Prevention Eligibility in Metro Denver

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to establish an overview of the homeless prevention resources available in Metro Denver. Specifically, we sought to determine how agencies utilize limited financial resources to prevent homelessness, whether they attempt to target specific populations based on risk factors and to get a sense of the outcomes across separate agencies. We collected data by sending out a survey to prevention service providers in Metro Denver. The results indicated that agencies rarely target specific populations, generally distribute resources on a "first come, first serve" basis, lack a common assessment tool, lack a forum for coordination of efforts and seldom track client outcomes. Based on this information, we have developed four recommendations to increase the efficiency and efficacy of homeless prevention services in Metro Denver.

INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted to provide an overview of homeless prevention resources available in Metro Denver. Several forms of assistance are available for households that are at risk of becoming homeless, such as rental assistance, security deposit, utility assistance and childcare assistance. Such financial assistance is an effective form of prevention because many at-risk households require only temporary interventions to avoid losing their homes. This study is an attempt to discover to what extent agencies triage such assistance on the basis of need and vulnerability. The alternative approach, distributing assistance on a "first come first serve" basis, has serious drawbacks, including an inefficient—and therefore less effective—distribution of those resources. But, it is also important to note that eviction prevention and homelessness prevention are not always the same thing, as alternatives to homelessness exist for many at risk households. Diversion is a form of counseling that seeks to find alternatives to financial assistance, such as moving in with friends or family, reconciling with a landlord or even taking on additional roommates. Only a few responding agencies—as detailed below—have diversion programs.

METHODOLOGY

In order to obtain data we created a survey that targeted information around the eligibility and outcomes of prevention programs. The survey was sent to twenty-five agencies in the Metro Denver area. Agencies were identified through Mile High United Way 2-1-1 and MDHI partners. MDHI received responses from nine agencies, with a 36% survey response rate.

RESULTS

Those in need of financial assistance can access agencies in multiple ways: 55% of responding agencies can be accessed via email, 89% via phone, 67% by walk-in, and 22% by referral. Monthly

enrollment figures vary between agencies depending on their capacity. The number enrolled ranged between as few as five to upwards of seventy people each month depending on the agency capacity. The mean number of people across agencies enrolled each month is around twenty. However, responding agencies also reported turning away people they were unable to serve. This number fluctuated between as few as zero and as many as 200. The mean amount of people turned way by agencies is forty-seven.

Agencies provide various types of funding. Many agencies provide more than one type of funding: 89% of responding agencies provided money for rental assistance, 78% provide money for security deposit, 100% for utility assistance, 11% for mortgage assistance, and 11% for medical expenses. Half of the responding agencies provide a maximum amount of assistance for the people at risk of becoming homeless. In addition, 78% of agencies allow their assistance to be renewed and 22% do not. All eight responding agencies also provide non-financial resources as well. These resources include landlord mediation (55%), case management (88%), budgeting (88%), and family/friend mediation (11%).

However, there are certain requirements potential clients must meet to qualify for assistance, which vary according to agency. Many agencies receive HUD funding and so must meet that agency's specific criteria. Other criteria include HIV positive status or residency requirements (state or county). Only 22% of responding agencies have a targeting threshold, meaning they target people based on need or vulnerability. Those that do use an interview process to evaluate that status. However, the factors upon which a household is determined to be at risk were limited and often subjective. Many agencies require those receiving assistance to conform to certain behaviors to remain eligible for services, such as receiving medical or psychological counseling, remaining sober or developing a plan to exit services.

A majority of agencies follow up with clients once they have exited the program into a housing solution. Data is gathered to measure the durability of the housing solution. However, most agencies did not report outcomes or data.

DISCUSSION

Based on information gathered from our homeless prevention services survey, the following are recommendations for improving both the efficiency and efficacy of the provision of these services in Metro Denver.

Recommendation #1: More accurate information on agency capacity

The services provided by prevention agencies are in high demand in the Denver Metro Area. This is evidenced by data from Mile High United Way's 2-1-1, which indicates that the top five services requested by callers in 2016 were rental payment assistance, housing, shelter/transitional housing, utility assistance and income support.[1] The 2-1-1 service has contact information for multiple agencies that provide such services, but frequently agencies have already met their service capacity. This means that

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[1] http://www.unitedwaydenver.org/sites/default/files/2016NDAnnualReport.pdf

callers seeking assistance generally have to contact many agencies in order to access that assistance. A real-time feedback mechanism between homeless prevention resources and referring agencies on availability of funding would allow for greater coordination and reduced participant trauma.

Recommendation #2: Develop a common assessment tool to measure need

Prioritizing distribution of resources on the basis of need across the homeless prevention community would ensure that those with the highest need would receive services first. Research has been conducted on ways to implement such a system. One example of such research is detailed in an article titled "Information on Homeless Prevention and Diversion," (Evans, Sullivan and Wallskog 2016)[2] a study which described risk factors that could be used as a basis for a triage system. These factors include the following:

- Pregnancy
- Child younger than two
- Currently receiving public assistance
- Eviction threat from landlord
- Moved frequently in the past year
- Involvement with protective services
- High conflict with landlord
- Disruptions as a child (foster care, shelter)
- Shelter history as an adult
- Recent shelter application
- Seeking to reintegrate from an institution

We believe these factors should be targeted. The easiest way to do so would be to develop a common assessment tool that could quantify risk factors. Agencies could then use the survey to target funding to the most vulnerable. New York City uses a point based system for prevention resources[3], similar to the VI-SPDAT assessment for persons experiencing literal homelessness.

One Point for

- Pregnancy
- Child Under two
- No High School or GED
- Not Currently employed
- Not a leaseholder
- Reintegrating into community

Two Points for

- Receiving public assistance
- Protective services involvement

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[2] (Evans, Sullivan and Wallskog 2016)
[3] http://www.abtassociates.com/AbtAssociates/files/cf/cf819ade-6613-4664-9ac1-2344225c24d7.pdf

- Evicted or asked to leave by landlord
- Applying for shelter in the last three months

Three points for

- Reports of previous shelter stay as an adult

Age

- One point if 23-28
- Two points if 22 or younger

Moves last year

- One point if one to three moves
- Two points if four or more moves

Disruptive experiences in childhood

- One point if one to two experiences
- Two points if three or more experiences

Discord (Landlord/Leaseholder/within household)

- One point if moderate
- Two points if severe

Building an assessment using this one as a foundation could ensure that the most vulnerable are being served.

Recommendation #3: Tracking client progress post-housing solution

Though some agencies do maintain contact with clients after they have achieved housing, most do not and those that do track very limited kinds of data. Tracking client outcomes more thoroughly for longer periods of time could yield valuable insights into the most effective strategies and interventions for preventing homelessness, both at the agency-level and across the broader community.

Recommendation #4: Establish a Prevention Affinity Group to coordinate efforts across agencies

Increasing access to more up-to-date information on available agency capacity, developing common assessment tools and tracking region-wide client outcomes will require of means of coordinating efforts between agencies across the Metro Denver region. We believe the establishment of a Prevention Affinity Group could achieve such coordination and serve as a forum for discussion of any other issues community wide issues that could arise in the future.

An additional advantage of such a group would be the ability to use available prevention resources more strategically. For example, prevention services agencies have access to two different kinds of funding: restricted funding and non-restricted funding. Our research indicates that, currently, in many cases, unrestricted funding is used for a given service without regard to whether restricted funding

specifically earmarked for that service is available at another agency. This has resulted in situations in which a service is needed by clients and money is available, but its use is restricted to a different kind of service. A Prevention Affinity Group could serve as a mechanism for coordinating use of restricted funds first, reserving non-restricted funds for meeting unanticipated needs or overflow demand of a certain kind of services.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to establish an overview of the homeless prevention resources available in Metro Denver, which we sought to do by conducting a survey of provider agencies. The results of our survey of homeless prevention services provider in the Denver Metro area indicated that agencies rarely target specific populations, generally distribute resources on a "first come, first serve" basis, lack a common assessment tool, lack a forum for coordination of efforts and seldom track client outcomes. Based in this data, MDHI has issued four recommendations to increase the efficiency of prevention services: 1. Working to increase access to up-to-date information on available agency resources; 2. Develop a common approach for measuring need and vulnerability; 3. More thoroughly tracking client outcomes after receiving resources; and 4. Establishing a Prevention Affinity Group as a means of promoting agency cooperation.

WORKS CITED

Evans, W, J Sullivan, and M Wallskog. 2016. "Impact of Homelessness Prevention Programs on Homelessness." *Science Magazine* 694.