

## **FALL RIVER, MA, HPRP-FUNDED PREVENTION PROGRAM**

The Office of Community Development in the Fall River Community Development Agency (CDA) administered the city's homelessness prevention program, funded by HUD's Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP). The program provided rent arrearages, case management, and legal services to approximately 706 households (a mix of families and single adults) through four subgrantees. Households accessed prevention by presentation to any one of three subgrantees and had to show evidence of active legal eviction proceedings and financial capacity to cover current housing costs if arrearages were paid. Households stayed in the program for an average 184 days (and a median 123 days).

### **Community Description**

Located south of Boston, Fall River borders the state of Rhode Island, has a 16.2 percent poverty rate, and an annual unemployment rate of 14 percent. It is a member of the South Coast Regional Network to End Homelessness, one of the 10 regional networks within the state. According to the local point-in-time count, the city identified 11 unsheltered homeless people, 169 people in emergency shelter, and 108 in transitional housing. In 2011, the Fall River continuum of care (CoC) counted 135 formerly homeless people living in a permanent supportive housing program. The Fall River CoC homeless service system was also coordinated within the city's CDA and administered funding for 115 transitional housing beds, 181 emergency shelter beds, and 135 permanent supportive housing beds.

Fall River is currently revising its ten-year plan to end homelessness. The city states that the characteristics of its homeless population are changing: fewer people are primarily chronically homeless, and more are elderly, youth, and those homeless for the first time because of unemployment. Prevention is expected to be a core component of the new ten-year plan.

### **DESIGN AND SETUP OF HPRP PREVENTION**

In 2009, Fall River received \$1.3 million in federal funds for its HPRP. Because of its lack of experience with rental assistance, rapid re-housing, or homelessness prevention, the city consulted its major service providers when designing the program; Catholic Social Services had an existing, privately funded prevention program, and South Coast Counties Legal Services had a long history in eviction prevention. The city knew, because of early phone calls received from the public, that there was high need for prevention assistance in the community. As a result, Fall River chose to leave the program design open at the subgrantee level in order to ensure flexibility for stabilizing at-risk people. Although Fall River initially planned to allocate 60 percent of its funds spent for prevention, it ended up spending approximately 90 percent on prevention.

The city wanted to serve as many people as possible, and so it chose not to keep any funds for administration of the program. Three city staff members, however, dedicated 20 to 25 percent of their time over the course of program operation (CDA's director, planning and housing coordinator, and contract compliance officer).

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Fall River funded four subgrantees to provide HPRP services: Catholic Social Services (CSS), Citizens for Citizens (CFC), South Coast Counties Legal Services (SCCLS), and The Women's Center (TWC). Each

subgrantee served a mix of families and individuals. SCCLS was selected specifically to provide legal services and did not provide any financial assistance; TWC was chosen to serve victims of domestic violence. CSS, CFC, and TWC conducted client intake and assessment and provided direct financial assistance and case management services. Subgrantee case managers decided eligibility and amounts and types of financial assistance received.

### **Outreach**

Before HPRP was implemented, a local newspaper ran a story about the program. Consequently, subgrantees were consistently booked for intake appointments several weeks out. Word of mouth was a primary method of marketing; because subgrantees were well known in the community, potential candidates were often referred as part of normal agency business. SCCLS met with housing court judges and lawyers to educate them on the program and how to connect clients with it, and to ask them to change processes to ensure time for negotiation with landlords.

### **Point of Entry**

Potential participants could access the program via CSS, SCCLS, and TWC. There was no coordinated intake; all the subgrantees used their own forms. However, CSS and CFC shared information on clients accessing the program during prescreening to ensure no duplication of services.

### **Intake: Eligibility and Assessment**

Each subgrantee used its own process and forms for screening potential participants for program eligibility. Because of limited staff, CFC relied on SCCLS to do all the initial screening and provide referrals for individuals or families that were eligible for the program and needed financial assistance. Each subgrantee also had its own assessment process.

- *Prescreening.* Screening typically occurred over the phone but also occurred in person. Screening focused on HUD eligibility requirements (particularly income) and whether the participant had a 14-day notice to quit. Some subgrantees also briefly evaluated the income-to-rent ratio in order to get a sense of sustainability, but income screening more commonly occurred during full assessment. SCCLS screenings were conducted by paralegals through a centralized intake line. Any applicant passing the SCCLS screening that appeared to also need financial assistance received a referral to CFC (or CSS if rapid re-housing, TWC if domestic violence).

All subgrantees indicated that most people that passed the screening phase were likely to receive some type of services, even if they were not served with HPRP funds. Those applicants that clearly presented with barriers to sustainability or service needs too great to be a good fit for HPRP, that did not fit the income guidelines, or that could not produce a 14-day eviction notice were referred to other programs in the community or served with other funds within the subgrantee.

- *Screening and Assessment.* Once an applicant passed the screening process, an in-person intake appointment was scheduled. These intakes typically included an assessment of income, benefits, expenses, housing history, family characteristics, and other factors. During this intake, the staff

collected all the required documentation from participants (eviction notice, statement of assets, income, etc.). The intake process served two purposes: to assess the household's likely ability to sustain housing on its own and fit with the program, and to identify the necessary components to develop a case plan, including the amount of assistance needed. The case plans focused solely on immediate housing stability issues, including landlord-tenant negotiation, income, benefits, and expenses. The plans also included the development of a detailed budget and identification of financial counseling need, when necessary. If non-housing issues such as mental health or substance abuse presented during the assessment, the subgrantees referred applicants to other programs (either internally or externally, depending on barrier presented). The majority of applicants that made it through intake and assessment were enrolled in the program.

### **“But For” and Sustainability Rules**

When determining if an applicant was eligible for prevention services, subgrantees considered income and current housing situation. A 14-day notice to quit, court date, or 48-hour notice to vacate were all evidence that a participant meets the “but-for” test.

Because the Fall River HPRP primarily provided rental arrears, “good fit” for prevention services hinged on evidence that the applicant would be able to sustain housing on his or her own once the arrears had been settled. Sustainability was evidenced by a rent-to-income ratio and the applicant's financial budget. Additional considerations included housing history, employment, and other factors that could influence long-term sustainability, such as a long-term disability. Applicants that presented with barriers that were likely to require a long-term stability strategy, such as disability, received referrals to other programs within the agency or other organizations, such as treatment or job-training programs. The estimated amount of financial assistance required to achieve sustainability was also a big factor in decision-making. If applicants could not show they could sustain their housing costs after arrearages were paid, they were referred to another program. The only exception to this was participants selected for enrollment at TWC, where the primary factor indicating a poor fit for HPRP was undocumented status (because being undocumented created barriers to accessing benefits, services, and employment). TWC was able to provide prevention assistance to undocumented participants with an alternative program.

The staff at each subgrantee made the final determinations about enrollment. Subgrantee staff members brought difficult cases to a biweekly meeting attended by the case managers at CFC, the housing advocate and supervisor at CSS, and the managing attorney at SCCLS. At these meetings, staff members discussed scenarios and decided collectively how to handle each case.

### **Prevention Activities**

Fall River primarily provided rental arrearages with ongoing case management and legal services. The city's HPRP-funded prevention program served approximately 1,081 people (706 households) as of September 30, 2010.

**Financial Assistance.** Fall River provided rental and utility arrearage assistance; in rare instances, financial assistance included security deposit and first month's rental assistance. The city capped its

financial assistance to no more than 6 months of arrearages and required clients to manage ongoing rental costs to ensure that clients were actively involved in retaining their housing. Participants were required to prove payment of current-month rent in order to receive arrearage payments.

**Case Management.** Participants received comprehensive case management services that focused on connection to mainstream resources, income, and budgeting. Not all participants needed ongoing case management services, but most participants had to meet with case managers multiple times before their arrearages were paid in full.

### **DATA AND MONITORING**

The Office of Community Development in the Fall River CDA was very involved in regular monitoring, particularly around reporting and expenditures. Because of concern over the accuracy of the homeless management information system (HMIS) data, the city developed a monthly report for the subgrantees and conducted financial monitoring monthly. All payment requests were reconciled with the monthly reports. This report was also used for monitoring HMIS data entry. Program monitoring included desk audits, review of monthly reports, and site visits.

All four subgrantees participated in HMIS; however, the city did not use HPRP funds to cover HMIS operating costs. The grantee paid HMIS fees through the existing CoC HMIS grant. All the subgrantees used HMIS in addition to at least one other client management software. Both the grantee and the subgrantees reported difficulties in using HMIS, including the amount of additional data required in HMIS raising concerns over attorney-client privilege. TWC was able to use HMIS because it was not solely a domestic violence program but had programs that served a broader population. The agency was already using HMIS for other programs.

Because the city of Fall River had a closed HMIS, CFC developed a Google Excel spreadsheet to share participant demographic and service data with CSS to ensure participants do not receive services at more than one subgrantee. The agencies used an HPRP release of information that specifically authorized them to share data with other service providers as part of the program. The Google environment was secured by access and authentication protocols (user IDs and passwords) and could only be accessed by the case manager at CFC (who also managed it) and the three CSS case managers.

### **PLANS FOR THE FUTURE**

In planning for the implementation of the Emergency Solutions Grant Program, Fall River intends to provide some limited prevention but will be placing a higher priority on rapid re-housing. This is primarily because of HUD's emphasis on rapid re-housing and because Fall River's emergency shelters are currently operating at capacity. The city plans to use ESG to continue prevention in essentially the same manner as HPRP, with less funding. Revision of the ten-year plan in conjunction with the consolidated plan may bring other opportunities for prevention activities.

CSS continues to operate its prevention program but is now providing financial assistance at pre-HPRP levels: up to \$200 in private funds. TWC continues to provide prevention assistance to victims of domestic violence through state flex funds and funding through the Department of Justice Office of Violence against Women. SCCLS continues to provide legal services around eviction prevention through other sources of funding as well. CFC is no longer providing any prevention assistance owing to lack of funding.

One of the biggest lasting impacts of HPRP has been a change in the community’s attitude toward prevention and rapid re-housing. The program was able to change the culture of the homeless assistance system from shelter-focused to a comprehensive approach that included prevention and rapid re-housing. The program also provided an important opportunity for subgrantees to refine and improve their approach to prevention. One subgrantee reported that HPRP has increased overall participation and engagement in the Continuum of Care and collaboration among the subgrantees in the community.

An additional impact of the program is the change in housing court processes and the increased presence of SCCLS within the court. Because of HPRP, SCCLS is now more familiar with housing court judges, lawyers, and many landlords in the community. This has helped change the culture and process around evictions in the housing court. Other subgrantees built lasting relationships and familiarity with landlords in the community as well. The program also increased the awareness of landlords and property managers around tenant rights and the importance of a lease.

**Exhibit E.4: Fall River, Massachusetts, Prevention Overview, Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program**

	Persons		Households	
	#	%	#	%
Total served Year 1 <sup>a</sup>	1,081	100	706	100
Persons in families	646	60	—	—
Adults without children	435	40	—	—
Total served Year 2 <sup>a</sup>	438	100	222	100
Persons in families	288	66	—	—
Adults without children	172	39	—	—
<b>HPRP services</b>				
Rental assistance	—	—	429	61
Case management	—	—	223	52
Security/utility deposits	—	—	21	3
Outreach and engagement	—	—	0	0
Utility payments	—	—	7	1
Housing search/placement	—	—	1	<1
Legal services	—	—	488	69
Credit repair	—	—	1	<1
Motel and hotel vouchers	—	—	2	<1
Moving cost assistance	—	—	2	<1
<b>Destination<sup>b</sup></b>				
Total leavers	662	100	—	—
Homeless	4	<1	—	—
Institutional setting	3	<1	—	—
Permanent housing with subsidy	161	24	—	—
Permanent housing without subsidy	447	68	—	—
Family or friends	4	<1	—	—

Source: Fall River Community Development Agency Annual Performance Report Data, 2009 program start through September 30, 2011.

— not applicable

<sup>a</sup>Total served numbers may not add to 100 percent because the “children only” and “unknown” categories are not included in this table. Numbers may add to greater than 100 percent due to data reporting error.

<sup>b</sup>Destination numbers may not add to total leavers because the “other,” “hotel/motel,” “unknown,” and “deceased” categories are not included in this table.

“Homeless” includes the following destinations: emergency shelter, TH for homeless persons, staying with friends (temporary tenure), staying with family (temporary tenure), place not meant for human habitation, safe haven, and hotel or motel paid by client.

“Institutional setting” includes foster care, psychiatric facility, substance abuse or detox facility, hospital (non-psychiatric), and jail or prison.

“Permanent housing” with subsidy includes housing owned by client with ongoing subsidy, rental by client with VASH subsidy, rental by client with other ongoing subsidy, and Permanent Supportive Housing for Homeless Persons.

“Permanent housing” without subsidy includes housing owned by client without ongoing subsidy and rental by client with no ongoing subsidy.

“Family or friends” includes living with family, permanent tenure or living with friends, permanent tenure.