



Canon Barcus: Housing for Long-Term Homeless Families

Canon Barcus, located in San Francisco, California, is a 48-unit permanent supportive housing apartment building for homeless, very low-income families living with special needs, particularly those related to substance use, mental health, and/or HIV/AIDS. Canon Barcus staff and their colleagues in San Francisco are at the forefront of providing supportive housing for families, as described below.

Also available are a [complete profile](#) of Canon Barcus and a [photo tour](#) of the building.

Introduction

Recently, there has been an increased focus on serving people who are homeless for the long term. Much of this increased focus is attributable to the prioritization of this population by the federal government. This has led local governments and community based organizations to carefully examine existing programs or create new programs that serve the long-term homeless. In working with this population, many have noted that families who are homeless for the long term are often overlooked. These families are often part of a second generation of homelessness and are typically young women with young children. Many of the parents have been through the foster care system. While the needs of these families is great, newer federal funding specifically targeted for work with the long-term homeless sets a narrow definition of long-term or “chronic” homelessness that excludes families. Without additional funding, many service providers and housing programs do not have sufficient resources to work with homeless families.

Despite funding challenges, more providers across the country are focusing on families who have been homeless for the long term. Many of these organizations already serve individual adults who have been homeless for the long term. Others have served families in shelter or transitional settings and are now looking to shift to a permanent supportive housing model, recognizing that those homeless for the long term are often not well-served in transitional settings. This focus on long-term homeless families has highlighted considerations around building design, property management, and service provision that are above and beyond what is required when serving individual adults. In general, families tend to be more “dynamic” and often present more complex needs than individuals, which require flexibility and responsiveness on the part of housing and service providers.

The following information was drawn from the experiences of family supportive housing service providers, including some from Canon Barcus Community House in San Francisco. In early 2005, CSH will release “The Road Map: Lessons Learned in Family Supportive Housing,” which will build on these observations and recommendations based on the experiences of family supportive housing providers in San Francisco, Minneapolis, Chicago and New York.

Building Design

Designing housing for families who have experienced long-term homelessness presents unique challenges. Many families homeless for the long term have been living in shelters or cars where personal space is at a premium. Providing a sufficient number of rooms in units to comfortably

accommodate families of various sizes must be a design goal and in fact can be therapeutic. Generally, families value privacy. More rooms, even if they are smaller than if a given unit had fewer rooms, allows for teenagers to perhaps have a private bedroom and other family considerations.

Common space in family buildings should include safe outdoor play space for children that is on an interior courtyard or otherwise adequately protected from the street. Similarly, adequate indoor common space for children and youth can serve a range of purposes, from play space in bad weather to a homework/learning center. Such indoor space must be flexible in use and not over-designed for a particular age group, since the age range of the eventual tenants is unknown and will change over the life of the building. The key is to proactively plan for adequate children and youth space, whatever its future use may be.

Property Management

Property managers, when wearing their professional hats, may see children as an insurance and safety risk in addition to a source of increased wear and tear on the property. To reduce risk, property managers may create rules that say that children cannot play in common areas without adult supervision. This is very difficult for the children and parents alike, especially if there is not dedicated space for children, and it is even more difficult to enforce consistently. Parents may need to learn or re-learn their responsibility for their children's behavior, especially those parents who are newly reunified with their children.

Property managers may also find that dealing with surrounding market-rate tenants or homeowners is more difficult when children live in a building because the children can be seen as a nuisance by the neighbors.

Services

Providing supportive services to families who have been homeless for the long-term is similar to providing services to individuals. Both populations typically require services around substance use, mental illness, money management, and housing retention. In addition, however, families also need a range of services specifically for children and youth: health, mental health, after school, and activity programs. The specific need for services is difficult to determine in advance, given that the specific age range of the children is not known until the building is occupied. When planning services for adult tenants, it is important to recognize that parents may require additional services such as assistance with parenting skills, as well as navigating the child protection system, the school system, and childcare. With children in the household, issues such as appropriate food budgeting, shopping, and meal preparation can also take on greater importance.

Like individual adults leaving homelessness, many parents living in supportive housing are overwhelmed with the stresses of life. Many families moving into supportive housing may be reunifying with children who have been in the child protection system, which brings personal challenges as well as another layer of bureaucracy to deal with. Children may just add to the stress and parents may be more than willing to send their children to activities outside of the home as a way of decreasing the stress of parenting. At the same time, parents may fear that when their children are out of the home, they will tell family "secrets" to staff or neighbors. Children often

carry with them the shame and hurt of their family situation and are often well aware that other families around them have had similar experiences. Within this environment, service providers need to be careful to support parents in their parenting role, instead of taking on the role of parents themselves.

Other challenges specific to families leaving long-term homelessness may include budgeting, child care, employment, housing subsidy complexities, and domestic violence.

- Families may find that it is difficult to budget because their children have many unexpected and unrealistic needs or wants.
- Parents may have trouble making and keeping appointments because they have to care for their children, which limits their availability and ability to plan for meetings, events, etc.
- Some parents may desire to stay home with their children (rather than work) due to cultural expectations or safety concerns. In other cases, parents may not have this option due to requirements imposed by their public assistance. The work requirement may make it especially difficult for parents to balance their own well-being and treatment needs with the needs of their children.
- Providing services to families often requires working outside of the typical workweek, which can be difficult for staff.
- Some families rely on their children to retain their subsidized housing and may consider their children to be, at least in part, an economic resource. This may make the recognition of abuse or neglect especially difficult. Communities must examine how to help families keep their children safe.
- Supportive services personnel working with families may have additional challenges stopping the cycle of family violence.

Finally, the health and safety of children is especially important to consider when parents are struggling with active substance use, substance use relapse, or mental health issues. Creating a safe environment where parents can work with staff on issues of substance use or mental illness without fear of losing their housing or custody of their children is difficult. A healthy and consistent approach to reducing harm while strengthening housing retention in family supportive housing can be ensured by in-depth and regular staff training.