HopeLink: A program evaluation

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HopeLink: A Program Evaluation

Prepared by Cheryl Edwards, Telma Lopez, Bryan Osborne and Erik Pappa

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for PUA791

Dr. Christopher Stream

May 8, 2009
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2009, a four-member team of University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) Department of Public Administration students set out to evaluate the effectiveness of HopeLink, a transitional housing program in Henderson, Nevada. The research team was tasked with evaluating the effectiveness of the agency and assisting the Committee on Homelessness in deciding future funding allocations. This paper provides our review and analysis, including program strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for future program and funding improvements.

According to the 2007 U.S. Census, there are approximately 11,000 homeless people in Clark County, Nevada, with 75% of those utilizing transitional housing programs, compared to a national average of 55%. The fact that Clark County had a higher percentage of homeless people using transitional housing programs made the research team aware of the importance of transitional housing agencies and their success rates in this community. HopeLink’s transitional housing program helps homeless families — mainly women and children who become dispossessed as a result of domestic violence situations — achieve positive housing outcomes.

A review of current and closed client files, followed with statistical analyses, staff interviews, an attempt to survey clients, and a literature review, provided the research team with information that led to both quantitative and qualitative findings and seven recommendations to assist the agency improve upon its successes. The primary recommendation is to continue the funding of this agency and, if possible, increase funding. There is one case manager who is responsible for 26 families at any given time. The dedication and effort she puts forth is a key to the success the agency has achieved thus far, and we believe that additional resources would allow for further improvements. Additional recommendations are to increase emphasis on client training, establish standard criteria for program acceptance, and utilize volunteers. We also provide recommendations on improving the efficacy of the HMIS system.
PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how successful HopeLink has been in moving clients through its transitional housing program and into permanent housing. The evaluation is intended to result in recommendations aimed at improving its transitional housing program, related delivery of services, and increasing the success rate of its clients. Further, this analysis will provide insights to the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition (SNRPC) as it weighs how best to support HopeLink and similar transitional housing programs.

The SNRPC, through the Office of the Regional Homeless Coordinator, initiated the request for technical assistance offered by way of this report. The SNRPC has made ending homelessness a priority. In 2003, it established a standing Committee on Homelessness, which in turn developed a plan to end homelessness called, Help Hope Home (HHH). Funding for implementation of the plan comes in the form of grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

HopeLink’s transitional housing program assists homeless families achieve positive housing outcomes. HopeLink’s strategy is to provide intensive case management and related support services. Throughout the program, HopeLink employs a full-time case manager who works individually with each client by helping him or her obtain child care, employment assistance, education, health/rehabilitation services, transportation, and other services.

In spite of HopeLink’s intensive supervision and case management, clients seem to struggle obtaining permanent housing and self-sufficiency. Unfortunately, HopeLink does not have the resources to effectively evaluate its program or adequately measure the effectiveness of its services, which is not atypical of agencies in the non-profit sector. This evaluation seeks to help remedy those deficiencies.

BACKGROUND

In 2002, the National Alliance to End Homelessness issued a challenge to America to end homelessness in 10 years. HUD recognized early on that local homeless providers need sufficient and flexible federal resources to create a comprehensive and coordinated system that addresses the many dimensions of homelessness. In response, the administration dramatically increased the budget for HUD's homeless programs and, as part of the application for its competitive programs, asked communities to design and submit a Continuum of Care (COC) strategy. (HUD, 2008)

Southern Nevada answered that challenge in 2003 when the SNRPC, whose member representatives are the governments of Clark County, each of the county’s five cities and the Clark County School District, established a Committee on Homelessness. After many meetings and much work, the committee developed the HHH program, the centerpiece of which is a comprehensive, 10-point plan to end homelessness in Clark County. The 10 points are these:

1. Enhance coordination between non-profit organizations and government.
2. Prevent individuals and families from becoming homeless.
3. Provide seamless client services through effective partnerships.
4. Foster self-sufficiency through access to education, training and employment opportunities.
5. Increase the availability of stable and affordable housing.
6. Facilitate the transition from homelessness through intensive case management.
7. Ensure the availability of basic needs services.
8. Increase access to medical, dental and vision care services.
9. Improve the availability of mental health services.
10. Improve the availability of substance abuse treatment programs.

According to the SNRPC bi-annual homeless survey (2007), 75% of the homeless population within Clark County is deemed transitional, far exceeding the national average of 55%. (HUD 2005) If success can be found in meeting the needs of this demographic, a significant drop in the overall homeless population should be seen. Figure 1 breaks down the homeless categories in Clark County and the percentage of the population in each group.

<table>
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<td><strong>Clark County Homeless Population</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
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</table>

Source: SNRPC, 2007

One of the functions of the Committee on Homelessness is to allocate HUD homeless assistance grants to agencies in Clark County that meet the grant-required criteria. One of the agencies that the committee allocates funding to is HopeLink.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE AGENCY**

HopeLink, located in Henderson, Nevada, was founded in 1991 as a state-designated Family Resource Center. The agency serves the southern region of Clark County encompassing Henderson, Boulder City, and the Southeast area of the Las Vegas valley. Today, HopeLink operates out of the 4,000-square-foot Harry Reid Center for Children and Families, funded and constructed in 2006, in a low-income neighborhood in Henderson, Nevada. According to its fact sheet (2009), “HopeLink is building a stronger community by preventing homelessness, keeping
families intact, and promoting self-sufficiency.” Its annual budget is $2.1 million with 85 percent reportedly “going to direct client services, an extremely low administrative expense ratio.” (HopeLink tri-fold flier, 2008) HopeLink has several different programs to help eliminate homelessness, one of which is the transitional housing program. HopeLink’s Vision Statement and Values Statement can be found in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1

Vision Statement:
HopeLink will be the premier community leader in providing vital services that prevent homelessness, preserve dignity, and promote self-sufficiency.

Values Statement:
• We serve all people in need with compassion, dignity, and respect.
• We support our mission with integrity and ethical principals.
• We empower individuals and families by instilling accountability and responsibility in attaining self-sufficiency.
• We use our voice as an advocate on behalf of our clients’ needs. We implement these advocacy efforts by developing and strengthening our collaborations with other agencies and organizations.

HopeLink’s transitional housing program aims to assist women and children exiting domestic violence situations. Clients are generally referred by one of five local homeless shelters: Shade Tree, Safe Nest, Safe House, Salvation Army and the Las Vegas Rescue Mission. Described as a “subsidized housing coupon program,” the program is modeled after HUD’s Section 8 Voucher Program. The amount of subsidy provided toward rent is determined by the participant’s household income and is assessed every six months and adjusted if warranted. Additional adjustments occur whenever household income changes by at least $100, at which time an assessment is conducted again to determine the new rate of subsidy. (Commitment of Understanding, 2009) Subsidized housing may be provided for up to 24 months. (HopeLink fact sheet, 2009)

According to its literature (Program Parameters, 2009), HopeLink has in its transitional housing program a goal “to move homeless individuals and families gradually into stable housing and a life of self-sufficiency. Eligible clients can have their rent subsidized for a minimum of six months to a maximum of two years. During the time covered, the client will be assigned a regular case manager at [HopeLink]. The client will complete a comprehensive family assessment and organize a set of achievable goals, and action steps that will assist the client to become independent and eventually be able to pay their [sic] own rent and other expenses without needing further public assistance. Clients may choose where they want to live,” usually through leasing an apartment, and are put in touch with various community resources. Those may include rental assistance, utility assistance, emergency shelter, medical, dental and vision assistance, help procuring and filling prescriptions, disability assistance, welfare (Temporary Aid to Needy Families, TANF), help repairing credit and developing money management skills, help
procuring food, parenting classes, child/respite care, counseling and support group enrollment, transportation help, help developing job skills, assistance in obtaining a General Educational Development (GED) credential or high school diploma, legal assistance, help procuring state identification cards and driver’s licenses and Social Security cards, insurance, prenatal care, furniture, help with extras for the holidays and even tax preparation assistance. Additionally, if a client lacks a job, he or she is expected to apply for 10 jobs each week and provide documentary evidence of this. (HopeLink Program Parameters, 2009)

Barriers to finding a job, such as medical conditions or difficulties with transportation, must be documented and presented to the case worker. Clients found under the influence of illegal substances may be terminated and, if there are children, Child Protective Services may be notified. At the conclusion of six months, the matter is reassessed to determine the level of continued assistance or even if it is still necessary. After two years, client participation in the program is concluded. (HopeLink Program Parameters, 2009)

Those eligible for the program “must be verifiably homeless or unable to return to a home because of some extreme circumstance such as domestic violence, divorce or similar condition. The ideal client is an individual or family who has been staying in a shelter environment, has been following a case plan, but whose main barrier to leaving shelter is a lack of sufficient income to independently support a household.” (Program Parameters, 2009) Clients must have some income, earned or through public assistance, and “have an ability to learn, gain skills or secure employment within the period of assistance which will enable the household to be self-sufficient in the long term. Potential clients must be substance free and/or engaged in substance abuse treatment. Preference will be given to victims of domestic violence…” (Program Parameters, 2009)

The case manager meets with the family to complete an assessment and together they “formulate a comprehensive set of goals and action steps that will be closely monitored, including but not limited to educational goals, financial counseling, vocational training, psycho-social problem resolution, and dealing with multiple familial issues. (See Exhibit 2, the path prospective clients take from entry into the transitional housing program to a successful exit into permanent housing).

This case management is designed to assist the client in overcoming the obstacles that have prevented them from being self-sufficient in the past by connecting them with resources, both public and private, which may aid in the completion of their goals.” (HopeLink Program Parameters, 2009)
While the aforementioned criterion for selecting clients is helpful, interviews with HopeLink staff demonstrate that the full range of criteria used to pick clients is ill defined. Nonetheless, when viewed through the prism of a national Urban League study of transitional housing programs (Burt, 2006), HopeLink’s selection criteria differs most noticeably when it comes to clients with severe persistent mental disorders, sexual offender criminal records and a poor rental history. Among Urban League study participants, 72% accepted clients diagnosed with severe persistent mental disorders. HopeLink, meanwhile, rejects these clients out of concern with their ability to become self-sufficient, the primary goal of the program. HopeLink finds acceptable clients with a sexual offender criminal record, compared to 28% of the Urban League study program participants – ironic since HopeLink’s focus is to assist families in domestic violence situations. The other area where HopeLink differs concerns clients with a poor rental history. In the Urban League study, every program evaluated stipulated that clients had to have been unable to keep a roof over their heads, yet HopeLink has no such requirement. The literature supports the notion that the inability to sustain housing should be a minimal requirement in qualifying a family for transitional housing assistance. (Burt, 2006, Puno, 2009)

STAFFING

HopeLink is governed by a 10-member board of directors that includes attorneys, a banker, a City of Henderson employee and other community and business leaders. Daniele Dreitzer, executive director, reports to the board. The organization is divided into two main areas, housing and basic needs, overseen by recently hired director Heather Albert, and family support services, overseen by Andrea Michaels. The transitional housing program is Albert’s responsibility, as she oversees all housing programs, including emergency shelter, as well as direct services to clients in those programs. Four positions report to Albert, including subsidized housing program manager Molly Puno, housing resources manager Darlene Becker, family resource program
manager Nicole French and outreach manager Felicia Boney, also recently hired. Puno has for more than three years served as the case manager and main point of contact for HopeLink's transitional housing program clients. Prior to Puno's hiring, several persons served relatively short stints as case managers for transitional housing clients. Albert joined HopeLink having previously served as a case manager at a community mental health clinic. Boney works with clients at two area churches, Central Christian and Hope Baptist, and within the HopeLink office, providing assistance with rent, utilities, transportation, food, clothing and other resource and referral services. (HopeLink Newsletter, Spring 2009) Exhibit 3 depicts an abbreviated organizational chart.

The Family Support Services area appears to provide little or no support for the transitional housing program. Included in this area, is a Family Support Intervention Program with a dedicated case manager, to which schools could refer children and families in crisis with the intent being to resolve problems such as the need for food, utility assistance and clothing and to improve the chances for children to succeed in school.

Exhibit 3 – Abbreviated Organizational Chart for HopeLink

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR</th>
<th>HOPELINK BOARD OF DIRECTORS &amp; COMMITTEES</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HOUSING &amp; BASIC NEEDS DIRECTOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUTREACH MANAGER</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HOUSING RESOURCE MANAGER</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FAMILY RESOURCE PROGRAM MANAGER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BOOKKEEPER (Part time)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HopeLink

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation was conducted through a series of methodologies in lieu of one overall defining system or approach due to the intrinsic difficulty of assessing non-profit organization programs. The mixed methodological approach was directed as an effort to encompass both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the program. This multidirectional approach to collect and process information also allowed for more confidence in the results through comparison and more
redundancy in case one or more of the methodologies failed to provide definitive or substantial results.

The methodologies employed in the evaluation consisted of a four tiered approach to the data collection and processing. In all of the methodologies, success was defined as recipients who left the transitional housing program to live on their own in a permanent housing environment, with friends or family or to a permanent housing subsidized program:

1. Extrospective qualitative-quantitative approach: Based on program success rates reported to HHH by HopeLink and other local organizations that provide transitional housing programs. The success rates were compared at a basic statistical level to determine the success HopeLink had in comparison with the other local organizations providing transitional housing services, as identified by the Office of the Regional Homeless Coordinator. Local organization success rates (in lieu of non-local) were used in order to mitigate heterogeneity of the samples; the particular cultural intricacies and idiosyncrasies of transitional housing in the Las Vegas Valley were assumed to be potentially different than those of other localities at the state or national level, (e.g. drug abuse, gambling, or alcohol may be an important factor for Las Vegas but not important in another city). This methodology provided the most direct means of assessing the success of HopeLink in relation to the success reported by others. It must be noted that the accuracy of the data reported to HHH was independent of this study and could not be effectively assessed. This is the reason why other more qualitative methodologies were simultaneously used to assess the work of HopeLink, and these are described below.

2. Introspective qualitative-quantitative approach: Realized through specific client information attained directly from HopeLink. The data collected was primarily nominal level data; however, some ordinal level data was available as well. This data allowed for the extraction of 99 parameters (independent variables) that were used to assess in a more comprehensive manner the relationship between these variables and the individual client success in the program. This evaluation provided a new dimension to the study, mainly because it went beyond and at the same time complemented the simple comparison of the success rate between HopeLink and other local transitional housing organizations, providing a better insight in the multiple levels of complexity that are inherent in the work of organizations like HopeLink. The analysis of this approach included a bi-variate frequency evaluation in conjunction with the use of a chi-square analysis to determine the parameters that had the apparent highest influence over the program success rate. These results could later be used to recommend alternative approaches in the selection of program recipients and also indicate what factors may require more attention in the program.

3. Extrospective qualitative approach: Conducted through the collection and assessment of information provided through literature reviews and related national, state and local transitional housing reports and studies. This aspect of the evaluation provided a broader perspective on the differences and commonalities between HopeLink and other organizations at the national level. A number of challenges were found to be shared between HopeLink and other transitional housing entities, providing us with potential
solutions to problems that had previously been encountered and addressed in other organizations.

4. Introspective qualitative approach: Conducted through the collection and assessment of information provided through interviews and surveys. The descriptive nature of the data collected through this approach does not allow for an effective statistical interpretation due to purely nominal character of the variables assessed. However, the information attained provided considerable insight in the organizational structure of both the program and the non-profit organizations involved. In addition this approach allowed us access to the multitude of perspectives from managers, administrators, case workers, and recipients that were involved directly or indirectly in the program.

It must be noted that throughout the evaluation the dependant variable was defined as the program success of HopeLink, and success is defined as recipients who left the transitional housing program to live on their own in a permanent housing environment, with friends or family or in a permanent subsidized program.

Types of Data Collected

The data collected falls in five main categories based on the source of the information:

1. External source report data: This was primary source program data, reported to Help Hope Home by HopeLink and other non-profit organizations. This data was quantitative in nature and was presented as number of clients that were compliant or non-compliant with the particular transitional housing program.

2. Internal source report data: This is primary source client data provided by HopeLink. This data was subcategorized as listed below. A complete list of independent variables used in this evaluation is provided in Appendix A:
   a. Demographics
   b. Employment
   c. Physical, mental, legal challenges
   d. Receipt of public assistance at intake and exit
   e. Miscellaneous
   f. Skills & knowledge challenges
   g. Environmental challenges
   h. General reported parameters

3. Internal source interview information: This was primary source data provided by HopeLink as well as HHH staff through interviews and discussions performed during the program evaluation.

4. External source survey information: This was secondary source information provided by current and former recipients of the program.
5. External source literature review: This was primary and secondary source data attained through the research of existing reports and studies provided by HUD as well as other public entities and independent sources.

Data Collection

The main source of data was collected through reports requested directly from HopeLink and HHH. The individual recipient data attained from HopeLink was collected by the research team through site visits and file searching in the HopeLink office. External reports provided by HHH were attained through meetings with representatives of this organization. Interviews were conducted with HopeLink staff and complementary information was obtained through discussions with both HopeLink and HHH representatives. In addition, a telephone survey was conducted to obtain opinions and perspectives from the current and former recipients of the program.

Data Analysis

Multiple methods of analysis were employed in the evaluation of the available data; ranging from a simple percentage comparison to a detailed assessment of each independent variable in comparison with the dependant variable. A comparison of program success rates was conducted to evaluate the overall success of HopeLink in relation with other entities. In addition, a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis was conducted in order to identify parameters that influenced more readily the outcome of the recipient’s performance in the program. The following is a descriptive list of the different analysis conducted in the evaluation:

1. Program success rate comparison: This analysis entailed the comparison of the success rates (number of compliant recipients vs. total number of recipients) between different local entities in the Las Vegas valley. A single variable evaluation was conducted in order to provide a perspective of where HopeLink rated among other local organizations, the mean and standard deviation were attained and under the assumption of a normal distribution a Gaussian function bell curve was created, locating the HopeLink success rate in the curve for reference.

2. Identification of influencing factors: A bi-variate frequency analysis (cross tabulation analysis) was conducted between each of the independent variables and the dependant variable, to assess the relationship the independent variables exercised over the program success (dependant variable). A chi-square evaluation was conducted as well with the bi-variate frequency analysis in order to determine the statistical significance attained by the bi-variate relationship. The chi-square test method assumes that there is no relationship between the two variables analyzed within the population and it determines if this relationship in a sample is solely by chance. It must be noted that this method as well as any other similar statistical method is approximate in nature and its results are very dependant on the type, quality and amount of data available; this was made apparent in this evaluation as will be explained in the limitations section of the report. The benefit we hoped to achieve using chi-square in this evaluation was to attempt to narrow down the analyzed variable relationships to those that potentially can be expected to exist in the
population. Chi-squared values calculated from the evaluation are compared to values tabulated by statisticians to determine the level of confidence in inferring that the sample relationships can be assumed also in the population.

3. Survey and interview data interpretation: The evaluation of this purely qualitative data required a considerable amount of literature research in order to understand and consequently interpret the data provided. The interpretation of the data required knowledge of the specifics of how the organizations functioned and how they interacted with the staff and recipients.

LIMITATIONS

There were a number of limitations to the execution of this evaluation. The most evident limitations are listed below:

1. Time constraint: The time frame for the evaluation was roughly one semester (four months). This evaluation could be conducted in much greater detail with the inclusion of a broader sample, including other transitional housing organizations and a much larger recipient sample. The evaluators feel that much more could have been achieved if a larger time frame could be allowed.

2. Sample size limitation: The data provided by HopeLink for the evaluation constituted 42 recipients; this does not constitute a large sample considering the large diversity of characteristics between recipients. As with most statistical analysis, a much larger sample would provide more reliable results.

3. Missing data: A total of 99 variables were assessed for each recipient, unfortunately a number of variable data was missing from the individual recipients records. A large portion of this missing data was collected through interviews and alternate primary sources of data (e.g. case worker interviews and notes). However, for some variables the remaining missing data may have rendered these variables non-significant in the analysis.

4. Data sampling: It must be noted that the data used was not attained through random sampling mainly because the recipient selection process is not a result of random selection. The lack of random sampling may affect the accuracy in the statistical significance analysis, affecting the overall results, especially if the recipient selection process is not strictly maintained.

5. Data type: The data available was primarily of the nominal and ordinal level, the majority of the data collected was of the nominal level, limiting the evaluation to mainly a qualitative analysis, and also limiting the analysis to only a handful of available statistical methods.

6. Data reliability: During the evaluation of the data it was noted that some of the information was not accurately or fully reported. This will certainly affect the accuracy of the results. However, it is not certain to what extent.
SURVEY

For this evaluation, the team made an effort to conduct a telephone survey of all of HopeLink’s current and former clients. Early on, the team recognized the challenges to surveying homeless individuals, but decided to move forward with the plan hoping to gain valuable first-hand knowledge of client’s experience with the program. The intent was to obtain information about the program’s services and determine if they were effective in helping clients attain permanent housing or self-sufficiency. The survey was designed to be short and ask questions that could be easily understood by people who differ in many ways (see Appendix B). The results on the survey are reported in this evaluation. However, the results may not reflect the intended sample or the population.

HMIS PROBLEM

One conceivably reliable source of data that is collected through the nation’s Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), was useless for this study. HMIS is a computerized database that collects client-level data over time for homeless persons, including their characteristics and service needs. According to BitFocus (2008), the contractor that operates HMIS in Southern Nevada, the mission “is to provide standardized and timely information to improve access to housing and services, and strengthen our efforts to end homelessness. Our goal is to eventually provide a comprehensive picture of homelessness as possible, by incorporating information from all emergency shelters, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing providers, as well as other points of contact for people experiencing homelessness, such as outreach programs, drop-in centers, and food shelves.” Ideally, the system’s data should be able to provide, according to the Arizona Department of Housing (2009), “an unduplicated count of homeless persons, [and allow those concerned with homelessness to] analyze local patterns of services usage, and assess local service needs.” Perhaps even more significantly, the HMIS allows “[k]nitting together service providers in a more coordinated and effective service delivery system for the benefit of homeless clients... [and obtaining] and reporting critical aggregate information about the characteristics and needs of homeless persons.” One major HUD goal: “to help individual homeless service providers ... in their day-to-day operations and to help increase the effective coordination of services in the Continuum of Care (CoC).”

The effectiveness of this system is undermined in two ways: first, personally identifying information of domestic violence victims is not allowed by federal mandate to be entered into the HMIS, despite the fact that personal information is already deemed confidential; and second, local homeless service providers, particularly those providing transitional housing services like HopeLink’s, are failing to enter data into HMIS.

The first problem is national in scope and deserves to be addressed if the system’s benefits are to be realized. To get a sense of how large of a deficiency this is, one needs only to look at the statistics: According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2009), “Domestic violence is the immediate cause of homelessness for many women. Research studies reveal that domestic violence is one of the most frequently stated causes of homelessness for families, with 13 percent of homeless families saying that they had left their last place of residence because of abuse or
violence in the household.... Domestic violence is the immediate cause of homelessness for many women and children. In November 2006, over 22,000 victims of domestic violence—12,000 children and 10,000 adults—received housing services from 1,243 domestic violence service providers.” Studies suggest that the percentage of homeless women who are domestic violence victims is high. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (2004), one-third of homeless women in Minnesota were homeless due to domestic violence and 46 percent said they had stayed in abusive relationships because they had nowhere to go. The ACLU (2004) also reported that a San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless survey found that 50 percent of homeless women are victims of domestic violence. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2007), a Massachusetts study found that 92 percent of homeless women had at some point in their lives experienced severe physical or sexual assault, and 63 percent were victimized by an intimate partner.

Michele Fuller-Hallauer, Southern Nevada's continuum of care coordinator in the Office of the Regional Homeless Coordinator, agrees that the effectiveness of the HMIS system is undermined by federal restrictions handed down by HUD and that those restrictions do nothing to protect domestic violence victims since the information in the HMIS is treated as confidential. “...[W]e are bound by the federal laws,” Fuller-Hallauer explained. As noted in the Federal Register on March 16, 2007, HUD interpreted a new confidentiality provision in the Violence Against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005 (VAWA 2005 reauthorized and amended the Violence Against Women Act of 1994) to bar those providing services to domestic violence victims from disclosing “for purposes of HMIS, personally identifying information about any client.... The term ‘personally identifying information’ is defined to mean ‘individually identifying information likely to disclose the location of a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, including (I) a first and last name; (II) a home or other physical address; (III) contact information (including a postal, e-mail or Internet protocol address, or telephone or facsimile number); (IV) a social security number; and (V) any other information including date of birth, racial or ethnic background, or religious affiliation, that, in combination with any other non-personally identifying information would serve to identify any individual.”

While HUD early on had recommended cloaking individual domestic violence clients’ identities, HUD officials later clarified at a national HMIS conference it sponsored that domestic violence “clients were to be kept out of the HMIS system,” according to Herdzik (April 21, 2009).

Fuller-Hallauer said that HUD officials are “actively working” with advocates for domestic violence victims “to find a solution that is agreeable to everyone.... Currently under the VAWA laws Hopelink is prohibited from including their domestic violence clients in the HMIS system. The Federal HUD offices are actively trying to find an alternative for this knowing that this absence of this data skews the data reports coming out of HMIS. Unfortunately, this is a problem we have to deal with until a solution is found. We have asked our community providers to submit an aggregate data report to our office on a quarterly basis.... [Hopelink] should be submitting an aggregate report to my office on [their domestic violence] clients so they can be manually added to the HMIS output data,” something which has not been occurring. Fuller-Hallauer indicated (April 20, 2009) that Hopelink may never have been informed of the
requirement for aggregate reporting since the Office of the Regional Homeless Coordinator had not been aware of the volume of domestic violence victims in its transitional housing program.

It is unclear if HopeLink was aware of the restrictions on entering domestic violence victims’ personally identifying information into the HMIS. It has entered some data, though it is sparse, and had recently trained two new hires on how to enter data into the system. But HopeLink is not alone in its lack of HMIS use. Fuller-Hallauer had identified for the authors of this report seven other agencies providing transitional housing services in Southern Nevada so that HopeLink could be benchmarked against those agencies. [Those agencies are Lutheran Social Service’s Project Home, Help of Las Vegas’s Bonanza Views, Women’s Development Center (WDC) at Cobb Lane and Middlesex, Salvation Army Transitional Housing Pathways, St. Vincent’s HELP program, and U.S. Veterans’ Veterans in Progress program.] Robert Herdzik, the HMIS project manager for BitFocus, reviewed the data entered into HMIS with one of the authors of this report and found that five of the seven aforementioned agencies had either not entered data into the HMIS or the information entered was insufficient. The other two programs were the WDC at Cobb Lane and Middlesex, which have not entered data due to HUD restrictions but which have been submitting monthly aggregate reports to the Office of the Regional Homeless Coordinator. (Fuller-Hallauer, April 20, 2009)

To fully realize the benefits of the HMIS, it is important that all homeless providers in Southern Nevada be compelled to submit all pertinent information on a timely basis. Until that happens, some homeless people are likely to fall through the cracks and not receive all those services available to them and local governments will not have as complete or true a picture of the area’s homeless problem.

INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The following interpretations and conclusions were drawn from the evaluation; however, it must be noted that the results are subject to the above-stated limitations:

1. The success rate comparison indicated that HopeLink is rated near the overall mean of the sample (i.e. the mean of program success of the transitional housing organizations in the analysis). Though HopeLink appears to report a lower program success rate in some program time frames, the overall rate assessed by using the individual recipient data (58.5 percent) indicates that this success rate is apparently near the mean. The tabular format of the calculations and data analyzed is located in Appendix C. According to Burt (2006, p. 39), “On average, 70% of families went to permanent housing, with or without subsidies or supports.”

2. Per the statistical evaluation, the following parameters (variables) were found to be the most influential in regards to the program’s success. These parameters and their respective conclusions, recommendations and comments were placed in tabular form in Appendix D.
   a. Recipients met at least one goal (at 5-percent level of significance)
   b. Recipients caring for an elderly family member (at 10-percent level of significance)
c. Recipients with a lack of educational skills (at 5-percent level of significance)
d. Low-income recipients (at 5-percent level of significance)
e. Social Security Insurance recipients (at 5-percent level of significance)
f. Section 8 recipients (at 10-percent level of significance)
g. WSAP recipients (at 10-percent level of significance)
h. Substance abusers (at 10-percent level of significance)
i. Recipients with a lack of employment skills (at 5-percent level of significance)
j. Recipients with a lack of skills to find a job (at 5-percent level of significance)
k. Currently employed recipients (at 5-percent level of significance)
l. Transportation challenges (at 10-percent level of significance)
m. TANF and food stamps recipients (at 10-percent level of significance)
n. Recipients referred to educational service & GED (at 10-percent level of significance)
o. Recipients arrested or convicted of a crime (at 10-percent level of significance)
p. TANF recipients (at 10-percent level of significance)

3. To fully realize the benefits of the HMIS, it is important that all homeless providers in Southern Nevada be compelled to submit all pertinent information on a timely basis, HopeLink included. Until that happens, some homeless people are likely to fall through the cracks and not receive all those services available to them and local governments will not have as complete or true a picture of the area’s homeless problem. Federal restrictions against entering personally identifying information about victims of domestic violence into the HMIS also is problematic. In the interim, HopeLink should be submitting monthly aggregate reports to the Office of the Regional Homeless Coordinator.

4. As a result of the interviews conducted and the authors’ analysis, we were made aware of additional needs within the HopeLink organization:

   A. Staffing levels and patterns are an essential part of any program. In one report, transitional housing staff are identified as “what makes the difference to a family to commit to the goals of the program and leave successfully.” (Burt, 2006) As one might assume, bigger programs have more resources and lower staff-to-client ratios, while smaller programs such as HopeLink have higher staff-to-client ratios. HopeLink offers intensive case management and has one full-time case manager overseeing 26 cases. (Puno, 2009) Table 1 reports the staff-to-client ratios for one transitional housing study (Burt, 2006). Based on this scale, HopeLink’s staff-to-client ratio appears to be low. While additional case workers probably cannot be added given budgetary limitations, some of the more mundane case work could be assigned to volunteers or clerical staff – freeing up the case worker’s time for critically needed duties. Currently, HopeLink volunteers are assigned to assist non-transitional housing programs. (Puno, 2009)
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Units</th>
<th>Staff-to-Client Ratio</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 to 9</td>
<td>1 to 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 19</td>
<td>1 to 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 to 39</td>
<td>1 to 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 or more</td>
<td>1 to 20</td>
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</table>

*Source: Burt, 2006*

B. One of the greatest challenges for any program is deciding which applicants to accept or deny. HopeLink’s eligibility criteria are not clear, though its clients come predominantly from shelters, which do their own screening. From what we have seen, determination is made by one person or perhaps two. “Creaming” refers to a program accepting clients whose problems are not very complex or severe in hopes of increasing the number of clients who successfully transition into permanent housing. (Winship, 2001) Most transitional housing programs nationally allow for some creaming, though it is generally limited (Burt, 2006, p. 45), and certainly HopeLink is no different. From our review of case files, many of the clients accepted into HopeLink’s transitional housing programs have many challenges and creaming appears limited. More defined criteria for acceptance into the program are needed and acceptance should be determined by a committee of at least two and preferably three persons to ensure nonbiased decision-making (which is not to suggest that decision-making to date has been unfair or biased).

C. Measuring true success of the program is difficult, given the limited availability of data. Increasing the supply of critical data can provide greater insights into the program’s successes and weaknesses, allowing a more thorough analysis with recommendations for improvements that can be beneficial not just to HopeLink but to the clients it serves. For instance, tracking clients once they leave the program for a period of at least six months would be helpful in determining whether they found permanent housing and whether they were able to live independently. (The authors recognize that “permanent housing” and “live independently” are relative terms; HUD, for instance, considers living in subsidized housing such as Section 8 to be “permanent housing.”) A review of the Annual Progress Reports (APRs) submitted by HopeLink to HUD shows that a fair number of clients are not accessing services that they would appear to need. HopeLink is required to complete an APR each time it submits an application to HUD for grant funding. Included in those APRs are comparisons between program goals and performance. For funding transitional housing programs, HUD considers the responses to questions on the APRs (SHP Desk Guide, p. 13). The reasons why clients are not accessing some services appear to be (1) the remote location where some services are offered makes it difficult for clients to access those services—such has been the case with financial management classes offered by Consumer Credit Counseling (HopeLink APR, March 2008); (2)
clients did not feel the classes were necessary – domestic violence victims have expressed this point about domestic violence courses; (3) accessing some services was postponed until the second year of the program following completion of client treatment and case plans from previous situations (HopeLink APR, October 2008); (4) client income instability, "which often dominates the clients’ time" (HopeLink APR, October 2008); and (5) HopeLink is not able to persuade clients to pursue these opportunities. Complicating the matter is the general lack of support services in the Las Vegas area vis-à-vis what is common in other large metropolitan areas of the country. (Brown, 2005) In some cases, HopeLink’s case manager attempts to fill a void by providing some of these services herself. For instance, in one APR (March 2008), it was reported that none of the clients participated in financial management training classes, although 100% worked with case manager on a cash management review of the household and ability to maintain bills and expenses, work toward employment and/or disability benefits, etc.” (HopeLink failed to meet this goal in its last three APRs.) This is less than ideal for two reasons. First, classes offered by these outside entities are presumably more comprehensive and better designed to meet clients’ needs. Second, it consumes the case manager’s time, which might be better spent on other matters. Additional observations from the APRs include that (1) HopeLink has not been meeting its “residential stability” goals tied to clients obtaining income sufficient to maintain long-term housing, though the organization’s most recent APR (October 2008) showed improvement since “8 out of 12 households … did obtain income after entering the program”; (2) HopeLink failed in each of its APRs to meet its goal of having those lacking a high school diploma earn a GED; (3) HopeLink failed to secure domestic violence counseling for most victims in two of the three years it was listed as a goal; (4) very few clients went into HUD-subsidized housing, though that is listed as a goal – it should be noted that the demand for subsidized housing outstrips the supply locally (Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, 2007, pp. 101-102); (5) HopeLink has had good success with enrolling clients in job assistance programs; and (6) HopeLink has been effective in getting clients to complete individualized case plans and to complete at least one goal in those plans.

D. According to HopeLink, one of the elements of the program that seems to be meeting or exceeding expectations is the current waiting list. Per staff, the wait list is truly working and the shelters try to keep the families in as long as they can once they know that HopeLink has a specified time frame with which to transition the families into permanent housing. (Puno, 2009)

E. According to HopeLink, transitioning from shelter into HopeLink’s transitional housing program appears to be challenging. (Puno, 2009) When an apartment becomes available, the client moves in to often empty home lacking furniture and even beds. Many times, it takes about a week or so to get the house furnished. If HopeLink does not, at the time, have funding for the furniture bank, it may take even longer. This can be especially challenging for mothers who have a need for a bassinet or a crib to put her baby in. It also is not uncommon for a family to
move into an apartment and go a weekend without pots, pans and toiletries. Additional resources or a more expedient process for the acquisition of furniture and other household needs is apparently required.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the observations, statistical results, and analysis covered in this evaluation. It also should be noted that they are limited to the conclusions attained in the evaluation and limited to the analysis described earlier. The team has divided the recommendations into two parts – the first for HopeLink, the second concerns the HMIS and are meant for the Office of the Regional Homeless Coordinator and the SNRPC and its member entities. The aim of the recommendations is to improve the operations of HopeLink and the system of service delivery in Southern Nevada so that the homeless are given an opportunity to improve their lives and increase their chances of becoming self-sufficient over the short- and long-terms.

HopeLink Recommendations

1. The review of success rates by HopeLink and other transitional housing service providers along with a review of HopeLink goals and progress toward meeting those goals as identified in its own HUD-required APRs suggests there is room for improvement. Financial management training classes are often recommended for clients, but the remote location of classes makes that problematic. HopeLink should seek to find a workable alternative such as coordinating with Consumer Credit Counseling to set up classes in more convenient locations or work with a qualified volunteer (such as through the Volunteer Center) to teach such a class, perhaps by using Consumer Credit Counseling’s curriculum.

2. The APRs also demonstrated that domestic violence victims did not see the value of courses aimed at preventing re-victimization. Perhaps resistance to such classes could be alleviated with financial incentives provided to clients, possibly through a partnership with anti-domestic violence-oriented programs such as Safe Nest.

3. Clients lacking a high school diploma also mostly failed to obtain a GED. While obtaining a GED can require a substantial commitment of time on the part of clients and require clients to overcome issues of self-esteem, obtaining this record of basic educational achievement has advantages. Therefore, HopeLink staff should redouble their efforts to encourage clients to achieve this goal.

4. The statistical evaluation of HopeLink client files shows that some factors are more influential than others in terms of how successful clients will be in ultimately transitioning out of the program successfully. As such, HopeLink staff may wish to consider the factors below in determining whether to accept prospective clients into the transitional housing program. HopeLink may also want to put additional focus on these factors as it addresses client development. Additionally, standard criteria should be developed for acceptance into the program, and at least two persons and preferably three
should sign off on the acceptance of all clients. Here are the parameters (variables) found to be the most influential in regards to the program's success (at 5-percent level of significance):

![Figure 2 – HopeLink Cross Tabulation Analysis](image)

Seven variables in the 'spider web diagram', above, appeared to have the most statistical significance based on the chi-square evaluation. These values were rated based on the percentage differential obtained in the cross tabulation analysis, with the most influential variables having the highest percent difference (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ranking Highest Impact on Success</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client Met Minimum 1 Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Educational Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security Insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Employment Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Job Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently Employed</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1. It appears that the staff-to-client ratio may be low (Burt, 2006). Providing additional case workers seems unlikely, given budgetary restrictions. However, HopeLink's one case manager's time could be better focused on critical client needs if some of her duties could be shifted to others. Currently, all HopeLink volunteers are assigned to other programs. (Dreitzer, 2009) We propose that volunteers be assigned to the transitional housing program so that they may assist the case manager with non-critical client needs. Such persons might also be used to improve monthly reporting to the Office of the Regional Homeless Coordinator.

2. As noted in Recommendation No. 4, a more standardized tool should be created for determining who is accepted into the transitional housing program. Development of such a tool could be performed by a student volunteer from the UNLV Department of Public Administration. Such a student or students might also be utilized to create a formalized system of tracking clients after they leave HopeLink to determine if they were successful in transitioning into permanent housing and leading independent lives six months after departure. Such a system, which should tap HMIS resources where feasible, would better measure program success and provide insights into how the transitional housing program might be improved. Such a student or students also could be employed to create questionnaires that a volunteer might employ to ask questions both when clients leave the program and then again six months later. Burt's review (2006, p. 39) of transitional housing programs across the country found that "...most programs in our sample measure outcomes at some period after program exit."

3. Recipient families that initially move in to their temporary homes frequently find themselves without furniture. It is recommended that additional resources be acquired or that existing resources be made available in a more expedient way to allow for the timely provision of furniture for the recipients. Additional funding and perhaps logistic efforts may be required from Help Hope Home to allow for this improvement.

4. The evaluation team believes HopeLink's transitional housing program is generally well-run. Limitations on time and resources, however, cut short the team's examination of the program. Further study could provide additional benefits, and we recommend that HopeLink and the UNLV Department of Public Administration consider an examination of other components of the transitional housing program in order to improve its effectiveness.

HMIS Recommendations

1. Local transitional housing providers as defined by the Office of the Regional Homeless Coordinator are largely entering incomplete and inadequate data into the HMIS system. Thus, the benefits available to the agencies' clients and to the local organizations themselves are not being fully realized. To remedy this, we recommend that the SNRPC and its member governments require all local homeless providers to input all pertinent data concerning homeless clients and services into the HMIS as a requirement for all grant and related funding and that performance be documented and reported quarterly to
the SNRPC's Committee on Homelessness, which should include those reports on its publicly noticed meeting agendas.

2. HUD has barred the entry into the HMIS of personally identifying information of domestic violence victims in order to protect them from those who would prey upon them. This seems unnecessary since the information in HMIS is already deemed to be confidential. The SNRPC and its member governments should lobby forcefully through the state of Nevada’s Congressional delegation and other appropriate means to dismantle this nonsensical prohibition so that victims of domestic violence can access the full range of services and benefits available to them, something that a well-run HMIS can assure.

CONCLUSION

SNRPC’s Committee on Homelessness allocates HUD Continuum of Care funds to agencies in Clark County that work to meet the needs of the homeless population. Because there is a limited amount of funds available, we were asked to evaluate one transitional housing agency, HopeLink, to see if the resources were being utilized in the most effective way. The Committee essentially asked, “Should it continue funding HopeLink?”

Looking only at the numbers shows an agency whose success rate is, according to studies, lower than the national average. Yet it has been suggested by more than one author that the reported success rates are often inflated and may not reflect reality. It also depends on the agency’s definition of success and the type of clientele they are serving. Looking at the statistical analysis is just one part of the picture – perhaps even a small part. This is an agency serving a segment of society with very challenging personal, social and psychological problems for which there are often no easy answers. HopeLink is a well-respected agency in Clark County, receiving recognition from the City of Henderson and awards for its contributions to the community. Our interactions with this agency revealed a dedicated and caring staff.

Still, there is room for improvement, and as such, our recommendations touch upon issues of allocation of resources, primarily personnel, increased access for clients to educational and training classes we consider important to their own success as well as the agency’s, tracking of clients once they leave to better understand client and agency performance, and even the provision of basic furnishings to assist the homeless to transition into apartment life.

Other recommendations are more administrative in nature and may not require additional resources (especially if UNLV student interns or volunteers are utilized), and include standardizing client acceptance criteria and full utilization of the HMIS system. Creating a criterion worksheet based on the information in the interpretations and conclusions section of this report could help standardize the process and focus valuable resources on clients with a higher chance at success. To fully realize the benefits of the HMIS, it is important that all homeless providers in Southern Nevada, in addition to HopeLink, be compelled to submit all pertinent information on a timely and continual basis. Until that happens, some homeless people are likely to fall through the cracks and not receive all those services available to them and local governments will not have as complete or true a picture of the area’s homeless problem.
The team believes that success in achieving the aforementioned steps could go far in improving the utility of the HMIS and the delivery of services to this vulnerable population and could make this agency more successful at doing their part to eradicate homelessness in Clark County.

The team came away from this evaluation with a deeper appreciation of the issues facing the homeless and an agency dedicated to doing all they can to address this important need in our community. Our recommendation to the Committee on Homelessness is to continue funding HopeLink.

We would like to thank HopeLink Executive Director Daniele Dreitzer, HopeLink Case Manager Molly Puno, Regional Homeless Coordinator Shannon West, and our faculty advisor, Dr. Christopher Stream, for their valuable time, efforts and, of course, the opportunity to prepare the aforementioned analysis and report.
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