



Fall 2008 Conference

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Creating a Central Access Point into the CoC for Homeless Families



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Overview

The problem: Homeless families in Cincinnati were being forced through an obstacle course of different phone numbers, staffing patterns, intake criteria, and access systems in order to get into emergency shelter.

The solution: CAP – Central Access Point – a hotline to provide access into all of the family emergency shelters in the CoC.



The Family Shelter Partnership Program

- The Family Shelter Partnership Program (FSPP) is a collaboration among all of the family shelter providers in the City of Cincinnati and the Department of Jobs and Family Services dedicated to providing quality services, access to mainstream benefits, and integrated case planning to all of the families who are housed in our emergency shelters.



FSPP and HMIS

- As the FSPP was beginning in 1999, it was clear that a new mechanism was needed to track client outcomes and coordinate clients between the family shelters. They decided to facilitate data-sharing electronically and created a prototype software system that has since evolved into Cincinnati's HMIS system.



Collaboration

- The FSPP created an improved case management system across all family shelters, implemented weekly integrated supervision for all the shelter case managers, and brought the shelter leadership together for monthly planning and coordination meetings.



Problems Identified

- As a result of this ongoing collaboration, the FSPP realized that system by which families gained access to the shelters was very difficult to navigate – not just for homeless families, but for community service providers.
- In addition, they had little or no information about the people they were turning away. Each shelter tracked (or didn't track) calls according to their own system.



A Potential Solution

- Central Access Point
 - One simple phone number
 - Staffed by people whose primary job is to provide a friendly point of contact for homeless families and to book them into the shelter best able to meet their needs based on household type, bed availability, and clients' history with each shelter.
 - Available 7 days a week



Potential Barriers to the Potential Solution

- Funding
- Defining and programming a Bed Finder
- Each shelter had to be able to put their admissions policies into writing so that the CAP worker could consistently refer families that the shelters would take, at times they can take them.



Easy Answers

- The FSPP applied to SC Ministries for a grant of \$6,000 to cover the cost of building the Bed Finder.
- Long term, the operating expenses for CAP will be paid by the Hamilton County Department of Jobs and Family Services.
- In the short term, when we hadn't gotten through the red tape and our start date was approaching, we went to a local philanthropist. After describing the problem, we asked for \$50,000. He gave us \$100,000.



Easy Answers (continued)

- The Bed Finder is built in to our HMIS for the sake of convenience, but is not tied to the data in it – its data is maintained separately.

248/250	1 (twin) Angela6791 (ETA)	2 (twin) child (ETA)	3 (top bunk) child (ETA)	4 (bottom bunk) child (ETA)	5 (top bunk) child (ETA)
260	1 (top bunk) (public ID) (ETA)	2 (bottom bunk) (public ID) (ETA)			
261/263	1 (twin) Phyliss1663 (1, 2) (ETA)	2 (top bunk) child (ETA)	3 (bottom bunk) child (ETA)		
262/264	1 (top bunk) Posy2430 (1, 3) 8/6 10 am	2 (bottom bunk) child 8/6 10am	3 (top bunk) child 8/6 10am	4 (bottom bunk) child 8/6 10am	
265/267	1 (top bunk) Persephone2525 (ETA)	2 (bottom bunk) Persephone2525 (ETA)	3 (top bunk) Persephone2525 (ETA)	4 (bottom bunk) Persephone2525 (ETA)	



Which leaves us with...

- Each shelter had to be able to put their admissions policies into writing so that the CAP worker could consistently refer families that the shelters would take, at times they can take them.



Why is that so hard?

- Some shelters have very explicit admission criteria; other were ad hoc and varied from worker to worker.
- Negotiation of consistent, across-the-board criteria for all shelters was not going to happen; settling on 'different but fair' criteria seemed more likely.



Matching household types

- All five shelters will take a family composed of a single parent with one or more children – except when they won't.
 - One shelter won't take boys older than 11
 - Another shelter won't take boys older than 12.
 - Two more will take boys as long as they're in school and/or disabled.
 - The fifth will take boys up to age 18 as long as they're under guardianship.
- All shelters will take a same sex female couple with children. One shelter, however, won't take a male-female married couple with children.



And if the household type is a match...

- Three of the shelters prefer to have clients who have recently exited their shelter return to them, so that they can provide continuity in case planning. (Except when they don't because the client is barred.)
- One shelter will not accept clients who have recently* exited the shelter. Another prefers not to, but will in an emergency.

*How do we define 'recently'?



When everything lines up

- CAP has a conversation with the head of household about the family's needs, verifies that they are homeless and in need of shelter.
- The client is given an appointment for check-in at the shelter.
- CAP makes a shelter bed reservation in the Bed Finder for the family at the shelter best suited to meet their needs.



Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot

- An Ohio program designed to provide intensive home-based case management and up to \$1000 in stabilization funds to families where it is possible to prevent homelessness.
- Callers to the CAP line who are in imminent danger of homelessness and meet the program's criteria are referred to the Homelessness Prevention Program.



Communication

- Once the referral has been made, the CAP worker contacts the destination shelter to let them know. We use instant messaging because it's quick, doesn't interrupt phone calls or require waiting on hold, and provides more accessible information than a voice mail.
- IM not only provides a live, real-time information exchange, but also keeps a log of conversations so we can track times of referrals, what information was provided, and when.



Coordination

- CAP coordinates its shelter placements with JFS to be able to notify children's services workers of any open/active children's service case within a work day of shelter placement and notify income maintenance of any family which has or needs an open benefit portfolio.



Where we are now

- Six months in, we are very proud of the CAP program.
- Shelters are operating closer to capacity more of the time – when there are available beds, we are able to fill them.
- The phone lines are open from 10 am to 8 pm Monday through Friday, and from 10 am to 2 pm on Saturdays and Sundays.
- We average about 30 calls a day.



Where we are now (continued)

- We average 18 calls / day from families in need of emergency shelter. Of those:
 - We make bed reservations for 1.6 families a day.
 - We refer about 1 family / day to other programs.
 - Once every 4 or 5 days, a family refuses shelter.
 - On average, about 15 calls a day are told that the family shelters are full, please call again.



Where do we go from here?

- We were operating under a policy of first come first served, but we may need a waiting list.
- We know we're turning people away. Is this new? Is it temporary or ongoing? Do we need more family emergency shelter beds? Do we need to move families out of shelter faster?



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Thank you!

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