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**Nature and Scope of the Problem**

The current economic recession has driven tens of thousands of families and children into homelessness. The National Center on Family Homelessness estimates that in the course of a year, at least 1.35 million children are homeless. Some 41% of those sleeping on the streets, under bridges, in hallways and dumpsters throughout Los Angeles County are families and youth and 42% of children living with homeless parents are under the age of six.

Parents who are without housing are forced to place their children in unsafe and hazardous environments because of the lack of adequate, affordable housing for them and their children. Analysis of the Fragile Families database, comprised of at-risk families whose mothers have recently given birth, shows that among those families living below 50% of the poverty line, homelessness is related to having no housing assistance. Yet while many Departments of Public Social Services subsidize rent for families “at risk”, they do not consider homelessness to constitute risk for the release of funds to house them.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has estimated that 30 percent of homeless persons in families are unsheltered, due to the lack of shelter capacity for families in communities across the country.

This mismatch between shelter capacity and family need jeopardizes the safety and well-being of homeless children and their parents. According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, homeless children, in comparison to those who live in homes with their parents, are:

- Four times more likely to have developmental delays;
- Twice as likely to have learning disabilities;
- Twice as likely to repeat a grade, often due to frequent absences and moves (28% of homeless children go to three or more schools in a single year).
- Get sick twice as often. They have:
  - Six times as many speech problems
  - Five times more stomach problems
  - Four times as many asthma attacks

Twice as many hospitalizations  
Twice as many ear infections  
They go hungry twice as often as other children.  
20% of homeless preschoolers have severe emotional problems requiring professional care.  
47% of homeless school-age children have problems of anxiety, depression, or withdrawal.

Every day, homeless children are confronted with stressful, traumatic events.

Within a single year:

97% of homeless children move, many three times;  
Many are separated from their families, put in foster care or to live with relatives;  
25% have witnessed violence within their families.

In addition to the more than 1,350,000 children and youth who experience homelessness each year, hundreds of thousands more live in substandard and overcrowded conditions placing them at heightened risk of illness, serious injuries, hunger and educational delays.

As many as 1.5 million additional persons, many of them families and youth, may become homeless in 2009 and 2010 due to the current recession.

### **The Cost of the Problem**

The Office of the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHS) concluded that preventing a family from becoming homeless costs one-sixth as much as intervening once the family has become homeless. (U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services Office of the Inspector General (1990). Homeless Prevention Programs. Washington, DC: Author.)

As reported by Culhane, Parker, Gross, & Sykes in *Accountability, Cost Effectiveness, and Program Performance: Progress Since 1998*, the cost for long-stay families in shelters ranged from \$27,000 to \$55,000 per family.

But there are greater costs to the child, the community, and public resources. Bantchevak, Bartle-Hering, Dashora, Glebova, & Slesnick in "Problem Behaviors of Homeless Youth: A Social Capital Perspective," *Journal of Human Ecology*, 23, 285-293 (2008) document how homeless youth, one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in our society are, by their inexperience, more subject to accelerated psychosocial problems. They are 69% more likely to develop problems of substance abuse, their high risk sexual behavior and will make them 71% more likely to contract HIV than non-homeless peers. 29 to 83% of homeless youth met the criteria for clinical depression and 75% reported involvement in criminal activity.

## **Child Welfare Agencies Involvement: Foster Care**

The lack of affordable, permanent housing is the primary cause of family homelessness, and an influential factor in child welfare involvement among homeless families.

The doctrine of *parens patriae* mandates the state to intervene to protect children from abuse and neglect, resulting in states using Child Protective Services to place children in foster care. While such placements may be essential where the family is abusive or negligent, but does it apply to all families who are rendered homeless?

Every day, homeless parents are forced to choose between keeping their children – often infants below the age of five – on the streets with them or surrendering them to foster care.

Removal from their parents' care is traumatic enough; most placements are subject to numerous disruptions as children are moved from one foster home to another. Many studies report that when an attachment with a primary caregiver is disrupted, infants experience serious effective, behavioral, and social difficulties.

Harman Childs, & Kelleher in 2000 found that children in foster care were 3 to 10 times more likely to receive a mental health diagnosis, had 6.5 times more mental health claims, and were 7.5 times more likely to be hospitalized for a mental health condition than children on AFDC. Over 80% of foster care youths had developmental, emotional, of behavioral problems.

Wolanin, in *Opportunities for Foster Youth* (2005), reported that 46% of foster youth do not complete high school, And after aging out of foster care, 60% were unemployed.

Research reported in the *Child Welfare*, Special Issue on Housing and Homelessness, found that the average annual cost of keeping the average child welfare size family (2.7 children) in foster care amounted to \$47,608.

This is more than three times the average cost of providing permanent housing with support services for a year = \$13,412.

Nationally, Housing with Supportive Services would cost \$16, 923,478 for that Foster Care population with Services for which we now pay \$53,286,333. We could house children now in foster care with their families at a savings of \$36,362,854 each year!

Once youth are in the foster care system, Child Protective Services are unlikely to reunite them with their natural parents who are homeless.

46 percent of youth placed in foster care do not complete high school and as a whole experience greater economic, social and behavioral problems and similarly less than 10 percent of foster youth (compared to 60 percent of the general population) obtain a college degree and 60 percent remain unemployed after high school.

Extensive studies have documented irreparable psychological harm to children removed from their parents and, as is usual in foster care, transferred from one foster placement to another, resulting in higher rates of illness, mental illness, delinquency, and crime.

The foster care experience may exacerbate emotional and behavioral problems since multiple placements are legion and each stay is tenuous, of uncertain duration. Moreover, foster parents often have little or no emotional ties to children placed with them and may be less likely to advocate necessary services to address their needs. It is always easier to move them along to another placement.

However, 30 percent of all youth in foster care could be reunited with their biological families if safe affordable housing were available to them.

Reunification rates are 50 percent lower for families that experienced a homeless episode during the 12 months immediately prior to foster care placement than reunification rates for their poor, housed counterparts.(Courtney, M., McMurtry, S.L., & Zinn, A. (2004). Housing problems experienced by recipients of child welfare services. *Child Welfare, Special Issue: Housing and Homelessness*, 83(5), 393-422)

One study found that delayed reunification due to housing problems cost an estimated \$2.9 million, based on a delay of six months on average per case.( Kellam, S. (2001). When foster care and homelessness intersect. *ABA Child Law Practice*, 20(4), 50-55, citing a study in Toronto, Canada)

These studies demonstrate a clear need to develop programs that place an emphasis on keeping families together and facilitating housing retention and/or rapid rehousing (“housing first”) into permanent, affordable housing.

These studies also demonstrate the need to increase the capacity of child welfare agencies, individually or through partnerships, to address the housing problems of the children and families they serve.

The strongest predictor of exits out of homelessness for families is receipt of subsidized housing.

The *Family Unification Program* (FUP) not only produced documented savings (compared to the cost of foster placement) but also resulted in an 88 percent retention rate among homeless families who were provided a FUP voucher. All the recently homeless families who retained their housing over a 12 month period, 90 percent of the families at risk of having a child placed in an out-of-home placement remained intact and 94 percent of families with children in foster care were reunited.

### **The Need to re-Prioritize Services for Homeless Children and their Families**

No program currently combines the social work tasks overseen by the Child Protective Services and the housing-based resources provided by HUD with adequate funding and organizational authority to act in the placement and servicing of homeless children with their families.

Congress has asserted a commitment to protecting children from neglect and abuse by authorizing and appropriating funds for the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, of 1980 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.

Children are not only homeless within a family unit, but also as unaccompanied youth.

Many homeless unaccompanied youth have also experienced child abuse and/or neglect and exhibit high rates of substance abuse and mental health problems.

Many homeless youth avoid shelters and other services because they fear being taken into the foster care system.

Youth who turn 18 or 21 and consequently “age out” of foster care often lack the financial, social and personal resources to live independently.

### **The Right of Children to Housing**

In 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt declared that the U.S. had adopted a “second Bill of Rights,” including the right to a decent home.

The U.S. signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, recognizing housing as a human right.

Over 3/4 of Americans believe that adequate housing is a basic human right, and 2/3 believe that government programs may need to be expanded to ensure this right.

The U.S. has signed and ratified the International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights (ICCPR), which states, inter alia, “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

The Human Rights Committee in its 2006 review of the U.S. under the ICCPR, expressed concern about the disparate racial impact of homelessness on minority homeless populations and recommended that the U.S. “should take measures, including adequate and adequately implemented policies, to ensure the cessation of this form of de facto and historically generated racial discrimination.”

The U.S. signed the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights in 1977 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1995 and is therefore committed to uphold the object and purpose of these treaties, including the right of children to adequate housing.

The Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements, signed by the U.S. in 1996, recognizes the right to adequate housing and the particular needs of children and youth for safe, healthy and secure living conditions.

Based on all these factors and reasons, we, students and faculty in the School of Social Work of the University of Southern California, for whom I have been invited to speak, call upon the House of Representatives to:

- (1) affirm that protection of the family unit is a basic human right in line with our American values.
- (2) recognize that all Americans, in particular children, have a basic human right to adequate housing.
- (3) recognize the significant harms and costs that homelessness poses to American children and youth, family life and values, and to American society.
- (4) recognize the unacceptably large number of children and youth in the United States who yearly experience homeless, often due simply to their families' inability to find affordable housing.
- (5) recognize that foster care placement for homeless youth is an inadequate, possibly damaging and expensive substitute for assistance in retaining and/or obtaining affordable housing, for families whose separation, whether initial or ongoing, is primarily due to a lack of stable permanent housing.
- (6) call upon HHS and other federal agencies serving foster children to prioritize providing homeless children with service infused permanent with their parent(s) over foster care placements when such placements would be made for economic reasons.
- (7) support the expansion of rental housing assistance programs to serve families at risk of homelessness, and the adoption of policies to encourage state and local public housing authorities to create or expand set-aside voucher programs for homeless families and youth, including partnerships between homeless services system and mainstream systems such as child welfare and foster care.
- (8) call upon HUD and the Interagency Council on Homelessness to create concrete goals and timelines that aim to specifically end child and youth homelessness in the United States of America.

- (9) support the strengthening of educational access and stability for homeless children and youth through the reauthorization and the full funding of the education title of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.
  - (10) support removing regulatory restrictions to enable shelter funding, including hotel vouchers, to be used for alternative shelter models, particularly the masterleasing of apartments from private landlords, in order to reduce the unsheltered homeless family population.
  - (11) support the creation of projects that provide services to parents and other caretakers concerned about youth's behavior to prevent possible homelessness.
  - (12) support the inclusion and expansion of homelessness prevention funding in future federal economic stimulus packages.
  - (13) support requiring a portion of future Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds be used to convert foreclosed multi- and single-family properties to affordable rental housing and emergency shelter units.
  - (14) support the development and implementation of programs at federal, state, and local levels, that unite housing agencies with child protective services to provide service-infused congregate housing for unaccompanied older youth for whom reunification with their family would not be in the best interests of the child.
  - (15) reaffirm the commitment made by the U.S. in signing the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements "to the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing". and
  - (16) affirm that wherever it is in their best interests, children have a right to be housed with their families
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