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The Hidden Work of Exiting Homelessness: Challenges of Housing Service Use and Strategies of Service Recipients

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of parents attempting to re-attain housing after a shelter stay. Eighty parents participated in semistructured face-to-face interviews approximately six months after being recruited from shelters in four states across the U.S. Qualitative analyses identified common challenges of service use, strategies of service recipients, and characteristics of positive and negative service experiences. Challenges of service use included “catch-22s” resulting from incongruity between service policies/procedures and participants’ contexts and/or requirements of other services, confusion and uncertainty resulting from absent or insufficient communication about services, and long waitlists. Participants demonstrated persistence and determination, networked with service providers, and activated formal resources. Positive service experiences were tailored to families’ needs and marked by clear and consistent communication between providers and with service recipients. Findings suggest effective health communication tactics should be applied to housing services. Providers should collaborate to ensure service attainment does not impede other pathways to stability.

Keywords

homeless; service use; housing services; social services; effective communication

Despite the overwhelming stressors associated with poverty and homelessness, most families who experience homelessness re-establish housing within a few months (Culhane, Metraux, Schretzman, & Valente, 2007; Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010; Link et al., 1995; Phelan & Link, 1999) and do not re-enter the shelter system (Culhane et al., 2007). Nonetheless, research efforts focus more on the processes and pathways through which they become homeless than on the pathways through which they re-attain housing stability. Families often meet basic needs and get back on their feet by identifying and accessing social and housing services. However, little is known about what motivates people to make use of housing services and what predicts their success in such use (Christian, Armitage, & Abrams, 2003; Christian, Clapham, & Abrams, 2011). An understanding of the unique

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challenges experienced by families who use the housing service system, and the strategies they find effective, is critical for improving service planning and effectively allocating funds to families in need (Banyard, 1995; Milburn & D'Ercole, 1991; Shinn & Weitzmann, 1990). This is especially important in the recent economic context; as the availability of affordable housing units decreases and the number of homeless families increases (Sard, 2009), obtaining housing services becomes increasingly competitive and those in need must be more strategic.

Barriers experienced by parents attempting to use social services (e.g., childcare subsidies, food stamps; Edin & Lein, 1997; Remler & Glied, 2003; Schlay, Weinraub, Harmon, & Tran 2004; Wu & Eamon, 2010) may or may not be representative of their experiences with the housing service system. For instance, parents perceived the childcare subsidy system to be confusing and ever changing, especially with regard to eligibility requirements (Schlay et al., 2004). Complex application processes, especially those requiring multiple face-to-face visits, present another substantial barrier to successful service use (Edin & Lein, 1997; Schlay et al., 2004; Wu & Eamon, 2010; Zedlewski et al., 2003). Furthermore, parents have described competing and conflicting requirements of single programs (e.g., must have a job to be eligible but must take off multiple days of work to apply, thereby jeopardizing their employment; Schlay et al., 2004) and of multiple programs [e.g., meeting eligibility for one service disqualifies them for another (Schlay et al., 2004), or a subsidy increases net income resulting in loss of other services (Hastings, Taylor, & Austin, 2006)]. Even when individual services have logical and reasonable requirements and rewards, families who have the highest level of need and use multiple services (such as those who become homeless), may find that the service environment, as a whole, introduces “catch-22s” which prevent them from achieving goals (McKnight, 1995). The experience of service-related catch-22s may be compounded for racial/ethnic minorities. In a small qualitative study, Gooden (1998) found that White welfare recipients reported receiving encouragement and assistance with educational goals and transportation from caseworkers, whereas African American recipients did not.

Although these are formidable challenges to accessing housing services, most families overcome them. Bogard (1998) found that women in homeless shelters identified and took advantage of “opportunities for effective action” (p. 229) despite the restrictions imposed by the shelter environment. Phenomenological studies of poor families highlight the time and tenacity required for successful service use, in addition to negotiation, advocacy, organization, and presentation skills (Bogard, 1998; Brodsky, 1999; Canvin, Marttila, Burstrom, & Whitehead, 2009; Hastings et al., 2006). Such work is analogous to the overlooked and undervalued ‘hidden work’ performed in the home to care for children, prepare meals, and other tasks that make daily life possible (Star & Strauss, 1999; Canvin, et al., 2009). Parents who become homeless may do more service use work than any other group; often their days are spent seeking, applying for, and negotiating services for temporary and permanent shelter, food, and childcare (Bogard, 1998; Brodsky, 1999; Canvin et al., 2009). However, because successful use of social and housing services is not a typical marker of success (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001), the work and skills required to identify and access services are undervalued and understudied.

Therefore, this study sought to understand the housing service system from the perspective of 80 parents exiting homeless shelters in four states across the United States (US). Specific objectives were to identify the challenges presented by use of the housing service system, the strategies families used to successfully obtain resources for their families, and the differentiating characteristics of positive and negative service experiences.

Methods

Study Context

Participants had been recruited from shelters as part of a larger randomized evaluation study conducted in twelve sites across the US led by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Abt Associates (for details see Gubits, Spellman, Dunton, Brown, & Wood, 2013). Parents from each family completed informed consent for the larger study if they were staying in a shelter for at least seven days with at least one child (age 15 years). Only 13 of 2,503 eligible participants across all twelve sites decided not to complete informed consent (Gubits et al., 2013). For the larger study, participants were randomly assigned to receive no special offer for housing services (i.e., treatment as usual) or to receive an offer for one of three housing interventions: program-based transitional housing (PBTH), time-limited housing subsidy through community-based rapid re-housing programs (CBRR), or long-term housing subsidy through a Housing Choice or project-based voucher (participants commonly referred to this assistance as Section 8). Families who did not meet the preexisting eligibility criteria of at least one of the intervention programs were excluded from randomization (183 out of 2,490 consenting participants were not randomized, resulting in a final sample of 2,307 in the larger experiment; Gubits et al., 2013).

Study Procedures

Four participating sites were selected for recruitment for in-depth semi-structured interviews: Kansas City, Missouri; Phoenix, Arizona; Alameda County, California; and Connecticut (including Bridgeport, New Haven, Norwalk, and Stamford). These four sites were selected because they were geographically diverse and had a sufficient number of families assigned to each of the intervention groups by the time recruitment for the interviews began. Prior to recruitment, study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Abt Associates and Vanderbilt University. Participants were recruited through regular follow-up tracking contacts for the larger study, beginning at least 3 months after they were randomized to receive a housing offer as part of the larger study. No contacted participants refused to participate in the interview, but 11% of those scheduled cancelled/missed their interview. Recruitment was designed to represent the four random assignment categories across the four sites. Participants were enrolled until 80 had been interviewed with a goal of five in each random assignment category per site.

Trained interviewers conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with participants in a private location an average of 6.4 months ($SD=1.9$, range: 3 – 10.5) after random assignment. Interviews lasted 60 – 90 minutes. The interview protocol had four sections: housing decisions participants made since leaving shelter (Fisher, Mayberry, Shinn, & Khadduri, 2014), family processes in different living conditions (Mayberry, Shinn, Benton,

& Wise, 2014), family separations and reunifications, and social support for parenting. No interview questions asked participants to describe their experiences interacting with service providers or with trying to obtain their assigned offer or any other form of housing services. Interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed verbatim by transcribers who were independent of the investigators. Participants were compensated \$50 for their time.

Sample

Participants (N=80) were, on average, 31.2 years old (SD=9.0), 96% were female and 16% were married/partnered. Approximately half (49%) were non-Hispanic African American/Black, 17% were non-Hispanic Caucasian/White, and 4% were Native American. Of the 25% reporting Hispanic ethnicity, most (13 out of 20) also reported Caucasian/White or African American/Black race. Only four respondents reported “other” race and did not report Hispanic ethnicity. Though none had completed college, 56% had a technical certificate, high school degree, or equivalent. Participants had an average of 2.0 (SD=1.3) children with them in shelter. Over half (53%) of the children were 5 years or younger (mean=6.1, SD=4.5, range 0 – 17). At the time of the interview, 10 (12%) families were in PBTH, 45 (56%) were in their own place (33 with a subsidy and 12 without), 15 (19%) were doubled up with family/friends, and 10 (12%) were in a shelter or hotel.

Effects of random assignment—As mentioned above, for the larger study these families had been randomly assigned to one of the interventions for which they met basic eligibility criteria (or to treatment as usual), and then nonrandomly assigned to a specific program within that intervention for which they appeared eligible (see Gubits et al., 2013). Although random assignment sent families to the “front of the line” for their assigned program, at the front of that line they went through the same eligibility and screening processes as other families. Thus, random assignment to receive an offer of intervention absolutely did not ensure the receipt of such an offer. Programs could and often did screen-out applicants based on further eligibility criteria not disclosed to research staff or refer participants to other programs, and/or participants could decide not to pursue or to decline their assigned offer. Participants assigned to any condition could and did access other housing programs on their own, but did not get to “skip line” for those programs. On average, participants (N=80) had experienced 1.8 (SD=0.8) living situations between leaving shelter and the interview. Only 30 (38%) participants received the placement/subsidy they were assigned and 15 (19%) obtained a different placement/subsidy than that assigned to them (see Fisher et al., 2014 for housing trajectories of this sample). Therefore, the random assignment process accelerated participants’ experiences with the housing service system but did not create a unique system or experience compared with that of other families trying to exit homeless shelters using the housing service system.

Analysis

First, a team of research assistants read a subset of interview transcripts to (a) to develop an initial coding scheme for the *a priori* interview topics and (b) identify topics in the transcripts that were not specifically queried by the interview protocol (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998; Tesh, 1990). During this process, the team identified *experiences with the housing service system* as a topic that was spontaneously discussed in

many interviews. The team decided to identify all content relevant to this topic during structural coding. Structural coding is a process in which interview transcripts are read completely to identify all of the text associated with each particular research question (MacQueen et al., 1998). Structural coding is important for identifying situations where a respondent mentions something relevant to an earlier research question spontaneously later in the interview and for identifying unanticipated topics that occur in different places throughout the interview (MacQueen et al., 1998), as *experiences with the housing service system* did in this case. Teams of two conducted structural coding for each interview. The dyads met weekly to compare their coding processes and reach consensus about which topic areas were addressed in each section of the transcripts. Through this process, the team was confident that all content pertinent to participants' *experiences with the housing service system* had been identified for further analysis.

Once the structural coding process was completed, the author conducted further analysis of the data within the *experiences with the housing service system* structural code using thematic analysis, which included open coding (a process of examining and categorizing data) followed by axial coding (a process of reassembling data into groupings based on relationships identified in the data; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2008). Main themes identified during this process were further coded and refined to identify subthemes, which were then analyzed for categories, properties, and dimensions (i.e., axial codes). The resulting codebook with examples and definition of each theme, subtheme, and category/property/dimension was taken back to the research team for refinement, iteratively until it was finalized (MacQueen et al., 1998). Finally, selective analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to identify the most frequently discussed challenges of service use and strategies of service users. Constant comparison analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used to identify key characteristics of positive and negative service experiences. Descriptions of conflicts with shelter staff or challenges with shelter rules/policies were excluded from the presentation of results because these have been discussed elsewhere (see Mayberry et al., 2014) and were not relevant to using the service system to obtain additional services or housing stability.

Frequency counts—Although frequency counts alone are insufficient to convey qualitative findings, they provide additional information as to how many participants discussed a theme and help identify patterns (e.g., women discussed a theme more than men), and therefore are useful in concert with other forms of data presentation (e.g., thick description provided by participant quotes). The use of frequency counts enhances credibility and trustworthiness of the findings because the reader can assess whether the themes were important across participants rather than “cherry picked” by researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Namey et al., 2008). Adopting the approach recommended by Namey et al. (2008), frequency counts indicate the number of participants who spontaneously mentioned a theme or subtheme out of the full sample (N=80). Thus, frequency counts are intended to (a) emphasize the subthemes that were mentioned by many participants rather than those mentioned by very few participants, (b) demonstrate how pervasive specific service use challenges were across sites so the reader does not conclude

that a specific challenge was germane to only one particular service program, and (c) indicate the salience of a theme/subtheme to participants. Although it cannot be concluded that those who did not discuss a theme did not experience it, it is reasonable to conclude that the themes discussed by many participants in this sample were experienced by more service users than those discussed by one or a few participants in this sample.

Results

Three main themes were identified in participants' spontaneous discussion of their experiences with the housing service system: challenges of service use, strategies of service recipients, and characteristics of positive and negative service experiences. The most frequently discussed subthemes for each are described in detail below. First, the description of challenges of service use includes barriers to finding and obtaining services needed to attain housing stability. Second, the description of strategies of service recipients includes the most commonly discussed methods participants used to overcome or attempt to overcome challenges associated housing service system use. Finally, the description of the characteristics of positive and negative service experiences includes participants' perceptions of programs or services they received; what made some of these services helpful or motivating and others harmful or unsuccessful from the perspective of the participants?

Challenges of Service Use

Forty of the 80 interviewed participants (50%) discussed at least one challenge with service use, including catch-22s (43%), uncertainty or confusion (39%), and waiting lists (26%). These challenges were common across sites, indicating systemic challenges across various housing service systems rather than a single challenging service system in a specific location. Frequency counts are presented by site for each of these challenges of service use below.

Catch-22s—Catch-22s were discussed by participants from each site: 12 out of 18 from Missouri; 11 out of 19 from Arizona; 7 out of 20 from California; and 9 out of 23 from Connecticut. A catch-22 is a commonly used phrase for a situation in which a desired outcome is impossible to obtain due to a set of inherently illogical or contradictory rules or conditions. More specifically, a catch-22 indicates a situation in which a requirement cannot be met until a prerequisite is met but obtaining the prerequisite is conditional upon meeting the original requirement. For instance, participants recounted situations in which they were required to obtain one thing (e.g., job, subsidy) to obtain another (e.g., childcare, eligibility for service), but could not obtain the first without the second. Sometimes these contradictory requirements came from a single program, and but more often from multiple programs.

I needed a job before I could get the [CBRR] voucher. It was extremely difficult for me to obtain a job with my kids and I told him, "Once I find out where I'm going to live then I can find a job, because if I don't know where I'm – I don't have a car so it's extremely hard for me to get from point A to point B and if I don't know where I'm going to live then I can't really pick out where I'm going to work." (26 year-old African American female in Arizona)

The most commonly discussed catch-22 was the requirement that participants have a job in order to receive childcare services. Participants described how difficult it was to find a job without childcare:

Daycare is what I need to get but the only way I could get daycare is if I have a job already and so that's why I'm going to have to go look for a job but [my kids are] going to have to come with me... But I know once I get a job then I'll be eligible for childcare. [But] they cut a lot of [other services] off when you get a job. (26 year-old Hispanic female in Arizona)

They did have childcare, but you had to be working a certain amount of hours. And I'm like—well, I don't have a job at all. It doesn't exactly look right taking your kids to interviews. It's like [to potential employer], "Don't worry, they won't be at work with me." (22 year-old White female in Arizona)

Since employment was often a condition of eligibility for housing services, such as CBRR, this catch-22 also impeded participants' ability to use available housing services. Several participants suggested programs offer childcare for a brief trial period and revoke it if parents were unable to obtain a job after a certain period of time. Participants felt that housing programs should communicate with one another to avoid placing contradictory requirements on families:

There aren't enough resources and enough networking. I think that [other social services] should be networking with HUD, with Section 8, with other types of housing to try to prevent this. (33 year-old Hispanic female in Connecticut)

Uncertainty or confusion—Uncertainty/confusion was discussed by participants from each site: 9 out of 18 from Missouri; 11 out of 19 from Arizona; 7 out of 20 from California; and 9 out of 23 from Connecticut. Participants reported uncertainty and confusion as a result of absent or insufficient communication with service providers. Specifically, they reported uncertainty/confusion about (a) what services were available, (b) what they needed to do to qualify for assistance, (c) which programs were responsible for which services, (d) when and how their subsidy was paid to the landlord, and/or (e) when or under what circumstances they could lose assistance or be forced to leave. One source of this confusion was participants' inability to get in contact with key service providers:

They told me [the CBRR subsidy] was six to – every three months they evaluate you... But if they don't communicate with you, I mean what? Nobody has called me. Nobody has left me messages. I haven't heard nothing. I've called [my CBRR contact's] cell phone plenty of times. I don't know the office number, and I don't know exactly where it's located, so I don't know what else to do. (28 year-old White female in California)

Conflation of service providers was another source of confusion. For example, often participants expressed confusion about whether or not “the lady” they spoke to was associated with a shelter or housing subsidy program and therefore did not know how to get back in contact with her.

Participants also described service providers' lack of communication within and across housing programs. For instance, a participant would speak with a service provider who would advise them to complete certain tasks to be eligible for their program, but when they completed those tasks another service provider with the same program would tell them they were ineligible. They often described feeling like they were "just getting the runaround" rather than progressing as they talked to each consecutive service provider. For instance, this participant reported being told she would be eligible for a service if she had a part-time job, but after she obtained the job she was deemed ineligible:

I went through a process, three months' worth of trying to get them all the paperwork. So it was – it's just like I was being told one thing, then another. (43 year-old "Other" race female in California)

Participants also described how their application would be accepted and then rescinded/rejected, or how they completed required steps but were rejected due to budget cuts, a background check, or another previously un-checked eligibility requirement.

It's really hard for me to get accurate information as far as assistance... There's situations where someone would tell me "Oh, this place or that place will help you with assistance." And I get all my stuff together and go there and they're like "Oh, well we don't do that anymore." or "The program is shut down. We don't have funding for it anymore." And it's like, "Oh wow, I kind of did all this work for nothing." (23 year-old African American female in Missouri)

Participants described how eligibility and recertification requirements for housing assistance programs were unstated or seemed to keep changing. This participant says neither she nor her case worker could understand why she no longer met eligibility criteria for a PBTH program that originally accepted her:

My [case] worker kept saying, "Well, I don't know what is going on. I don't know." That is what made me so frustrated and wanting to leave [PBTH] because I'm like, "How do you not know?" We are calling the same people and they are not responding to [either of] us, so I don't know what else to do." (25 year-old African American female in Connecticut)

Study personnel also encountered confusion as a result of unstated eligibility criteria of housing assistance programs. The larger study screened for eligibility requirements by asking participants if they would like to be considered for programs with specific eligibility restrictions, thereby allowing them to remove themselves for consideration without disclosing sensitive information (e.g., a criminal record, substance abuse). However, programs did not disclose all eligibility criteria to study personnel and tended to exclude criteria they felt were obvious (e.g., not allowing men or boys over a certain age). Although study personnel added previously unstated eligibility criteria to screening procedures and provided additional referrals, the lack of clearly stated program criteria reported by participants also introduced confusion into the research process for the larger study.

Participants also felt confused about the criteria programs used to decide who to give assistance:

Literally, I am homeless, and it's like they – I just feel like they're giving [assistance] to people that, I don't know, they're not even looking for jobs, some of them aren't... I'm in a situation where I'm really homeless and I can't get any assistance, any help, anything. (25 year-old African American female in Missouri)

My thing was trying to get [help with my] security deposit. They said I didn't qualify. You know, so it's kind of hard when you are a straight and narrow person they don't want to help you but if you're domestic violence, a drug head, alcoholic they're throwing [services at you]. And that's what they told me. They said, well, I wasn't put out by a fire or domestic violence. I said okay, so if I'm getting my behind whupped you would help me... if I was a crackhead you would help me. If I got my kids taken away from me you'll help me. But because I'm straight up it's "you're good." (34 year-old African American female in Connecticut)

These experiences gave participants the impression that eligibility was privy to the whim of the service provider, or that services were offered based on relationships with those in power:

I'm still trying to find out what services they provide and utilize them. They really don't offer a whole lot except for a place to sleep and shower. They say they do but it's really hard... You've got to know the right people and have friends in high places to get anything. (29 year-old White female from Arizona)

People don't play fair when it comes to applying for things. There's a lot of nepotism here. [Providers would] rather give [services] to their kin or their cousins. (36 year-old Hispanic female in Missouri)

Waiting lists—Waiting lists were discussed by participants from each site: 5 out of 18 from Missouri; 6 out of 19 from Arizona; 4 out of 20 from California; and 6 out of 23 from Connecticut. Across the four sites, participants reported waiting lists for long-term housing subsidies were two to five years long. Participants described assistance services and their waiting lists as “saturated” or “completely full.” Many stated they didn’t know what else to do because they were on every waiting list in their county and neighboring counties.

I put in applications in [this county], and the next county over, everywhere I can find I put them in. Section 8 had a lottery where they pick a name and I'm on the waiting list for that so I did my check up with that so they're saying now they're just waiting for interviews. I put an application in transitional housing at the beginning of the year. They're saying that they're backed up three months so the application should be within the next 30 days but you still have to wait for them to go through your application to give you an interview to do all that stuff. (30 year-old African American female in Connecticut)

Strategies of Service Recipients

All participants described very busy lives; in addition to regular family obligations required to care for their children or their parents, their days were filled with searching for services, completing applications, gathering paperwork, arguing their case to service providers, searching for jobs, working, going to school, and attending mandatory meetings. These

participants described the time and energy required to balance competing demands and obtain or use housing assistance:

[With] me having to [look for a place to use my subsidy] on foot and on bus, it was kind of hard going here to there with my children. You know, and then worrying about, oh my gosh, I've got to put them in school, running back, picking them up... And I was staying all the way in [shelter] at the time and had to be in at 7 o'clock so I had to rush, rush, rush and then go back and pick up the kids. So, it was not like that much opportunities for me to just get in the car and go [look for a place that would take my subsidy]. (29 year-old "Other" race female from Arizona)

Forty-eight out of 80 participants (60%) discussed specific strategies used in response to the challenges of service use. Specifically, participants described persistence and determination (49%), networking (30%), and activating other resources (28%).

Persistence and determination—One of the ways participants managed having to wait for services to become available was to persistently contact service programs to ensure they were on every waiting list and knew their placement on the lists. Participants felt they had to "harass" or "hound" service providers with follow up calls and visits to ensure they were not overlooked when their spot came up on waiting lists. Several explained that service representatives had advised them of the importance of their persistence:

I've been checking in and calling supportive housing. I'm on the list. I'm in the top 20 for that so they told me to just keep calling back and making sure I check in. (30 year-old African American female from Connecticut)

Monitoring and managing their place on multiple waiting lists demanded a lot of time, energy, and organization.

Networking—In response to the lack of clear information about availability and eligibility requirements of services, participants networked with other shelter/program residents and developed and leveraged relationships with service providers to become "in the know":

The only problem I had with it is you had to ask and probe them as to what resources were available to you. They weren't readily available and they didn't offer them or advertise what was available. So if you weren't asking, you wouldn't find out. A lot of people are kind of afraid to ask and so a lot of them don't find out about what's there. I never stopped asking. I asked everyone. (29 year-old White male in Arizona)

If you throw your hands into the right people at the shelter, they can lead you into some good stuff. They know more than your family members, or they've got more access. So, you've just got to talk to certain people that know certain things, and just go straight to the point. Depending on how you look at things, [shelter] is like the best opportunity for people that's like me, because it's the option that leads to many options if you just look at it in that way, but you've got to go into [shelter] like you're coming out with something. (26 year-old African American female in Connecticut)

Participants described how the relationships they developed with service providers were social currency they could draw upon to access services. One participant said he “sweet-talked” a member of the shelter staff to bend rules so she could stay there. Sometimes these relationships were with people who might not have power themselves (e.g., bus drivers, cafeteria workers) but could activate supervisors or friends with resources on behalf of the participants:

They have this health service van, so I got to know one of the ladies on the health service van. So every time she came [to pick me up] I would bug her to talk about, “When is [a shelter program] going open?” And so, she finally said, “We have this other program; it’s the [Transitional Housing Program],” so she helped me and that’s how I got into the [Transitional Housing Program]. (31 year-old “Other” race female in California)

Activating formal resources—Participants activated formal resources when they were unable to access services on their own, or when the services offered to them were not suited to their needs. Several participants reported activating official resources (e.g., police or service providers’ supervisors) to make their case and obtain services. One participant contacted the project officer at HUD in Washington, DC because she was displeased with the geographical restrictions of the subsidy she was assigned by the larger study. She made the case that she needed a subsidy she could use without relocating and requiring her children to change schools. Several other participants described making arrangements with school boards so their children didn’t have to change schools every time they relocated for housing, as was their right under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (as amended by Congress in 1994; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). One participant who was displeased with the sanitary conditions of a shelter filed a complaint with the state government and was placed in a hotel as a result of their investigation. Another filed complaints if service providers were not helping her move towards her goals:

I was determined to get a place. I stayed homeless all this time and I was determined and actually this is my fourth caseworker. If one don’t work for me I call and report them and this one is working for me. (38 year-old African American female in Missouri)

Characteristics of Positive and Negative Service Experiences

These challenges of service use and strategies of service recipients focused on accessing services. However, participants also described differentiating characteristics of their experiences with the services they received. Twenty-four out of 80 participants (30%) described a particularly helpful service experience or explicitly compared positive and negative service experiences. Comparative analyses identified key characteristics of positive and negative service experiences (shown in Table 1 with associated participant quotes).

Discussion

The ‘hidden work’ of service use (Brodsky, 1999, Canvin et al., 2009) is a fitting description of the lived experience of these parents as they worked to exit homelessness. Accessing

services while balancing family demands was challenging, but participants reported several strategies for successful service use including persistence and determination, networking with service providers, and activating formal resources. The notion that poverty and associated need for assistance are the results of low motivation leads to increasingly restrictive social policies designed to externally motivate poor individuals to find jobs and become self-sufficient (Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003). In contrast, the parents in this study were extremely active and motivated, leveraging all available resources (e.g., relationships, program policies, legal rights) to exit shelters and find services while also maintaining family life. The finding that participants leveraged relationships with service providers to become “in the know” and obtain services is an extension of Bogard’s (1998) finding that women networked with friends, family, and kin to pool resources and obtain information while in shelter. Participants in this study rarely mentioned informal relationships when describing service attainment; it may be that informal networking facilitates life while in shelter, and networking with service providers and other formal resources facilitates exits from shelters to more stable housing.

The challenges of service use described by these parents have been highlighted in research on homelessness before: catch-22s presented by service use (Barrow & Laborde, 2008; Edin & Lein, 1997; Gubits, Khadduri, & Turnham, 2009), confusion about services (Gubits et al., 2009), and long waiting lists (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). Furthermore, these themes are reflected in literature on other social services these families use as well (e.g., childcare, food stamps, Medicare; Remler & Glied, 2003; Schlay et al., 2004; Wu & Eamon, 2010), suggesting families’ experiences with these challenges are compounded with each additional service they need to survive in severe poverty. However, the consistency of these themes across different sites points to systemic problems in housing services. Several facts lend support to the assertion that communication problems are not solely attributable to the service recipient. First, the lack of clarity and communication about services was consistent across sites. Second, the problem of unstated or unclear eligibility requirements described by participants parallels the problems encountered by study personnel. Finally, the same participants contrasted clear and unclear service requirements, suggesting program differences rather than participant differences.

Reflections on the Role of the Larger Randomized Evaluation Study

The larger study disrupted the ecology of service provision for participating communities in ways that may have created additional confusion for service recipients. Participating communities garnered resources in the form of long-term vouchers and CBRR funds designated for homeless families. In exchange, programs agreed to allocate housing resources by random assignment, which interrupted patterns of service delivery that may have previously been more continuous and clear for service providers and service recipients alike. However, in practice, the true value of being randomized to receive an offer from a housing program was greatly reduced by the somewhat unsystematic nature of the housing service systems in these sites. Presumably, giving a family an offer for a housing program for which they have been prescreened would result in an offer for a placement/subsidy from that program, which they could then accept or decline. This was not reflected in the experiences of these participants. Follow-up on an assigned housing offer often stopped after

a single phone call during which participants learned of previously unstated eligibility criteria their family did not meet or were advised to pursue another type of program (for which they did not get to “skip line”). In other words, even in the context of a HUD-funded multi-site randomized evaluation study, families’ ability to receive a housing program placement or housing subsidy was anything but straightforward.

Implications

Service providers are the gatekeepers of resources for families experiencing housing instability and homelessness. Therefore, for families to optimize available resources to meet goals of stability and self-sufficiency, policy and research attention must be paid to communication between service providers and service recipients. Participants’ narrations of interactions with service providers evoke the concept of health literacy in doctor-patient interactions. Health literacy is “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions” (Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 32 citing Ratzan & Parker, 2000). Although health literacy is strongly associated with educational attainment, health literacy limitations may also present problems for individuals who are functionally literate in other areas but are unable to function in the context of health-related language and communication. Research on doctor-patient interactions has highlighted the fact that people understand and retain less when in a state of high stress, such as upon hearing a diagnosis or feeling ill (Kessels, 2003; Payne et al., 2002, 2006), and the role of power differentials in curtailing patients’ inclination to ask clarifying questions of providers (Ley, 1976; Shapiro et al., 1983; Quill, 1989). Healthcare providers undoubtedly want to convey a clear message to patients so the patients can follow recommendations and be well; nonetheless, patients frequently leave healthcare appointments unable to repeat their diagnosis or explain how to take their medicine correctly (Vermeir, Hearnshaw, Van Royan, & Denekens, 2001). Similarly, families who experience an instance of homelessness are often acutely stressed and power differentials inherent between service providers and service recipients (e.g., the power to expel families from a program) are often augmented by differences in race and class.

Although service providers’ perspectives are not represented here, it is fair and reasonable to assume they have positive intentions and are not deliberately obscuring information or changing eligibility requirements. Just as healthcare providers want to convey clear messages to their patients, service providers likely want to help families obtain housing services. The field of health communication has focused research and policy efforts on improving the readability of printed materials and testing strategies to enhance patients’ understanding of patient-provider interactions and treatment recommendations (American Medical Association, 2003). Similar efforts are necessary to assess service recipients’ ability to access the service system and complete necessary paperwork (i.e., “service literacy”), and to understand the relationship between recipients’ level of understanding during/after interactions with service providers and their subsequent success with service attainment. Strategies effective in enhancing provider-patient communication should be implemented and evaluated in interactions between service providers and recipients. For example, providers should be trained in active listening to assess the recipients’ broader goals and

context. After giving information, providers should assess understanding by asking the recipient to repeat the information to confirm comprehension (i.e., “teach back”). Given Lareau’s (2002) findings that children from poor families are socialized not to question service providers or attempt to tailor requirements to their own needs, such communication techniques are particularly critical for housing services, which often target families rooted in generations of poverty.

In addition, communication across services needs to be routinized both within the housing service system and between housing services and other relevant social services (e.g., childcare subsidies). Since welfare reform in 1996, there has been a trend toward decentralization of the US welfare system, with more and more programs operating at the discretion of state and local governments in concert with federal programs (Manza, 2000). This decentralization, in combination with increasing amounts of anti-poverty funds being spent on “opportunity” programs (i.e., those designed to provide poor families with opportunities to get ahead rather than the provision of direct income; Manza, 2000), has likely led to the poorest families experiencing the service environment as contradictory and replete with catch-22s. Participants described how they felt the service *environment*, more than any single service, impeded their efforts towards independence and stability. Providers should collaborate with service recipients and with *other service providers* to establish an actionable plan with clearly defined next steps, free of contradictory requirements, to ensure families do not complete unnecessary tasks or pursue services that may exclude them. One of the most formidable catch-22s experienced by parents who become homeless could be addressed by cross-program collaboration; study participants suggested that parents in shelters should be offered childcare subsidies while they seek employment and housing on a short-term basis, rather than only being eligible for childcare subsidies after they are employed. Participants also described the critical role of case managers who provided continuity of care and helped them identify the right services to pursue. More opportunities for service providers to communicate with case managers and network with providers from other services should be built into regular processes.

Limitations

Due to the eligibility criteria of the larger study (that participants be in a shelter for at least one week with at least one child), our results do not represent the unique experiences of parents who do not access the shelter system upon becoming homeless or those who were separated from their children and staying in shelter alone. Our methodological approach also introduced limitations. First, as described above, possible self-selection bias and participation in the larger study may limit generalizability. Second, interviewers were likely perceived as “outsiders” and potentially categorized as service providers because of their alignment with the larger study and race and class differentials. Interviews were conducted by two-person teams and scheduled such that at least one interviewer had the same race as the participant, but we cannot assess the degree to which this approach reduced the effect of such differentials on the information disclosed during interviews. Although interviewers informed participants that their participation would not affect the larger study and their responses would remain confidential, it is likely that participants used other less socially acceptable strategies that were not discussed in interviews (see Bogard, 1998). Additionally,

study personnel added another “lady” which service recipients often confused with their contact for the housing assistance program, contributing further to confusion. Finally, we did not elicit service providers’ perspectives or observe interactions between participants and service providers. This is an important area for further research.

Conclusion

Parents demonstrated tenacity in pursuing available resources to regain stability for their family after a shelter stay. However, housing instability is marked by extreme stress, competing demands, and (for many) first exposure to a complex service system. To ensure families are able to successfully activate available resources to reach their goals of stability and self-sufficiency, service providers need skills and techniques to ensure that families understand necessary information and are able to qualify for services without compromising other important goals. Research and policy efforts should focus on applying best practices identified in research on health communication to housing assistance materials and to interactions between service providers and recipients to maximize families’ chances of obtaining the resources necessary to quickly exit homelessness.

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Table 1

Key characteristics of positive and negative service experiences.

Positive Service Experiences	Negative Service Experiences
<p>Parent/family goal focused; opportunities to choose services to meet family needs <i>They help you find jobs – they just help you all around, they make a monthly case plan with you and see what your goals are and what jobs are you looking for so you can be more self-sufficient. (30 year-old African American female in Arizona)</i></p> <p>Networking across services/service providers <i>I had help with trying to locate jobs, and other agencies like housing and places for food and clothing. And they were helpful with all the knowledge in finding schools. Like, if you had a problem, say you needed help with your daughter in school, they would supply a counselor to come in and help... They already have the listings of work that you can go through. And everything was helpful as far as getting into the right agencies, finding work, making you feel like you are still a part of something, you know. (49 year-old White female in Arizona)</i></p> <p>Clear and frequent communication between service providers and participants <i>[My case manager] helped me and she was extremely nice from point A all the way to now of everything I needed, what I needed to do – very clear, there was no gray areas, everything was smooth. (26 year-old African American female in Arizona)</i></p> <p>Stated and consistent eligibility and retention requirements <i>I knew what the rules were; I knew what I could do, and what I couldn't do. They didn't have – well, they do have some mandatory stuff that you do have to go to, but it's not to the point where – I didn't have to go up and explain it to someone more than once that I go to school at nights. "On Tuesdays and Thursdays when you guys have those mandatory meetings," I said, "And I'm not going to be able to make it to them." And they excused me from them. I didn't have to, like at [the previous shelter], continue repeating myself and [keep] getting in trouble. (39 year-old Native American female in Missouri)</i></p>	<p>Program requirements the same for all families; inflexibility of program requirements impeded personal and family goals <i>My experience with like between the two shelters that I stayed in – one of them, they were very active and helpful and it felt like they was more helping me, but the other one was more like how could I help them. Like I spent most of my time at one shelter looking for apartments, looking for housing, looking for employment. And the other place I just spent filling out paperwork and signing my name on paperwork, like signatures and dates [that I attended] workshops basically. Really, I felt kind of used at the second one. (21 year-old African American female in Missouri)</i> <i>But again, the groups that they have you go to it's not – they don't really help you. They're based on disabled people, and most of the people that come into the shelter, not everybody is disabled. (Note: by "disabled" the participant is referencing those with alcohol/drug dependencies or mental illness.) (29 year-old African American female in Missouri)</i></p> <p>Unpredictable rules, requirements, and schedules <i>Well what they do is they pay the – at first it was the first month deposit, and it could be six months to a year of help. But then as the time went on, it dwindled down to only three months of help. And then as it got closer and I was just about to find a place they said well, you're not working full-time so this program may not be good for you. So it ended. (43 year-old "Other" race female in California)</i></p> <p>Vague criteria for and/or threats of expulsion <i>They can put you out at any time if they feel like you're not meeting their criteria that they want you to meet. (25 year-old Native American female in Missouri)</i> <i>I got kicked out [of a shelter] with no explanation. So that was pretty – that's probably the worst experience I've had is being kicked out with no explanation, not one. (29 year-old African American female in Missouri)</i></p>