

Working with Families Facing Severe Hardship: Lessons from the Families In Transition Program

A Policy Brief from Berkeley Policy Associates

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Abstract

Families in Transition (FIT) is a nonprofit organization helping families that are homeless—or at risk of homelessness—to secure stable housing, increase employment and income, and address their barriers to self-sufficiency. One of the critical factors in FIT’s ability to serve a highly disadvantaged population is its close collaboration with the Santa Cruz Human Resources Agency (HRA), the county human services agency that administers cash assistance, Child Protective Services and other programs. FIT serves as an example of how public agencies and the nonprofit sector might work together to address the needs of traditionally hard-to-serve populations. Berkeley Policy Associates’ evaluation of FIT identified the following strategies as essential to the partnership between FIT and HRA: outstationing of HRA staff at the main FIT office; streamlined coordination between FIT case managers and a variety of HRA service providers; and regular crossover meetings between FIT case managers, HRA staff and other service providers.

In addition to collaborating with the county human services agency, FIT has implemented several innovative strategies to address client families’ barriers to self-sufficiency. An intensive client assessment process that takes place over the course of several weeks enables case managers to establish rapport with client families, identify families’ needs and goals, and explore financial planning and budgeting issues in depth. During this assessment period, FIT discusses housing assistance options based on client needs, projected income, and FIT’s diverse housing assistance resources. In addition, FIT’s case management model features regular and frequent meetings with FIT clients. Case managers consistently follow up with clients to assess progress on their financial goals and other objectives, arrange for necessary housing assistance, and serve as a single point-of-contact for brokering and coordinating nonhousing services received by FIT families. Extensive training and support for case managers—including opportunities to learn from more senior case managers—and a team approach to case management facilitate the successful and consistent implementation of the FIT service model.

Introduction

Several characteristics of the federal welfare system encourage human services agencies at the local level to create partnerships with community-based, nonprofit service providers. The federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program focuses on providing welfare recipients with access to a broad range of employment-related services, many

of which can be contracted out to nonprofit service providers. State and local welfare systems have considerable flexibility in program design under TANF, a situation that enables local human services agencies to establish new and creative ways of working with the nonprofit sector. Furthermore, limited government budgets in recent years have

provided a strong impetus for cross-sector partnerships that draw on both public and private funds.

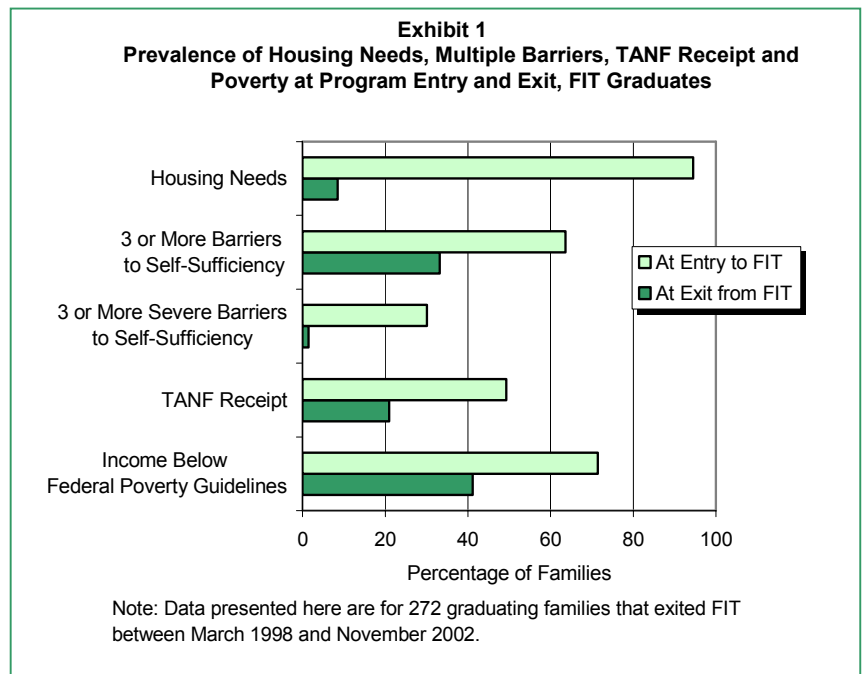
In this climate, there is a need for information on how human services agencies partner with nonprofits to successfully serve certain populations, especially clients facing the most significant barriers to self-sufficiency—often referred to as the “hard-to-serve.” For the past five years, Berkeley Policy Associates—with funding from The David and Lucile Packard Foundation—has conducted an in-depth evaluation of Families in Transition (FIT), a nonprofit organization that works closely with the county human services agency to meet the needs of one of the hardest-to-serve populations: families that are homeless or at risk of being homeless. The FIT program model combines housing assistance with intensive, individualized case management, and appears to have been successful in helping client families—many of whom also participate in TANF—to stabilize their housing situations, increase earnings and income, and address barriers to self-sufficiency.

This policy brief offers a case study of FIT, highlighting program features that have been instrumental in addressing the needs of client families. FIT serves as an example of how an effective alliance between the public sector and a nonprofit service provider might be structured. In addition, this policy brief identifies promising strategies from FIT’s program model in the areas of client assessment, case management and staff development. The approaches presented here have the potential for wide replication by state and local welfare offices, nonprofit organizations, One-Stop Career Centers, public housing authorities and others that work with hard-to-serve populations.

FIT merits attention because of its ability to address the needs of an extremely disadvantaged population. Although a lack of stable housing is the identifying need for families referred to FIT, most clients are confronting other issues, such as job-readiness needs, mental illness, domestic violence, substance abuse or involvement with Child Protective Services (CPS). These nonhousing issues frequently contribute to—or are exacerbated by—housing instability, and typically represent significant barriers to sustained employment and self-sufficiency. Almost all families entering FIT (over 95 percent) face two or more barriers, and almost half face four or more barriers.

Although the exact impact of the FIT program cannot be determined (due to the lack of an appropriate

control group for which data are available), existing data indicate that families make significant progress toward improved well-being and self-sufficiency while participating in FIT. As Exhibit 1 shows, families that graduate from FIT (about half of families that enter the program) experience large decreases in housing needs, total number of barriers and TANF receipt between program entry and exit, and are far less likely to be in poverty at program exit than at entry.¹ These outcomes suggest that FIT’s program model is a sound approach for helping families make significant strides toward self-sufficiency.



A True Public/Private Collaboration

Families in Transition was established in 1991 to meet the service needs of homeless families—and families at risk of homelessness—in Santa Cruz County. Santa Cruz County is located about 75 miles south of San Francisco and adjacent to the Silicon Valley region. FIT was initially created as a program of the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency (HRA), the county human services agency that administers CalWORKs (California’s TANF program), CPS, Medi-Cal and many other programs. Initial funding for FIT came through a collaborative grant between the County of Santa Cruz Housing Authority and Santa Cruz County. One year later—as had been initially envisioned by HRA—FIT spun off from the county agency to become an independent, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. This separation was mutually

Promising Strategies in Client Assessment, Case Management and Staff Development

Collaboration with HRA is a crucial component of FIT, yet it is not the only key to the program’s success in serving families facing homelessness. Here we take a closer look at specific strategies from the FIT service model to highlight other promising approaches in working with this hard-to-serve population.

Most families in FIT are referred to the program by HRA, though some are referred by other governmental agencies or by nonprofits or sponsoring individuals (e.g., a clergy member). FIT provides client families with housing assistance, intensive case management, and referrals to public agencies or nonprofits for more intensive services. Housing assistance can take several forms, depending on a family’s needs: transitional housing (for up to 18 months) at one of eight residences; emergency housing assistance that addresses a family’s immediate housing needs (for example, a cash payment to avoid eviction during economic hardship); and rental assistance that helps families afford housing in the private market. By stabilizing families’ housing circumstances, FIT aims to create a situation in which families can focus on addressing their other, nonhousing barriers to self-sufficiency.

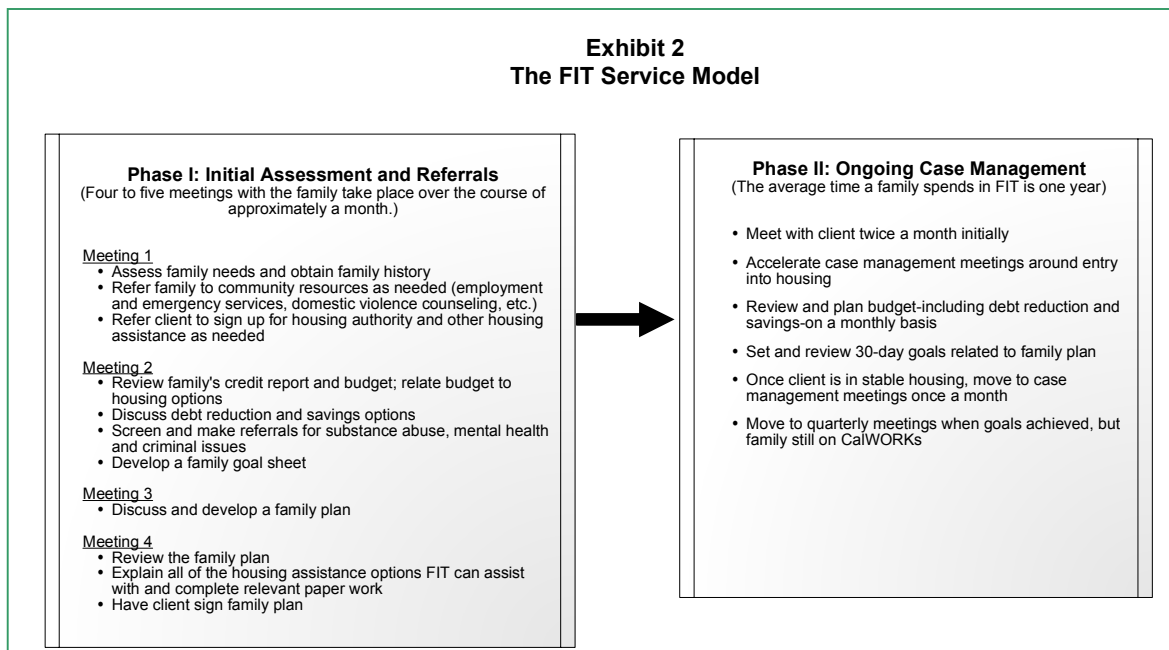
Interviews that Berkeley Policy Associates conducted with program participants, staff at FIT and HRA, and

community-based service providers highlighted various program strategies that are integral to FIT’s ability to work with the hard-to-serve. These strategies can be grouped into three categories: client assessment; case management; and staff training and development.

Client Assessment

As illustrated in Exhibit 2, the FIT model consists of two phases of service: initial assessment and referrals, and ongoing case management. During the initial assessment and referrals phase, which takes place over the course of a month, a FIT case manager meets with the family four or five times to: discuss housing assistance needs and other challenges; make necessary referrals to other providers for more intensive services (for example, employment services or domestic violence counseling); develop a budget and savings plan; and create a family plan for stabilizing housing and progressing toward self-sufficiency.

Accurate assessment of families’ service needs and their barriers to employment and self-sufficiency is a persistent challenge in working with families similar to the ones served by FIT. Some of the most serious barriers—such as domestic violence, substance abuse or mental illness—are difficult to assess or diagnose, in part because clients may be hesitant to report or discuss these issues. Within the FIT program model, the following strategies appear to be effective at identifying families’ needs and goals and designing plans to address them:



Case Management

The second phase of the FIT program model is intensive, ongoing case management that addresses the needs of the entire family. FIT case managers assist families in obtaining stable housing, make additional referrals for services, review progress on the budget and the family plan, and provide any needed advocacy or support. The average time in FIT is about one year, and families stay with the same case manager from assessment through graduation. Families graduate from FIT when they are in permanent or stable housing; have secured employment; have demonstrated the ability to keep up with their expenses; and—in most cases—are off CalWORKs.

FIT's case management approach aligns the program well with research that identifies personalized service and attention, face-to-face client interaction, and ongoing monitoring of client progress as important elements in working with the hard-to-serve population.² FIT's case management model encompasses the following key strategies:

- **Regular and frequent communication between case managers and clients.** After meeting with clients every week during the assessment phase, FIT case managers continue to meet with clients on a regular basis throughout families' time on FIT. Case managers also conduct home visits with client families when necessary—such as when a client is unable to travel to the FIT office for a case management meeting, or when the case manager needs to obtain additional information on a family's home situation. Case management meetings initially occur twice per month. When a family is about to enter stable or permanent housing—such as housing in the private rental market—case management meetings become more frequent to ease this transition. Case managers provide a stable source of support for families and consistently monitor progress on the family plan. The frequency of case management meetings ultimately tapers off to monthly and then quarterly, depending on the family's circumstances.
- **Streamlined brokering and coordination of services.** For families' nonhousing needs—such as those related to employment and training, child care, mental or physical health, substance abuse, domestic violence, or other issues—FIT case managers refer families to HRA, other appropriate public agencies or nonprofit service providers. FIT case managers are a single point-of-contact for families, assisting them to understand and navigate the network of services available to them. Furthermore, FIT case managers monitor families'

participation in these services to ensure that clients are fulfilling the requirements of different programs and that all of a family's needs are being addressed.

- **A consistent focus on financial goals and budgeting.** As indicated earlier, the FIT assessment phase helps families to undertake detailed, forward-thinking financial planning. To help families follow through on these plans and achieve financial stability, case managers work with families throughout their time on FIT to assess their financial circumstances and assist with budgeting and debt reduction. FIT case managers teach clients money management skills and keep them focused on their financial goals. This ongoing attention to finances and budgeting prepares families to find and afford housing in the private housing market, a primary goal of the FIT model. Solid money management skills often mean the difference between stable housing and homelessness.

Staff Training and Development

Providing case managers with the necessary skills, information and support to fulfill their roles is integral to FIT's program model. Service providers and other community partners that work with FIT have praised the staff's knowledge of client families and their needs. The quality of case management provided by FIT reflects not only the personal commitment of case managers hired by the program, but also the training provided to case managers and FIT's team-oriented environment. Key training and staff development strategies in FIT include the following:

- **Opportunities for new case managers to "shadow" more experienced staff.** One of the most important resources that FIT draws on in training new staff is the expertise of experienced case managers. During their first month, new case managers spend much of their time shadowing senior case managers, which includes accompanying them on home visits and observing assessment and case management meetings with client families. Shadowing senior case managers helps new case managers to understand the FIT program model, target population and underlying philosophy, and exposes new case managers to strategies for working with client families. Further, shadowing allows new case managers to establish a solid rapport with their more senior peers and creates the cooperative environment that is a defining characteristic of FIT.
- **Case conferences that facilitate joint decision-making as well as training of junior case managers.** FIT's team-oriented environment



About Berkeley Policy Associates

Berkeley Policy Associates (BPA) is a social policy research and consulting firm based in Oakland, California. For over 30 years, BPA has conducted research and analysis that helps government agencies, community-based organizations, foundations and businesses design and operate programs that make a real difference in people's lives. BPA has developed special expertise in evaluating programs that assist people who encounter obstacles to full participation in our society due to a lack of education or job training, a history of poverty or dependence on public assistance, age, disability, health, limited English-language skills, or responsibilities associated with caring for children.

BPA's current research agenda focuses on the following issues:

- Welfare policy and program design
- Workforce development, including implementation of the federal Workforce Investment Act
- Education and school-linked programs
- Child welfare
- Child care
- Disabilities and health

BPA offers a full spectrum of services, including large multiyear program evaluations, process studies, impact evaluations, needs assessments, management studies and technical assistance. For more information on Berkeley Policy Associates' services and capabilities, visit www.berkeleypolicyassociates.com, or write to info@bpacal.com.



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