Building Public Housing Authority Capacity for Better Resident Services

Lesson from HOST

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"The way we've been able to create services has improved our tenants' lives. Actually it works to improve our assets and the lives of the residents—and those are both great outcomes."

—Executive vice president of resident services, public housing authority

Finding the right balance of services for families living in public and assisted housing is a constant challenge. Communities with traditional service models struggle to meet the needs of highly distressed families. Meanwhile, communities with intensive service models struggle to target these more costly interventions to the residents who can benefit most. The Urban Institute's Housing Opportunity and Services Together (HOST) demonstration offers a strategy to address the needs of the whole family and to better match services to resident needs. Even with limited funding, recognizing that traditional service coordination won't work for all residents opens the door for new partners, new strategies, and new flexibilities. With new models, housing providers may find better, more enduring ways to meet resident needs.

This brief describes the opportunities to use housing as a platform for resident services, the challenges to coordinating services effectively in public and assisted housing, and the strategies and recommendations to ensure that service coordination is evidence based and supports the best

outcomes for residents, housing providers, and communities. It highlights insights from HOST along with important lessons from other projects, such as the Urban Institute's work forging partnerships between housing authorities and schools, the Enterprise Foundation's three-year Resident Services Initiative (summarized in Proscio 2006), and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) previous evaluations of service coordination. The brief also includes anecdotal collections of best practices, as well as the breadth of experience represented in communities of practice such as the American Association of Service Coordinators. These lessons can be applied broadly to resident services coordination.

Given the significant self-sufficiency needs of residents in assisted housing, and the historical and financial contexts within which housing providers serve residents, the following recommendations could improve outcomes:

- HUD should highlight the flexibility Moving to Work provides and how it increases service coordination capacity. Public housing authorities (PHAs) should adopt promising practices and build staff capacity to both support resident services and partner with local service providers.

- When reviewing applications for service coordination funding, HUD should prioritize proposals that identify opportunities to serve high-need families through intensive, whole-family service models.

- HUD and PHAs should require rigorous, focused data collection for service management and increase their tracking of service outcomes.

The Case for Housing as a Platform

Policymakers and researchers are increasingly interested in how to use housing as a platform for providing services that help vulnerable, low-income residents stabilize and thrive. Housing can increase residents' quality of life at various points along a continuum of needs. While there are many different models of service coordination, intensive delivery models are particularly salient in public and assisted housing when targeted to residents with high needs.

Services help families establish stability mentally, physically, and financially. The results of Urban Institute's Chicago Family Case Management Demonstration, on which the HOST service model is built, showed that anxiety rates decreased, participants' physical health stabilized, and employment rates increased. For example, the share of residents indicating fair or poor health fell 15 percentage points between the demonstration's inception and its four-year follow-up (Popkin and Davies 2013).

When crises are addressed, residents are also less likely to fall behind on rent, be evicted, or create other problems such as damage to units or violent disruptions; these improvements result in lower costs and better property management (Proscio 2006). Additionally, when residents are stable and healthy, they are able to improve their surrounding community, by taking part in school and community activities and by contributing to the economic life of the neighborhood.

Federal Support for Housing and Service Coordination

Currently only a quarter of the nearly 19 million households eligible for federal housing assistance receive it. With the need growing and resources stagnating, housing authorities have been forced to make difficult trade-offs between funding resident services and funding other special programs—and even, in some cases, providing additional housing assistance. Within these constraints, housing agencies are under increased pressure to better identify "work-able" residents, provide the support those residents need to move to unsubsidized housing, and turn over subsidized units more quickly (Scott et al., forthcoming). Nevertheless, HUD continues to play an important role in setting policy and providing resources for services.

Until the 1990s, HUD—and therefore housing agencies—gave little thought to using assisted housing as a platform for services. Even as expectations for housing agencies are changing, these organizations are relatively new to resident services. Housing finance rules have effectively kept service provision and housing management in separate silos by requiring operating budgets in which the proceeds of rent and real estate financing pay for nothing beyond traditional logistical and managerial necessities, such as maintenance, security, financial management, and supplies. Even as the federal government strove to improve public housing and opportunities for residents in the early 1990s, its efforts focused primarily on transforming physical conditions, which had only modest effects on residents' well-being (Popkin et al. 2009).

Federal initiatives continue to incorporate local institutions and supportive services for residents, but the learning curve is still steep for PHAs new to service coordination. Being an effective partner alongside other community stakeholders, such as schools, health care, and parks and recreation, represents a new way of working and requires new skills.

In fiscal year (FY) 2014, HUD announced $135 million in programs designed to support service coordination for residents of HUD-assisted housing, including the Resident Opportunities and Self Sufficiency (ROSS) Service Coordinator program, Family Self-Sufficiency Program Coordinators (FSS), and the Jobs Plus Pilot program. HUD also funds service coordinators for assisted housing designed for the elderly and people with disabilities, awarding $7.5 million in FY 2013.

These programs provide incentives for public housing authorities (and other eligible providers or partners of HUD-assisted housing) to better coordinate resident services. Especially in a resource-constrained environment, ensuring that service coordination funds are used effectively can support the best outcomes for residents, housing providers, and communities.

Models of Resident Services Coordination

Resident services coordination is a widely used model for connecting residents of assisted housing to services through partnerships with community providers. Resident services models span the continuum of family need, but they all focus on developing strategies to help residents move toward economic

independence. A key piece of these self-sufficiency strategies is overcoming a fragmented social services system and eliminating the barriers to accessing services, barriers that are most likely to affect the families who need services most.

Previous evaluations of FSS and Jobs Plus offer initial guidance for policymakers and practitioners. The public housing–based Jobs Plus shows promising effects on employment and income, but the evidence on FSS is mixed. A full evaluation of FSS is under way, with results expected in 2018. HUD is also evaluating proposals for both a ROSS evaluation and a second-round Jobs Plus Pilot Program evaluation. Meanwhile, it will be important to improve existing service coordination models through lessons and best practices grounded in experience and evidence. Policymakers and practitioners should tap into lessons from other models.

Funding constraints mean that HUD-funded service coordinator models are mainly intended to link residents to community-based services. Most do not even provide enough funding to allow providers to ensure that residents connect with the community providers and receive the needed services.

Funding for service coordination programs like ROSS and FSS is limited, and caseloads are necessarily high; often one coordinator is responsible for an entire community. With low funding and high caseloads, it is probably unreasonable to expect that a light-touch approach to service coordination can significantly improve residents' long-term employment or educational outcomes (Turner, Cunningham, and Popkin, forthcoming). The mixed findings from the research imply that such approaches likely only work for the most independent, work-ready families.

But to address the concentrated disadvantage and intergenerational poverty in many assisted communities, organizations need effective strategies for the most vulnerable households. These families face deeper challenges, such as chronic mental and physical health problems, low literacy levels, substance abuse, and family members with criminal records. They need a more intensive approach, similar to what they would receive in family supportive housing (Theodos et al. 2012).

Public housing authorities have an important role to play in helping residents connect to services. As proponents of service coordination are quick to point out, families do not experience challenges in the siloed way most social service systems try to address them. Navigating the multistep, multisystem process for, say, employment often requires the support of someone who understands how to access services and can help eliminate barriers.

The Urban Institute's HOST project seeks to demonstrate the type of model needed to serve high-need families living in assisted housing. HOST is designed to improve employment and other outcomes among these high-need residents through individualized, intensive whole-family case management that deeply assesses employment barriers and coordinates service needs for mental health, literacy, education, and/or employment training (see box 1 for more details).

BOX 1

The Housing Opportunity and Services Together Demonstration

The Urban Institute, with the support of the Open Society Foundations, launched the Housing Opportunity and Services Together demonstration in 2010 to test a whole-family, wraparound model for addressing intergenerational poverty and disadvantage in public and subsidized housing. A major goal of the demonstration was to inform HUD's strategies to use housing as a platform, particularly the then-new Choice Neighborhoods initiative. HOST builds on the lessons of the Chicago Family Case Management Demonstration and incorporates many of its successful approaches. However, HOST broadens the focus of services to the whole family. HOST includes a core case management component with low ratios of 30:1 and staff trained in motivational interviewing and strengths-based counseling approaches. The services help parents confront their key barriers to self-sufficiency—poor physical and mental health, substance abuse, low literacy and educational attainment, and historically weak connections to the labor force—while integrating services for children and youth.

HOST operated in two public and mixed-income communities in Chicago and Portland, Oregon, from 2010 to 2014 and is currently operating in a third community in Washington, DC. Though the evaluation of HOST is still under way, early results indicate employment gains for participants (Scott et al. 2013, forthcoming). Underscoring the need for new and creative approaches, a number of local housing authorities are interested in launching HOST initiatives in their communities. As a result, the Urban Institute is creating a HOST Network that will provide training, technical assistance, and support for these efforts.

Widely recognized as a promising practice, HOST is now supported by a consortium of foundations as well as research partnership funds from HUD. The participating PHAs are all part of the Moving to Work demonstration and are able match philanthropic funds with their own resources to support case management and help ensure that the lessons from HOST are sustainable.

Service coordination models include three key types of activities:

- developing strategies and partnerships to link residents with services;

- bringing services on site for target residents and high-priority needs; and

- monitoring the performance of providers and the outcomes of services.

The next section discusses the unique challenges presented by implementing these activities in public and assisted housing, along with the strategies for ensuring that service coordination achieves key outcomes.

Traditional Service Coordination Does Not Meet the Needs of the Most Distressed Families Living in Public Housing

Service coordination alone is unlikely to address the unique vulnerabilities of many public housing families. Lessons from a growing body of research show that many families who have endured the worst of distressed public housing have extremely complex problems. These issues include long-term disconnection from the labor force; failure in school; addiction; profound physical and mental health problems; and histories of trauma, domestic violence, and other social ills. None of these problems have simple solutions. And, to improve outcomes for the next generation, these problems require intervention and sustained investment in supports that interrupt risky behavior, address trauma, and equip young people to overcome the effects of concentrated disadvantage.

Residents of Assisted Housing Face Multiple Barriers to Self-Sufficiency

The concentrated disadvantage, social disorder, and chronic violence found in many public housing communities don't just lead to poor outcomes for parents and youth. They also can erode a community's collective efficacy—its cohesion, shared values, expectations, and trust. In our baseline survey of HOST participants in Chicago, perceptions of collective efficacy were extremely low: for example, only one-quarter of residents believed people in their neighborhood can be trusted (43 percentage points fewer than parents in the average Chicago neighborhood). Lack of collective efficacy limits families' abilities to rely on social networks (which are often key for low-income families struggling to make ends meet) and to envision positive changes for both the neighborhood and themselves.

Residents also have long histories of bad experiences with traditional service coordination. HOST participants reported that frontline staff turned over so often that residents couldn't even learn staff members' names. Or, residents chose not to learn staff members' names, since residents would see them rarely—for example, only to sign annual paperwork. Residents are also hesitant to engage with service coordinators because, until recently, many coordinators worked for and reported to property managers. Information given to coordinators could therefore affect residents' housing assistance.

For all these reasons, the challenge of service coordination begins before any service is ever provided. It begins with intensive interactions between residents and providers to build trust and relationships.

Services Are Critical if Residents Are to Transition to the Private Market

Beyond the challenges residents *in* assisted housing may face, perhaps the most compelling argument for services is the likely trajectory of those residents who *leave* assisted housing. According to new research, almost half (46 percent) of residents who left housing assistance for negative reasons reported spending some time without their own place to stay (Smith et al. 2014). Over 33 percent of

residents who left housing assistance for negative reasons reported having to double up with friends and family; a shocking 12 percent had been homeless.

Even those who leave public housing or vouchers for positive reasons—increased earnings or homeownership—struggle in the private market and experience a lot of material hardship. They are likely to face unpredictable income, unsteady employment, and unstable housing, as well as the resulting financial pressures. With little savings and a weak safety net, a health problem, divorce, or job loss could quickly negate their previous financial gains. One in five "positive" leavers still reported food insecurity, nearly two-thirds reported having medical or credit card debt, and 17 percent reported having more than $5,000 in credit card debt.

This sobering picture of what happens to those who leave—regardless of why they leave—makes a compelling case for intervening *while families are still in assisted housing*. These services may become the difference between housing stability and instability or even homelessness.

PHAs Face Fiscal and Programmatic Constraints

Along with the challenges that make it difficult for families to access services, PHAs face programmatic and fiscal barriers to providing the services that families need. Given the historical and regulatory contexts, innovative strategies are needed to address such barriers.

Complex Challenges Require Collaborative Responses

PHAs that need training on how to develop community partnerships are in good company. The entire social services field is trying to address complex social issues by coordinating activities for participants served by multiple systems—often called collective impact. A growing body of research and practice has established frameworks for types of collaborative work. For example, Urban Institute research looked at seven key elements that have shaped and strengthened housing and education partnerships (Gallagher 2015). Those key elements include shared goals and joint strategies, effective leaders and staff, partnerships with strong service providers, flexible funding sources, promising programs and services, data for decisionmaking, and systems and protocols for coordination.

PHAs Work within a Constrained Regulatory Environment

Our work with PHAs through HOST has also revealed the critical role that regulatory flexibility plays in PHAs' ability to coordinate services. HUD's Moving to Work (MTW) Demonstration, established in 1996, permits selected PHAs to seek exemption from many public housing and Housing Choice Voucher program rules. One of these exemptions grants agencies the flexibility to combine federal funds, traditionally siloed for specific uses, into a single pool that can be used interchangeably to better meet the needs of residents and local communities.

Of some 3,300 housing authorities nationwide, the 39 PHAs with Moving to Work status are the only ones currently able to seek such flexibility. Both the Chicago and Portland HOST sites had MTW

status, and other MTW housing authorities are using the flexibility to implement models like HOST, expanding and innovating on self-sufficiency activities such as linking rental assistance with supportive services, escrow accounts, earned income exclusions, intensive case management services, and self-sufficiency requirements.[1]

Strategies and Recommendations

Several strategies have emerged as areas of focus for PHAs seeking to develop effective service partnerships: expand PHA capacity for effective service partnerships; focus limited resources comprehensive service models; and require practical data systems and processes for performance measurement to inform program planning and design. In addition, there are recommendations on how these components may be included in federal support, both financial and technical, to continue expanding this capacity.

Expand PHA Capacity for Effective Service Partnerships

Local housing agencies must have the flexibility to support resident services and to be able to partner effectively with local government agencies and providers, such as the flexibility provided to selected MTW agencies. With the necessary regulatory flexibilities, PHAs must also ensure that their staff receives training in partnership management to implement the flexibilities for greatest impact. First, PHAs must navigate recruiting appropriate partners. Even with limited resources, innovative PHAs have developed their ability to leverage existing assets, such as space and relationships, to bring in new service partners. For example, PHAs can offer office space for service staff or activities, and they can offer connections to resident councils or on-site schools. Another powerful leverage point is PHA support or co-applications for service provider fundraising. Many of these activities require senior-level support and vision to ensure that the full weight of the PHA is leveraged to bring local government agencies and nonprofits to the table.

While partnership training may focus primarily on service coordinators, PHA leadership would also benefit from training on how to build these larger partnerships within the community, perhaps by learning from their peers who have made great strides in this area. National networks are key to facilitating these peer learning opportunities. PHAs who are involved in associations such as the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities or the HOST Network have access to webinars, convenings, and virtual communities that support the exchange of lessons and ideas.

After recruiting great partners, PHAs should formalize these relationships and the service coordination agreements. Even if the PHA has ongoing working relationships with partners, memoranda of understanding or similar documents can set forth guidelines that can help clarify with service providers, in detail, the services or resources they will provide and for whom. These memoranda can also outline processes to support the integration of resident services, such as collaborative meetings among service providers; interdisciplinary team meetings for frontline staff, managers, and executives; and mechanisms for collecting and reviewing feedback on service provision.

Once participants are engaged with service providers, PHAs should have processes to monitor the quality of services participants receive. Performance monitoring for service coordinators can differ depending on the context, ranging from simple resident feedback to contracts that make payments contingent on meeting specified outcomes.

> **Recommendation: HUD should highlight MTW's flexibility and how it improves service coordination capacity. PHAs should adopt promising practices and build staff capacity to both support resident services and partner with local service providers.**
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> HUD should highlight case studies of PHA promising practices in service coordination made possible by MTW flexibilities. Building the evidence base for how these flexibilities allow PHAs to best use limited resources will help make the case that Congress should grant the necessary regulatory flexibility to more PHAs. Newsletters, webinars, conferences, and other PHA communication channels should be leveraged to disseminate lessons in service coordination and allow agencies to learn from each other and apply promising practices. PHAs should adopt promising practices as they are able and ensure that funding is used to develop leadership and service coordination staff skilled in technical requirements of partnership management.

Focus on Comprehensive Service Models

Both leadership and service coordination staff would also benefit from gaining a comprehensive perspective on effective service models. In coordinating services, PHAs will need tools to select high-performing service providers that implement appropriate service models, including effective approaches to case management and two-generation, whole-family models. Social work has advanced in its use of strengths-based approaches to assessment and service planning, such as motivational interviewing and trauma-informed care. Resident services in public housing, through its historical connection to property management, may be slower to move away from its primarily compliance-driven approach to services if staff members are not trained in more progressive approaches and able to promote these models among service providers.

HOST's new approach to case management—rooted in staff training and lower caseloads to facilitate trust and relationship-building—led to a much greater understanding of families' strengths and needs than ever before. Resident services staff who had been struggling to support families under the old case management model for almost four years gained pivotal new information about resident needs with the new model, leading to both small breakthroughs and big successes.

PHAs that have focused on serving heads of households may also see improved outcomes by adopting two-generation models that focus on strategic service coordination for children and youth. There is a growing consensus that children cannot thrive in homes where their parents struggle to make ends meet, and low-income parents cannot succeed without meaningful support for their children. Two-generation service models target both children *and* parents from the same household, combining interventions for both groups to interrupt the cycle of poverty by boosting individual participation and

working toward family-level outcomes. As mentioned earlier, connections to peer networks such as the American Association of Service Coordinators and the Aspen Institute's Two-Generation Ascend Fund can ensure that PHA staff are linked to best practices and support.

> **Recommendation: When reviewing applications for service coordination funding, HUD should prioritize proposals that identify opportunities to serve high-need families through intensive, whole-family service models.**

> Comprehensive service models are necessary to achieve results for high-need families. For HUD and many federal agencies, the strongest tools available to set the stage are the federal funding announcements and the grant application and award process. The funding announcements set parameters for eligible activities and proposed scopes of work, and they encourage partnerships and other practices through scoring rubrics and preference points. While developing the funding announcement, and up to selecting grantees, HUD should prioritize service coordination proposals that identify opportunities to service whole families and provide comprehensive services to high-need families. HUD may consider several components of service coordination, through requirements and/or incentives and preferences, to ensure that applicants build the necessary partnerships and plan appropriately for family needs. To meet such requirements and incentives, PHAs should identify effective partners for this work, in part by connecting to national networks for peer learning and technical assistance.

Require Practical Data Systems and Processes for Performance Measurement

Housing authorities are no strangers to data. Through their annual or biannual recertifications, PHAs receive information about household size and composition, income, benefit receipt, and geographic location. But beyond these eligibility data, many PHAs operate with limited information about residents' services. Residents fall along a continuum of need, and effective service coordination and efficient use of scarce resources generally requires PHAs to connect the "right" residents to the "right" services.

In the HOST demonstration, sites relied on the kinds of data used in public and subsidized housing settings for lease compliance: basic ages and numbers of people in the household, flags for meeting subsidy requirements, histories of rental payments, lease violations, and compliance with work requirements, if any. Staff members quickly realized that these data had serious limitations and that they would need to spend time understanding family needs before defining outcomes or proposing services.

While coordinating services for residents, PHAs should seek data to understand resident participation and outcomes and have a practical system or process for collecting and using that data to inform program planning and partnership managing. Managing the performance of service providers and tracking outcomes using a shared data system is a big capacity gap for many PHAs. Requiring regular, consistent submissions of performance data that capture such things as outreach efforts, resident participation, and goals achieved is complicated by PHA data systems that often don't

accommodate these data and staff who often lack the training to use data to modify programs and service provider agreements to achieve greater outcomes.

The HOST demonstration involved PHAs in a real-time data feedback loop. A very limited set of indicators was chosen at the beginning of the demonstration; service providers reported on the indicators monthly, and the PHA and service providers reviewed the reports collaboratively. To inform program planning, these data were also presented to residents who helped shape the interpretation of findings, such as reasons behind low participation rates or stubborn lease violation trends. All this feedback helped the PHAs and their partners improve services and achieve better outcomes.

Finally, it has become increasingly clear that more outcome data are needed to draw the attention and support of housing funders and partners. No matter how convinced they may be as individuals that housing and services should be linked, most funders and partners are rarely able to change institutional funding patterns for resident services without compelling new evidence. The HOST demonstration and other research opportunities are establishing the evidence for housing and services, but perhaps most compelling would be if PHAs could tell the story of their own successes through data on service outcomes for their properties, residents, and communities.

> **Recommendation: HUD and PHAs should require rigorous, focused data collection for service management and increase tracking of service outcomes.**
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> More data on service outcomes are needed to help guide model design and attract partners and funders. HUD should fine-tune its data collection requirements, looking to focus on the right kind of data that can inform decisions on what services achieve outcomes for residents with various needs. HUD can provide the requirements that put this type of data effort in motion, but PHAs should also prepare their staff and partners for the culture change it requires, a change that requires moving from a culture of contract compliance to a culture of continuous improvement monitored by a real-time feedback loop of data on service provision and resident outcomes.

Conclusion

Broader lessons from the service coordination field echo the strategies and recommendations outlined in this brief. The success of service coordination, and of families in assisted housing, hinges on two essential elements. "The first is the ability of families to find the services they need close to the place where they live. The second (really just the flip side of the first) is the ability of housing developers and managers to pursue the whole mission of affordable housing: to provide a platform on which their residents can build a stable, healthy and independent future" (Proscio 2006, 19).

This perspective is brought to life in the examples and stories heard from the housing providers, service providers, and residents involved in the HOST demonstration. When asked how services could help achieve her goals, one HOST public housing resident summarized the case quite poignantly:

It just dawned on me that I grew up in [public] housing. My mother had housing growing up, but where we lived, I didn't realize it was housing. Until recently, and I was like, wow, I grew up in housing.…

So—my goal will be to make it so my children don't worry, to be able to take care of myself, and maybe move out of housing. And not just me move out of housing, but move out of housing or whatever it would take so that my children don't end up back in housing.

And I would say to whoever the powers that be are, just don't give up on the people. Because sometimes if you not used to getting help, you don't know how to receive it.… And if they can help it, just try to remain hopeful and creative in how to get people…the help they need. Because again, if you don't know how to begin, you just don't know. Especially if you grew up in housing. You just don't know.

As with most preventive models, resident services models like HOST can be more resource intensive in the beginning. But they can also improve the current system, in which service coordination is paying for activities with no long-term, meaningful results. Adapting lessons from HOST for current service coordination models, even in an environment of scarce resources, creates opportunities for new partners, strategies, and flexibilities. These new connections can encourage housing providers to meet resident needs and produce real results.

Note

1. "Moving to Work FAQs," US Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed July 9, 2015, http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/ph/mtw/faq#2.

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Acknowledgments

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