

Homeless Emergency Response Workgroup

Assessment of Unmet Family Shelter Need in Washington, DC

Based on Virginia Williams Family Resource Center Survey – November 2009

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Summary

In April 2009, a group of homeless individuals, advocates, and providers joined together as the Homeless Emergency Response Workgroup in response to urgent concerns being voiced by homeless persons and service providers about the lack of shelter capacity in DC. As DC transitions to a homeless assistance system based on providing stable permanent housing rather than primarily emergency shelter—which the Workgroup wholeheartedly supports—the mission of the Workgroup is to ensure that adequate emergency shelter capacity is maintained.

The Workgroup has been particularly concerned about shelter capacity for families in the District. The number of families on the Pending Case List¹ at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center, the city’s central intake facility for homeless families, rose from 240 on April 4 to 429 on November 15, 2009.²

In response to these concerns, the Homeless Emergency Response Workgroup decided to assess unmet family shelter need in the District through a survey of families who requested services at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center during one week in November 2009. The survey gathered information about the needs of families coming to Virginia Williams, services received, and the housing arrangements of families after leaving the center.

This report summarizes the findings of the family survey, offers lessons learned for future surveys, and presents recommendations for improving DC’s family shelter system.

Several of the key findings of the survey include:

- A significant percentage of families returned to very temporary housing arrangements that some felt were unsafe after leaving Virginia Williams.
- Many families returned to very crowded housing arrangements after leaving Virginia Williams.
- 2 families may have been denied emergency shelter even though they had no place to stay at all (both families were offered emergency shelter placement after the program and DHS were notified by survey administrators).

Recommendations include:

- **Avoid denials of shelter** to families who have no appropriate or safe housing.
- **Assess safety and stability of placements** for families on an ongoing basis.
- **Increase oversight** of Virginia Williams by the Department of Human Services.
- **Look at best practices for family shelter in other jurisdictions** for ways to improve the family shelter system in the District.

Virginia Williams Family Resource Center Survey

Methodology

The Virginia Williams Family Resource Center survey was administered by a group of volunteers from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day for a one week period from November 16 to November 20, 2009. During the five days of the survey, volunteer survey administrators were able to survey 37 families. The 37 families comprised 125 individuals, including 78 children. One woman was pregnant. The children's ages ranged from 6 months to 23 years.

When families came to request services, they were informed by Virginia Williams staff about the survey taking place and were invited to participate if interested. On some days of the week, the volunteer survey administrators were also permitted to tell families about the survey directly while families were waiting to see a case worker.

Families who chose to participate in the survey met with volunteers in a conference room adjacent to the building's entrance lobby. Surveys gathered general information about the family, reasons for coming to Virginia Williams, previous experience with Virginia Williams, services received during their visit, and plans for housing arrangements after leaving the center.

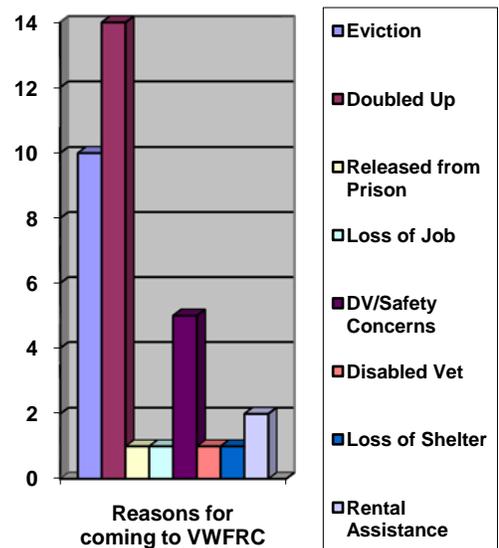
All survey administrators attended a training session before participating. Social work graduate students from the Catholic University of America compiled the data from the surveys. The survey was designed to be administered after families had seen a case worker, but some families started the survey before meeting their case worker but did not return to the conference room to finish the survey. As a result, participating families did not answer every question, and many of the findings reflect that a different number of families answered each question.

Limitations to the survey, recommendations for future surveys, and a copy of the survey questions are available in the Appendix.

Findings

More than 80% of surveyed families came to Virginia Williams for one of three reasons: living doubled-up with a family member or friend (40%), being evicted (28.6%), or fleeing domestic violence (13.5%). See graph to the right.

Most families coming to Virginia Williams had been homeless for a significant amount of time. Families surveyed had been without their own home for an average of 124 days. Two families, however, reported not having stable housing for one year and another family for two years. Five families were in their own homes, but were facing imminent eviction. Most families (72.2%) reported staying with a family or friend the previous night.



Most families had been to Virginia Williams previously, on average three times. Upon their first visit to Virginia Williams, 6 of 19 families (31.6%) reported receiving a housing placement. 75% of families were able to speak with a caseworker during the visit in which they were surveyed.

Only a few families received a housing placement as a result of their visit on the day of their survey. Of the 23 families that completed the survey after they met with a caseworker, only 3 (13%) received emergency shelter or a long-term placement. Requirements for documentation may have been a barrier to receiving immediate services – 8 of 24³ families (33.3%) were told to bring back more documents before their case could proceed.

Most, but not all of the families who did not receive a placement had a safe place to spend the night. 14 out of 23 families (60.9%) expected to spend the night with a family member or friend, and 4 families expected to stay in an emergency shelter where they had been previously placed. 2 of 23 families did not know where they would stay that night. Most families, 20 out of 27 (74.1%), reported that their families would stay together that night, and 18 out of 23 families (78.3%) said they expected to feel safe that night.

A significant percentage of families returned to very temporary housing arrangements after leaving Virginia Williams. Of 19 families reporting their housing arrangements during the survey, 7 (36.8%) expected to stay in their temporary living situation for 0-2 days. 6 families (31.6%) expected to stay for 21-43 days, while 2 families (10.5%) said they could stay for 8 weeks or more.

Many families returned to very crowded housing arrangements after leaving Virginia Williams. Of those living doubled-up with family or friends, 8 of 17 (47.1%) reported sharing temporary arrangements with more than one other family. One family reported sharing living space with six other families.

Two of the twenty-three families fully completing the survey may have been denied emergency shelter even though they had no place to stay at all. After survey administrators notified the Virginia Williams directors and the Department of Human Services about the situations, both families were offered placement in emergency shelter. These two families represented 2 of the 3 families surveyed who were offered emergency shelter during the week.

7 out of 23 (30.4%) families received assistance other than shelter, such as referrals and in-kind services like bus tokens.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the Virginia Williams survey, the Homeless Emergency Response Workgroup offers the following recommendations for improving services for homeless families in the District:

1. Avoid denials of shelter to families with no appropriate, safe housing.

Short-term:

- a. **Develop written guidelines or regulations** for determining which families should be placed in emergency shelter immediately.

Virginia Williams reports that any family that does not have any options for shelter will be given emergency shelter assistance. This is an important policy priority. The process for ensuring that families with no appropriate or safe housing are not denied a shelter placement could be improved by publishing written guidelines or regulations that define when a family should be immediately placed.

- b. **Create a review or appeal process** for families denied shelter on the day they apply.

As indicated above, two families may have been denied emergency shelter when they had no place to stay if survey administrators had not intervened. While the task of determining emergency shelter need is understandably very difficult, this indicates a need for an oversight mechanism to ensure that eligible families are not denied shelter during the emergency shelter intake process. There should be a clear process in place for reviewing or appealing shelter denials, including oversight from DHS.

- c. **Remove barriers to emergency shelter** caused by any documentation requests that are unreasonable.

As indicated above, one third of families were told to bring back more documents to Virginia Williams before their eligibility for services or need for shelter placement could be determined. While some of these families may have had a safe place to stay while gathering the documents, the barrier could deny an emergency shelter placement from those in immediate need. Possible improvements include streamlining document requirements, posting lists of needed documents on the Virginia Williams website and including them in a phone message, and creating a process for families to receive emergency shelter while they gather additional documents.

Long-term:

- d. **Develop a system for families to be placed temporarily in emergency shelter** while Virginia Williams assesses whether they have an appropriate and safe place to stay.

In New York City, all families requesting emergency shelter are given provisional shelter for seven to ten days. During this provisional period, families are required to provide proof that they have no safe place to go. A case manager is available to help. In DC, DHS has spent some time looking at this model, which could potentially decrease the risk of families being left without an appropriate and safe place to stay. Families could be offered an appeal mechanism if they were refused longer-term shelter. During the appeal, the family would be permitted to remain in the shelter, thus providing a better protection

against tragedies that can occur when families are in unsafe situations or outside. This approach would increase shelter usage and thus have budget implications. However, it would help ensure that the shelter system fulfills its purpose and, in the long run, could provide insights for further, cost-effective improvements.

2. Assess safety and stability of placements for families on an ongoing basis.

Short-term:

- a. Give families clear information about importance of contacting Virginia Williams** again for emergency shelter if their temporary arrangements with family or friends change.

The nature of the Pending Case List as a way to triage the needs of families can be difficult for families to understand. Many families leave with the understanding that there is no room in a shelter for them and that they have been placed on a waiting list. If families were told more clearly that they will receive emergency shelter if their situation changes such that they have no safe place to stay, then they would be more likely to call back for assistance. The rate that families call back for assistance would inform the city about the safety and stability of families' temporary arrangements.

Long-term:

- b. Provide case management for all families** starting on the day they apply for services.

Although Virginia Williams reports that families are placed on the Pending Case List only if the case worker believes they have adequate temporary housing arrangements, to our knowledge Virginia Williams staff does not contact families to ensure that this remains the case. Many families who subsequently need emergency shelter are likely return to Virginia Williams on their own, but others may not.

Providing case management would help many families through times of extreme crisis, but would also be a way to stay in touch with families. Their unstable situations are one of the biggest challenges to regularly assessing their temporary living arrangements after leaving Virginia Williams. If all families on the Pending Case List were connected to a case manager during their first visit to Virginia Williams, they would be more likely to stay in contact if their housing situation changed since they would have an established relationship with someone whose job it is to help them. Currently, families are encouraged to call the case worker who processed their application weekly and if their situation changes, but many families report that they do not call because they doubt they will be offered assistance.

If budget constraints temporarily rule out case management for all families entering Virginia Williams, Virginia Williams should be calling families on the Pending Case List on at least a monthly basis. This would help the city better assess shelter needs and inform policy discussions about priorities for services for homeless families.

3. Increase oversight by the Department of Human Services.

DHS should regularly survey homeless families assess whether their needs are being met.

Although this report sheds light on the needs of homeless families coming to Virginia Williams, a quarterly or semi-annual survey by DHS officials of applicant families' experiences seeking help at Virginia Williams would go a long way towards ensuring better services. It would also strengthen DHS oversight. Assessments should focus on the effectiveness of services provided at Virginia Williams from the perspective of applicants who are exiting the center. All surveys should be conducted anonymously and should be done without announcing to intake workers the days they will be conducted. Lessons learned from this November 2009 survey could be used to improve future surveys. Assessment results should be shared with the Interagency Council on Homelessness so that advocates and affected families are informed about the performance of Virginia Williams.

4. Look at best practices for family shelter in other jurisdictions for ways to improve the family shelter system in the District.

Researching best practices for family shelter models in other jurisdictions could offer insights into how to improve the District's approach, including how best to implement the recommendations above.

For example, the District should further examine New York City's family shelter intake model to evaluate what could be replicated in Washington. In particular, the District should explore the legal and financial feasibility of placing families in emergency shelter while Virginia Williams assesses whether they have another appropriate, safe place to stay.

Los Angeles reports that they have had success with offering family shelter through master-leasing scattered-site apartments rather than using congregate shelters. They have found that this approach is more cost-effective than traditional shelters and has better long-term outcomes. For more information about Los Angeles's approach, see Beyond Shelter's policy brief, "Alternative Shelter Models to Address Rapidly Rising Family Homelessness," available at http://www.beyondshelter.org/aaa_the_institute/research.shtml.

Hennepin County in Minnesota has also been recognized as a leader in approaches to reducing family homelessness. See the National Alliance to End Homelessness's "Community Snapshot: Hennepin County. Programs in Ending Homelessness," available at <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/945/>.

¹ The Pending Case List is different from a wait list for shelter. It represents the number of families who have applied for and been found eligible for shelter but whom Virginia Williams staff have determined have adequate, temporary housing arrangements, often with family or friends. Data provided by The Community Partnership: <http://www.ich.dc.gov/ich/cwp/view,A,1396,Q,575263.asp>.

² The number of families on the Pending Case List has decreased since the survey, between November 2009 and February 2010 by about 200 families. Nearly 300 families were removed from the list because they have “housing in a family member or friend’s apartment.” See <http://www.ich.dc.gov/ich/cwp/view,A,1396,Q,575263.asp>. It is unclear to the Workgroup why families who are still doubled-up and had previously requested shelter would be removed from the list when they are still eligible and in need of shelter.

³ Not all families answered every question, so the N changes throughout the findings (e.g. some “5 of 23 families,” others “8 of 24 families,” etc.).

Appendix

A. Lessons Learned—Recommendations for Improving Future Surveys

The findings from the survey have a number of limitations. While 37 families were surveyed, not all of these families were able to answer every question and some left before finishing the survey, which has the potential to skew some of the results. In future surveys, protocol should be determined regarding the inclusion of incomplete surveys in the data analysis.

Lack of clarity about expectations for the survey process between those administering the survey and staff from Virginia Williams and DHS led to a decreased survey response rate because survey administrators were not always permitted to advertise the survey directly. Increased communication with Virginia Williams and DHS staff to clarify expectations for the survey process and increase buy-in from the center staff would be critical for future survey efforts. Offering an incentive to participate in the survey could also improve response rates.

The survey did not gather some basic demographic information that would have strengthened the findings. Especially helpful would have been noting the gender of the adults participating in the survey, the Wards where respondents live, and the race and ethnicity of survey respondents.

The organization of the survey questions turned out not to match perfectly the way that Virginia Williams services are delivered. The survey design assumed that everyone coming to Virginia Williams would be requesting emergency shelter assistance. The survey would be strengthened by asking respondents to identify what service they are requesting, whether or not they are seeking emergency shelter, and screening out some potential respondents (such as those requesting emergency rental assistance or non-housing services from the center).

Future surveys would be improved if a dedicated survey coordinator could be present for an entire week to assist volunteers. Frequent changes of volunteers made communication between survey administrators and Virginia Williams staff more difficult.

Dating and numbering surveys would help provide information about peak times for interviewing and allow information to be gathered about how many potential respondents chose not to participate. Comparing the number of survey respondents to the number of families signing into the center for services would also give a better picture about the total response rate. Introduction and engagement protocols and clearer confidentiality policies would improve future surveys. Training in open-ended interviewing techniques is also important, since respondents may want to tell their story but can do so better if not constricted to following the order of survey questions exactly.

Since many respondents had young children with them, survey procedures to accommodate the children would improve the survey. Training of interviewers about how to include children in the task environment would help meet the needs of the respondents. Offering food, especially nutritious food, could help occupy the children during a survey as well as meeting sustenance needs.

B. Family Shelter Access Survey

Family Demographics

1. Who needs housing in your family?
If answer does not include children, skip to Question 4.
2. How many children do you have with you who need housing?
3. How old are they?

Background Situation

4. What situation has brought you to the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center?
5. How long have you needed shelter?
6. Where did you stay last night?
7. Was the rest of your family with you?
8. Do you have anywhere you can stay tonight besides an emergency shelter?
9. Is this the first time you've come to the Center?
If Y, skip to Question 12.
10. How many times have you been here before?
11. Did the Center help you get housing when you came before?

Current Services Received (after completing intake with FRC staff)

12. Did someone talk with you today about your situation and try to find a solution for your housing?
If N, skip to Question 15.
13. Did they find you a place to stay today?
If N, skip to Question 15.
14. What sort of place is it—an emergency shelter, longer-term housing run by an organization, a friend or family member's home, someplace else?
15. What did they tell you about finding you a place to stay?

Outcome of Services

16. Where do you expect to stay tonight?
17. Will the rest of your family be with you?
18. Do you feel that you [and your family] will be safe there?
19. How long do you think you can stay there?
20. How many other families are staying there?
21. Were you offered any another kind of help today?
22. Is there anything else about your experience you'd like to share?