

Rethinking Shelter

An Analysis of Purpose, Policies, and Impact of the Ramsey County Family Shelter System

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Background

On any given night, Ramsey County has the capacity to shelter approximately 30 households in its two family shelters. The number of families on the shelter waitlist is typically twice as many and they wait, on average, a month before space becomes available. Given this situation, Ramsey County, as the community partner of Resilient Communities Project (RCP), identified a need to understand how policies that support the day to day operation of the family shelter system impact a family's ability to access shelter, experience shelter, and exit shelter. This research project was conducted by a team of four graduate students at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs under the guidance of Dr. Maria Hanratty, and in partnership with community stakeholders.

Methods

This research project sought to

1. Assess the level of shared community understanding regarding the purpose of family shelter in Ramsey County
2. Understand the impact of current county and shelter policies on families access to, stay in, and exit from family shelter, particularly through an equity lens.

Methods included a literature review, assessment of existing county and shelter policies, interviews with key county and community stakeholders of the family shelter system, analysis of shelter waitlist and shelter data, and interviews with shelter residents.

Results

The lack of family shelter space in Ramsey County reflects a disconnect between values and resources

Community advocates as well as county and shelter staff unanimously agreed that families in need of shelter should have a safe place to stay. However, there was not shared agreement on what this should consist of or how to effectively deliver on this principle. A range of interventions were identified, including more shelter space, robust shelter diversion and prevention services, and increased housing opportunities. Stakeholders largely believed that it was a community responsibility, and not solely Ramsey County who was accountable to respond to this need.

Lack of shelter space drives policies which result in unintended consequences

Data indicates that only 27% of families that get on the shelter waitlist actually enter shelter from the waitlist. This is a reflection of demand for shelter space far outweighing supply, and as a result, policies are created to manage this scarce resource. While many of these policies may have unintended consequences, three stand out: (1) the prioritization policy, (2) the call-in policy and (3) the length of stay policy. Stakeholders felt these policies create unnecessary bureaucracy, are not person-centered and effectively screen out people with additional barriers, especially mental illness.

1. **Prioritization policy.** Families referred by police or hospitals are considered Priority 1, and families verified by a third party as living in a vehicle, car, or outside are considered Priority 2. Of those given Priority 1 or 2, 49% eventually enter shelter while only 16% of families who are not prioritized enter shelter. This prioritization encourages systems involvement, places an additional burden on families to "prove" they are homeless in a time of crisis, and may in fact be missing families who are extremely vulnerable but unable to meet criteria for either priority.
2. **Call-in policy.** Families must call in each Monday to remain on the waitlist, missing two Mondays will get one removed from the waitlist. Among families that were removed from the shelter waitlist, 51% were removed for not

complying with the call-in policy to remain on the waitlist. Some stakeholders suggested a need to increase clarity, consistency and flexibility of this policy. There is interest in better understanding what happens to families that are removed from the list for not calling in, as it is currently unclear to what extent families are either self-resolving or still in crisis and in need of shelter, but unable to comply with the policy.

3. **Length of stay policy.** The average length of stay at each of the two shelters is nearly identical (60.0 days at Family Service Center and 61.3 days at Project Home) despite a length of stay limit (120 days) imposed at the Family Service Center and none at Project Home. 86% of families placed at Project Home stayed less than 120 Days. Despite stakeholders agreeing that 120 days was an improvement from the previous limit (30 days), this indicates that the length of stay policy may be arbitrary for most families, and might also be unnecessarily harmful given that most families do not meet this maximum stay, but some families may benefit from more time.

Current policies are not family-centered

- Stakeholders reported families and frontline staff have limited voice in policy development at the county level. Shelter staff can adjust many of their policies to meet family needs, but are limited by some county rules.
- Generally, stakeholders identified a need to incorporate the perspective of families in the shelter system into policy development.
- Escrow policies, which require families to save money while in shelter, are beneficial in theory but not flexible enough in practice. The policy is intended to help families save money for housing upon shelter exit, but it leaves residents with little money to pay bills and other expenses. This appears to cause some families to withdraw from shelter, choosing a return to homelessness over complying with the policy and remaining sheltered. Given there is no data to demonstrate whether or not families use their savings for housing related costs (the stated purpose of the policy), stakeholders felt this policy may cause more harm than help.

Recommendations

Given the vast overrepresentation of households of color in the homeless response system in Ramsey County, use Equity-Centered Redesign Tools like human-centered design methods and racial equity toolkits to ensure policies are family-centered and address racial equity.

Shift policies to be more family-centered

- Give more agency to residents, and identify ways to involve or shift decision-making to frontline staff and residents.
- Recognizing the range in length of shelter stays, explore a progressive engagement model that would allow staff to develop an individualized plan for a family's length of stay and exit to permanent housing.
- Target shelter resources based on family need using a variety of data points and indicators, not just system involvement or a HUD definition.

Increase options for shelter-seekers that considers range of interventions and needs

- Increase and diversify prevention and diversion resources so that more families remain housed, and those in need of shelter that might be able to avoid a shelter stay are provided more appropriate resources.
- Explore shelter alternatives as well as increased shelter space, acknowledging both that families have varying levels of need and existing support systems, and that current shelter provision is inadequate to meet the need.

Create shared ownership to solve these challenges with Ramsey County and the community

- Ramsey County cannot solve these problems alone. The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners should designate a Shelter Task Force that includes people with lived experience, government, non-profits, faith communities and philanthropy charged with trying to identify ways to leverage community resources to increase shelter options as well as provide external support and accountability for improving the shelter experience and outcomes.
- With a family-centered lens, use community resources to further research how to target existing resources and increase positive housing outcomes.