



# United Advocates for Children and Families

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MEMORANDUM TO: MHSOAC

FROM: Sandra Duval  
Chief Officer of Policy and Research

RE: MHSA Issues

United Advocates for Children and Families is a statewide organization comprised of parents, family members, caregivers, parent partners, youth and other advocates for children's mental health. Our mission is to promote the emotional, behavioral and social well-being of children, youth and families through transformational leadership.

In assessing whether a project, event or activity is family centered UACF applies the following seven principles.

1. Family Driven, Hope Centered and Youth Guided
2. Full Domain and Environment of the Child
3. Community Based Support Services
4. Culturally and Linguistically Competent
5. Prevention and Early Intervention
6. Strength Based Intervention
7. Interagency Collaboration

At the June 26 meeting of the MHSOAC, the subject of housing and children came up. Commissioner Gale stated that it would be helpful to have a panel presentation regarding the issue and we agree. UACF is putting together a presentation, and we anxiously await hearing when we will be on the Commission's agenda. In the meantime, below are some of our thoughts regarding mentally ill children and their families and housing problems.

# **Mental Health, Housing and Children**

## **Children are homeless**

A 2005 survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that families with children comprise 33% of the homeless population. The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty found that in 2003 39% of the homeless population were children under age 18.

## **Children create situations that lead to homelessness for their families**

From creating a nuisance to destruction of property, children with a mental health disorder or serious emotional disturbance get their families evicted from their homes by their behavior. Parents face a loss of pay and sometimes a loss of their job tending to the needs of their mentally ill children. This has a direct impact on the family's ability to make rent or mortgage payments.

Once a family has defaulted on a mortgage or been evicted from their rental home, it is difficult and, in some situations, impossible to find housing for the family.

## **Children who are homeless experience greater problems in:**

### ***1. Mental Health-***

According to Mental Health America:

- Nearly one in three children who are homeless have at least one major mental disorder that interferes with daily activities compared to nearly one in five school-age children who are not homeless.
  - Almost half of children who are homeless have anxiety, depression or withdrawal compared to less than one in five other school-age children.
  - And more than one in three children who are homeless manifest delinquent and aggressive behavior compared to less than one in five other school-age children.
- In school

### ***2. School-***

According to the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center on Family Homelessness, compared with other children, homeless children are:

- Four times as likely to have developmental delays.
- Twice as likely to have learning disabilities.
- Twice as likely to repeat a grade, most often due to frequent absences and moves to new schools (28% of homeless children go to three or more schools in a single year).

## **Barriers to providing housing:**

### ***Children aren't homeless; their parents are?***

It seems that the attitude of those providing housing is that parents are the ones who are homeless and the children are just along for the ride. This results in poor or no planning for the supportive housing needs of families when the child is the only one with a mental health diagnosis. Homeless mentally ill children and their families who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness need specific supports to maintain family

stability and maintain their housing. Children are homeless and they and their families have unique needs that must be included in housing plans.

***Children can't sign a lease***

Since children don't sign the lease for their housing, they have been left out of housing plans for the mentally ill. We need to work to solve any problem associated with a homeless child being the mental health client and the parent or guardian needing to be the one to sign the lease agreement for housing.

***What happens when the child is no longer receiving services for mental illness?***

We need to solve the problem associated with a family's housing needs when the child who was receiving mental health services is no longer receiving services. If the child is temporarily placed in residential treatment or becomes involved in the juvenile justice system, does the family lose their housing? What happens to the family's housing if a child ages out of children's mental health but still lives with and is supported by the family?

***Parents don't feel safe talking about being homeless***

One of the barriers to solving the problem of family homelessness due to a child's mental illness is that it is not well documented. Parents that become homeless fear losing their children because they are not able to provide a home for them, and their parenting skills have most likely already been questioned. They fear the stigma associated with being unable to provide for their family, and they already facing the stigma of having a child with a mental illness.