

BRIDGES TO HOUSING EVALUATION 2009 YEAR-END REPORT



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The *Bridges to Housing Evaluation: 2009 Year-End Report* was published April of 2010 by the Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bridges to Housing (B2H) is a regional initiative serving high need homeless families in Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties in Oregon, and Clark County in Washington. B2H provides permanent housing and intensive case management to stabilize families and assist them to move towards greater safety, stability, and wellbeing. Since the fall of 2006, when the first families were enrolled, B2H has served nearly 300 families through seven providers in the region.

This Year-End Report for 2009 focuses on core outcomes for B2H families that have been enrolled 18 months or longer, examines changes that have occurred in the lives of families as they near the end of their participation in the program, and presents new data on retention rates and early exits.

Overall, findings suggest that the initial gains in safety, stability, and child wellbeing that we found when families entered the program have largely been sustained for the families who have remained in the program 18 months or more. Moreover, dramatic changes have occurred for many families, with improvements in basic life skills, social support networks, and progress towards education or employment for heads of households. The impact on children has been particularly evident, with substantial gains in success at school or in childcare settings, peer relationships, access to needed services, and opportunities to participate in new recreational and social activities.

- **Family stability.** B2H has succeeded in its primary goal of reducing instability in housing for families in the program. Among the 81 families enrolled 18 months or longer when data were compiled for this report, the very few moves that occurred between 12 and 18 months were to larger or more desirable units within the same housing sites. This is in contrast to a history of multiple episodes of homelessness prior to enrolling in B2H and two or more moves within a six-month period before entering the program for two-thirds of the families.
- **Family safety.** The dramatic improvement in safety from domestic violence has also been maintained. Forty-two percent of families reported one or more instances of domestic violence in the six months prior to intake. This dropped to less than 5% in the six months after entering B2H and remained at 5% at 18 months. Safety for children has been mixed. A few families have had a recurrence of child protective service involvement

or a new placement of a child in out-of-home care. Child protective service concerns have also emerged for some families in the program who were not initially involved with the child welfare system. In other cases, a child has been returned from care, reunifying the family.

- **Child wellbeing.** At 18 months, nearly three-quarters of heads of households report that their children are performing at grade level or better in contrast to a little less than half at intake. Moreover, the number of heads of households who said they were ‘unsure’ whether their child was meeting grade-level benchmarks dropped from 42% of the parents to 13%. Children have also remained stable in childcare or education settings and a larger percentage of them are involved in organized social or recreational activities. All of the children have a primary health care provider by 18 months in B2H (in contrast to 82% when they entered) and nearly all (96%) have primary dental health care (in contrast to 60% at intake).

Families as They Prepare to Exit Bridges to Housing

More detailed reports from case managers reveal that progress for adults as well as children in families that have been enrolled 18 months or longer is striking in many areas, particularly with respect to increasing basic life skills and developing healthy and expanding social support networks. Case managers report that 88% of families have shown improvement in these areas. Progress indicators suggest that families have made special gains in the realms of:

Personal Finance

- 67% of families are managing money better.
- 49% of families have paid off a debt.
- 40% of families have increased their monetary assets.
- 32% of families opened a checking account.
- 21% of families opened a savings account.

Communication Skills

- 63% of heads of households have reached out to neighbors or someone in the community.
- 59% of heads of households are able to manage conflict better.
- 56% of heads of households have improved their communication skills.

Access to Transportation

- 71% of families increased their ability to use public transportation or purchased a car.
- 26% of families had someone obtain a driver’s license.

Progress towards employment. Heads of households may enter B2H with minimal preparation for work and with histories and challenges that can present nearly insurmountable obstacles to employment. Most heads of households need support to address pre-employment goals. In terms of skills and training, case managers' reports show that nearly half of currently enrolled B2H families with 18 months or more in the program have someone in the family who has obtained new job skills. Families have acquired skills in a multitude of ways:

- In 41% of families, someone in the household entered college.
- In 26%, someone started volunteering.
- In 23%, someone in the family completed a job training or certification program.
- In 10% someone in the family completed their GED.

At 18 months, employment had risen slightly from 18% of heads of households who were enrolled at intake to 23%. The figures rise again after the 18 month data collection point. More than a third of heads of households who have been enrolled 18 months or longer (including some who have remained in the program beyond 24 months) were employed. However, only a small portion of these jobs are adequate to support a family. Among the 34% of heads of households who are employed, more than half are working in jobs that are full-time, yet only a quarter of these jobs are full-time with benefits and a living wage.

On the other hand, the majority of unemployed B2H heads of households in this sample are making strides towards self-sufficiency and future wellbeing. They are either in school, in a job training program, or actively seeking employment. Some are engaged in all three. In fact, more heads of households are in school (sometimes also working part-time or attending a training program) than are simply employed, and given the realities of the employment picture, this is a promising finding. Many of these families will remain in B2H beyond 24 months so that their case managers can continue to assist them through the next steps. This will allow families to continue to have access to childcare funds that are attached to B2H while they prepare for futures with increased potential for self-sufficiency.

Program Retention and Early Exits

As reported, stability and safety for families in Bridges to Housing remains improved across all time points relative to their experiences and circumstances prior to entering the program. Moreover, there has been substantial progress for many families in multiple areas of their lives. At the same time, not all of the families who have enrolled in B2H are reflected in these findings. Some families exited along the way, either because they chose to (and in some cases were doing very well) or because they were evicted from housing and/or terminated from B2H. In considering the overall effectiveness of the program and designing a continuum of

services to meet the needs of all homeless families, it is important to include program retention and the nature of early exits.

- The six-month retention rate in B2H is very high, with 92% of families remaining across all of the providers, and this is relatively consistent across providers and jurisdictions, suggesting that B2H case managers are successfully enrolling and engaging families and assisting them through the first difficult period of stabilization.
- Twelve-month retention rates are also high, with more than 75% of families remaining at least a year in the program.
- Between 12 and 18 months, the overall retention declines to 57%, with a wider range of retention rates across the providers and jurisdictions. In a few instances, exits between 12 and 18 months reflect program ‘completion’ but for most, exits are of some concern.
- Twenty-four month retention rates indicate that 57% of the families are either still in the program (and may remain longer) or have ‘completed’ by that time, suggesting that virtually all of the families who are still engaged at 18 months remain engaged.

There are a number of circumstances that may help explain the drop in retention between 12 and 18 months. For example, families who have been on the Section 8 wait list may finally come up to receive a voucher and leave because they will be able to secure housing elsewhere. In other cases, families may have found employment or developed a new relationship that results in a different housing opportunity. However, discussions with case managers, in combination with the HMIS data on retention, suggest a pattern among some of these families similar to one that was identified and addressed early in the program. From case managers’ perspectives, many heads of households in B2H have lived most of their lives in turmoil, have experienced prolonged and complex trauma since childhood, and have little experience of themselves (or their children) without a backdrop of crisis and chaos. Some have difficulty tolerating the unfamiliar calmer existence and lifestyle that emerge around 12 months after they enroll and may begin to make choices that bring crisis and turmoil back into their lives (e.g., returning to a violent relationship, relapsing with drugs or alcohol, etc.). Case managers and supervisors who meet regularly in the B2H Provider Workgroup are sharing information and ideas about how to help families through this phase so that they and their children can realize the benefit of the work they have invested up to that point.

Summary

Over the past three years, the evaluation has gathered compelling evidence from multiple sources that Bridges to Housing has made a tremendous difference in the lives of many families. There has also been evidence of needs and challenges that have been difficult to address effectively and that have limited or curtailed progress for some families. Some of these challenges have been at the individual or family level; others have reflected gaps in services in the community and still others point to

systems or policy issues that affect both implementation and outcomes. As private philanthropy for B2H wanes over the next two years, county and local jurisdictions will need to determine which aspects of B2H are important to maintain in their communities and how to use the lessons learned over the past three years to strengthen the continuum of services for homeless children and families.