

The California Linkages Program: Doorway to Housing Support for Child Welfare-Involved Parents

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Abstract Housing instability can complicate parents' efforts to provide for their children. Child welfare service agencies have had difficulty adequately serving parents' housing needs due to limited and constrained funding streams. This article integrates the voices of four important stakeholders to illuminate how an innovative model of service system coordination called Linkages addresses housing needs for child welfare-involved parents eligible for public assistance. Facilitated by Linkages, these parents can receive supportive housing services through programs affiliated with the California public assistance program CalWORKs. Personal narratives reflecting the diverse perspectives of stakeholders in the Linkages collaboration—the statewide program director, a child welfare services coordinator, a CalWORKs caseworker, and a parent program participant—shed light on how the collaboration assists parents in attaining case plan goals, and highlights some of the factors facilitating and hindering effective collaboration between the agencies involved. Stakeholders emphasized the value of flexible service approaches, the intensity of the efforts required, the role of advocacy, and the importance of a shared vision between agencies working together to provide housing supports.

Keywords Collaboration · Child welfare services · Public assistance · Housing · Service delivery · Parents

Housing instability can complicate parents' efforts to provide for their children. For child welfare-involved parents,

housing problems have been shown to increase the likelihood of having a child enter care (Fowler et al., 2013), and to hinder parents' efforts to reunify with children removed from their care (Courtney, McMurtry & Zinn, 2004). Child welfare service agencies have had difficulty adequately serving these parents' housing needs due to limited and constrained funding streams. This article integrates the voices of four important stakeholders to illuminate how an innovative model of service system coordination called Linkages addresses housing needs for child welfare-involved parents eligible for public assistance. Facilitated by Linkages, these parents can receive supportive housing services through programs affiliated with the California public assistance program CalWORKs. In this article, we provide personal narratives reflecting diverse perspectives of important stakeholders in the Linkages collaboration: the statewide program director, a child welfare services (CWS) coordinator, a CalWORKs caseworker, and a parent program participant. Their perspectives shed light on how the collaboration supported parents in attaining case plan goals, as well as some of the factors both facilitating and hindering effective collaboration between all the agencies involved.

Background on Linkages

The California Linkages program is intended to improve outcomes for parents simultaneously receiving CalWORKs and CWS services. Although in most California counties child welfare and public assistance services are provided through the same agency (Speiglmán, Karpilow & Orrante, 2002), the two programs are often housed in different locations and supported by separate personnel. Each bureaucracy has its own set of requirements, aims,

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and time frames within which parents' activities must be accomplished. For families involved with both systems, this can result in excessive, duplicative, or conflicting requirements that may hinder parents' progress. The Linkages program provides for enhanced coordination between the two systems to avoid redundancy or conflict in case plan goals and activities, and facilitates access to an increased array of services by drawing on the resources of both systems.

Linkages is based on an understanding of the connection between poverty and maltreatment. In addition to reducing the logistical burden of case plan completion for parents, the program aims to enhance child well-being by improving the economic conditions of child welfare-involved families through connecting them to public assistance resources (Karpilow, 2005). Initially piloted by 13 counties and funded by a private foundation, the Linkages program received a federal grant from the Administration of Children and Families in 2007 for a 5-year demonstration project; the California Department of Social Services Office of Child Abuse Prevention (OCAP) provided several additional years of funding, and California counties continued to provide funding until this year, when the program was determined to be adequately incorporated into county administrative and organizational structures.

Counties' Linkages programs vary in terms of the kinds of services they provide and the families that they target, but most programs incorporate several fundamental components: (a) the early identification of clients involved in both CWS and CalWORKs; (b) the development of coordinated case plans aligning the activities and goals of both programs; (c) ongoing communication between the family's caseworkers in each program, (d) the sharing of resources across the two systems, and (e) joint conferences with families and caseworkers from both systems (Harder & Company, 2011).

For child welfare-involved families, Linkages can be the doorway through which they access housing supports available through CalWORKs. CWS funding streams are generally targeted to out-of-home placement costs for children with only a small amount directed toward services to assist parents: over 90% of child welfare services funding comes from Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, and is designated for case management and out-of-home care costs. Less than 10% of total child welfare spending comes from Title IV-B, which is designated for services (Stoltzfus, 2015). CalWORKs has more flexibility and can provide certain kinds of housing supports to families when such supports are necessary for the client to attain economic self-sufficiency. One such support is the Family Stabilization Program (FSP); FSP was designed to improve the likelihood that CalWORKs parents successfully engage in associated employment training and work

activities ("Welfare to Work", or WTW) through intensive case management and other services. These services include counseling and treatment for problems like domestic violence and substance abuse, and also include supportive housing services such as emergency shelter and assistance with transitional housing. Another program for CalWORKs families is the Housing Support Program (HSP), which assists homeless families in quickly attaining permanent housing by providing wrap-around supports. Families can receive financial assistance for moving costs, hotel vouchers, case management, housing outreach, landlord recruitment, and credit repair (CDSS, n.d.). Families also can receive other housing supports outside of CalWORKs. For example, the Family Unification Program (FUP) is a federally funded program that provides housing vouchers to families to avoid child removal or enable reunification through the county public housing agency (Dworsky, 2014).

Coordination between agencies is critical to effectively provide such a complex network of supports to child welfare-involved clients; however, this level of coordination has its challenges. The four narratives provided here reflect the experiences of a variety of stakeholders in this process, each with a unique and valuable perspective on families' housing situations, the Linkages program, how coordination between the agencies works, and what can get in the way. The *Linkages statewide coordinator* oversees Linkages for all the participating counties in the state, and thus sees systemic issues as they arise in multiple counties across jurisdictions. The *child welfare coordinator* in a northern California county works with FUP and CWS clients in the Linkages program, and the *CalWORKs caseworker* from a southeastern county focuses on employment-related case management for Linkages families, drawing on resources from both the FSP and the HSP. Finally, a *parent participant* from the Linkages program shares his experience with housing support and collaborative services.

Linkages Statewide Program Coordinator

I have spent almost 30 years in child welfare practice as a worker, supervisor, manager, and eventually deputy director and director over child welfare. I came to the position of Statewide Linkages Project Director with that child welfare perspective, which focuses more on protecting children and less on looking at the needs of the family. When I started working with Linkages, it was quite eye-opening for me to think about the family much differently, and think about how we can create a stronger system by doing better collaboration, partnering with other agencies that have additional supports for our families.

The work that I do with Linkages is a more family-focused approach—it looks at strengthening the family and helping with self-sufficiency issues as well as child welfare issues.

The Linkages program develops strategies and protocols to encourage collaboration between staff from CWS and CalWORKs/WTW programs. Often staff from the two programs, even when working within the same agency, are not coordinating, collaborating, and partnering together as they each serve the family. Partly this is because each of those programs has very different responsibilities; one program—CalWorks—aims to get the parent to work and become self-sufficient, while the other—CWS—aims to protect the child and promote permanency. The two programs can get “siloeed” in their thinking. Linkages helps to break the siloes down, helps staff from each program see the other program’s role in strengthening that family, and helps to meet program goals on both sides. Right now, there are 28 counties in the state that are participating in the Linkages project. Our office consists of myself and several consulting staff working within the Child and Family Policy Institute of California. We have helped each county develop a Linkages work plan, provided technical assistance, given webinars, published a newsletter to share best practices and information, and provided an annual conference to showcase county best practices in different areas, with workshops on different topics that focus on collaboration.

Figuring out the housing piece has been a really important part of the collaboration. What we have found is that many of our Linkages families, if not homeless, may be living with another family in an overcrowded situation creating stress on the family situation. There is a severe housing shortage in our state, with a lack of affordable housing even for working people, let alone families that have been on welfare. If families do not have adequate housing, protecting and caring for their children will be difficult, and trying to find work will be difficult.

In the child welfare program, there are limited dollars designated for direct services, and most counties spend these funds in the first quarter of the year. CalWORKs, on the other hand, has more resources that can be spent on supportive services if that is needed for parents to become self-sufficient. This can include housing support services, as it is very difficult for homeless parents to take care of their children and find a job. In Linkages, we emphasize housing support as a resource that can be provided by CalWORKs agencies to our shared CWS families. For example, in one of our large counties, the Linkages program places a housing liaison from CalWORKs in the CWS front-end emergency response program. When there is that connection between the agencies, families can get services more quickly.

A number of challenges can get in the way of effective collaboration between the agencies. The biggest problem is the lack of a shared vision. The first thing we review with the new counties coming into Linkages is the importance of the vision, mission, and guiding principles of each program. Agency leadership has to start off agency-wide with a clear vision and training, so staff members know why the collaboration is important and see the value in what the other agency does, how it strengthens the family, and how it supports the child. Program leaders have to spend time talking about their vision, how the programs differ, and how they can create a common vision. Implementation cannot move forward if the agencies are focused on different goals—work participation in CalWORKs versus child safety and reunification in CWS.

Another challenge is that collaborative practice does take more time. Workers often feel like they do not have the time for this kind of collaborative practice because the agency has not created structures that facilitate it. At the macro level, agency leaders have to create the vision. Then that vision has to become part of practice—the organization has to create the policies and practices that work when there is a joint client between CalWORKs and CWS. Creating the policies that guide practice and then monitoring fidelity is critical. Otherwise, workers will not move into a vision of collaborative practice.

Another important aspect of successful collaboration is leadership commitment. When leaders really want that collaboration to happen, barriers of compartmentalization, siloing, and the notion that “. . . These are our dollars, this is our housing program” melt away. For example, we know you have got to have community partners to serve families well. Agency leadership has to coordinate and collaborate with the housing agency to make sure that their child welfare-involved families are eligible for Section 8 housing or get on lists for shelters. Leadership needs to take the responsibility to create the structures that enable collaboration to work.

Also helpful is inviting parents to share their experiences. The truth is that most professionals working with families have not been without housing. Bringing parents on as mentors really helps agency staff get a perspective regarding what it is like to be in those situations. We can read about it, but it is difficult to really understand unless we hear from those who have gone through it. One of the things I strongly recommend for collaborative practice when you are doing training across agencies and programs is to incorporate the voices of parents who have been there.

Successful collaboration requires having strategies at all levels. It has proven to be challenging—I would like to see it just to be part of the way people think. In some ways, I think CWS is starting to move that way, but it

still has far to go. The lesson learned is that you have to pay attention to facilitating change at all levels, not just at the level of individual practice.

CWS Coordinator

I have worked in Child Welfare Services for over 17 years, as a caseworker, a Domestic Violence Specialist and currently, as a CWS coordinator for Linkages and FUP. In this section, I will identify three primary challenges that we have encountered in the course of Linkages implementation in our county, and the solutions we have put in place to address them. I will also describe the barriers that families in Child Welfare face in finding permanent housing, and how families are assisted to access limited housing resources through Linkages collaboration.

In my current role, I coordinate and lead key operational strategies for Linkages. We have had Linkages for several years, and like the other Linkages counties, we have encountered some challenges. One of them is turnover of staff at all levels, which slows the progress of Linkages. Time that could have been dedicated to implementation or expansion is used to do more training, educating, explaining, and debating about pros and cons of certain procedures and protocols. To reduce the impact of staff turn-over on implementation, we advocated for the integration of Linkages curriculum in the Induction Trainings for new social workers, employment counselors, and eligibility workers. In the past few years, the Linkages curriculum has been included in the induction trainings.

Another challenge is competing priorities. Sometimes, key staff members are not able to participate in important meetings due to conflicts in schedules and their Department's other pressing priorities, so delays are experienced. Similarly, differences in roles, expertise, priorities, approaches to work, and the level of Linkages knowledge between the team members can extend the length of time needed to arrive at agreements. The differences sometimes make collaboration a daunting and frustrating process, but these differences also help in producing a "dynamic tension" that results in the best ideas. We have addressed the challenge of competing priorities by having regular meetings, and continuing promotion of the values of Linkages to executive management and managers. We conduct monthly Linkages meetings attended by the county coordinators for Linkages (a manager from CWS and a manager from CalWORKs), Linkages WTW employment counselors and supervisors, CalWORKs eligibility workers and supervisors, and representatives from Staff Development and Training and Information Systems. This is the venue where goals and directions of Linkages are

developed, clarified, and reinforced, and where implementation issues are raised and resolved.

Another challenge of collaboration relates to data issues. Our two administrative data systems are not able to "talk" to each other, which makes identification of Linkages clients a bit tedious as part of it is still done manually. We have addressed this to some degree by having our information systems unit create a data-matching program so a portion of the process of identifying common clients is automated. We also advocate for additional resources, emphasizing the importance of documentation, data gathering, and evaluation to justify requests and sustain Linkages.

In coordinating FUP, I have become keenly aware of the difficult struggle of families to find permanent housing and maintain stability. One common barrier among the families in Child Welfare is not having adequate income to afford rent; the costs of housing and living in our county are too high. Second, there is a lack of subsidized or low-income housing in the county. As of June 2016, the local Housing Authority has approximately 25,000 individuals on the Section 8 wait list. Third, some families cannot compete with other renters because of their bad credit history, criminal background, and rental history; some have evictions on their records.

To ensure that the limited Section 8 vouchers available through FUP are fully utilized, I have maintained close communication with the Housing Authority, in order for any of the 100 FUP Section 8 vouchers that become available to be returned to CWS, and re-allocated to a CWS client as soon as possible. When a voucher becomes available, an announcement is made to all CWS staff to submit referrals. Clients who meet the preliminary criteria are called for a Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) Interview. A representative from CalWORKs, who is a member of the Linkages Team, sits on the committee. Having CalWORKs represented in the MDT is very important, as the meeting is also an opportunity to educate the client about CalWORKs and other associated benefits, and to reinforce goals related to economic self-sufficiency. If the applicant is a Linkages client, the social worker and the employment counselor are both invited in the MDT and engaged in developing a Housing Support Plan with the client that addresses both child safety and economic goals. Once the MDT approves the applicant, the referral is sent to the Housing Authority for the second stage of screening, and intake.

Linkages families with FUP vouchers who need additional housing assistance are connected to the CalWORKs housing support programs which include housing search and placement assistance, first month's rent, and deposit or rent subsidy for the first 3 months. They are strongly encouraged to take advantage of CalWORKs services for

job training, job search, and placement in order for them to be more competitive in the labor market and to increase their incomes. These services are crucial in our county where the rental market is highly competitive and the cost of living is expensive.

Collaboration and coordination are crucial strategies in preventing fragmented services to families. It can be frustrating at times but it is the best approach to social service work that can truly change clients' lives. Understanding poverty and its impact on a person's ability to successfully perform his or her role in society is important; this helps child welfare workers appreciate why we cannot just focus on safety goals. To prevent and address maltreatment of children, it is necessary to also assist families address survival needs and economic vulnerabilities. I have learned that there are situations that cannot be addressed through micro or mezzo practice and which cannot be totally resolved or changed by collaboration or Linkages. Addressing issues of homelessness and increasing inequality in our county needs social action or advocacy at higher levels.

Given the challenges, what helps is to trust and nurture teamwork, continue to problem solve, know and focus on what is within one's control and sphere of influence and just do one's best. My advice to someone about to step into my shoes is to have patience, focus on the joys brought about by differences and the creative solutions that come out of those differences, and let clients' successes be an inspiration to keep the collaboration going.

CalWORKs Caseworker

I am a case manager in the CalWORKs office. I focus on the case management of the Linkages caseload, a specialized caseload of approximately 30 cases assigned to a single worker. I am invited to CWS staff meetings related to the case so that I can become familiar with the dynamics and circumstances that lead to the intervention and what the families are asked to do to reunify with the children or complete successfully a family maintenance plan. During that process I gain a perspective on how we can support the clients to comply with CWS requirements and at the same time encourage more employment-oriented activities that are geared toward reaching self-sufficiency.

I am responsible for creating the Linkages case plan, with input from the social worker and of course the family. Also called the coordinated case plan, it lists the activities that satisfy the CWS requirements. The CWS/WTW coordinated case plan is designed so that compliance and activities associated with CWS plan requirements supersede requirements that would normally be imposed for the WTW-participating adults in the case if no CWS issues were involved.

Linkages families have a long list of barriers not only to reaching employment goals but also to securing and maintaining permanent stable housing. Parents are frequently dealing with severe and chronic substance abuse issues. Through the years of substance abuse and self-destructive behavior, many have burned bridges and damaged relationships with people who otherwise would constitute a network of support for them. In many ways, the parents we work with have created barriers for themselves that become hindrances to regain or reach stability. To illustrate the point, some of the parents in Linkages cases have damaged relationships with relatives or friends who could be of assistance by serving as co-signers on rental applications. Additionally, many of our clients have history of evictions or a limited or non-existent employment history. Their challenges are quite significant, and are compounded by the limited low-income housing available in our county.

When clients with all these barriers attempt to find housing, their applications are often rejected. Helping clients with these kinds of challenges can require efforts on our part to create new relationships with landlords who are willing to give our participating families an opportunity. In some of these cases, I step in when the clients are doing their housing searches. I go with the clients to do the housing search, and explain to the landlords our involvement, how this family is being supported, and the extent to which we require accountability from the parents. Some landlords then are willing to give the client a chance or at least to consider them.

I also coordinate with the Housing Support Program (HSP). Funds from the HSP help parents secure housing in a variety of ways; in many Linkages cases, we subsidize the rent 100% for several months, including situations in which family reunification is gradual, moving from overnight visits to weekend visits. During that period of time, the HSP helps secure and retain stable and adequate housing that facilitates reunification. Referrals to the HSP can come from an array of department staff including social workers, eligibility workers, and even staff from other agencies. By county policy, Linkages cases can bypass the regular screening process so that I can respond more quickly.

The FSP provides important flexibility for service provision. With FSP funds, we can assist the family with anything conceptualized as a barrier to WTW participation. In addition, for Linkages cases, a broader definition of homelessness can be applied, such as when families are living with relatives and/or in overcrowded conditions. Linkages parents can be assisted with these funds as long as the support makes it possible for the parents to reach the goals of their child welfare plan. That kind of flexibility is very valuable, and makes the FSP a good fit with

the complexity of many of our cases. The circumstances that surround many of the Linkages cases are unique and it would be impossible to address them effectively with a rigid approach. The way I see it, having access to various resources from both CWS as well as the more recently introduced programs such as HSP or FSP is extremely valuable.

While there are many benefits, this collaboration has its challenges. There have been some gaps in understanding and communication between the WTW caseworker and the CWS caseworker. When I first started attending meetings where CWS and WTW were part of the team, I felt out of place. Because many of the issues discussed were very specific to behavioral changes, parenting, and other issues where I would not have input, I felt my contribution was of lesser value. There were some challenges to acclimate to the new approach and to adjust our thinking to the collaborative formulation and the multiple goals.

Some of the collaboration challenges have been resolved at least in part by efforts of administrators to fully inform their units and divisions of the value in this coordination of efforts. As a result, there has been significant progress. For example, a CWS caseworker recently implemented the collaborative approach by e-mailing me some questions from her iPad right from the location of the interview. I was able to provide answers and also get a better understanding of what was going on with the client. Although I had not been able to meet the client yet, through this kind of collaboration she got a message that this was a team effort. It is a new experience—all of us are now confident that we have additional tools and another team member to consult with as we try to help the client.

Other improvements have come as we work together on more cases. During CWS Team Decision-Making meetings, the facilitator now always makes time for me to address issues related to employment, housing, and so forth. It feels natural for us to check in with each other. What has made a big difference is the emphasis on frequent communication. As I review cases, I usually e-mail the social worker my narrative, so they can see what is happening on the CalWORKs side. These updates may at first look like they contribute little to CWS, but later on it turns out that just a small piece of information that I offered in the update helped the CWS caseworker understand certain situations that came up later when dealing with the family.

Linkages cases also require willingness to spend extra time and effort with each family, beyond what we would do in regular WTW case management. I have had cases where I would communicate with the client on a daily basis. Frequently in Linkages, we need to figure out whether to intervene and go a little farther, or wait and

give the client a chance to demonstrate initiative and resourcefulness. In some cases, additional assistance may be helping too much, and ultimately have a negative effect, as it can cause the client to lose focus on their own responsibility and their own role. In making determinations about whether I am doing too much or not enough, I try to understand what it feels to be in the client's shoes. It is critical to understand the circumstances of each case and always keep in mind that every case is different—there is a need for flexibility.

Linkages Parent Participant

I work as a mentor parent in the court system with parents who were in my situation. The parents are struggling; often they are homeless or renting a room in a not very safe place. It is similar to what I went through. My family's story illustrates a few points that are present in other sections.

My wife and I were participating in dependency drug treatment court. Prior to our dependency case, we were homeless. We were staying with my wife's parents, but it was not an ideal situation. It was volatile, and you never knew when you came home if you would have a place to stay. Once our children were removed, we were completely homeless; my wife was in jail and I was living on the street. Through the court process, I got in a Transitional Housing Unit (THU). When I was there, I was awarded custody of my daughter and she was able to actually live with me at the THU. My wife eventually got out of jail, and she was also at a THU, so our daughter was splitting her time between the two of us. When our time at the THU was running out, we were facing homelessness again. I was dealing with a pretty serious medical condition at the time and my wife was going to school, so we were on CalWORKs, which provided us some money but a very limited amount. We were actually pretty scared that we going to be homeless again, and we had no idea what the next step was going to be.

The judge told us about the Family Unification Program that provided housing vouchers for families that were close to completing their case plans and having their case closed. We ended up getting one of those vouchers. It is a Section 8 Voucher for families involved with child welfare. If we were to lose the voucher due to relapse or criminal activity, the voucher would go right back and the agency could give it out to somebody else. My wife did a lot of the footwork to get us the voucher. After we had heard about the program from the judge, my wife called our social worker and informed her about the program. The worker had not known that it existed, and when she looked into it for us, she was told that all the vouchers

were already given out. I do not know how my wife did it, but she figured out that in fact there were still vouchers available. She told our social worker who to contact, and from them the worker learned that there actually were vouchers still available. Our worker then got us nominated for consideration for a voucher.

The background check almost excluded us because my wife and I had drug charges. Once we got past that, they told us to go out and find a place. We needed three bedrooms for the number of children and adults in the household; we could not go over unless we wanted to pay the difference and we could not go under because the law says that is not allowed.

Finding housing in the area where we live is a challenge. Many property owners do not want to rent to people who have Section 8 because they are worried about damage to their house as well as criminal activity. As soon as you tell them that you are Section 8, even though it is guaranteed money for them, they are still not interested. Another challenge is getting around on public transportation. We were riding the bus everywhere, with a bus pass provided by our social worker. Just to go look at a place was difficult. None of the houses were close together, and a lot of them were off the bus routes. I would allow 1 hour to go just one stop. We were doing our services downtown and had to travel to the southern part of the city to look at places located near my daughter's school. The process was exceptionally difficult. We ended up looking at only three places because we just could not get to all of them. It was hard to set up an appointment with an owner if you had no idea of how long it would take to get to the house. Moving in was also a challenge—while we did not have much to move in, what we did have we had to carry on the bus. It was difficult.

We got lucky—I've got four kids and we found a three bedroom house. My child welfare worker and another worker from the housing agency worked together and helped us get everything together. My caseworker helped with getting all the paperwork, and showed up for the inspection to make sure that everybody was on the same page. She went over the rules with us and made sure we were in compliance, and talked to us about how to stay in compliance. We were not mobile at the time, so she would come out to the house to make sure we were okay and that we had what we needed to succeed. She was very interested in our success and how she could help. She was a kind soul—never once made me feel like I was putting her out by asking for help, and came through for us in every way. She was just awesome. Also, CalWORKs was involved—our down payment came from CWS, and the first several months of rent came from the CalWORKs program. We are getting to the point now that we are

becoming self-sufficient. Our contribution to the rent—about 35% of our income—was very minimal when we started because we had so little money. Once again things have gotten difficult as one of our children moved out when she turned 21. We were told we needed to move to a two bedroom place, but there were no two bedroom places available in our area. We would have to move away, which we did not want to do because we wanted to keep our daughter in this school district where she is thriving. We feel that stability for our children is one of the things that can help her succeed. So instead we stayed, but I now pay something like 75% of my salary to rent.

One of the things that we learned through dependency wellness court/dependency drug treatment court was how to advocate for ourselves in a respectful manner and how to follow through with things. Before, we sat quietly and let the world pass us by; now we have learned how to be more active in our own life. You have to stay vigilant. You also have to be nice. Our caseworker has asked us on a few occasions to talk to other groups about the program and what to expect, and we do this without hesitation. I think that goes a long way. Every time somebody walks into our door, whether they are doing an inspection, whoever they are with, we talk to them, because they matter; we are honest and friendly. Also, we did everything that was asked for us. I give the agencies and the workers a lot of credit, but my wife and I participated in everything that was offered and asked. We went over and above what was needed, which was the reason we were nominated to begin with. We did our part in the process.

We get to keep the voucher as long as we follow the rules and as long as it is needed. Right now, the reality is that every year we become a little bit more self-sufficient. I am anticipating that in a year or two, we will not be needing it. As soon as we do not need it any longer, we will give it back to the courts for somebody else to change their life. We would not be in the position we are in right now as a family, as members of society, if we did not get the assistance that we got. I am involved in so many community things now, on the good side of the law and not on the bad side. My wife now is a parent advocate, so I feel that in some way we are paying back the gift that was given to us with our community involvement. Not everybody takes advantage of the gifts given, but for the ones that do, what is offered really can make a difference. I wish the stigma was not so negative because there are a lot of people who have had unfortunate circumstances that were outside of their control. A lot of people I work with were addicts and were not participating in life—now they are an actual part of society and respected. If you give a family a second chance and they

run with it, there is no limit to what can be done or achieved.

Discussion

A number of common themes emerge from the perspectives of these Linkages stakeholders. Most fundamentally, each expressed awareness and concern about the magnitude of the challenge confronting low-income child welfare-involved parents needing to find housing in California. The high cost of housing, the shortage of low-income housing, the difficult circumstances of parents, the siloed nature of services, and systems inflexibility create a perfect storm of challenges for both parents in finding stable, safe, and affordable housing. However, the stories of these stakeholders show that it is possible to assist child welfare-involved parents to find and maintain housing. In this section, we review program characteristics highlighted by stakeholders as essential for effective programs and practice.

As highlighted by several participants, the *flexibility* of the supports appears to be important in addressing many of the barriers to housing and agency collaboration. Other researchers have made similar calls for flexibility in discussing the challenges of collaboration (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Shdaimah, 2009). The California housing programs demonstrated this quality in several ways. Flexibility in the definition of homelessness used by the FSP program for Linkages clients meant that some clients who normally would not qualify as “homeless”—but whose living circumstances were not conducive to safe and stable parenting—could be assisted. Flexibility in the services provided through FSP, HSP, and FUP enabled multiple barriers to stable housing to be addressed. For example, flexibility in the HSP referral process allows high-needs Linkages clients to have priority access to services. Flexibility existed in FUP processes, with the parent participant retaining eligibility despite his arrest history, and possession of the voucher after one of his children moved out.

Another relevant aspect emerging from across the perspectives is that housing supports were provided through *multiple programs* and were *multi-layered*. Payments for first and last months’ rent might be provided through one program, rental subsidies from a different program, and intensive case management from another. By strategically employing supports from both CWS and CalWORKS (and beyond), assistance can do more than provide a “patch” allowing a client to survive through a crisis; the assistance can be substantial and diverse enough to enable clients to shift the course of their lives. The parent who provided his story here is an excellent example of this, having gone from active substance abuse and living on

the streets to becoming a parent advocate who now helps other parents overcome their own barriers to self-sufficiency.

It must also be noted that *intensive and time-consuming efforts* were required from caseworkers, agency leaders, and clients. Caseworkers from CWS and CalWORKS worked with clients on a daily basis, drove them to see housing units, met personally with potential landlords, came out during housing inspections, and assisted far beyond what would be provided during normal case management on a CWS, WTW, or CalWORKS case. The parent described extraordinary efforts to find housing and track down support. The program director noted efforts that must be made by agency leadership to establish collaborative structures and partnerships.

Part of the time-consuming nature of the work was also likely related to the *advocacy* present in all the first person accounts in different ways. The CalWORKS caseworker advocated on behalf of his clients during the housing search, working to convince hesitant landlords to accept Linkages clients by describing the multiple supports in place for them and the accountability required by the program. The parent mentioned the importance of self-advocacy, a skill he learned from his experience in dependency wellness court, and his spouse was a persistent advocate for the family in identifying and obtaining a housing voucher. Finally, the CWS caseworker noted the need for advocacy at higher levels to address issues such as homelessness and social inequality.

The importance of a *common vision* between collaborating agencies was also mentioned by multiple stakeholders. A common vision has been mentioned as important to successful collaboration in other studies (Berrick, Frame, Langs & Varchol, 2006; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008; Johnson, Zorn, Tam, Lamontagne & Johnson, 2003). While clearly a challenge, county agency administrative leaders have developed structures to ensure CalWORKS and CWS staff agree upon common goals and develop a common vision prioritizing housing services coordination and collaboration for the benefit of clients.

As the program director put it, there is still “a long way to go.” The challenges of high housing costs and limited availability will not likely be resolved soon, or are the nature of clients’ difficulties that hinder stable housing likely to diminish. However, an effective Linkages program can support clients through these challenges. Administering a complex program like Linkages has its own challenges, such as caseworker time constraints, communication, and data-sharing between CalWORKS and CWS, and engaging county leadership. One mechanism for addressing these difficulties has been the annual Linkages convening, bringing together managers and line staff from each county’s Linkages program to discuss

implementation challenges, gain tips and support, and learn about innovations from one another's experiences.

The CWS caseworker advises those attempting this work to “focus on the joys brought about by differences.” The “creative solutions” that these differences foster is exemplified by the Linkages program. By facilitating connection and collaboration between CalWORKs, WTW, and CWS, the Linkages model of service delivery facilitates creative, intensive, multi-layered interventions to help troubled low-income parents stabilize their housing situations, giving them a real opportunity to transform their lives and move on from system involvement.

Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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