



## THE DUDLEY DIVERSION PILOT PROJECT

Fall 2008

### PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Action for Boston Community Development

The City of Boston

The Family to Family Project

Front Door Collaborative

Homes for Families

HomeStart

MA Department of Transitional Assistance

Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership

One Family, Inc.

Project Hope

St. Mary's Women and Children's Center

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dudley Diversion Project was a collaboration between several service-providing organizations and the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). The purpose of this two-month pilot was to test the use of a diversion intervention for families seeking shelter at DTA's Dudley Square office. Utilizing resource experts, assessment professionals, and \$50,000 in flexible funding the pilot was able to work with 69 families and divert 42% of those families from DTA shelter. Of the diverted families, 10 identified family or friends to live with, 11 were stabilized in their original housing, and 7 were placed in private sector transitional housing. The outcome for one family is unknown. The \$50,000 in flexible funding was spent on one-year subsidies for working families and on rental and utility arrearages to preserve vulnerable tenancies.

*The unique aspects of this Pilot Project that made it so successful include:*

- Utilizing a resources based intervention with families
- Having access to flexible funding that was used for a variety of needs
- Working with a private market housing management company that was willing to take a chance on at-risk families and overlook the credit and CORI issues that are traditional barriers to housing

## THE FINDINGS FROM THE PILOT DATA, LEARNINGS FROM THE STAFF AND FAMILIES' OUTCOMES INFLUENCED SIX MAJOR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

### FINDINGS

Only 46% of the 18-24 year old population in the Pilot Project had a high school diploma or GED and only 12% were employed.

33% of families in the pilot were living in some form of subsidized housing (either as the primary tenant or doubled-up) prior to their shelter request.

During the pilot project, overcrowding, not being on a lease, and being doubled up with a family in subsidized housing were widely reported reasons families sought shelter.

Short-term subsidies serve as a vital bridge for working families to remain housed while increasing their income. Six pilot families utilized flexible funds offered through the pilot project for one-year subsidies.

None of the families in the pilot project were able to use MRVP to avoid homelessness.

Families should be able to access a wide variety of services such as housing, child care, employment, and education without having to go through the shelter system.

### RECOMMENDATION

*Linking workforce, educational, and vocational programs to housing subsidies, especially for young parents.*

*Increase outreach to public and subsidized housing providers and implement an early warning system.*

*Allow families in subsidized or public housing to support a homeless or at-risk family member for a short period of time while a more permanent solution can be arranged.*

*Implement bridge subsidies for working families based on their assessment.*

*Restructure and increase funding to the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) to include flexible short- and long-term subsidies based on a family's assessment.*

*Develop new community access points to service families at-risk of homelessness.*



## PROJECT OVERVIEW

*Throughout 2008, Massachusetts experienced a spike in the number of homeless families*, in September of 2007 there were 1,857 families living in Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) shelters and by September 2008 that number was up to 2,472 families. In an emergency response to this crisis, a team of service-providing organizations and DTA came together to pilot a new response to family homelessness at DTA's Dudley Square Office. This site was selected because it has recently experienced an approximately 15-20% increase in families seeking emergency shelter. This diverse group of providers began planning the 60-day Dudley Diversion Pilot project in late August 2008, and the pilot project was launched at the end of September 2008. The purpose of the pilot project was to test the effectiveness of diversion intervention at DTA's front door and to collect data to better understand the needs of families seeking shelter. Staffs from multiple service organizations with a variety of expertise were brought together on a voluntary basis to participate in this pilot for two months. The donation of staff time highlights the widespread commitment to identifying innovative solutions to homelessness and allowed the team to keep costs low and direct all pilot funds toward assistance for families.

The goal of diversion intervention is to work with families in immediate housing crises to locate resources and community supports that can prevent their need for emergency shelter. The diversion intervention was targeted to families on the brink of homelessness who came to DTA to access Emergency Shelter. Families were offered the option of working with the Diversion Team upon arrival at DTA's Dudley Square office. Families who chose the Diversion Team option worked with both an assessment and resource group to identify housing alternatives to shelter. The assessment group was made up of a clinical provider, DTA frontline staff, and peers (mothers who have recently experienced homelessness). The resources group was made up of housing search workers, prevention specialists, and housing resource experts. The assessment group met with families to gather critical information and to assess the nature of their crisis. The resource group then worked to match the right resources with families based on the needs highlighted in the assessment and to help families identify alternatives to shelter. These alternatives included staying with family members, stabilizing their existing housing or helping families quickly move into more affordable housing.

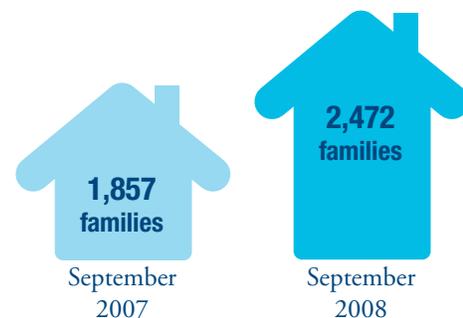
The team of service providers and DTA staff chose a diversion intervention because helping families identify alternatives to homelessness and shelter saves families the trauma of homelessness

and has the potential to save the Commonwealth significant financial resources. Like traditional prevention models, diversion is a cost effective way of directing essential housing and economic resources to families without having to go through the costly shelter system. While the costs of shelter programs vary across the Commonwealth, the average cost of a DTA shelter is \$2,800 per month per family.

The Dudley Diversion Pilot Project initially targeted young parents between the ages of 18 and 24 who were seeking shelter. This young parent population represents approximately 25% of the homeless population under DTA's system of care. Despite this effort, the team found that these narrow participation criteria limited the number of families accessing diversion services. Therefore, after 4 weeks, the criterion for eligibility was expanded to include all families seeking shelter. This resulted in a rapid increase in the number of families accessing diversion services. In total, over the two months, the Pilot Project worked with 69 families who had a total of 89 children. The young parent population continues to be a challenging population to serve because of their limited work and housing rental histories; new interventions must continue to be explored.

Through this collaborative process, service providers and DTA case workers learned new techniques and resources for helping families avoid homelessness and researchers and policy makers are learning about the various interventions that are most useful for families facing a variety of circumstances. The pilot's flexible model and access to flexible resources allowed case workers to get the right resources to the right people at the right time rather than applying a one-size-fits-all solution.

# OF HOMELESS FAMILIES IN MASSACHUSETTS INCREASES 33% FROM 2007-2008



## RESULTS

*There were several key findings that came out of the pilot.*

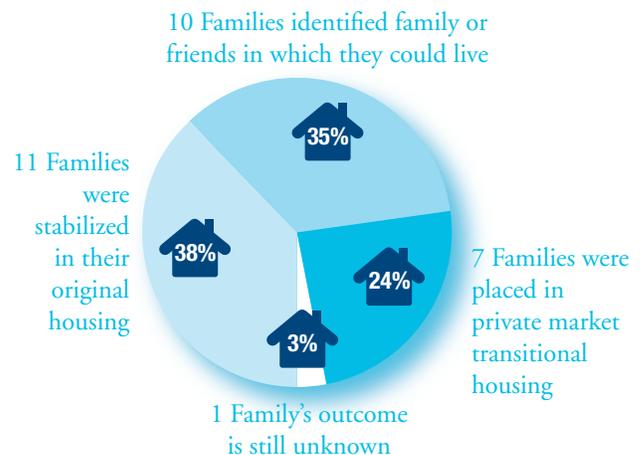
- Of the 69 participating families, 42% were able to be diverted from DTA shelter. Of this 42% (29 families), 86% remained out of DTA shelters after 7 weeks.
- Of the diverted families, 10 identified family or friends to live with, 11 were stabilized in their original housing, and 7 were placed in private sector transitional housing. The outcome for one family is unknown.
- A variety of resources made it possible to prevent homelessness for these 29 families, including:
  - Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership's (MBHP) Moving to Work Program
  - Community-based prevention resources
  - Negotiation/mediation supports with landlords or primary tenants
  - Private sector transitional housing units
  - Diversion pilot flexible funding (A total of \$50,001 was spent. Sources of this flexible funding included RAFT funding from MBHP and flexible funding from One Family, Inc., The Family to Family Project, the Front Door Collaborative, and the City of Boston.)
  - Rental Assistance For Families In Transition (RAFT)
  - The Family to Family Project grants

*The pilot project's assessment identified a few key characteristics about participating families that are important in order to understand their housing challenges and potential solutions.*

- 71% of participating families were unemployed.
- Only 34 (49%) of participating parents reported having their High School Diploma or GED.
- Participating families' primary sources of income included: employment (25%); public assistance (TAFDC, SSI/SSDI and Unemployment Insurance) (42%); child support (1%); and 29% reported having no income at all. Data is missing for 2 families.
- Families came to the pilot from a variety of housing situations, including:
  - Homelessness: 10 (14%)
  - Their own apartment or room in a house: 10 (14%)
  - Couch surfing: 5 (7%)<sup>4</sup>
  - Doubled up with friends or family: 31 (45%)<sup>5</sup>
  - Living with parents: 9 (13%)
  - NA: 4 (6%)

- 12 of the families (17%) were living in market rate housing, and 23 (33%) were living in some type of subsidized housing. This information is unknown for 34 families.<sup>6</sup>
- 14 families reported not being on the lease at their current housing as a main reason for seeking shelter. 27 families cited overcrowding, and 11 reported that they could not afford their rent and/or utility payments. Other reasons for leaving their housing situations included being asked to leave, eviction, conflict with other residents, safety concerns, and no longer being able to stay because their host family lives in subsidized housing.

### OF THE 29 FAMILIES DIVERTED FROM SHELTER



<sup>2</sup>Private sector transitional housing refers to the apartments made available by the Mayo Group through a separate pilot project between the management group and DTA. These units are available to families within the DTA system and families receive supportive services and subsidies for one year within this pilot.

<sup>3</sup>Front Door Collaborative was formerly the Boston Homelessness Prevention Clearinghouse.

<sup>4</sup>Couch surfing means families that stay with different friends or family for a short period of time before moving on to another friend or family member.

<sup>5</sup>Doubled-up families refers to a family that is staying with another family for an extended period of time.

<sup>6</sup>This question was added half way through the pilot.

## LEARNINGS

Integrating assessment and resources expertise at DTA's front door is important for effective service delivery. When our assessment and resource groups began intervening simultaneously with families, our outcomes improved. The Diversion Team was able to serve more families in a timely manner and was able to allocate more family-specific resources.

Having access to private sector transitional housing units was essential to finding housing alternatives for working families who would otherwise turn to shelter. Because DTA guaranteed stabilization services for families in these units, the Mayo Group, the management company who oversees these private apartments, did not run CORI or credit checks. Their willingness to work with DTA families is tremendously helpful in overcoming barriers to housing.

Rapid access to flexible funds was vital to providing resources for stabilization. The funds available to the Diversion Team were able to be used for a variety of needs whereas other program dollars have specific use requirements. The team used these funds for rental and utility arrearages and for short-term subsidies for working families. In total, the team spent \$50,000 in flexible funding for nine families to pay utility and rental arrearages for three families and to pay one-year subsidies for six families. The six families who received one-year subsidies averaged a cost of \$7,564<sup>7</sup> and the three families who used the money for rental and utility arrearages averaged a cost of \$1,538. While this price tag per family may seem high, one year of subsidy is significantly less costly than one year of shelter (\$33,600 per family per year).

This unprecedented collaboration allowed service providers and DTA staff to build strong working relationships that fostered an important exchange of knowledge and resources. Additionally, this collaboration allowed the team to offer families a menu of resources that were able to meet the variety of needs presented. Partnering organizations not only donated staff to this effort but also simplified their application process for participating families and provided unusually rapid responses to requests from pilot staff and families. These accommodations were made available for this Pilot Project, but a more wide scale replication of that accommodation would be helpful for all at-risk families.

## THE VALUE OF FLEXIBLE FUNDING



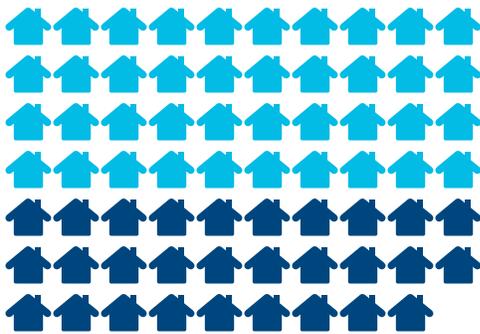
Savings were derived from the following calculations: The average cost of a shelter stay for a family for one year is \$33,600. At an average length stay of 7 months, the cost per family would be \$19,600. For the nine families diverted, the savings is \$126,400 (\$176,400 minus the \$50,000 spent in flexible funding).

<sup>7</sup>All six of these families were placed in DTA/Mayo Group Units. This subsidy amount is sufficient to support these families for one year because all six families are working. These six families are only utilizing the Diversion Pilot subsidy and are not accessing other permanent subsidies at this time. This price does not include the intensive case management and permanent housing search services that the families will receive from Project Hope.

## PILOT PROJECT WITH DTA'S DUDLEY SQUARE OFFICE

69 Participating Families

29 Families (42%) Diverted from Shelter



### AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

An initial component of the diversion strategy was to conduct home visits with young parents prior to shelter entry. The proposed purpose of the home visit was to assess the young parent's original living environment and if the housing was deemed safe, attempt to overcome barriers to remaining in that housing. Under the current law, home visits cannot be required and were offered on a volunteer basis. In our pilot project, no families consented to the home visit. While home visits were unable to be tested at this time, the Diversion Team remains committed to exploring this idea to allow for mediation, negotiation, and resource allocation with primary tenants or parents of many of the young parents seeking shelter from DTA.

Another challenge the Diversion Team experienced was in follow-up with families. We were able to track families' entry into DTA shelters through DTA's database. We attempted to conduct follow up phone calls with all families who were diverted from shelter to assess what aspects of the pilot worked best for them and to learn about their current living situation. This follow-up methodology failed because we were only able to make contact with a handful of participants seven weeks after their initial meeting with the Diversion Team. This failure maybe due in part to a system-wide lack of follow-up, a lack of a personal relationship between provider and client, or the transient nature of many of the families' lives.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

*The results and learnings from this project have influenced six major policy recommendations. These changes to policy and practice would make diversion an even more effective tool to ending family homelessness.*

- 1. Linking workforce, educational, and vocational programs to housing subsidies, especially for young parents.** Only 46% of this younger population in the pilot had a high school diploma or GED and only 12% were employed. Linking housing subsidies to access to education and workforce development could be an effective way to bring these resources to young parents. For young parents linking a transitional jobs model and academic achievement allows families to progress incrementally, attain job skills, and compete with highly educated job seekers. The transitional jobs model is likely to be a part of the 2009 Federal Economic Stimulus Package and insuring that its benefits reach families at-risk of homelessness is essential.
- 2. Increase outreach to public and subsidized housing providers and implement an early warning system.** 33% of families in the pilot were living in some form of subsidized housing (either as the primary tenant or doubled-up) prior to their shelter request. Public and subsidized housing providers should implement an early warning eviction prevention system that could help keep many of these families housed.
- 3. Allow families in subsidized or public housing to support a homeless or at-risk family member for a short period of time while a more permanent solution can be arranged.** During the pilot project, overcrowding, not being on a lease, and being doubled up with a family in subsidized housing were widely reported reasons families sought shelter. A 'waiver to take in' would allow families in public housing to host a family member for short time without punishment or risk to their own tenancies. Local Housing Authorities should also be more flexible around adding members to the household so that those who are doubled-up can move from a precarious living situation to permanent housing.<sup>8</sup>
- 4. Implement bridge subsidies for working families based on their assessment.** Short-term subsidies serve as a vital bridge for working families to remain housed while increasing their income. Six pilot families utilized flexible funds offered through the pilot project for one-year subsidies. During this time, they will be working with community based organizations to increase their income and stabilize their housing. The average cost of this one-year subsidy was \$7,564, alternatively one year in a DTA shelter costs approximately \$33,600 per family (average shelter stays are between six and seven months).<sup>9</sup>

**5. Restructure and increase funding to the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP).** None of the families in the pilot project were able to use MRVP to avoid homelessness. The MRVP is drastically underfunded and structured in such a way that keeps it from meeting the needs of families. It does not include an escrow/savings component, and there is no link to education and job training. Additionally, the lack of flexibility within the program restricts its ability to provide short-term and flexible funds that would allow families to stay housed.

**6. Develop new community access points to service families at-risk of homelessness.** Families should be able to access a wide variety of services such as housing, child care, employment, and education without having to go through the shelter system. By coordinating services in a family-friendly community-based setting, families would be able to more easily access services. These access points should bring together the services and resources of multiple state agencies in an integrated way including: Department of Transitional Assistance, Department of Housing and Community Development, Department of Children and Families, and the Department of Mental Health. Such community-based access points should be targeted to the most vulnerable neighborhoods.

## MAINSTREAMING DIVERSION

If a diversion strategy is to become a standard aspect of the Commonwealth's system to end and prevent family homelessness there are several aspects of the model that are essential for successful replication. The integration of flexible funds with resources expertise (someone who has a sophisticated understanding of the local community, landlords, and state agencies) is essential to diverting families from shelter.

The Pilot Project had great success working with the Mayo Group because of their willingness to overlook credit and CORI issues. This flexibility and willingness to work with DTA families should be expanded to public and subsidized housing providers as well as other private management companies. As diversion becomes more widely utilized it will be important to partner with housing providers who will be willing to work with at risk families and accept families with less than perfect credit and CORI.

Accommodations by participating organizations to streamline their funding and service application process and guaranteeing a rapid response were central to success. This simplified process and rapid response must be replicated within new diversion projects. As the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness' Regional Networks begin their work this rapid access to resources between organizations can and should be included in each region.

One of the most essential aspects of the Pilot Project's model was the use of resources experts that could rapidly identify community resources, work with potential landlords, and connect families with community-based supports. The clinical expertise and peer assessment components of the model could have been put to better use if the model had involved long term support services, but this fast paced short-term intervention model depended primarily on the ability to rapidly access flexible funding and community-based resources. Intensive case management, clinical expertise and the peer assessment model should all be considered when looking a long-term models for homeless prevention and stabilization.

<sup>8</sup>Individuals or families added to households would have to agree to have their income counted for the purpose of determining the total rent share to be paid by the tenants.

<sup>9</sup>\$7,564 was calculated as a sufficient subsidy for these six families because of their employment and income.

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### **\*Data Disclaimer\***

This data is based on self-reported information collected at the time of the initial diversion meeting.

The 18-24 year old population maybe overrepresented in these findings because for the first few weeks of the pilot 18-24 year olds were the target population.

This information is based on diversion assessments documents and resource documents from the Diversion pilot and there was limited ability to confirm its accuracy.

Some data fields have several NA answers and that is due in part to questions being added to the assessment over time.

