCFS staff members acknowledge that some caseworkers are careful to verify that families meet FUP criteria for inadequate housing and need for the voucher to gain or sustain stability; others refer most potentially eligible families when vouchers are available because they believe nearly all families would benefit. Some DCFS caseworkers and supervisors are unclear about eligibility criteria, with some DCFS staff members suggesting there are none. Some staff are unclear about when criminal history could be excused, or when it would exclude a family from receiving a housing voucher. From at least one worker's perspective, staff knew 100 vouchers were awarded in 2011, but "[the vouchers] were gone within like a month," and limited criteria were applied to determine which families were "most needy."

Before forwarding a referral to CHA, the DCFS FUP liaison also checks whether a DCFS caseworker has referred the family to a housing advocate (if not, the liaison makes this referral). As a result of the Norman Consent Decree settlement, DCFS uses contracted housing advocates to help child welfare clients locate housing.<sup>17</sup> Under the consent decree, clients cannot receive assistance from a housing advocate or Norman cash assistance on security deposits, start-up necessities, and related services without an open DCFS case. Moreover, the DCFS reading of the NOFA precludes it from referring families for FUP unless a case has been opened.

The DCFS FUP liaison sends the FUP referrals to the CHA FUP liaison. Because many vouchers were available in summer 2011, the DCFS liaison sent referrals to the CHA FUP liaison in small batches (usually around five per week) to ensure that referral, intake, and follow-up were manageable.

## **Voucher Issuance, Housing Search, and Lease-Up**

FUP voucher issuance involves two key groups: (1) CHA administrators and staff, who verify families' eligibility, administer and maintain the vouchers, and provide housing services; and (2) DCFS-contracted housing advocates, who assist families with housing search support. Once families are housed, DCFS continues to provide case management and cash assistance. The FUP model includes housing search, cash assistance, and three to six months of supportive services following lease-up.

Upon receiving a referral from the DCFS FUP liaison, the CHA FUP liaison verifies that it is complete and gives the case to the CHA housing specialist who handles FUP cases. This FUP housing specialist schedules a CHA intake appointment and contacts the family by mail, communicating the date and time of the appointment. The caseworker may be contacted if the family is difficult to reach.

In preparation for the intake appointment, the family fills out the HCV application and gathers identification papers, proof of income, and materials verifying and explaining criminal history. Often, the caseworker or housing advocate helps complete these forms and find necessary papers, such as birth certificates. The client brings these materials to the intake appointment, which is administered by the CHA housing specialist (often, the client misses the first appointment and requires a second one). If the materials are not complete, the client must return for a second intake appointment.

The CHA housing specialist reviews client paperwork for income eligibility, then sends identifying information to a private vendor to conduct a screening report, verifying criminal history, past lease violations, and whether the client owes CHA or any other public housing authority (PHA) money. The

housing specialist also reviews paperwork regarding criminal history and mitigating circumstances or actions.

Registered sex offenders and clients with a history of illegal drug distribution or manufacture are not eligible for a voucher, but nonviolent drug offenders who prove completion of a treatment program will often be accepted. Under some circumstances, the CHA staff describe being more lenient toward FUP clients' criminal histories than toward the criminal histories of HCV applicants. For example, CHA will excuse charges of criminal endangerment for FUP clients, as these tend to be directly related to why the clients are involved with the child welfare system in the first place. If the application is denied following the screening report and review of mitigating circumstances, it is returned to the family, who has 10 days to appeal.

DCFS and CHA describe FUP clients as often having complex service needs, so both agencies offer some leeway to families who may appear less able to use and maintain the voucher. For example, CHA automatically schedules a second intake appointment for FUP clients when they make the initial one, knowing that many clients will miss the first appointment or will not have all of their documents. DCFS, CHA, and DCFS-contracted housing advocates also meet at least quarterly to discuss specific FUP clients, demonstrating more support than for other potential voucher recipients.

Families CHA approves for a FUP voucher are notified by mail to attend a briefing that provides information on the voucher, housing search, housing inspection, and lease-up process. Families also learn about using vouchers in low-poverty neighborhoods and about other programs available to CHA families, such as Family Self-Sufficiency. The families receive their vouchers at the briefing.

Each family's assigned housing advocate assists with the housing search, offering a list of promising landlords and properties and preparing the family to approach landlords. Services provided by the housing advocates may vary by contracting agency, the family's needs, and the advocate's caseload. Some housing advocates will visit the family's home multiple times before and after they move and provide auxiliary support such as rides to briefings or to view apartments.

Some DCFS caseworkers, caseworker supervisors, and housing advocates find it challenging to locate appropriate, affordable housing for low-income DCFS-involved families. Housing advocates report that Chicago's stock of subsidized housing is limited and that they can do little for clients without FUP vouchers, because most families have little or no income (many with less than \$600 per month, including cash benefits). Although the Norman Consent Decree provides start-up money for household items and initial expenses such as previous utility debt, it does not cover rent. Without a FUP voucher, housing advocates worry that very poor families will not be able to maintain their housing after

receiving the initial provisions available through the consent decree. With a FUP voucher, however, a good housing advocate can help a family quickly find adequate housing with a landlord who accepts tenants with children and a housing voucher (and, in many cases, past drug offenses).

Although FUP households tend to be larger than the average voucher family, CHA says the FUP lease-up rate (and voucher utilization rate) is high. In 2011, when CHA received the latest 100 FUP vouchers, approximately 93 percent of families who received a FUP voucher leased up. This percentage is higher than rates for HCV recipients during this period (80 percent). The difference is particularly notable because both agencies believe that FUP families are more difficult to serve than the general population of voucher holders. Both CHA and the DCFS FUP liaison attribute success in the program, at least partly, to housing advocates participating in the FUP lease-up process. DCFS caseworkers' ability to contact the families (if they have moved, are unresponsive, or have no fixed address) and assist in obtaining documents also likely increases the rate.

Families with CHA housing vouchers (including FUP families) have 90 days to find housing but can request an additional 60 days. If the family does not find housing within this period, the family loses the voucher.<sup>18</sup> In 2011, the majority (57 percent) of FUP families who did eventually lease up with the voucher did so within 90 days. Fourteen percent required more than 120 days.

When the family finds a rental unit, CHA conducts a unit inspection and rent reasonableness assessment. The family then signs a lease with the landlord, CHA keeps a copy, and the landlord signs a contract with CHA.

At move-in, DCFS can provide cash assistance (through the Norman Cash Assistance program) for expenses such as a security deposit, move-in costs, past utility bills, and household items, as needed. Caseworker supervisors can approve cash assistance up to \$800 for families with open DCFS cases; their managers can approve up to \$1,200, but they need approval from OHCA for higher amounts.

## **Case Management and Supportive Services**

Families are often reunified quickly after moving. The DCFS case remains open for at least six months after the family receives a voucher and at least three months following lease-up (as required under the FUP NOFA), with the caseworker providing regular post-reunification services, monitoring through check-in appointments, and referrals to counseling, treatment, and other state and local resources.

The housing advocate also provides services and oversight for three to six months after lease-up. In most cases, housing advocates visit families once a month, though they may call or visit more frequently if needed. Housing advocates say they close a case “when the client is stable and doing well,” which is subjective but can mean paying bills on time and keeping the home reasonably clean and safe. Sometimes housing advocates help clients find employment or education opportunities, though this tends to happen only when the client does not receive a FUP voucher and needs additional income to find housing.

## **Program Partnerships**

DCFS largely spearheaded the partnership with CHA and initiated the application process for FUP vouchers by approaching local PHAs in Chicago and other localities around Illinois and encouraging them to apply for FUP vouchers. As of January 2011, CHA began using a new contractor to administer HCV, FUP, and other voucher programs. For daily work pertaining to FUP, DCFS interacts with the CHA contractor, which functions as an arm of the CHA (the contractor’s employees work from CHA offices and use CHA business cards). Throughout this report, CHA and its contractor are referred to interchangeably.

CHA and DCFS convene regular cross-agency meetings<sup>19</sup> at the DCFS central office, attended by DCFS and CHA FUP liaisons, CHA housing specialists, and housing advocates (and sometimes their supervisors). Meeting participants review active FUP housing cases (including FUP voucher recipients who have not yet leased up, who have recently signed a lease, or who are going into eviction) and ensure that all parties understand each family’s next steps. The meetings also provide an opportunity to identify cross-agency discrepancies in record keeping for each family. Each meeting lasts approximately 90 minutes, depending on how complicated and numerous the active cases are.

Aside from the contracted housing advocates, no community-based organizations are directly involved in the Chicago FUP.

## **Systems Change**

FUP has led to sustained coordination between DCFS and CHA, but only for administering FUP. CHA chose to keep all 500 previously awarded FUP vouchers for FUP clients whenever the vouchers turn

over (which was not required by the previous FUP NOFAs). The DCFS FUP liaison and CHA have collaborated since the late 1990s to administer referrals and vouchers.

The DCFS FUP liaison suggested that involvement with CHA may influence DCFS to develop longer-term strategies to meet families' needs (though the liaison does not believe that any changes of this sort have occurred yet). DCFS tends to serve families in acute distress; once the agency helps families overcome a desperate situation, DCFS quickly reduces its involvement and closes the case. In contrast, CHA serves families over longer periods of time; children often grow into adults while living in CHA-subsidized housing.

The DCFS FUP liaison, DCFS caseworkers, and housing advocates all say that the housing advocates are much more effective in serving DCFS clients who have a FUP voucher than those who do not. Although this difference does not constitute an obvious example of broad "systems change," it demonstrates how FUP can make an existing program more effective. The advocate helps all DCFS-involved families find adequate housing and stability, but this assistance is limited by the family's own financial resources, as described previously.

## **Administrative Data and Tracking Outcomes**

CHA collects standard data for each of its housing programs, including voucher utilization and turnover rates, and which households have received assistance and under what program. The data are not collected specifically as a result of FUP. CHA uses voucher turnover rates for planning (e.g., determining how many new FUP vouchers they will need from DCFS on a regular basis) and reports FUP voucher utilization rates to HUD; these reported rates are likely high-quality, complete data.

DCFS keeps limited records on FUP families, and most data elements are held only temporarily. Caseworkers send paper referral forms to the DCFS FUP liaison. The form includes general information about the family, their status (reunification or preservation), whether they are within 90 days of reunification, and what makes their housing inadequate. If the DCFS FUP liaison refers a family to CHA, the liaison records basic information in an Excel spreadsheet, including the family's name, referral date, and current status but does not generally indicate whether the family is preservation or reunification.<sup>20</sup> The paper forms are eventually destroyed, so records are only maintained for families ultimately referred to CHA for FUP.

OHCA does not track new or recurring out-of-home placements for FUP families, though the FUP liaison says this information would be interesting and useful. Neither OHCA nor CHA has resources to

collect this information, though the DCFS FUP liaison notes that it may be possible to employ an intern to address this question in the future. Because DCFS has names and DCFS case ID numbers for heads of households it has referred for a FUP voucher, it would be possible to match these families with their DCFS case records.

## Implementation Challenges

DCFS, CHA, and associated organizations invest substantial resources toward implementing a well-coordinated FUP. FUP grants only cover the housing vouchers themselves and standard administrative costs for CHA. No funding is provided to DCFS to administer the program. As a result, the child welfare agency (CWA) must cover the costs of administering FUP out of existing resources. CHA also faces funding challenges because administrative funds (reduced in recent years) only cover the costs of running a traditional housing voucher program, but CHA reports that FUP requires additional resources and staff time.

In Chicago, this challenge is partly mitigated by CHA's status as a Moving to Work<sup>21</sup> site, which provides funding flexibility. DCFS is also well situated to support FUP because the Norman Consent Decree created a position within DCFS dedicated to housing and cash assistance for agency-involved families. However, it appears that the Chicago FUP's success is at least partly attributable to new responsibilities added to staff members' workloads, rather than hiring of additional staff.

DCFS and CHA say that a strong partnership between the CWA and the housing authority is essential for administering FUP, because refining and maintaining the referral process requires regular communication. Both agencies stress the importance of having one individual point of contact at each agency. For the Chicago FUP, having these points of contact minimizes difficulties in passing information between agencies. For example, the coordinated communication enables the DCFS FUP liaison to understand CHA requirements and be a gatekeeper when making referrals. DCFS also finds it important that the individuals administering FUP are passionate about and committed to its success (possibly because of the extra work required).

Criteria and selection priorities may be difficult to document or replicate with DCFS's individual gatekeeper model: they depend heavily on one person's knowledge and experience. For the short term, this may not pose a problem; in the long term, however, and especially in Chicago, where substantial ongoing work is required to manage the 600 FUP vouchers, the gatekeeper model may be challenging to sustain. Both DCFS and CHA value the model's efficiency and flexibility, which enables them to activate

vouchers and house eligible families relatively quickly. It also gives DCFS more flexibility to adjust its referral criteria as the number of available vouchers expands or contracts.

# Family Unification Program Case Study: Hartford, Connecticut

The Hartford FUP is a partnership between The Connection, Inc. (a nonprofit human services and community development agency), the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF), and the Imagineers (a contractor for the Hartford Housing Authority). The program is part of a broader statewide supportive housing program operated by The Connection in conjunction with DCF. Hartford has 100 FUP vouchers.

## **Intake: Targeting, Identification, Eligibility, and Referral**

Statewide DCF social workers identify eligible families in their caseload for the supportive housing program. Identified families eligible for the supportive housing program from the Hartford area may eventually become eligible for a FUP voucher. A family is eligible for supportive housing if they are in compliance with their DCF treatment plan, do not have a termination of parental rights pending or planned, and can demonstrate housing need. Family housing need is determined by the DCF social worker. A family has a housing need if they are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless or if housing is a barrier to reunification or preservation of the family.

To qualify for supportive housing, the family must also be able to qualify for the HCV program. Families can qualify if they are in good standing with the housing authority and no family member over 18 is on the sex offender registry or has had any felony convictions for acts of violence or drug sales within the past three years. Family members with a drug possession charge in the past three years must provide the housing authority with a treatment letter to be eligible for the program. Although the supportive housing program accepts both reunification and preservation families (families child welfare is working to reunite and families child welfare is working to keep together, respectively), reunification families receive priority.

DCF social workers refer families who meet these eligibility criteria to the supportive housing program's central office at The Connection, Inc. Referrals are time stamped and placed on one of eight waiting lists (one for each of The Connection's supportive housing regional offices in New Haven, Groton, Middletown, Hartford, Waterbury, Torrington, Danbury, and Bridgeport). There is no FUP waiting list separate from the supportive housing program. Families are admitted to the supportive housing program in the order they enter the waiting list, with reunification families receiving priority. When the supportive housing waiting lists become too large, they are closed to preservation families

(though never reunification families). Statewide, over 700 families are on the program's waiting lists. This translates into a wait of eight months to a year.

## **Voucher Issuance, Housing Search, and Lease-Up**

The Hartford FUP is built around the DCF supportive housing program managed by The Connection. When a family reaches the top of the supportive housing program waiting list, The Connection's assessment team conducts a clinical assessment. This assessment, which includes a comprehensive psychosocial interview, a brief appraisal of sources of family risk and resilience, observation of the environment of care (home), and screenings for parenting stress, mental health challenges, and substance abuse, is used to confirm family eligibility for the supportive housing program and to form an initial impression of family assets and needs for support. Families are ineligible for the supportive housing program if they (1) have a history of unwillingness to follow through with providers or inability to hold down housing, (2) have major drug problems or felony convictions, or (3) are not on the path to reunify, with a termination of parental rights pending. Ineligible families are referred for other services. The DCF social workers generally target their referrals to eligible families, and most families who reach the top of the waiting list are eligible for the program.

Families eligible for the supportive housing program are assigned a Connection case manager in addition to the family's DCF social worker. Each Connection case manager handles between 12 and 15 families. Case management from The Connection is more intensive than DCF case management: The Connection case managers conduct at least one weekly one-hour home visit per family, and families with more intensive needs receive more frequent, longer visits.

The Connection's case managers work with each family on a service plan for achieving housing stability. When a family enters the program, they are prepped to receive a permanent housing voucher. Families in the program receive a transitional subsidy while they wait for a permanent housing voucher. Transitional housing support works like a permanent voucher: the family pays 30 percent of income toward housing, and the transitional housing funds cover the rest. Funds for the transitional subsidy come from the supportive housing program and not from the housing authority. Unlike the permanent voucher, the transitional subsidy can be removed if the family does not comply with their case plan or if their parental rights are terminated.

The case manager and family work together to prepare the family to receive a voucher. They assemble the materials required for the permanent housing voucher (e.g., birth certificates, income

verification) into a packet before receiving the transitional subsidy. Families with utility arrears or who owe money to a housing authority are ineligible to receive a voucher. If there are past utility or housing payment issues, the case manager works with the family to pay them off so they will be eligible to receive a voucher.

Once this packet is assembled, it is sent to the Connection's central office. If the packet is missing information, the central office works with the family's case manager to acquire all the paperwork. Completed packets are logged in a central database that tracks each family's progress toward obtaining housing. The family is then put on the regional waiting list for a permanent housing voucher. After the housing packet is certified as complete, the family and The Connection case manager begin an apartment search.

The Connection's case managers provide intensive support in the housing search and may refer families to The Connection's apartment search specialists. These specialists use a family's housing requests and needs to identify potential housing units. The case manager will take families to look at housing units and provide counsel on which unit may best serve the family's needs. Case managers encourage families to be patient with the process and pick housing in high-quality neighborhoods.

Because families in the supportive housing program often have bad credit or criminal backgrounds, it can be difficult to get landlords to rent to them. The Connection responds to this problem by building connections with landlords, and statewide housing development employees often reach out to landlords to explain program details. They highlight that the family only puts 30 percent of their income toward rent, and that the family has a case manager who can be contacted if there are any issues. When the apartment is inspected, the inspector will also explain the program to the landlord, and case managers will individually reach out to the landlords of units families want to rent. Case managers also coach families on how to communicate with landlords. In general, The Connection has had more success in getting flexibility from individual landlords than from large management companies. Caseworkers report more trouble working around criminal background issues than credit problems.

After the family finds an appropriate apartment, the case is referred to The Connection's apartment inspection unit, which verifies that the housing meets HUD guidelines. The housing inspector also records information about neighborhood quality based on the inspector's impressions and area knowledge. If the housing unit is in a low opportunity neighborhood, then the family is encouraged to look elsewhere. But if the housing unit is suitable, the housing inspector puts in a request for security deposit funds. Approximately 60 percent of families in the supportive housing program get assistance with their security deposit.

## Case Management and Supportive Services

The Connection's case manager works with family members following move-in to help them become independent and ready for the permanent voucher. The case manager provides guidance on home care, employment, and case plan progression. Case managers can request funds for items the family may need to achieve stability in a new home (e.g., home furnishings). The case manager can also be a resource to mediate between landlords and families, and the landlord can call the case manager if there are issues with the tenant. Case managers will also contact landlords when necessary to help the family get proper maintenance or other services from the landlord.

FUP is one of multiple permanent housing resources offered by The Connection. Connecticut's Rental Assistance Program also provides housing vouchers, but only some of these vouchers are reserved for the supportive housing program. The Connection also manages properties with subsidized units rented to families in the supportive housing program. Funds for the transitional housing subsidy come from DCF, but they are earmarked for the supportive housing program by the state legislature.

The Connection's central housing office determines when a family is eligible to move from a temporary to a permanent housing subsidy. When a permanent voucher becomes available the central office contacts the case managers and the case manager supervisors of the families at the top of the permanent subsidy waiting list. The central housing office staff consult with the case managers and the case manager supervisors to determine which family will receive the permanent subsidy. A family must be mostly independent before it can receive a permanent subsidy; that is, the family must have made sufficient progress on its case plan and be in compliance with both DCF and The Connection. The Connection tries to ensure that each client has a job before receiving a voucher. Families at risk of losing their children again or having parental rights terminated are not given vouchers. If The Connection decides that the family is ready for a permanent housing subsidy, then the central processing office double-checks the family's housing packet. If the packet is missing information, the central office will contact the family's case manager to correct this problem.

When a family receives a FUP voucher, The Connection forwards its housing packet to the Imagineers, a housing services organization that contracts with six Connecticut housing authorities, including Hartford, to administer housing vouchers. If the packet is complete, the Imagineers set up an eligibility appointment with the family to check the family's income, ascertain any outstanding debts to any housing authority, and run a criminal background check. Families with felony convictions in the past three years are screened out. If the family passes the background check, then the Imagineers hold an orientation meeting and provide the family with a housing search packet. The Imagineers conduct the

FUP voucher orientations along with the HCV program orientations, and a Connection case manager attends the orientation with the family.

The Connection tries to facilitate the application of FUP vouchers to the same housing units where families applied their transitional subsidy. When families choose their first apartment, the Connection tries to stay within rent caps when known and follow all known inspection guidelines to prevent families from having to move and to deter any housing instability. In some cases, the FUP vouchers can have a lower rent cap than the transitional subsidy. In these instances, the case managers must work with landlords to negotiate a lower rent to keep the family in the same unit. Program staff believe it is important that the supportive housing program offers stability to families, so in all cases every effort is made to prevent families from having to move when they transition to their permanent voucher. If the family must relocate, then the case manager will again provide intensive support throughout the search process.

Whether the family continues to live in the same apartment or must find a new unit, the Imagineers check the unit for rent reasonableness. They also perform a unit inspection on top of the earlier inspection by The Connection. If the unit passes inspection, then the Imagineers sign a lease with the landlord and family.

The Connection will only close a case when a family has a housing subsidy in place, their DCF case is closed, and they can operate independently. On average, families stay in the supportive housing program between 18 months and two years. After the family leaves the supportive housing program, they continue to receive support from the Imagineers, but without the intensive case management provided by The Connection.

## **Program Partnerships**

Hartford's FUP is a partnership between three organizations: the Connecticut DCF, The Connection, and The Imagineers.

DCF is the CWA for the State of Connecticut. DCF identifies families and provides funds for the supportive housing program. The transitional housing funds and the budget for the case management provided by The Connection come from DCF.

The Connection provides intensive case management for families in the supportive housing program and allocates permanent housing subsidies to families. The organization is structured around

regional groups of case managers and contracts with six other nonprofits to provide case management in regions that it does not serve. These contractors offer the same case management and access to the same resources that The Connection provides, and they have full access to all data collected by The Connection.

Each case manager has a caseload of 12 to 15 families, and there are 45 case managers statewide. Case managers have at least a bachelor's degree and some experience in the field. The Connection provides ongoing training to its case managers on relevant topics, such as mental health, substance abuse, and physical disability. Case managers are organized into small units with a case manager supervisor. Each unit meets once a month, and all case managers in a region meet together every other month.

The Connection has three statewide housing units: a housing search unit, an inspection unit, and a housing certification unit. The housing search unit currently has one staff member who does outreach to landlords and helps case managers identify potential apartments. The apartment inspection unit inspects apartments before move-in. All apartment inspectors go through training provided by Nan McKay and Associates, a consulting firm specializing in assisted housing management. The three staff members of the housing certification unit are responsible for reviewing each family's housing packet for completeness, setting up orientations with housing authorities, tracking each family through the leasing process, and serving as a point of contact for housing authorities if there are any issues. The housing certification unit also determines when a family gets a permanent housing subsidy.

The Imagineers contract with the Hartford Housing Authority (and six other housing agencies) to administer housing vouchers. The group has one staff member to process initial paperwork and one occupancy specialist managing lease paperwork and recertification for all the FUP vouchers. The Imagineers have mobility agreements with the areas surrounding Hartford, so if a family ports its voucher to a surrounding area, the voucher becomes a regular HCV and a new FUP voucher becomes available in Hartford. The Imagineers inform DCF and The Connection when a new FUP voucher becomes available in Hartford.

The Connection has maintained a multiyear partnership with the University of Connecticut's Center for Applied Research in Human Development. Faculty associates from this center conduct program evaluation, consultation, and technical assistance that provides third-party monitoring of program processes and child and family outcomes.

## Systems Change

Connecticut has had FUP vouchers since the program inception in 1992. The state immediately used some of its FUP vouchers to create the DCF supportive housing program, which made it easier and faster for housing authorities to move families through the voucher process. This improvement to the voucher process also contributed to fostering collaboration between DCF and The Connection to improve family case management.

The Connection's case managers work with families to collect all the needed paperwork upfront, which has reduced the work burden for housing authorities, allowing them to more quickly process FUP families. This improved processing speed is particularly important as FUP vouchers are awarded in large batches, which requires the housing authorities to process a large amount of paperwork at once. Because The Connection's case managers and central office already have reviewed the paperwork for completion and accuracy, housing authorities immediately process the family's paperwork when a voucher is received. Moreover, the intensive housing search assistance provided by the Connection's case managers helps housing authorities achieve higher FUP voucher utilization rates.

Each month, The Connection's case managers send a monthly report to the DCF social workers who work with the same families, and in some cases, caseworkers from both organizations collaborate and visit families together. Because the Connection's case managers tend to have a less antagonistic relationship with the families than the DCF social workers, their presence at a joint meeting can facilitate improved relations between the DCF social worker and the family.

DCF social workers feel more comfortable closing a case when a family is in the supportive housing program. The DCF caseworker knows that The Connection case manager is observing the family and will report any abuse or neglect to DCF.

## Administration Data and Tracking Outcomes

The Connection tracks each family's case plan and movement through the voucher system by maintaining a comprehensive database that enables ongoing quality monitoring and improvement. Case managers are responsible to maintain updated data on case management activities, family engagement in supports, family progress, and outcomes.

The Connection, like all DCF-contracted programs, enters data into the DCF Program Service Data Collection Recording System. The Connection additionally provides DCF, as requested, weekly,

monthly, quarterly, and annual information on admissions, discharges, services, waiting lists, lease-ups, and so forth. The supportive housing program is now instituting results-based accountability outcomes into their current data system.

The Imagineers track turnover among the FUP vouchers, but they do not track outcomes specifically for the FUP voucher holders. None of the partners tracks family outcomes once the family has left the supportive housing program.

## **Implementation Challenges**

The supportive housing program provides a valuable resource to both families and caseworkers. As a result, demand for the program far exceeds available slots and has created a large waiting list for program entry. Families can wait almost a year before they are accepted into the supportive housing program. Permanent housing subsidies are scarce, and even after entering the program, families can face a long wait before shifting from the transitional to the permanent subsidy. The long waiting list creates many program challenges. Caseworkers sometimes keep cases open that are stabilized so that families could still be eligible for the supportive housing program. DCF recently changed its policy to allow families to remain eligible after their cases closed, which removes the incentive for DCF social workers to keep cases open longer than necessary but does not solve the underlying problem. The long waiting list means that families are unable to enter the supportive housing program at the most critical point in their child welfare cases. By the time they enter the supportive housing program, many families are close to being stabilized or have had their parental rights terminated. If the families were able to enter earlier, the program could have a greater influence on the family's outcomes.

The long waiting list for permanent subsidies creates similar challenges. Families sometimes stay in the supportive housing program after they no longer require case management, which uses up a case management spot and contributes to the length of the supportive housing waiting list.

The supportive housing waiting list is long because this high-demand program is broadly targeted. Priority is given to reunification families, but beyond that, any family with a housing need is referred to the supportive housing waiting list. DCF staff reported that some families on the supportive housing waiting list could be stabilized through a less intensive intervention. The Connection takes any family into the program off the supportive housing waiting list who does not exceed the income requirements for a housing voucher. Neither The Connection nor DCF targets the program to the families who need the program most. Demand for the program is high and so without any targeting the waitlist is long.

The supportive housing program is currently piloting policies to respond to these challenges. DCF recently was awarded a five-year federal grant from the Administration for Children and Families that will enable The Connection to remain as the service hub for supportive housing for families while differentiating the intensity of case management through an initiative to meet the needs of families with more serious housing problems and severe service needs. In addition, The Connection and the University of Connecticut's Center for Applied Research in Human Development are piloting the use of a triage and screening tool that may assist in the eventual targeting of case management supports to families based on service needs.

# Family Unification Program Case Study: Massachusetts

The Massachusetts FUP is a statewide program. It is a partnership between two agencies, the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Massachusetts has issued FUP vouchers since 1992. DHCD currently manages 785 FUP vouchers, and as of February 2012, DHCD also managed 19,777 HCVs statewide.

## Intake: Targeting, Identification, Eligibility, and Referral

Massachusetts FUP serves reunification and preservation families (families child welfare is working to reunite and families child welfare is working to keep together, respectively) with open DCF cases. The state also sets aside vouchers for youth aging out of foster care. In October 2010, DCF served 24,368 Massachusetts families, 4,078 of whom were placed in shelters or motels. When a family in Massachusetts enters any form of DHCD temporary housing, DHCD staff members check for child welfare involvement. Families who have a child welfare case are referred to DCF's Housing Stabilization Unit (HSU). DCF regional managers and caseworkers also refer families with housing challenges to HSU.

Families referred to HSU meet with a regional HSU caseworker; the family's regular DCF caseworker may also attend this meeting. The family's housing situation is discussed, and the HSU caseworker will offer recommendations and references for outside housing resources. FUP-eligible families must meet HUD eligibility criteria (i.e., living in substandard housing, homeless, in imminent danger of losing housing, displaced due to domestic violence, living in an overcrowded unit, or living in housing that is not accessible to the family's disabled child or children).<sup>22</sup> If the family is eligible, then the HSU caseworker, or sometimes the DCF caseworker, will complete a FUP referral form, and the family is placed on one of nine regional waiting lists. The shortest waiting list ranges from 50 to 70 families, and the longest has more than 100 families. Reunification families receive priority on the waiting list.

When a voucher in the region becomes available, the HSU head contacts the DCF caseworker of the next family on the waiting list. They discuss the family's current case plan and housing situation, and if applicable, how close the family is to reunification. The family must be on track to reunify and close to finishing its case plan, with housing being the last barrier to reunification. (If applicable, the family must also still be homeless or in inadequate housing.) If the DCF caseworker verifies that the family still meets the voucher criteria, then the family is referred to its regional housing authority.

## Voucher Issuance, Housing Search, and Lease-Up

Once the regional housing authority receives the FUP voucher referral from HSU, it contacts the family and DCF caseworker with a housing voucher application and request for information. It also schedules an eligibility appointment with the family and DCF caseworker. At the appointment, the housing authority looks for outstanding payments owed to HUD and performs criminal background checks. Each authority sets its own standard for voucher-disqualifying criminal activity: for example, the Boston housing authority disqualifies any family with a member who is on the lifetime sex offender registry, has a drug manufacturing conviction, or was convicted of a drug or violent crime in the past three years. A family denied a voucher based on a family member's criminal background has 15 days to request a hearing. If the family passes the background check, then the housing authority schedules a voucher briefing. The FUP voucher briefings are held separately from general HCV briefings, and the DCF caseworker is required to attend. The FUP voucher is presented at the FUP voucher briefing.

From this point, the family has 60 days to find housing. The family can file for an automatic 30-day extension. If there are mitigating circumstances the family can apply for another 30-day extension. DHCD has mobility agreements for all its vouchers: Voucher holders must stay in the local authority area for a year, after which they can move to another area in the state. The Massachusetts rental market varies by region, but in general, housing costs are high, and finding units that accept housing vouchers is difficult. The rental market in the Boston metropolitan area is especially tight. The *Boston Globe* reported that in the last quarter of 2011, Boston rents reached record highs, and vacancy rates dropped to a nine-year low of 4 percent. According to Reis, Inc., which tracks commercial real estate prices, in 2011 Boston rents ranked as the fifth highest in the country.<sup>23</sup>

DCF and the housing authorities provide some resources to assist with the housing search. The partner housing authorities offer housing information, including apartment listings, through their housing consumer education centers. Families can also schedule appointments with their regional HSU caseworker, who can suggest housing units and search advice. DCF caseworkers also assist families with finding units. Ultimately, however, these resources primarily consist of housing information, and families conduct much of the housing search on their own.

Once the family has found an apartment, the housing authority inspects it and checks that the rent is reasonable. If the unit passes inspection, the landlord, family, and housing authority all sign the lease.

In the past, DCF had a fund for security deposits, but at present Massachusetts lacks resources to provide such assistance. Some partner housing agencies, however, do have money for deposit assistance.

## Case Management and Supportive Services

After the family has signed a lease, DCF is responsible for ensuring the family's DCF caseworker provides case management for them. DCF tries to offer each family three to six months of case management after voucher receipt. In some cases, DCF will close the case before the three-month mark.

## Program Partnerships

The Massachusetts FUP is a joint project between DCF and DHCD. Within DCF, HSU manages FUP vouchers. HSU's mission is to offer guidance to families who struggle with homelessness and to support their caseworkers. Each of HSU's four caseworkers covers a region in the state and consults with child welfare-involved families who have housing challenges. In May 2012, HSU performed 181 consults with families. During a consult, the HSU caseworker spends an hour with the family, discussing its housing history and current needs. Depending on respective housing needs, the caseworker may refer the family to outside agencies, provide information on applying for subsidized housing, or help fill out housing applications. After the consult, the HSU caseworker will follow up with the family one or two times by phone to check on the housing search and provide references for additional resources. The family can also contact their HSU caseworker with additional questions.

The HSU caseworkers identify potential FUP families from among the families they offer consults to. HSU manages the FUP waiting list in each region and decides which wait-listed families will receive a voucher. Except for the FUP vouchers, the HSU caseworkers do not have direct housing resources to offer families. The HSU caseworkers work with community organizations, so they know about outside housing resources and can make referrals as needed for families who do not receive FUP.

HSU caseworkers are also in charge of educating families and DCF caseworkers about FUP. They publicize the program among DCF caseworkers, educate them about eligibility standards, and help them navigate FUP and housing authority paperwork.

DHCD is a state agency that works on FUP with nine regional housing authorities (other responsibilities include providing emergency shelter to homeless families). When new FUP vouchers are granted to DHCD, it allocates the vouchers to each partner housing authority based on the length of the FUP waiting list in that area. Each housing authority manages the vouchers separately and has its own set of voucher forms and requirements. Housing authorities also set their own policies about screening out families based on factors such as a criminal background. Individual housing authorities report FUP voucher turnover to the HSU director.

## Systems Change

Massachusetts has provided FUP vouchers since 1992. In October 2005, the DCF HSU was formed to centralize the FUP process and provide a single point of contact for the housing authorities. This centralization has contributed to better communication among the housing authorities and DCF. Housing authorities provide training for the HSU staff about their policies, and HSU staff members are a resource for DCF caseworkers about the housing voucher process. As a result, families can get through the voucher process more easily, and fewer families (those who will not pass the housing authorities' background checks) are referred for FUP vouchers. In addition to managing the FUP program, HSU also tries to increase housing resources for DCF families. HSU caseworkers form connections with agencies and community-based organizations in their region and refer families to local housing programs, expanding the resources for DCF families beyond FUP.

## Administrative Data and Tracking Outcomes

The DCF tracks how many families receive consults from HSU each month, but it does not track all outcomes for families who receive FUP vouchers. The housing authorities track turnover in the FUP vouchers, but they also do not track outcomes for families with FUP vouchers.

## Implementation Challenges

Caseworker education is an ongoing challenge. DCF caseworkers can get confused about who and when to refer to FUP: For example, they may refer families who are ineligible for the program under the housing criteria or who will not pass housing authority background checks. DCF caseworkers may also wait until the family is close to reunification before submitting the FUP referral form, which results in the family being placed at the end of the waiting list, when they need the voucher sooner. Moreover, DCF caseworkers may not know what the voucher process entails, thinking their involvement ends once a family is referred for a voucher.

In response to these misunderstandings, Massachusetts implemented policies to educate its DCF caseworkers. HSU was established as a resource for DCF caseworkers. The HSU caseworkers consult with DCF caseworkers about the housing issues of DCF-involved families. They also take calls from DCF caseworkers who have questions about how to fill out FUP and housing authority forms. During HSU training sessions for DCF caseworkers, HSU caseworkers explain how FUP works and the

importance of housing for maintaining family stability. DCF changed its policy to require DCF caseworkers to go a family's eligibility and voucher briefings; in this way, the DCF caseworker learns with the family about required documents and the housing search and leasing process.

In addition, DCF management has become better educated about FUP housing policies. DCF tries to target the vouchers to the neediest families. Initially, as part of this goal, DCF referred families who did not make it through the housing authorities' screening process. DCF has become better at referring families who can pass these screenings. In 2010, only a small percentage of referred families were denied in the eligibility-screening phase.

At one time, Massachusetts had trouble keeping track of statewide vouchers. The housing authorities did not always inform DCF when vouchers were turned over, and FUP voucher waiting lists were not managed in a central place. Massachusetts solved this issue by establishing the HSU. Now, housing authorities have one place to contact when vouchers turn over, one DCF staff person responsible for tracking vouchers, and one group to manage the waiting lists.

The state faces ongoing challenges in its goal to provide six months of DCF case management after a family receives its voucher. Some families do not want continued DCF involvement after they have finished their case plan; in some cases, a family will turn down a voucher to prevent this continued DCF involvement. In other cases, DCF caseworkers do not want to keep cases open for families who have finished their case plan.

# Family Unification Program Case Study: Portland, Oregon

In 2011, Home Forward (formerly the Housing Authority of Portland) in Portland, Oregon, was awarded 100 FUP vouchers as part of HUD's awards for FY 2010. This award was Portland's first time receiving FUP vouchers.

## **Intake: Targeting, Identification, Eligibility, and Referral**

Portland's FUP is a partnership between Home Forward, the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS), Multnomah County, three nonprofit service providers operating under Multnomah County's Action for Prosperity (AFP) program, and Worksystems, Inc. Worksystems, the local recipient of Workforce Investment Act funds for Multnomah County, funds local organizations providing services to clients of Home Forward and Multnomah County. This combined system is called WorkSource. AFP is a program partnership of Multnomah County, Worksystems, and Home Forward that funds a group of local nonprofits providing case management, housing, and employment assistance to low-income households to move them toward self-sufficiency.

Portland serves all three FUP-eligible populations: families with children in out-of-home placement (reunification families), families with children at risk of being placed out of the home (preservation families), and youth aging out of foster care without adequate housing. Twenty-five vouchers were set aside for youth aging out of foster care; most referred families are preservation families.

Only DHS caseworkers can refer families for FUP vouchers, but local nonprofits working with families involved with DHS are encouraged to recommend clients for FUP by contacting the family's DHS worker. To qualify for FUP vouchers, housing has to be the last barrier to family reunification or a primary need for preservation families, and the client's DHS case has to be open. DHS caseworkers review their caseloads to identify potential clients for referral. To refer a family, the DHS caseworker completes a FUP referral form and indicates if the family (1) lives in substandard housing, (2) is homeless, (3) is in imminent danger of losing housing, (4) has been displaced due to domestic violence, (5) lives in an overcrowded unit, or (6) is in housing inaccessible to their disabled child or children.<sup>24</sup> The referral must document the family's history with DHS, income, race, existing efforts to find housing, and whether the family has been on the waiting list for other community housing. For reunification families, the referral form must also indicate that the child is expected to be reunified within 90 days of the family securing new housing. The caseworker is required to run a criminal background check with the

Oregon Judicial Information Network. If an applicant has a criminal history (violent criminal activity in the past three years, drug possession in the past three years, sale or manufacture of drugs in the past five years, or conviction of identity theft in the past three years), documentation of treatment completion or letters of recommendation must be provided.

After DHS caseworkers make the initial referral, a FUP committee determines a family's eligibility for the program. There are three DHS branch offices in Portland and one in Gresham. Each office has its own FUP committee that meets every few weeks to review applications, identify families at risk of child welfare involvement, determine likelihood of reunification, assess housing needs, and decide if an applicant is eligible for FUP. Home Forward and DHS staff developed eligibility criteria using language in the HUD regulations and trained the FUP committees on FUP eligibility.

DHS caseworkers present cases and advocate for their referred families at their branch's FUP committee meeting. (Caseworkers relate that the key to a successful determination of eligibility is their ability to "sell" their case to the committee.) To determine eligibility, the committee verifies that the family fits into one of the six categories of inadequate housing. The committee asks a series of questions about the family's current housing situation; substance abuse history, treatment, recovery, and any relapses; the likelihood of reuniting or keeping children at home; special needs in the family; criminal backgrounds; timeline for reunification and court involvement; who has custody of the children; other housing resources explored; and other benefits the family may be receiving (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

Finally, the committee addresses who will manage the family's case. If a family is interested in working with an AFP provider, and that provider has space, the AFP provider will offer their case management services. If no AFP provider has the capacity to provide case management and the case remains open, DHS may take responsibility for case management. If the case is not expected to remain open for 12 more months, the committee and the caseworker discuss who can provide the 12 months of case management required by FUP. The caseworker may suggest case management by a mental health provider or another social worker with whom the family is already engaged. As a means of prioritizing referrals, the branch committees also consider the district's initiative to reduce racial disproportionality of children in foster care.

At the end of the question and answer session, the committee tells the caseworker whether the family is appropriate for a voucher. The committee might ask the caseworker to gather more information (e.g., pay stubs, letters of recommendation) before approving a family for FUP. To be approved, the family must be ready to maintain housing (e.g., family members have completed drug

rehabilitation as needed and have not recently relapsed). The family should be likely to pass the Home Forward screening requirements (e.g., they have no recent criminal history and have an income below 50 percent of the area's median income). For preservation families, the committee must be convinced that the parents are at imminent risk of losing their child and that housing would preserve the family. Caseworkers indicated that the "90 days to reunification" status can be difficult to determine and they have to make their best guess. If the committee does not approve a family, it will suggest other places to look for temporary housing.

Once selected for FUP, a family's referral and information release forms are forwarded to a DHS FUP liaison; this person reviews the application for accuracy and asks the caseworker for any missing information. The FUP liaison certifies the referral and sends the referral form, information release form, and certification form to Home Forward for prescreening.

At Home Forward, the FUP liaison prescreens the referral for eligibility by performing a criminal background check, determining if the applicant owes money to Home Forward or another housing authority, and alerting the DHS FUP liaison to any potential issues in a family's history. This prescreening step takes place before the formal referral to the program so DHS can identify families needing additional supportive documentation for their application. This practice reduces the number of referred families denied for ineligibility and does not function as an official eligibility screening. Home Forward only considers an applicant's eligibility when they officially submit their application; the prescreening allows DHS to consider how to react to potential barriers to voucher issuance.

Based on the information received from the prescreening, the DHS FUP liaison decides whether to consider moving forward with the family. If Home Forward indicates that the referred household is unlikely to be admitted to the program when the application is received due to criminal history, then the FUP liaison alerts the DHS caseworker so that a letter of support can be procured and submitted with the application. If the family owes money to a housing authority, the DHS FUP liaison will inform the caseworker, who will then contact the DHS branch manager to request funds to pay outstanding debts.

Once the DHS FUP liaison determines that a family will continue to the application stage, the liaison may assign the family to an AFP provider, if appropriate. There are three AFP providers to which a family may be assigned: Self Enhancement, Inc., the Native American Youth Family Center, and Impact Northwest. On the referral form, families can indicate the AFP providers with which they are willing to work and their first choice of these (since many families may have mixed feelings about working with particular organizations). The FUP liaison typically assigns families to their first-choice provider, if possible, based on demographics (one provider focuses on Native American families and another on

African American families). Funding allows AFP providers to serve 60 families overall (each of the three providers can serve only 20 families). For the remaining families, DHS caseworkers must fill the service gap or find an alternative service provider. The Home Forward intake packet is then sent to the designated service provider.

The Native American Youth Family Center and Self Enhancement, Inc. each have one caseworker dedicated to working with FUP families, and Impact Northwest has three caseworkers (one full-time equivalent) who work with FUP families. All the AFP providers help families obtain the documents they need to complete the Home Forward intake packet; for example, they may take clients to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get an identification card. The AFP providers receive \$1,000 in supportive services funding per FUP client from Multnomah County and can use some of this money to pay for such documents.

## **Voucher Issuance, Housing Search, and Lease-Up**

The return of an intake packet to Home Forward constitutes the formal referral to the FUP program. At that time, families are added to the Section 8 HCV waitlist and marked as FUP applicants. If there are available FUP vouchers, families are immediately pulled from the waitlist, and the intake packet is assigned to a leasing staff member. If the intake packet is incomplete, the leasing staff contacts the AFP provider, DHS caseworker, and family to notify them of what else is needed. Once the intake packet is complete and processed, eligible families are scheduled for a voucher briefing, where vouchers are issued.

If a family is not deemed eligible after the intake packet is complete, Home Forward notifies the family, DHS, and the AFP caseworker of the reason for the denial and the right to appeal. The denial may be overturned through the appeal process if enough mitigating evidence is presented.

Clients are assisted in their search for housing by the AFP providers, DHS workers, and a leasing staff member from Home Forward. The amount and type of assistance varies by provider. Clients are provided with a list from Home Forward of available housing units. AFP providers, who are experienced in searching for housing and have relationships with landlords, show clients a map of available housing and discuss their options and preferences. The AFP providers and DHS caseworkers regularly check in with clients to discuss the search process and offer assistance. The AFP providers might write letters on the client's behalf for an appeals process and can negotiate with landlords about past property debts and application fees. They also coordinate with DHS to decide which agency will help pay the fees. The

AFP provider may connect a client to utility assistance or other resources in order to reserve the \$1,000 in county-provided funds for future needs. AFP providers, and occasionally DHS caseworkers, will transport clients to see apartments, meet with managers, fill out apartment applications, and if necessary, help submit an appeal. The family has 60 days to sign a lease and can request an extension.

According to HUD, the rental market in the Portland metropolitan area is tight.<sup>25</sup> The rental market vacancy rate decreased from 5.9 percent in 2010 to 3.5 percent in June 2012. However, one dozen apartment complexes currently under construction will offer more options for Portland families in the near future.

## **Case Management and Supportive Services**

After a family signs a lease, it receives 12 months of case management from an AFP provider or DHS caseworker. As mentioned, AFP providers can serve only 60 FUP families. For the remaining families, DHS caseworkers fill the service gap through continued case management or identify an existing service provider who is willing to provide case management. The challenge for those DHS caseworkers then becomes finding the time to provide longer-term case management.

AFP providers are required to make weekly contact with their clients and to hold monthly face-to-face meetings. The AFP program focuses on helping low-income families find employment, but AFP providers find that FUP families are not as readily employable as the other low-income families they serve. Compared with other low-income families, FUP families have higher barriers to employment, including disability, criminal backgrounds, substance abuse, and mental health conditions. As a result, case management has been extended beyond the original 12 months as the county renewed its support for the program.

AFP providers first help the family find housing and work with clients to address housing stability issues (e.g., domestic violence, mental health, budgeting, and school enrollment). They then work to address barriers to employment (e.g., criminal history and lack of child care). Once these barriers are addressed the AFP providers work with clients to access WorkSource, which helps with employment readiness, training, and job search. Services include resume assistance, computer classes, intense employment training, internships, job placements, and other support as appropriate.

AFP caseworkers conduct some outreach to landlords in low-poverty census tracts with buildings that are identified as convenient for participants (near DHS, near youth service locations, or near certain schools) and will ask the landlords to consider renting to FUP families as vacancies arise. AFP

providers sometimes accompany families to visit potential housing sites, provide introductions to landlords, and advocate directly with landlords on behalf of the families. They also assist families in completing rental agreements and other paperwork. DHS staff and AFP providers can provide landlords with letters of reference for families and provide documentation of services families have completed or progress that has been made (e.g., tenant education, substance abuse treatment, anger management, credit counseling, following probationary orders) to make them stronger candidates. If a client's rental application is denied, AFP providers may contact landlords to explore potential problems and help with an appeal, if appropriate. For disabled clients, caseworkers prepare reasonable accommodation requests as needed. DHS staff will refer clients to other housing search services if needs are identified (credit counseling, modifications to units for disabled households). Finally, DHS staff will notify clients of eligibility for monetary assistance for move-in costs through DHS's cash assistance programs.

DHS caseworkers may provide case management themselves, but many noted that they lack the time and resources to take on 12 months of case management after the family signs a lease. If lacking time or resources, the DHS caseworker will find another case manager already working with the family who can provide 12 months of services. The case management offered by DHS is loosely defined and differs from the AFP's employment focus. If neither AFP nor DHS can provide case management, a letter of commitment from another agency's caseworker is attached to the original referral form.

## **Program Partnerships**

Child welfare services are provided by the Oregon DHS. To strengthen families and reduce the number of children in foster care safely and equitably, the CWA partnered with other DHS programs, Tribal Indian Child Welfare Programs, the Youth Development Council, the Oregon Judicial Department, and county partners. Together, they work to wrap services around youth and families to create a strong, safe environment for children and families.

Portland's FUP application was based on a partnership between Home Forward and the Oregon District 2 Division of DHS. After the award, Multnomah County joined the partnership and brought with it three nonprofit service providers operating under Multnomah County's AFP program in addition to resources available through Worksystems. Partnering with Home Forward and the three AFP providers was a valuable step, one that offers a critical housing support to prevent the removal of a child and to help children and their families reunify faster. Representatives from each organization meet monthly to discuss FUP, troubleshoot, and disseminate information.

The inclusion of the AFP providers has proved critical to FUP implementation. DHS caseworkers do not have adequate time or backgrounds to assist families in housing application, search, and leasing, but the AFP providers are experts in these areas. Furthermore, DHS caseworkers do not have the time to provide the intensive case management these families require after leasing, nor can they provide these services if the case does not remain open. AFP providers are active in the communities they serve and thus bring connections to landlords and other services of value to these families.

All agencies agreed that the partnership is strong. Home Forward's history of collaboration with Multnomah County helped develop the connection with DHS; they have applied for FUP vouchers three times and have worked together on a variety of systems-level partnerships. The relationship between Home Forward and the AFP providers is also strong. AFP providers were responsive to Home Forward's needs for moving families through the voucher process.

## **Systems Change**

FUP is leading to improved, sustainable coordination between the CWA and PHA. Home Forward and DHS are now thinking of more ways to collaborate to serve child welfare families and youth, in particular youth aging out of foster care. Home Forward, DHS, and Multnomah County all applied (unsuccessfully) for another federal grant for a program similar to FUP and intend to apply for more federal grants. For Home Forward, running a voucher program with ongoing services attached is a key element in their new strategic operational plan. Traditionally, Home Forward helped clients find a Section 8 unit and made referrals for services as needed; that was the extent of their involvement, given limited staff capacity to provide ongoing services. Home Forward's experiences with FUP and other supportive housing programs such as HUD and Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing made clear that case management is a critical element to serving vulnerable populations. Home Forward is seeking to match more of its resources with systems partners that can provide case management support to families. The agencies have learned that high-need populations require more services to address the higher barriers to being housed successfully. For example, high-need families have large debts and difficulties obtaining housing due to their rental histories and criminal backgrounds; moreover, DHS workers are not trained in housing search. DHS has also recognized that a program of this scope, with many partners and moving parts, needs to be centralized, not handled separately out of each branch office.

## Administrative Data and Tracking Outcomes

The DHS FUP liaison maintains a spreadsheet with each family's identifying information (names, dates of birth, and case ID); the spreadsheet does not include the other items on the referral form. The liaison notes if and when the family was assigned to an AFP provider. The DHS branches track which families have been referred and if they were accepted. DHS also notes the date by which the family must sign a lease to tell them how much time the family has to search for housing. DHS does not currently plan to track families beyond case closure. However, they will know if the vouchers have turned over.

As contractors to the county, the AFP providers are required to track a lot of information about the families (e.g., date of signing a lease, use of FUP vouchers, demographics, barriers to finding employment, income). Each AFP provider reports its activities to the county's homeless management information system, including service provided, hours of service provided, flexible spending funds provided, and what those funds bought or addressed. The AFP providers also report the client's self-sufficiency matrix score into the homeless management information system. That score is based on an assessment made every three months and allows tracking of progress in eight domains: income, financial management, housing, employment life skills, training, employment, parenting skills, and family functioning.

## Implementation Challenges

The DHS staff with whom we spoke identified several implementation challenges. One challenge was informing caseworkers about FUP, explaining the process, and encouraging them to refer clients. To address the challenge of getting DHS caseworkers to make referrals, Home Forward and the DHS FUP liaisons held trainings for DHS caseworkers. DHS also offered a "train the trainer" course so each DHS branch office will have a point person to answer questions about FUP. Another challenge was that Home Forward initially returned many referrals due to application errors and missing information. To address this problem, the FUP liaison began to prescreen all referral forms for errors before sending them to Home Forward. A third challenge for DHS was the staff time commitment. DHS staff indicated that FUP is time-consuming, requiring a full-time employee's complete attention to start the program, establish the committees, work with Home Forward, help committees evaluate families, and ensure the project team remains on track to hit target timelines. DHS caseworkers also struggled to locate housing for clients. They found the Home Forward list of housing options to be out of date, so they developed their own list by searching the Internet. Finally, DHS was originally responsible for providing housing search assistance and case management, but caseworkers lacked the time and expertise to provide

assistance with the intake packet and housing search. The addition of the AFP agencies as partners provided that support to clients. DHS believes that any program like FUP would require similar support from outside organizations.

One notable feature of the Portland FUP program is that Home Forward set an eight-month time frame to issue all its vouchers and have recipients sign leases. This deadline created a significant challenge for Home Forward in terms of the timeliness of the referral, intake, and leasing process, particularly because referrals to Home Forward from DHS arrived at a slower rate than expected. These challenges were ironed out in the monthly meetings between Home Forward, DHS, and the three AFP providers.

FUP clients often had a hard time finding a unit because landlords would deny their application due to eviction histories, poor rental histories, or criminal background. To meet the eight-month time frame, Home Forward dedicated one staff member from its leasing team to help FUP families search for housing, something they would not typically do as intensively for their Section 8 families. This staff member developed partnerships with landlords and facilitated conversations between those landlords, the AFP providers, and the DHS caseworkers to ensure leases were signed promptly. The clients also had difficulties paying back rent or utility bills. The debt assistance from AFP and DHS helped families overcome that hurdle. AFP providers and DHS may also help pay security deposits. To keep things simple and efficient for all partners, Home Forward has assigned one case manager to all FUP clients. This case manager is the primary contact for DHS and AFP caseworkers, as well as landlords, if, for example, the landlord has tenant complaints.

One challenge for the AFP providers relates to challenges faced by FUP families. AFP seeks to prepare individuals for employment, and some FUP referrals to AFP are for people with disabilities who have a difficult time gaining employment. Furthermore, some clients are motivated to find an apartment but may not be ready to engage with employment services. AFP also found that the FUP families need to overcome significant hurdles (e.g., financial literacy, obtaining child care, and passing criminal background checks) before employment is a realistic goal. Some caseworkers have adapted to this challenge by changing their time frame and making employment a longer-term goal.

Contextual constraints also factor into the delivery of FUP in Portland. Multnomah County's general fund financed case management through the AFP providers. These funds are allocated annually, and projecting the level of funding available for FUP case management services can be difficult.

# Family Unification Program Case Study: Salem, Oregon

Salem's FUP is a partnership between the Marion County Department of Human Services (DHS) Child Welfare Office and the Salem Housing Authority (SHA). SHA was awarded 100 FUP vouchers in 2011. In the mid 2000s, Salem was awarded 200 vouchers, which were administered under the same partnership. SHA converted all but 19 of those original 200 FUP vouchers to regular HCVs as the original FUP voucher holders left the program or were terminated.<sup>26</sup>

## Intake: Targeting, Identification, Eligibility, and Referral

The Salem FUP primarily targets reunification families, for whom inadequate housing is a primary factor delaying the return of a child from out-of-home placement. The program has a secondary focus on preservation families, for whom inadequate housing is a primary factor in the risk of a child being removed from the home. The Salem FUP also serves youth aging out of foster care. Originally, DHS hoped that 30 of the 100 vouchers would go to this group.

DHS caseworkers in the Child Welfare Office identify potentially eligible families through their work.<sup>27</sup> They discuss the program with the families and recommend that each family complete a FUP voucher application packet. This packet includes a FUP referral form (which the caseworker fills out) and a full SHA application for a housing voucher (which the caseworker sometimes helps the family fill out).

DHS notes that children are never removed from a home or not returned to their families because of inadequate housing or homelessness alone. Instead, the agency and its staff see inadequate housing as part of a constellation of challenges any family may face, and this set of challenges can lead to circumstances of abuse or neglect (and further DHS involvement). As a result, DHS finds it difficult to identify specific criteria to determine whether inadequate housing is a primary factor in the need for removal of a child from the home or delay in returning a child to the home. Individual caseworkers (sometimes in consultation with their supervisors or with the DHS FUP liaison) tend to make the determination that housing is a primary factor based on instinct rather than specific, clearly defined criteria.

Although caseworkers are made aware of FUP through an initial training and bimonthly e-mail reminders, most are conservative about making referrals. Rather than refer all potentially eligible families, caseworkers tend only to refer families they think are most in need of the housing voucher or that they think will benefit most (compared with other families in their caseloads).

Generally, caseworkers believe they should only refer families when Child Protective Services (CPS) is involved and will remain involved for at least the length of time it will take for the family to receive a voucher and lease up. This means that caseworkers are unlikely to refer intact families. Once DHS receives a report of abuse or neglect, it has 30 days to assess the claim. If caseworkers conclude that there has been abuse or neglect, they look at issues pertaining to safety in the home. In some cases, they provide voluntary services to the family, or open a case and involve the courts to remove the child from the home. Because most DHS caseworkers do not refer intact families, there is a much slower stream of referrals than if they did refer these families.

The State of Oregon has instituted a new safety model under which CPS provides services to families to improve in-home safety (such as having a safety worker present to supervise a child when a perpetrator of domestic violence is the only other available option for supervision). This new system reduces the likelihood of children being removed from the home. For the Salem FUP, this model poses an odd challenge: the children caseworkers would have previously considered at risk of removal under the old system are now are less likely to be considered at risk.

Once caseworkers identify families to refer, the DHS FUP liaison discusses the referrals with the caseworkers and determines whether the families lack adequate housing<sup>28</sup> and are within 90 days of reunification (for reunification families). Caseworkers estimate that a family is within 90 days of reunification by reviewing the family's case plan. The DHS FUP liaison does not apply additional targeting criteria to referrals. In most cases, if a caseworker refers a family, the DHS FUP liaison approves the referral and sends it to SHA unless there is reason to believe that the family will not clear SHA's criteria for housing voucher eligibility.

## **Voucher Issuance, Housing Search, and Lease-Up**

After receiving the referral and application packet, the SHA FUP liaison documents and sends the packet to the SHA housing specialist assigned to FUP and other special programs. The housing specialist performs a criminal background check and verifies that the family is in good standing with SHA and other housing authorities (i.e., that no members of the household owe money to a PHA). If the family is not in good standing or if a member of the household has a history of violent crime, is a registered sex offender, or has a history of drug involvement without sufficient mitigation, then the application is denied. SHA accepts participation in drug court and other special alternative court programs as mitigation for drug offenses or addiction, but it tends not to accept involvement in most other programs, which it views as less stringent. If the application is accepted, the housing specialist contacts

the family and schedules an intake appointment. In some cases, the DHS caseworker will transport the family to this appointment. If an application is denied, the housing specialist sends a denial letter to the family and informs the SHA FUP liaison and the DHS FUP liaison, who contacts the referring caseworker. At this point, the family has 10 days to request an administrative hearing for appeal.

At the intake appointment, the housing specialist verifies income and reviews documents with the family (it is unusual for FUP families to be income-ineligible for housing assistance). If the family does not attend the intake appointment or needs additional documents, the housing specialist contacts the DHS FUP liaison, who then contacts the caseworker. The housing specialist may contact the caseworker directly by e-mail.<sup>29</sup> The caseworker may transport the family to an appointment and may help or encourage the family to gather the appropriate documents.

This procedure is slightly different from the regular process for housing voucher applicants. For the general applicant population, the SHA housing specialist sends a letter to the family to reschedule a missed appointment or inform the family that additional documentation is necessary. At that point, applicants in the general population who do not respond or fail to provide the requested documentation are denied and removed from the waiting list. SHA gives higher priority to FUP applicants, and, perhaps more importantly, all FUP families have a DHS caseworker to use as a secondary contact. SHA says that for FUP families, SHA will even schedule a third intake appointment if the DHS caseworker says that the family will attend.

If SHA approves a FUP family to receive a voucher, the family is invited to a regular voucher briefing where the family receives the voucher. SHA holds these briefings every two weeks. FUP families are held back at the end of the briefing, and SHA staff remind them that although regular voucher recipients have a waiting period before they can use their vouchers and lease up, FUP families can use theirs immediately. At this briefing, SHA also provides the family with a list of available properties and landlords who have expressed interest in tenants with a SHA voucher or with whom SHA has worked in the past (SHA does not prescreen these properties for rent reasonableness or inspection criteria). If the family does not show up to the briefing as scheduled, the SHA housing specialist notifies the DHS FUP liaison, who notifies the caseworker. SHA staff believe that FUP families are more likely to miss a briefing than other families.

The family has 60 days to lease up with the voucher and can request extensions in 60-day increments. While a family is looking for housing, SHA sends out a new list of available properties weekly. For FUP vouchers, SHA is willing to provide additional extensions to the housing search period

as necessary. In many cases, the SHA housing specialist will contact the DHS caseworker to determine why a family is having difficulty finding housing or completing a lease.

According to the HUD, the overall rental market in the Salem metropolitan area is tight.<sup>30</sup> The rental market vacancy rate for apartments was 4.4 percent in the first quarter of 2013, up from 3.0 percent in the first quarter of 2012. SHA reports that around 20 percent of all general housing voucher recipients never lease up. However, in part, this is because landlords often conduct their own screenings for credit and criminal history (on top of SHA screening) and will sometimes refuse to rent to families based on their own qualifying criteria. For FUP, this does not seem to be a major implementation problem; however, caseworkers report that the limited number of willing landlords is a challenge for FUP families and that these limited choices often cause families to live in unfavorable buildings or areas. As with all housing vouchers, SHA does an inspection and rent reasonableness assessment before approving the housing unit. If the unit is approved for rental, the landlord and the family sign the lease, and the landlord and SHA also sign a contract, at which point the family can move into the new housing.

SHA sometimes has money for FUP families' security deposits, as for regular HCV clients, through HUD funding controlled at the city level (HOME funding). SHA applies for a share of this money annually from the City of Salem. Although SHA had HOME funding for 2011–12, it ran out of funds at the beginning of 2012. When this money runs out, SHA refers clients to Mid-Willamette Community Action, which can sometimes provide money for security deposits and rental application fees, or to the 2-1-1 social services hotline. DHS caseworkers are often able to help obtain funds for security deposits and rental application fees. SHA and DHS do not have funding sources available to cover utility costs or pay off previous utility bills.

After lease-up, SHA is usually not directly involved with families again until their annual recertification. However, SHA staff believe that FUP families are more likely than others to try to add another person to their household (e.g., a boyfriend) soon after lease-up. In these cases, the housing specialist confers with the DHS caseworker to decide whether having another person move in is appropriate.

If at any time during the referral and intake process (especially before the voucher is issued) DHS determines that a FUP-referred family's children will not be returned home, DHS withdraws the referral and the family is no longer eligible for FUP. Seven and a half months after Salem's 2011 FUP award, this situation had occurred several times. Once leased up with a voucher, however, the parents cannot lose the voucher if their children are not returned.

## Case Management and Supportive Services

Once in new housing with the FUP voucher, families continue to receive standard child welfare case management and oversight from their DHS caseworkers until the families are considered safe and stable (cases remain open for varying lengths of time). No specific partnerships or policies are in place to provide additional or external case management for FUP voucher recipients.

## Program Partnerships

In the DHS–SHA partnership for FUP, each agency operates its own components of the program, with periodic communication and collaboration when SHA needs a caseworker to intervene on behalf of a family. In general, DHS is responsible for identifying families and providing referrals, and SHA certifies that the referred families are eligible for SHA vouchers and moves them through its voucher process.

Both agencies try to help FUP families through the process of referral, voucher screening, and searching for housing as part of their roles in serving clients, or as a slight extension of their usual roles. For example, DHS caseworkers may encourage families to go to a SHA appointment (occasionally even driving the family to the appointment) or help the family fill out paperwork or collect documents. This work is similar to the general oversight and support that DHS caseworkers provide to families in their caseloads.

SHA has assigned one housing specialist to administer the process for all FUP families. This housing specialist also administers the housing processes for SHA's other special voucher programs, such as Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing. Designating a specific housing specialist for all FUP applicants is an adjustment that SHA made after a few months of receiving and processing referrals—initially, FUP applicants were randomly assigned to different housing specialists who were not necessarily familiar with SHA rules, goals, and priorities with respect to FUP.

The FUP housing specialist now also communicates with DHS caseworkers when FUP families do not attend meetings, need help getting additional documents, or are difficult to reach. This communication is possible because of a simple change that SHA made to the FUP referral form: adding a space for caseworkers' e-mail addresses. The housing specialist finds that e-mail is the most effective method for this communication and eliminates time-consuming volleys of phone tag.

DHS and SHA have also tweaked the FUP referral and intake as well as interagency communication processes. Until recently, DHS and SHA used the FUP liaisons for all interagency communication about

FUP's daily operations. This arrangement meant that the DHS and SHA liaisons talked with one another and sent documents and information between agencies, but neither liaison communicated with other staff members in his or her counterpart liaison's agency. The single liaison-to-liaison communication model created a bottleneck, slowing the flow of information and response times between agencies. With a single SHA housing specialist handling all FUP cases, the process was unnecessarily slow because this single individual had to communicate with DHS through the SHA liaison rather than directly with the agency.

To eliminate the bottleneck, the DHS FUP liaison started including a SHA administrative assistant and the SHA housing specialist in all e-mail communication, which sped up the process and improved communication. Although both agencies see a benefit from having a single point of contact, staff members at both agencies are stretched thin, and the FUP liaison responsibilities were added to full workloads. For SHA, communicating questions about intake solely through the SHA FUP liaison served as an extra level of separation between the DHS FUP liaison and the SHA housing specialist. Now, referrals go to the housing specialist soon after they are sent by DHS, which allows the housing specialist to have direct communication with DHS staff. DHS believes this new process has improved communication and reduced response time.

During the first seven months of the program, DHS and SHA formally met twice to discuss the FUP referral and intake process. These meetings included the FUP liaisons, as well as the child welfare manager on the DHS side. In general, the DHS and SHA FUP liaisons communicate with each other about once a month to deal with challenges in referrals and lease-up, including issues that the caseworkers and housing specialist have encountered.

SHA notes that part of the DHS–SHA memorandum of understanding (MOU) stipulates that partner agencies will review their progress on helping families use FUP and make adjustments as needed. Many of the families DHS referred have been denied by SHA because of criminal activity, especially for drug offenses either without mitigation or without sufficient mitigation to meet SHA's standard criteria. DHS feels that criminal history is often a big reason the agency is involved with families in the first place. SHA is considering loosening its rules on criminal history and mitigating activities (e.g., specific drug treatment programs) to serve more families.

## Systems Change

DHS and SHA had a partnership in the mid 2000s, when Salem had 200 FUP vouchers (these vouchers were largely folded into the general pool of SHA HCVs as they turned over). During that time, a SHA staff person was collocated part-time at DHS. Staffs at both agencies remember this arrangement as helpful for them, their colleagues, and their clients, as many clients of one agency also need services from the other. Current funding conditions preclude a similar arrangement.

When the 2010 NOFA for FUP was released, SHA used a semiprofessional community connection to approach DHS at a foster care–focused community working group in which both agencies’ senior staff members participated. These DHS and SHA staff members trusted each other and each other’s agencies because they had worked together before and saw that FUP served a shared goal for the agencies.

## Administrative Data and Tracking Outcomes

SHA collects and tracks all basic data on families required for reporting to HUD, including voucher utilization rates. DHS collects information for case management on an ongoing basis and has tracking requirements from the state, such as the number of clients with a child coming into foster care, time until return, and reports of abuse and neglect. SHA tracks date of referral, voucher issuance, and lease-up, as well as date and type of denial or withdrawal. SHA does not record whether the referral is for a preservation or reunification family, but it does track whether a referral is for a DHS-involved family or for a youth aging out of foster care.

DHS also tracks referrals to SHA, but lost all the information from the program’s first six months in a crash of the statewide DHS computer system. SHA does not track whether FUP children return to out-of-home care (or come into care for the first time) or whether children are returned home after lease-up.

## Implementation Challenges

In the Salem FUP, referral and lease-up have occurred at a much slower rate than anticipated. Seven and a half months into the program, only 75 families or youth had been referred by DHS, and only 25 were leased up with a FUP voucher. DHS caseworkers made referrals at a much lower rate than both agencies expected, and SHA rejected more referred clients than the agencies had hoped. Several factors

contributed to this lower than expected rate for referrals, approval, and lease-up: DHS caseworker practices and beliefs, limited resources, eligibility policies at both agencies, and the convergence of disorganized families with immediate need and slower, more precise administrative processes.

DHS sees the time required to move FUP families through the intake, referral, and lease-up process as a major barrier to successful referral and lease-up. Caseworkers report that their clients tend to have an immediate or emergency need for housing, so referring these families may not seem worthwhile. Most caseworkers say they refer all eligible families because their clients have no real housing alternatives. Still, given the perceived slowness of the application and lease-up process and how prominently caseworkers highlighted this as a problem, it seems likely that the time required to obtain a voucher discourages some caseworkers from referring eligible families. Some caseworkers have had bad experiences with FUP's time frame or have heard that the process takes six to nine months from the point of referral to lease-up. These impressions may not accurately reflect the time frame, but the number of steps in the process (i.e., referral, intake, obtaining verification, voucher briefing, searching for housing, inspection, and lease-up) and the multiple individuals and agencies involved (i.e., DHS caseworkers, FUP liaisons, housing specialists, research services, landlords, inspectors, and the clients themselves) ensure that the process usually takes many months from start to finish.

In addition, many of the families whom DHS has referred for FUP have been rejected for housing vouchers by SHA because of past criminal history, particularly drug use, frustrating referred families and their DHS caseworkers. Although SHA accepts completed treatment as mitigation for a history of drug use, the only programs SHA generally accepts for this purpose are drug courts and other alternative courts that SHA sees as strong programs.<sup>31</sup> SHA acknowledges that the stringency and tight oversight of the court programs scares away many people who are willing to participate in other drug treatment and remediation programs. Because SHA has had to reject so many FUP applications under its current rules, it is considering whether it can relax the criteria for criminal history and drug treatment requirements without harming the integrity of the program.

Several months after the initial 2011 FUP vouchers were awarded, DHS and SHA made some changes in the referral process to speed up the processes and increase communication between staff within the agencies. About four months into the program, SHA noticed that some delays in FUP processing were caused by problems with SHA voucher applications and intake materials. SHA realized that providing the application through DHS might increase reliability and reduce delays. Therefore, SHA provided DHS with a copy of the voucher application for DHS caseworkers to have families fill out at the same time as the referral form; DHS then sends the completed application to SHA with the referral

form. Although this process change means a large amount of paperwork up front (especially for families who are ultimately denied), the SHA and DHS FUP liaisons believe it has sped up the intake process.

DHS and SHA also made changes to the administrative structure of the program (described in more detail above). SHA began assigning all FUP clients to a single housing specialist. A short time later, DHS began including the SHA administrative assistant who handles FUP clients, as well as the SHA FUP housing specialist, in all e-mail communication pertaining to referrals. Both agencies believe that this change and broadening their contacts will help the referral, intake, and voucher-issuance process move more quickly, with fewer surprises on individual cases.

Administering FUP requires additional work, processes, and communication for both agencies. DHS does not receive any funding to administer FUP. SHA receives administrative funding from HUD, but it is funded at the same level for FUP as for regular HCVs, which require much less administration. As a result, staff members with full workloads have taken on FUP administration as an additional responsibility. The DHS FUP liaison is a full-time caseworker supervisor who administers referrals and communication with SHA on top of her existing workload. Similarly, the SHA FUP liaison is a program manager who oversees all SHA vouchers and special programs, manages staff for these programs, and tracks additional funding opportunities. Although both liaisons put time and energy into administering the FUP referral process, the time that they have available is limited by the size and scope of their workloads.

In recent years, reduced administrative funding from HUD forced SHA to restructure, even to the point of laying off staff members. Because Salem is a relatively small jurisdiction and is not a Moving to Work site, SHA has minimal resource flexibility and must make stark trade-offs when applying for new special voucher programs (i.e., FUP and Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing). Budget stress makes it more difficult to run FUP for both SHA and DHS and poses particular challenges for specific staff involved with FUP.

# Family Unification Program Case Study: Salt Lake County, Utah

The Salt Lake County FUP is a partnership administered by three organizations: the Utah Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS); the Road Home, which is the county's largest family shelter; and the Housing Authority of the County of Salt Lake (HACSL). Child welfare services in Salt Lake County are run on a state level, with a regional division focused on the Salt Lake Valley that primarily administers the child welfare portion of FUP. In 2010, Salt Lake County was awarded 100 FUP vouchers; it was awarded vouchers in 1998, 62 of which were designated for FUP. HACSL also manages 626 public housing units and 2,100 HCVs.

## **Intake: Targeting, Identification, Eligibility, and Referral**

Reunification and preservation families (families child welfare is working to reunite and families child welfare is working to keep together, respectively) with open DCFS cases are eligible for FUP, as are youths aging out of foster care. DCFS caseworkers refer families from their caseloads to the program. Each DCFS caseworker works with 12 to 15 families who have ongoing (more than 60 days) cases. DCFS caseworkers can refer any family on their caseloads to FUP and are encouraged to err on the side of making referrals. Once a caseworker decides to refer a family, he or she completes a special FUP referral form and sends it to the DCFS FUP liaison.

FUP referrals can also come from the Road Home. During intake at the Road Home, all families are asked about their DCFS involvement. If a family is currently involved with DCFS, a Road Home staff member completes a FUP referral form for the family and sends it to the DCFS FUP liaison, who checks to confirm the family has an open DCFS case. If the family does not have an open case, they are not put on the FUP waiting list; if the family has an open DCFS case, the FUP liaison informs the family's DCFS caseworker that they are on the FUP list and connects the DCFS caseworker with the Road Home staff. Families referred by the Road Home thus have two caseworkers, one from the Road Home and one from DCFS.

DCFS and HACSL developed a site-specific referral form for the Salt Lake County FUP vouchers that asks about four risk factors aimed at quantifying housing need:

1. Does the lack of adequate housing pose a threat of harm to the children that could not be mediated by a temporary housing situation?

2. Does the family need relocation due to threats of continued domestic violence?
3. Is the family chronically unable to adequately maintain permanent housing?
4. Does the family's housing situation have an adverse effect on the child's health and/or safety?

The referral form also asks two eligibility questions:

1. Would the child or children be able to return to the care of a parent if adequate housing were available?
2. Will family members pass a housing authority-generated background screening?

For each question, families are rated on a scale of one to five by either the referring DCFS caseworker or the Road Home staff member based on the referrer's knowledge of the family. The referral form is then sent to the DCFS FUP liaison, who, after verifying that the family has an open DCFS case, places the family on a FUP voucher waiting list.

DCFS and HACSL had planned to use the referral form scores to target vouchers based on need. However, because DCFS and the Road Home were initially slow to refer eligible families for FUP vouchers, the two organizations decided to switch to serving families with an open DCFS case or youth aging out of foster care on a first-come, first-served basis in order to administer the first 100 FUP vouchers by HUD's deadline.

After the distribution of the first 100 vouchers, Salt Lake County plans to more carefully target FUP voucher recipients. Under the new system, when a voucher becomes available, the DCFS FUP liaison will contact the DCFS caseworker for each family on the waiting list. The caseworker will be asked to fill out a new referral form with updated case information and help the liaison learn more about each family's case. From there, the DCFS FUP liaison will meet with a committee of representatives from three community organizations, including the Road Home and HACSL, to determine which families will receive vouchers.

## **Voucher Issuance, Housing Search, and Lease-Up**

After determining the family's DCFS eligibility for obtaining a voucher, the DCFS FUP liaison contacts the HACSL eligibility supervisor, referring DCFS caseworker, and if applicable, the Road Home caseworker. Next, the family works with its caseworkers to complete an HCV application for HACSL. When the HACSL eligibility supervisor receives an e-mail from the DCFS FUP liaison that the application is ready, the eligibility supervisor moves the family's HCV application to a separate FUP

waiting list, schedules an eligibility appointment for the family, and e-mails the family's DCFS caseworker about the appointment. The DCFS caseworker calls the family to make sure they know about the appointment.

At the eligibility appointment, HACSL checks for income eligibility, sex-offender status, and good standing with the housing authority (i.e., no outstanding balance for past rent or unit damages). If there are any problems, the family's FUP application is denied at the appointment. If the FUP family is missing any information in their application, they must complete it before their voucher application can go forward. At the general HCV eligibility appointments, families with forms that are missing information have 10 days to assemble the outstanding materials. With FUP families, HACSL has been flexible and given families extra time to gather paperwork as needed.

After the eligibility appointment, HACSL conducts a criminal background check, screening out families with a member who is a lifetime state-registered sex offender, has engaged in violent or drug-related criminal activity in the last five years, or has been convicted of manufacturing methamphetamine at any time. If the voucher is denied, the family has 10 days to request a hearing. Caseworkers are informed if the family is denied because of criminal history and, at the hearing, can explain any mitigating factors (e.g., completion of a drug treatment program) that would help the family become eligible for the voucher.

Once a family is certified as eligible for FUP, HACSL sets up an orientation meeting. (FUP orientations are held separately from regular HCV orientations, but mostly convey the same information.) At the orientation, HACSL explains the lease-up process and the program rules and responsibilities. The Salt Lake County FUP requires six months of DCFS case management after the voucher is received, and this requirement is discussed at the FUP orientation. After the meeting, the family has 60 days to find an apartment, although it can file for a 60-day extension.

For leasing with the first 100 FUP vouchers, HACSL contracted with the Road Home to provide a housing specialist to help all FUP families, not just those referred from the Road Home, to navigate the voucher and housing search process. At the eligibility appointment, the family signs a waiver that allows HACSL to share its information with the Road Home–HACSL housing specialist. The housing specialist keeps a list of landlords with whom the Road Home has previously worked who accept vouchers and who have flexible credit-screening policies. The specialist also reviews classified ads for vacant apartments that accept vouchers. At the orientation, the specialist provides families with a master list of potential apartments; following orientation, the specialist calls FUP families weekly to provide additional assistance. For example, the housing specialist can perform individual apartment searches for

families and can also help in situations in which a family has located a unit but is having trouble getting the landlord to rent due to credit or other problems. In these cases, the specialist can explain the voucher program to the landlord and try to negotiate a solution. In addition to providing the housing specialist, HACSL recommends that all its clients use GoSection8.com, a website of apartment listings that accept housing vouchers.

It is easier in Salt Lake County than in many major metropolitan areas to find an apartment with a landlord who will accept a voucher. However, anecdotal reports are that affordable housing is becoming more difficult to find. This is especially true in downtown Salt Lake City and in the Salt Lake City suburbs. According to the Salt Lake Board of Realtors, Salt Lake City ranks among the top 25 major US cities showing the biggest home price increases in 2012, and the median single-family home price in Salt Lake County increased 11 percent between the third quarters of 2011 and 2012.

Many of the FUP families lack funds for security deposits. Previously, the Road Home used Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program funds to assist qualifying families with their deposits. Currently, the Road Home has a contract with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to provide deposit assistance, and DCFS caseworkers have up to \$2,000 that can be allotted to each family per fiscal year. This money is available for all DCFS families, not just FUP families. DCFS caseworkers can use this money to pay for services and items they and their supervisors believe the family needs to be stable, including drug treatment programs, car repairs, and strollers. Some caseworkers have used this money for security deposits. To allot the money, the caseworker needs to demonstrate that the family has means to meet financial obligations in the future if DCFS initially provides temporary assistance. In addition to the funding DCFS provides, the Road Home–HACSL housing specialist has been able to locate deposit assistance from local churches and other community organizations.

After an apartment is found, the family's file is transferred to the housing certification specialist in charge of all FUP vouchers. The housing certification specialist ensures that the apartment meets inspection standards and that lease paperwork is complete. This person also keeps a list of all FUP families who have found units and notes where they are in the leasing process. For example, if lease paperwork is incomplete, the housing certification specialist will contact the family and landlord to get the completed paperwork. Every day, the housing certification specialist provides the Road Home–HACSL housing specialist with a list of all the FUP families and their status. The housing specialist will help families complete lease paperwork, and when necessary, find another apartment.

## Case Management and Supportive Housing

Salt Lake County FUP plans to provide at least six months of DCFS case management to each family after they receive their voucher. Before families receive a voucher, they must agree to this schedule. However, DCFS has no way to force a family to stick with the case management once the family's legal DCFS case has been closed.

Families who were referred to FUP by the Road Home, and who thus have had two caseworkers throughout the process, will continue to receive services through this organization, but the time period is up to the discretion of the Road Home staff.

## Program Partnerships

The Salt Lake County FUP is a partnership between DCFS, HACSL, and the Road Home. DCFS identifies potential families and determines FUP voucher eligibility. The DCFS FUP liaison maintains the FUP waiting list and determines who gets a housing voucher. DCFS caseworkers provide case management throughout the process. Before the family moves into an apartment, the DCFS caseworker serves as the point of contact for the family, and after the family has obtained housing, the DCFS caseworker provides ongoing case management services.

HACSL manages voucher administration; it certifies income, performs background checks, briefs the families, inspects apartments, reviews leases, recertifies the vouchers, and mediates between landlords and tenants. FUP vouchers are handled like standard HCVs, with the exception that FUP families have more flexibility about deadlines, and HACSL regularly communicates with DCFS and the Road Home about FUP families. Otherwise the voucher is managed like a standard HCV. HACSL also funds the contracted Road Home–HACSL housing specialist position.

The Road Home manages the largest shelter in Utah. It has space for single men, single women, and families. The organization provides emergency and regular family shelter, and shelters about 100 families a night. On intake, each family meets with a case manager who helps provide access to immediate needs (e.g., food, clothing, birth certificates, and state identification). Shelter families are automatically enrolled in the Road Home's Self-Sufficiency Program, which provides ongoing case management. As part of the Road Home's shelter intake process, families are asked whether they have an open DCFS case. For families with open DCFS cases, the Road Home case manager completes a FUP referral form. Families referred by the Road Home receive ongoing case management during the voucher referral process and after moving into an apartment.

## Systems Change

The Salt Lake County FUP led to the creation of two committees, a referral committee and a leadership committee. The referral committee includes staff from the Road Home, HACSL, and DCFS. Committee members meet to discuss individual cases and best practices for voucher allocation. These meetings are also an opportunity for the partners to communicate about program status and family progress. This committee meets monthly.

High-level representatives from HACSL and DCFS, including the HACSL and DCFS directors, are members of the leadership committee. At these meetings, staff discuss the program's progress, goals, ongoing challenges, and solutions. Recent meetings have focused on data collection and how to implement ongoing case management. The leadership committee met monthly during the lease-up period for the original 100 vouchers and now intends to meet quarterly.

FUP has led to the colocation of one staff member to work across agencies. For the initial 100 vouchers, HACSL provided funding for a housing specialist from the Road Home to work at the housing authority's office. This arrangement has provided more intensive housing search assistance for FUP families and has improved communication between HACSL and the Road Home. The colocated staff member gives Road Home case managers a known contact at HACSL and facilitates improved access to information on families they are managing.

## Administrative Data and Tracking Outcomes

The DCFS FUP liaison keeps a list of all the families referred to the FUP voucher program, their case numbers, and whether they receive a voucher. The DCFS FUP liaison also keeps scanned copies of all FUP referral forms, which include the ratings for each of the four risk factors used to identify housing need.

At HACSL, information for all FUP families is maintained in a spreadsheet. The eligibility supervisor, the Road Home-HACSL housing specialist, and the FUP HACSL caseworker all use the spreadsheet to track where each family is in the leasing process.

## Implementation Challenges

Salt Lake County has had FUP vouchers since 1998; however, for 2010, the county designed a new process to allocate and manage the vouchers. This new process led to challenges in the early months of implementation: DCFS did not grasp the time pressure to use the vouchers, and staff believed the vouchers were a resource that could be stockpiled and used as situations arose. Consequently, DCFS caseworkers were initially slow to refer families. Moreover, although HACSL staff and the DCFS FUP liaison held a FUP training session for DCFS staff, the session was optional, and not all caseworkers attended. Thus, various DCFS caseworkers did not always know which forms to use and would send outdated forms to HACSL.

In contrast to DCFS, the Road Home provided many early referrals, but the majority of the families referred were ineligible for the program. At the time, it was unclear to the Road Home staff that only families with current, open DCFS cases could receive FUP vouchers, and the Road Home referred many families without DCFS cases to the DCFS FUP liaison.

After a few months, the leadership committee realized there were not enough referrals to use all the vouchers before they expired. In response, it adjusted the process. The committee decided to stop using the four risk-factor targeting criterion and instead provided vouchers on a first-come, first-served basis to any family on track to maintain parental rights and with an open DCFS case. Moreover, the DCFS FUP liaison and HACSL staff increased their education efforts. The DCFS FUP liaison (1) offered more training sessions with HACSL staff for the caseworkers, (2) began sending monthly e-mails to all the caseworkers encouraging them to refer families for FUP vouchers and explaining how to use the vouchers, and (3) assisted Road Home staff to more accurately target their referrals by clarifying voucher eligibility criteria.

HACSL found that families were not moving through the voucher process quickly enough. In response, HACSL provided funding for a Road Home staff member to help its families negotiate the voucher process. This action improved communication between HACSL and the Road Home, and the colocated Road Home staff member was able to provide better information to Road Home caseworkers on how their clients were managing the housing search and lease-up process.

The Salt Lake County FUP plans to provide families with six months of DCFS case management after they receive their vouchers. This part of the program has not yet been implemented, but it already provides some potential challenges. In the identification stage of the voucher program, we heard anecdotal reports of caseworkers reluctant to refer families because they did not want to increase the burden of their caseload. Families, also, are weary of having additional months of caseworker visits.

# Family Unification Program Case Study: San Diego, California

The City of San Diego's FUP is administered by a partnership between two agencies: the Child Welfare Services (CWS) division of the County of San Diego's Health and Human Services Agency and the San Diego Housing Commission (SDHC). SDHC currently has 100 FUP vouchers (awarded in the summer of 2010). San Diego had 200 vouchers in the late 1990s, but transitioned those 200 FUP vouchers into the general pool of available HCVs as the FUP families holding those vouchers left or were terminated from the program.

## **Intake: Targeting, Identification, Eligibility, and Referral**

The San Diego FUP targets reunification families. Within those parameters, CWS refers families who are eligible for FUP to SDHC on a first-come, first-served basis while vouchers are available. CWS aims to refer families for whom housing is a primary factor in either delay of reunification or potential risk of re-removal and who are scheduled to be reunited within 90 days of referral. In practice, most caseworkers refer all reunification families with inadequate housing to the CWS FUP liaison if they expect that the family will reunite within 90 days. The CWS FUP liaison sends approved referrals to SDHC. CWS considers a family to have inadequate housing if the family lives in substandard housing, lives in dilapidated housing, is homeless, has been displaced by domestic violence, lives in overcrowded housing, or lives in housing not accessible to a disabled child. CWS provides services for all of San Diego County (which extends beyond the boundaries of the City of San Diego), but SDHC only provides vouchers for families who live or work within the City of San Diego, limiting the geographic scope of the program to that area.

The referral process begins when a CWS caseworker, sometimes in collaboration with a supervisor, determines that a family on his or her caseload is living in inadequate housing and is close to reunification (within 90 days). The caseworker then completes a referral form with the help and approval of the family. The form calls for information on the type of inadequate housing (described above) and asks whether any adults in the household have a record of violent crime or involvement in drug-related activity or are registered sex offenders.

After a caseworker has completed a referral form, the caseworker's supervisor signs off on the FUP referral. Some supervisors discuss referrals with their caseworkers, verifying that the families meet FUP referral criteria, but many sign referral forms without review. After signing off, the supervisor

forwards the referral to a regional quality control manager at CWS. Adding this step has made automatic sign-off less frequent, as the quality control manager for the primary referring region of San Diego returns ineligible, inappropriate, and incomplete referrals to the referring supervisors.

Because regional quality control managers are caseworker supervisors trained in FUP eligibility criteria, they provide skilled oversight within the referral process. CWS divides San Diego County into six geographic service regions, with one quality control manager for each region. (Portions of just three regions fall within the City of San Diego, but San Diego County and the City of Oceanside—within San Diego County—were also awarded FUP vouchers.) Most referrals for the City of San Diego FUP come from the Central region. In this region, the quality control manager discusses referrals with individual caseworkers and supervisors to be sure that the referred family has inadequate housing and is within 90 days of reunification. All referrals pass from the referring caseworker's supervisor to the regional quality control manager, who reviews, collects, and forwards appropriate referrals to the CWS FUP liaison.

After receiving a referral from the quality control manager, the CWS FUP liaison checks the form for completeness and criminal history (if the criminal history is drug related, the liaison checks for proof of remediation, such as completion of a drug treatment program). If any information is missing, the CWS FUP liaison returns the form to the regional quality control manager, who then works with the original referring caseworker to complete and resubmit it. The CWS FUP liaison verifies that the family's referral form lists a City of San Diego zip code. The CWS FUP liaison sends the completed forms to the SDHC FUP liaison.

CWS focuses on reunification families for FUP because (for intact families) cases can only remain open for 30 days, after which CWS is supposed to close the case or take custody of the child. CWS notes that if there were a mechanism to make the voucher process move more quickly, it might be possible to refer intact families. However, because families referred to FUP often have trouble collecting all the required information and materials for voucher approval, it may not be possible to reduce the time between referral and SDHC voucher issuance.

Although a strict interpretation of the law does not allow judges to delay returning a child home due to inadequate housing alone, CWS says that many judges will, in practice, delay reunification if there is not a stable and adequate place to which a child may return home. At the same time, caseworkers say that some judges may err in the other direction, returning children home when the family is in the process of getting a voucher or in the process of looking for stable, adequate housing to lease. In some

situations, the child's quick return can make a family ineligible for a FUP voucher, causing a rockier and less sustainable reunification than caseworkers believe would have occurred had the judge waited.

## **Voucher Issuance, Housing Search, and Lease-Up**

Upon receiving a referral from CWS, the SDHC FUP liaison verifies that the referral form is complete, documents the referral in an Excel spreadsheet, and forwards the form to the SDHC housing specialist handling FUP and other special programs. If the referral form is incomplete, the SDHC FUP liaison returns it to the CWS FUP liaison, who sends it back to the caseworker through the CWS regional quality control manager.

When the referral form is complete the SDHC FUP housing specialist sends the family an intake appointment date and an application packet by mail. The FUP intake process is similar to the standard process SDHC uses for non-FUP voucher clients. This process includes an intake appointment as well as a check of the criminal records of all adults in the household and whether they owe money to SDHC or any other housing authority.

SDHC estimates that about 15 percent of FUP clients do not appear for the intake appointment (similar to the no-show rate for the general voucher applicant population). If a family does not appear or does not return materials to SDHC promptly, the housing specialist informs the SDHC FUP liaison and attempts to contact the family to reschedule the intake appointment. If SDHC cannot reach the client after a several attempts to find updated contact information, the housing specialist tells the SDHC FUP liaison that the referral is closed.

At the intake appointment, the housing specialist verifies that the family is eligible for a housing voucher. The family is asked to bring a completed application, birth certificates, Social Security cards, and proof of income, as well as any mitigating documentation for past criminal history (such as proof of completion from a drug addiction treatment program). The housing specialist also checks that the family lives or works in the City of San Diego. SDHC estimates that well over half of FUP families do not bring all required paperwork or information to the initial intake appointment (this is a common problem for HCV applicants as well). In some cases, CWS caseworkers may help families fill out the application and remind them to bring materials to the intake meeting.

SDHC is slightly more lenient about criminal history for FUP families than for non-FUP voucher clients, as it sees the factors relating to criminal history as big reasons many families end up involved in the child welfare system. Generally, families with a history of violent crime (or any criminal offense in

the past five years without proper documentation of mitigation) are not eligible for vouchers. However SDHC accepts a wide variety of mitigation programs for drug-related activity from FUP applicants and is unlikely to deny FUP vouchers due to a record of domestic violence. If a household member has a history of drug manufacturing or distribution or is a registered sex offender, then the family is not eligible for the FUP voucher. If the application is rejected, the family has 10 days to request an administrative hearing. The caseworker often helps with this process.

Families approved for a FUP voucher must attend a briefing at which they receive information about the voucher and are awarded the voucher itself. SDHC provides the same information to FUP families as it does to HCV clients, including a list of potential housing and landlords accepting vouchers. The family has 120 days to find and lease housing. This is a variation on HCV procedures, in which families are given 60 days to lease up, with a possible 60-day extension. No extensions are available to FUP voucher holders because the full 120-day window is provided up front.

On occasion, CWS caseworkers help families find housing, but this is not particularly common, as caseworkers carry full caseloads. In some instances, CWS caseworkers refer families to a Community Services for Families (CSF) caseworker under contract to CWS who helps the family find housing. Only some FUP families are referred to CSF. According to HUD, the overall rental market in the San Diego metropolitan area is tight. The rental market vacancy rate was 4.4 percent in November 2012, down from 5.6 percent in April 2010. However, for the most part, caseworkers say that families with FUP vouchers do not have trouble finding appropriate rental housing in San Diego.

Although some caseworkers encourage their families to move to low-poverty areas, they note that most families have a clear idea of where they want to live. Many communities in the San Diego Mid-City area have strong ethnic, national, or cultural identifications (e.g., a large Somali population), and many families are unwilling to move away from their home communities or support systems. Less frequently, some families specifically look for housing in low-poverty areas, which are opened to them by FUP vouchers (and the higher payment standards allowed because SDHC is a Moving to Work site).

Once a family finds a housing unit, SDHC completes an inspection and performs a rent reasonableness assessment. If SDHC approves the unit, then the family and the landlord sign a lease, and the landlord and SDHC sign a contract. At this point, the family can move into the unit. CWS can usually provide money for first month's rent (in lieu of a security deposit, which is not allowed because the deposit is refundable), and for utilities arrears, if applicable.

SDHC estimates that, once housed, FUP families are relatively similar to HCV clients, with a slightly higher rate of termination. SDHC reports that FUP families are a bit more likely than HCV holders to

have complaints from a landlord because they do not adequately care for the unit (possibly because FUP voucher holders tend to be younger than other SDHC clients), and because unauthorized people live in the unit. Unauthorized occupants often include ex-boyfriends who may be domestic violence perpetrators. In some situations, a FUP client will ask to put an alleged perpetrator of domestic violence on the lease. SDHC also reported that FUP families seem to ask if they can move again after moving into their first apartment with a voucher sooner than HCV clients. Unless there is a compelling reason, SDHC will not allow a family to move with the voucher within the first year. Because FUP clients are more likely to have been victims of domestic violence, SDHC does occasionally need to quickly move the family again to ensure safety.

SDHC recertifies FUP families and the general voucher population once every two years, rather than every year. This is a new policy, going into effect for families leased up in 2012 or later. This change is made possible because SDHC is a Moving to Work site, which allows for additional funding flexibility.

As in many cities, the relatively small number of vouchers limits the ability to serve eligible families, many of whom have little or no income and no viable alternatives for finding stable, adequate housing. Caseworkers are frustrated by the waiting list that CWS has implemented since all the vouchers were issued and say that many families on their caseloads are eligible for FUP and are in dire need of adequate, affordable housing.

## **Case Management and Supportive Services**

After lease-up, the San Diego FUP does not formally provide any services beyond the regular CWS follow-up for reunifying families or family maintenance (for intact families). Caseworkers say that the average case stays open six to seven months following reunification and lease-up. Some supervisors tell caseworkers to keep FUP cases open for at least six months after lease-up or reunification, but this varies by supervisor. Families referred to CSF receive additional services from their CSF caseworker, who connects the family with existing resources and generally serves as a case manager for the family outside of their compliance relationship with CWS. (CWS caseworkers can refer their families to CSF for services, regardless of whether the families are being referred for a FUP voucher.)

During the application process for San Diego FUP vouchers from HUD, SDHC hoped that CSF could provide families six months of services following lease-up with a FUP voucher and reunification. However, CWS does not have the funding to ensure that CSF can serve all FUP families. FUP vouchers do not come with any funding for the CWA, and CWS says that stress on the California budget has cut

into agency funding. Because of funding constraints, CWS does not specifically inform caseworkers to refer all FUP families to CSF, and CSF is not instructed to provide these families with at least six months of services after lease up.

## **Program Partnerships**

In the CWS–SDHC partnership for FUP, each agency operates its own elements of the program, with periodic communication and collaboration when SDHC needs a caseworker to intervene on behalf of a family. In general, CWS is responsible for identifying families and providing referrals, and SDHC certifies that the referred families are eligible for FUP and moves them through its housing voucher process.

To operate the program and keep referrals coming, the SDHC FUP liaison and the CWS FUP liaison act as single points of contact between the two agencies. Occasionally the SDHC housing specialist will contact a caseworker directly for help obtaining materials, but for the most part, the housing specialist communicates information about FUP applicants to the SDHC FUP liaison, who communicates that information to the CWS FUP liaison, who in turn lets the CWS caseworkers know via the quality control manager. In many cases, families inform their caseworkers if they need additional help obtaining materials. The caseworkers say that many families are motivated by receiving the letter for the voucher intake appointment and will ask for help to complete the process if they need it.

## **Systems Change**

It is not clear whether FUP will lead to sustainable coordination between CWS and SDHC. Although San Diego had FUP vouchers in the late 1990s (those vouchers have since been converted to regular HCVs as the original FUP families who held the vouchers have left the program or had their assistance terminated), the experience did not produce a sustained partnership between the two agencies. CWS and SDHC were happy to partner for FUP because the partnership allows each agency to further its mission of providing services or housing to San Diego residents; interagency interaction has been focused solely on generating referrals and housing families through FUP. CWS caseworkers and supervisors referring families for FUP may gain knowledge of SDHC rules (such as the restrictions for criminal history and area of residence) that can benefit their clients. At the same time, the SDHC HCV waiting list is long (families wait from 8 to 10 years to rise to the top of the list), and many caseworkers quickly burn out or leave the agency for other reasons, limiting the benefit of this knowledge.

CWS believes that its previous experience administering FUP has made the program easier to administer because CWS could base its new referral forms on the forms it had created previously.

## **Administrative Data and Tracking Outcomes**

SDHC collects and tracks data on all special programs, including FUP. The SDHC FUP liaison maintains a spreadsheet containing information about lease-up and voucher utilization rates, dates of referral from CWS, appointment dates, dates and reasons for denials, and lease-up dates. The SDHC FUP liaison also notes when families are referred to the fraud unit for investigation, the results of investigations, and whether and when a family leaves the program (but the reason for leaving is not recorded). SDHC collects this information so the agency can administer the program; for example, if a family leaves the program for any reason, the SDHC FUP liaison must ask CWS for a new referral to fill the voucher. The FUP liaison collects and tracks similar information for other special programs (such as the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program).

CWS does not collect or track extensive data for FUP, but the CWS FUP liaison keeps an electronic record of families referred to SDHC. Initially, for nonqualifying or ineligible caseworker referrals, the CWS FUP liaison kept all the information on the paper referral sheet rather than entering it into an electronic file; later, the liaison began recording all caseworker referrals in a spreadsheet. In general, the only FUP referral data that CWS tracks are the names and identifying information of families it has referred to SDHC and ineligible families referred to the CWS FUP liaisons by caseworkers and their supervisors.

## **Implementation Challenges**

Both agencies believe that having a single point of contact at each agency has made FUP easier to administer than it would have been otherwise. Having FUP liaisons as a single point of contact between agencies likely saves time and prevents systemic miscommunication, even if this arrangement means that each piece of communication must go through multiple people.

Similarly, SDHC has a single housing specialist who handles clients in special programs such as FUP and Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing. Having a housing specialist increases efficiency and allows the program to be more flexible than it would be otherwise. Because there is one housing specialist working on all FUP cases, this person is aware of FUP rules and can provide more leniency on certain

aspects of the families' criminal histories than is provided for non-FUP families who do not come to SDHC through CWS.

San Diego's FUP partnership experienced some initial communication problems that resulted in extra work and frustration for staff and clients. The CWS staff was not initially aware that SDHC could only accept families who live or work within the City of San Diego. Because CWS serves families throughout San Diego County, which includes large areas outside of the city, caseworkers initially referred families without regard to where they lived or worked, and the CWS FUP liaison forwarded these families' forms to SDHC. SDHC had to process these referrals, often going as far as the first intake appointment before learning that these families were ineligible because of their locations. SDHC and CWS note that this was frustrating to families and gave them false hope. The partner agencies later addressed this discrepancy. The CWS FUP liaison informed FUP quality control managers about the location rule and ultimately added zip codes to the FUP referral form, which has resolved the problem.

The tight state funding landscape and the fact that FUP does not come with any additional funding for CWS or extra administration funding for SDHC is a challenge for the San Diego FUP. At both CWS and SDHC, the FUP liaisons were people with full-time positions who took on FUP responsibilities in addition to their regular workload. In CWS, the liaison does not work with caseworkers directly, but instead communicates through the regional quality control managers in order to limit workload and simplify the process. There is only one SDHC housing specialist who handles FUP families, which ensures that a similar arrangement at SDHC is not necessary.

CWS caseworkers believe that the SDHC requirement that families live or work inside of the City of San Diego is a barrier to referring many clients they believe are appropriate for FUP. This is an issue for clients who live outside of the city, but within the county, and are willing to live in the city. It is also an issue for clients who become homeless, as one of the county-run shelters to which families are often sent is located outside the City of San Diego boundary lines. Caseworkers also noted that many families they serve are displaced by domestic violence, which sometimes forces them to live in a domestic violence shelter or other arrangement outside of the city. Residential drug treatment programs create the same problem for some families.

# Family Unification Program Case Study: Seattle, Washington

The Seattle Housing Authority (SHA), which received FUP vouchers in 1999, 2001, and 2010, was awarded 100 FUP vouchers in 2011 as part of HUD's FY 2010 awards.

## Intake: Targeting, Identification, Eligibility, and Referral

Seattle serves all three FUP-eligible populations: families whose lack of adequate housing is a factor either in the imminent removal of a child from the home (preservation families) or in delaying the return of a child to the care of his or her family (reunification families) and former foster youth ages 18 to 21 without adequate housing. Caseworkers from three agencies can refer a family for a FUP voucher: the King County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS or Children's Administration), the Department of Public Health–Seattle and King County (DPH), and the YMCA of Greater Seattle. The DPH in Seattle has nine nurses dedicated to families with a CPS case. If a report of child abuse or neglect is substantiated but deemed low risk, a public health nurse (rather than a DCFS caseworker) will be assigned as an alternate responder. Nurses may also become involved with families who have a DCFS caseworker, working with the family together with CPS, Family Voluntary Services, and Children and Family Welfare Services. The YMCA works in partnership with Casey Family Programs (CFP), and although the vouchers go to the YMCA, CFP workers work with the FUP families whom the YMCA manages. SHA gave 40 vouchers to DCFS, 30 to DPH, and 30 to the YMCA (10 of these are designated for families and 20 for youth).

Families eligible for FUP vouchers must meet HUD's eligibility criteria (i.e., in need of housing due to existing inadequate housing, substandard housing, dilapidated housing, homelessness, displacement by domestic violence, involuntary displacement, overcrowded housing or lives in housing not accessible to a disabled child).<sup>32</sup> Children must be ready for reunification, at imminent risk of removal, or at risk of child abuse or neglect due to domestic violence, substance abuse, or family health.

The family fills out a FUP referral form with their referring caseworker.<sup>33</sup> The applicant or caseworker must describe why the family is homeless or has inadequate housing and indicate whether the children have disabilities aggravated by the living situation. The form includes indicators for CPS, Family Voluntary Services, and Children and Family Welfare Services involvement; domestic violence; and chemical dependence. The form also asks about the family's support network and whether the children are in school.

Because each referral agency serves different family populations, each has a different way of identifying potential FUP families from their caseloads. DCFS caseworkers only refer reunification families. Although a family is supposed to be within 90 days of reunification, several DCFS caseworkers we interviewed referred all or almost all the families in their caseload. A court order may also prompt a DCFS caseworker to refer a family for FUP, though the court may return children before a family has signed a lease. Caseworkers reported that housing has to be the *only* barrier to reunification or case closure.

In Seattle's child welfare system, DPH nurses work with at-risk families as a means of preventing the removal of children from homes. These nurses refer families with children at imminent risk of removal who they believe can successfully obtain a FUP voucher. These nurses cannot perform criminal background checks, but they have not had referrals denied over criminal history in the past year. Public health nurses look for indicators of homelessness or inadequate housing and prepare a report about the family, including health needs, current residence, and how the FUP voucher will affect their housing situation. Public health program leads review the referrals and ask for clarification or additional detail before sending on the referral.

YMCA caseworkers only refer families in kinship care or families headed by a youth formerly in foster care. Former foster youth with children of their own do not necessarily need to have an open CPS case for their own children in order to be referred. The caseworker determines if a child is at "imminent risk" of removal through conversations with the DCFS FUP liaison. After the families are identified and screened for initial eligibility and need, the YMCA refers clients for FUP.<sup>34</sup>

All FUP referral forms are sent to the DCFS FUP liaison, who verifies the information and certifies eligibility. The FUP liaison's assistant enters referral information into a spreadsheet and supplements the information with data from SHA. The assistant then checks the case plan and calls the DCFS caseworker to determine whether reunification is likely to happen within 90 days. For referrals from DPH and the YMCA, "imminent risk" is verified by checking that the family has or had an open CPS case. The case plan is checked to verify housing need and determine if the family is homeless, is living in transitional housing, or if the housing itself is unsafe and a landlord has not fixed the problem. The three agencies can also refer families for King County Housing FUP vouchers, and the FUP liaison also certifies those referrals.

The FUP liaison fills out the FUP certification cover sheet, which contains information on the child, the referring agency, the DCFS case, instances of chronic neglect, whether the referral has been certified or denied, and reason for denial. If the FUP liaison approves the referral, then he or she notes

this on the cover sheet, notifies the referring case manager, attaches a copy of the SHA Section 8 application, and notifies the SHA housing counselor. The FUP liaison or assistant will notify the referring case manager if a client has been denied.

Upon receiving word of a client's approval, the referring caseworker will help the family gather the appropriate documentation and complete the application. Sometimes a family will receive help with the application from other sources, such as a nonprofit organization. None of the agencies have FUP-specific funds to help pay for the costs of obtaining application documents. A YMCA-CFP caseworker may help the family find money to cover the costs, but the availability of outside funding or a caseworker's ability to access outside funding may be limited. Once an application is submitted, the referring caseworker will be notified of any missing information.

Once a family is approved for FUP by the FUP liaison, they have 10 days to submit the application to the SHA housing counselor. If the family has not submitted a complete application within the 10-day deadline, the liaison will send out a final request and extend the deadline by 10 more days. In essence, then, the family has a total of 20 business days to return the housing application. The housing counselor spends substantial time fielding eligibility and application questions from referring case managers; to minimize the number of phone calls, the counselor sends an e-mail every Monday to the three agency leads on the status of each referral or voucher.

## **Voucher Issuance, Housing Search, and Lease Up**

After receiving the completed application, the SHA housing counselor forwards the application to a SHA application processing staff person, who verifies income, child support, and employment; runs a criminal background check to search for a history of felonies, methamphetamine use, or arson in public housing; and prepares the file for voucher issuance. The referral next goes to a SHA supervisor, who has three days to approve or deny the voucher referral. The application is then returned to the application processing staff member, who issues a voucher within 10 days. If the family has large outstanding debts with SHA, the referral is sent directly from the SHA application processing staff to the supervisor for denial, because none of the referring agencies have the money to pay off past debts. If the voucher referral is approved by the supervisor, the client is asked to attend a voucher issuance briefing as soon as possible.

SHA holds voucher briefings every two weeks. Whenever possible, referring case managers from DPH or YMCA-CFP attend the briefing with the client. By attending the briefing the worker knows the

voucher amount and can facilitate a housing search with these constraints in mind. DCFS caseworkers are not expected to go with their clients to the voucher briefing. The voucher issuance and briefing last two hours, with an additional two hours before the briefing for FUP voucher holders. In this extra time, the housing counselor covers a portion of the Ready-to-Rent curriculum, which includes a credit review, advice on overcoming personal history barriers, reading a lease, and filling out a rental application. The counselor also discusses the free housing search website, [www.housingsearchnw.org](http://www.housingsearchnw.org), which has a database of landlord postings in King County. SHA cosponsored the development of the website to connect its clients with housing. On this website, clients can indicate that they have a voucher and narrow a search to show only those landlords who do not run a credit or criminal background check. Upon voucher issuance, a FUP family has 120 days to rent a unit.

The extent of housing search assistance depends on the referring organization. Some referring caseworkers will print online listings and use these to discuss housing preferences. Caseworkers aim to place families in safe neighborhoods with more resources than high-crime, low opportunity neighborhoods, but they do not require families to only search for housing in low-poverty neighborhoods as it can be difficult for families to find affordable units in such neighborhoods. YMCA–CFP caseworkers direct families to online housing search engines and put the onus on the families to find housing that fits their needs. Families also have access to YMCA housing readiness classes and individual coaching throughout the process. At a family’s request, a YMCA–CFP worker will accompany the family to look at a unit and talk with the landlord. Public health nurses, in addition to meeting a client at a potential housing unit and talking with the landlord, will also help their clients search for housing through SHA’s website (as many of their clients lack access to a computer).

Public health nurses and YMCA–CFP caseworkers talked about negotiating with a landlord or advocating on their client’s behalf. Public health nurses may even write letters recommending their clients to a landlord. DCFS caseworkers generally do not get involved in a client’s housing search unless a client encounters obstacles when applying for housing or negotiating with a landlord. Though the DCFS caseworkers reported a lower level of involvement in the housing search process, one caseworker we spoke with had built her own network of landlords to whom she refers clients. Another helped a family move in—carrying furniture and using Family Preservation Services funds to help pay a deposit. (Only CFP has funds available to help pay application fees.) DCFS caseworkers had occasional access to emergency funding through Family Preservation Services, but these funds are too limited to help most families.

Another source of housing search assistance is the SHA’s housing counselor, who provides housing search assistance for any voucher holder (FUP or otherwise) if assistance is requested. The counselor

works with clients to determine the source of the housing search problem, helps clients search the database and print out listings, and speaks with landlords on a client's behalf. Finally, the counselor holds the Ready-to-Rent class described above in which clients receive instruction on presenting themselves to landlords and discussing their strengths as renters. Finding a rental unit in Seattle can be hard due to unit size, quality of schools, and affordability, and as a result more families are moving out of Seattle than anticipated: 16 families in 2011 and 12 in 2012. Recruiting families into low-poverty neighborhoods is also a challenge, so the SHA has a landlord liaison who works to recruit more landlords from those neighborhoods.

## **Case Management**

Referring case managers are required to provide six months of case management after the family signs a lease. By law, DCFS reunification cases must receive at least six months of case management after a child is returned home. When a child is returned home, DCFS maintains an in-home dependency case. DCFS may commence trial in-home services, connecting the family with community services or the appropriate contracted services. The public health nurses stay involved and visit the family after they obtain housing, as long as the family is receptive. YMCA-CFP caseworkers provide 12 months of case management with a minimum monthly phone check-in and quarterly in-person meetings to discuss budgeting, employment, and education. The YMCA-CFP caseworkers provide case management once a month for six months, with the option to extend case management. The public health nurses and YMCA-CFP caseworkers report that they sometimes struggle to remain connected after FUP families sign a lease; although a family may engage with their caseworkers to get the lease, continuing engagement after the family is placed is difficult to sustain.

## **Program Partnerships**

SHA is the lead agency for the FUP program. Five partner agencies were selected to refer FUP clients in the 2010 round of vouchers, but SHA found that two of the partners were ill-suited for FUP and only approached three of those partners in 2011: DCFS, DPH, and the YMCA. SHA allocates the FUP vouchers to each agency and decides how many will be allocated to youth versus families. SHA is responsible for encouraging FUP participation in low-poverty neighborhoods by engaging landlords through surveys, trainings, and customer service. SHA responsibilities also include checking waiting lists, shelters, and temporary housing for eligible families; providing a list of properties in low-poverty

neighborhoods; offering pre- and post-move counseling; administering vouchers; and training the three partners on Housing Choice Voucher procedures. Although SHA intended to remove jurisdictional barriers to mobility by allowing all King County families to receive and use FUP vouchers anywhere in King County, caseworkers reported that the current set of vouchers were only made available to families in the City of Seattle, and the voucher had to be used in the city.

DCFS offers housing search assistance, identifies and certifies FUP eligibility, and reviews caseloads each month for potential referrals. DCFS also provides pre- and post-move counseling and case management for at least 12 months after families sign a lease (or finds an alternative case manager). DCFS workers try to locate cash assistance for FUP-eligible families through the Additional Requirements for Emergent Needs, Diversion Cash Assistance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families programs. SHA keeps lines of communication open with DCFS and other partners through regular (often weekly) FUP update e-mails and quarterly meetings.

The YMCA and DPH are responsible for including housing and supportive services in their case plans and helping clients identify additional resources, such as funds to help clients pay utility bills. They also pledge to support clients through leasing, including housing search, case management, and follow-up for at least six months. Both agencies maintain client data for program evaluation.

The frontline staff and FUP liaisons described the partnerships between the organizations as strong. All the referring case managers knew who to contact within SHA with questions. The partners use the quarterly FUP meeting to discuss individual cases and opportunities, such as the unveiling of the HousingSearchNW.org website. SHA also hosts a biannual meeting with the FUP partners, Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing, and the Committee to End Homelessness to discuss updates and get feedback. The FUP liaison or a designee attends these meetings. SHA also hosted several launch meetings and trainings for referring case managers when FUP was first established in Seattle.

## **Systems Change**

SHA and DCFS have a long history of managing FUP vouchers, having received vouchers in 1999, 2001, and 2010. YMCA and DPH were partner agencies for the 2010 allocation. Internally, DCFS used the FUP program to advance its goal of engaging more fathers in the child welfare system. DCFS views FUP as a way of filling the need for housing resources for men with children in their care and tracks the gender of heads of household among FUP clients. FUP also led DCFS to change its community collaboration performance base to contract with more providers to serve vulnerable families. At the

housing authority, FUP led SHA staff to begin strategizing new ways to integrate the case management services available through FUP with all Section 8 vouchers.

At the state level, FUP led to improved coordination between DCFS and local housing authorities. Building Changes, a housing advocacy organization, facilitated conversations between DCFS and local housing authorities to develop a common MOU to apply for FUP vouchers. This MOU was used by eight state housing authorities in Washington, four of which were granted FUP vouchers. Since developing this MOU, Building Changes has facilitated conversations between DCFS, housing authorities, and nonprofits about piloting a program similar to FUP to provide housing for families awaiting reunification or to prevent a child's removal. The pilot program promotes self-sufficiency and tenant services beyond the end of DCFS services at case closure. Seventeen housing authorities in Washington State expressed interest in piloting the program, and DCFS is investigating whether a Title IV-E waiver may be used to add funding to the pilots.

## **Administrative Data and Tracking Outcomes**

The DCFS FUP liaison's assistant tracks detailed information about the referrals, including the date of referral, the referring agency, the DCFS FUP liaison's ruling, the dates the housing application was submitted and approved, the voucher issuance date, the leasing date, the time between application approval and lease signing, and the time between voucher issuance and leasing. The assistant also tracks whether a child was returned to the family after a FUP voucher referral.

The SHA housing counselor tracks client information as well, including veteran status, whether the voucher is for a family or a youth, the date SHA received the application, any missing information, the date of voucher approval, denial or cancellation, the date the voucher was issued, the leasing date, and the average number of days from issuance to leasing. The SHA also tracks regular Section 8 vouchers and whether or not the voucher turned over.

Seattle and King County DPH nurses use the Omaha Knowledge–Behavior–Status (KBS) Problem Rating Scale to evaluate the progress and service outcomes for FUP clients throughout the period of service. This five-point scale assesses caretaking and parenting, residence, and other health and behavioral health problems FUP clients may have at both intake and case closure. The KBS rating system assesses the client's knowledge (e.g., tenant rights, housing options, safety hazards), behavior (e.g., childproofing, cleanliness, housing search efforts, level of follow-through with housing resources),

and status (e.g., homelessness, living in a shelter, living in a clean and stable environment, living in housing appropriate to family size).

## Implementation Challenges

There have been many challenges implementing FUP and helping families locate housing. The Seattle housing market is tight, and it can be especially difficult to locate a large apartment for a big family. Caseworkers wanted to allow families to use vouchers throughout King County to find the most housing options, but clients must use the voucher within Seattle's city limits for at least one year. DCFS caseworkers present the jurisdiction limits as a requirement of the program and do not suggest the possibility of moving outside of Seattle. Other workers counsel their clients to sign a one-year lease in Seattle and then to move back into King County after a year.

DCFS caseworkers feel they lack the time to assist families through the application, housing search, and leasing process. To combat this pressure, some caseworkers refer clients to the Landlord Liaison Project, which offers homeless individuals and families previously denied by landlords help accessing permanent housing, signing leases, and moving. DCFS caseworker supervisors mentioned that finding landlords willing to rent to their clients was challenging. They do not think there is a good solution to this problem, but they write letters on their clients' behalf and coach them on how to present themselves to landlords. DCFS caseworkers also handle helping clients find ways to pay off past SHA debts. A further difficulty is that DCFS-referred families may receive less case management than other FUP families, because after a family's case closes, the caseworker can no longer be involved.

One of the biggest challenges for the FUP liaison is how to keep everyone informed about the FUP program and opportunities. To facilitate better communication, all DCFS area administrators are trained on FUP and to be the key FUP contacts in their offices. In recent years, DCFS has also struggled to absorb the cost of staff time for the FUP program. Only one staff person currently certifies applications and, without other support staff, the referral process is slow.

SHA faces its own challenges: for families referred near the end of the FUP year, SHA had to decrease the number of days allowed for the housing search from 120 to 60 to avoid hitting the year-end deadline to use all of the vouchers. Staff also struggled to market the FUP vouchers to landlords. Further, SHA is not always made aware of the timeline to reunification or changes to family size. For example, SHA issues vouchers for the number of family members listed in the initial application, but the family's size may have changed with the addition of a reunifying child or the removal of a child. To

address this potential mismatch between the number of bedrooms the voucher allows and reunified family size, SHA has asked DCFS to notify it of any relevant family changes.

For YMCA–CFP caseworkers, a key challenge has been the changing criteria for FUP eligibility. In the past, families did not have to be connected through CPS. Acquiring a solid understanding of the DCFS eligibility criteria emerged as a challenge after several conversations with the FUP liaison. Like other partners, the YMCA–CFP caseworkers also struggled with the limited time to complete the housing search and leasing process. Previous experience indicated that they should plan to accommodate 18 months of case management to get families all the way through signing a lease.

When asked about implementation challenges, public health nurses noted the importance of communication. Caseworkers appreciated having the SHA housing counselor as a contact for questions regarding eligibility. Program leads also valued the strong relationship with the FUP liaison, with whom they regularly confer about cases to make sure referrals would meet eligibility criteria before they submitted documents. The supervisors also mentioned the benefits of meeting with SHA and receiving training on their programs. FUP engendered this dialog and increased the spread of information across agencies.

# Appendix B. Table of Organizations Interviewed

TABLE B.1

## Interview Subjects

Sites	Public housing	Child welfare	Partner agency	Partner agency	Partner agency	Other
Portland, OR	Home Forward	Department of Human Services	Native American Youth Family Center	Impact Northwest	Self-Enhancement, Inc.	Department of County Human Services, Multnomah County
San Diego, CA	San Diego Housing Commission	County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency				
Chicago, IL	Chicago Housing Authority	Illinois Department of Children and Family Services	CHA-contracted housing advocates			
Hartford, CT	The Connection, Inc.	Connecticut Department of Children and Families	The Imagineers (a contractor for Hartford Housing Authority)			
Massachusetts	Department of Housing and Community Development	Department of Children and Families	Housing Stabilization Unit			
Seattle, WA	Seattle Housing Authority	Department of Children and Family Services	YMCA of Greater Seattle	Department of Public Health Nurses		
Salt Lake County, UT	Housing Authority of Salt Lake	Utah Division of Child and Family Services	The Road Home			
Salem, OR	Salem Housing Authority	Marion County Department of Human Services				

# Notes

1. In 2013 HUD released a study of the FUP program. Unlike this study, which focuses on families, the HUD study describes how PHAs and CWAs are using the program for youth aging out.
2. See HUD's FY 2010 *Notice of Funding Availability* (NOFA) (Docket No. FR-5415-N-01).
3. HUD FY 2010 NOFA for Family Unification Program (Docket No. FR-5415-N-15). In addition to families involved in the child welfare system, "youth, at least 18 years old, but younger than 22, who left foster care at age 16 or older and who do not have adequate housing are also eligible to receive housing assistance under the FUP."
4. The CWA checks whether families referred by community agencies have an open case or if they would be involved in the child welfare system in the future. Families who do not have an open case but have special circumstances that the community agency considers to place them at risk of child welfare involvement are certified as such by the CWA and then referred to the program.
5. By design the HCV program serves low-income families. According to program eligibility guidelines, the family's income may not exceed 50 percent of the area median income for the county or metropolitan area in which the family chooses to live. However, PHAs are required to target 75 percent of their vouchers to those households whose income is at or below 30 percent of median income. Household members must be US citizens or legal immigrants in certain qualified statuses. Depending on the practices of the local PHA, the family may also be required to pass a background test or be subject to PHA-specific preferences (e.g., literally homeless or high-rent burdened).
6. Some families turn down help filling out the application, preferring to fill it out on their own.
7. Ready-to-Rent is a tenant readiness education curriculum that teaches participants how to accept responsibility for past rental issues; repair credit; create a workable budget; prioritize housing needs; develop a housing search plan; understand the application and rental process; maintain appropriate housekeeping; communicate effectively with landlords; and earn a Ready-to-Rent Certificate of Completion.
8. HUD FY 2010 FUP NOFA.
9. In Massachusetts, the family, landlord, and housing agency all sign the lease.
10. HUD cites some of these indicators in "Promising Strategies: Family Unification Program (FUP)." September 2011. <http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=strategies-final.pdf>.
11. This meeting is usually held quarterly, but CHA decided to convene monthly meetings when many vouchers are available (i.e., during and after summer 2011).
12. The US Department of Health and Human Services approved title IV-E child welfare waiver demonstration projects in nine states (Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin) in 2012. These demonstration projects involve the waiver of certain requirements of titles IV-E and IV-B of the Social Security Act to allow more flexible use of federal funds in order to test new approaches to service delivery and financing structures. They do not provide additional funding to carry out new services. The nine demonstration projects further refine the target populations they will serve, the interventions they will implement, and the evaluation designs they will use to measure the impact of the demonstration.
13. This chain includes both DCFS employees and employees of private organizations contracted as caseworkers and supervisors. Caseworkers and supervisors working for DCFS or contracted organizations serve a similar role with regard to FUP.
14. A family must be referred to the DCFS FUP liaison by a DCFS caseworker or supervisor. However, sometimes social services agencies outside DCFS (e.g., housing advocates contracted by DCFS) meet families they believe would be appropriate for FUP. The agencies or individuals alert the DCFS FUP liaison, who contacts the family's DCFS caseworker to encourage him or her to complete a FUP referral form.
15. Substandard housing can include housing with inoperable indoor plumbing; with unusable flush toilets, bathtubs, or showers; without electricity or with unsafe electrical service; with unsafe or inadequate heat; with

no kitchen when the unit is supposed to have one; or that has been declared unfit for habitation by a government, department, or agency. Dilapidated housing that endangers health, well-being, and safety, as well as spaces not created or intended to be permanent residences (e.g., abandoned buildings, cars, and shelters) may constitute inadequate housing. Overcrowding, domestic violence, or a home not accessible to a child with a disability may also qualify. These are also the definitions outlined in the HUD notice of funding availability (NOFA) for FUP.

16. It is possible that caseworkers simply are not sure what makes a family eligible for FUP and for a housing voucher or that they have a previously used referral process in mind, as the FUP liaison used to attempt to prioritize referrals more minutely based on need.
17. Housing advocates are contractually obligated to contact a family and set up an intake appointment with them within one business day of DCFS referring the family to the advocate.
18. For families with approved reasonable accommodations or landlord or owner delays, this time may be extended even further.
19. This meeting is usually held quarterly, but CHA convenes monthly meetings when many vouchers are available (i.e., during and after summer 2011).
20. The current round of FUP is an exception: the DCFS FUP liaison is recording and tracking which families referred to CHA for FUP are reunification families versus preservation families, but this information is being recorded to assist an outside research study underway in Chicago during this round of FUP vouchers rather than for a programmatic purpose.
21. Information on Moving to Work can be found at [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/public\\_indian\\_housing/programs/ph/mtw](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/ph/mtw).
22. These eligibility criteria were laid out by HUD in the FUP NOFA.
23. Jenifer B. McKim. "In Tight Local Market, No Relief for Renters, Apartment Hunters." *The Boston Globe*, January 26, 2012. [http://www.boston.com/realestate/news/articles/2012/01/26/home\\_prices\\_may\\_still\\_be\\_down\\_but\\_boston\\_renters\\_hit\\_an\\_all\\_time\\_high\\_in\\_2011/](http://www.boston.com/realestate/news/articles/2012/01/26/home_prices_may_still_be_down_but_boston_renters_hit_an_all_time_high_in_2011/).
24. These categories of inadequate housing come from HUD's definition of "lack of adequate housing" as specified in the FUP NOFA.
25. Office of Policy Development and Research. 2012. "Market at a Glance: Portland, Vancouver, Hillsboro, OR-WA." Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development. <http://www.huduser.org/portal/MCCharts/marketReports.html>.
26. In 2011, HUD began requiring that previously awarded FUP vouchers still under lease by FUP clients remain FUP vouchers upon turnover.
27. When FUP vouchers first became available (per HUD guidelines), SHA notified all DHS child welfare-involved families on the HCV waiting list that they could apply for FUP, but received no responses.
28. A family can be determined to have a lack of adequate housing if the family lives in substandard or dilapidated housing, is displaced by domestic violence, is homeless, is in imminent danger of losing their housing, is living in an overcrowded unit, or is living in housing that is not accessible to a disabled child. These criteria are defined by HUD in the FUP NOFA.
29. SHA added a space for the caseworker's e-mail address on the referral form to streamline this process.
30. *Market at a Glance: Salem, OR CBSA*. 2013. Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research. <http://www.huduser.org/portal/MCCharts/marketReports.html>. (Accessed May 28, 2013.)
31. SHA recognizes three courts: Marion County Drug Court, Family Alternative Court (where an adult with children is the offender), and Supervised Treatment and Recovery (STAR) Court (where a minor is the offender). SHA also examines other factors and may request additional information from FUP applicants, such as current drug status and probation reports.
32. These eligibility criteria were laid out by HUD's NOFA for FUP.

33. When new vouchers were received in 2010 and 2011, Seattle adopted the form developed from their earlier FUP program.
34. As replacement vouchers became available, the YMCA used a lottery system to choose from the applicants who rated highest in eligibility and need.

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