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Moving Along: An Exploratory Study of Homeless Women with Children Using a Transitional Housing Program

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The increase in the number of women and children who are homeless, particularly in the last fifteen years, has generated the innovation of shelters that combine longer term housing arrangements and social services. These organizations are usually called "transitional housing," intended to assist this population toward the economic goal of "self-sufficiency." The impact and success of this strategy is often debated. However, there has been scant research investigating how residents of this setting use skills and resources to secure housing outcomes and community re-integration. Through multiple in-depth interviews and other qualitative data collecting strategies, a conceptual model is presented which offers an initial understanding of this rehousing process.

Traditional solutions to assist the homeless population, such as shelters and soup kitchens, were developed primarily to serve single unemployed, chronically mentally ill, and/or alcoholic men (U.S. HUD, 1989). The increase in the number of women and children who are also homeless, particularly in the last fifteen years, has generated the innovation of shelters that combine longer term housing arrangements and social services. These organizations are usually called "transitional housing," intended to assist this population toward the often-stated Housing and Urban Development (HUD) policy and funding goal of "self-sufficiency." Broadly interpreted, this goal refers to the establishment of economic independence. Transitional housing, also known as "second stage housing," is now seen as the bridging effort between emergency shelters (first stage) and permanent housing (end stage) for homeless women with children.

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This three-stage approach to helping homeless women with children has unofficially become the national housing strategy used to address this growing social problem. While many advocate building more affordable housing, Dolbeare (1992) argues that more housing alone would not be enough to eradicate homelessness. Considering only structural inadequacies in society does not account for the plethora of research that continues to correlate homelessness to institutional, ideological, political, and personal variables (Gulati, 1992). However, supplying temporary housing while providing social services seems to address some of the competing needs of this population.

Missing Information

Research on homeless women with children focuses on characteristics, social support networks, or precipitating events that lead to homeless (Bassuk, 1990; Bassuk, 1991; Burt & Cohen, 1989; Goodman, 1991; Hagen & Ivanoff, 1988; Johnson, 1989; Johnson & Kreuger, 1989; Reamer, 1989; Shinn, Knickman, & Weitzman, 1991; Weitzman, Knickman, & Shinn, 1990). Occasionally, studies will examine the outcome of specific intervention services provided to this group (Helvie & Alexy, 1992; Phillips, DeChillo, Kronenfeld, Middleton-Jeter, 1988; Wenzel, 1992; Ziefert & Straugh-Brown, 1991). More recently, research has been focused on homeless "careers" and the shelter setting (Friedman, 1994; Glick, 1996; Kelly, Clyde-Mitchell, & Smith, 1990; Piliavin, Sosin, Westerflet, & Matsueda, 1993; Weinreb & Rossi, 1995). However, few studies exist which examine living in a multi-family (group) transitional shelter. This exploratory study was conducted to determine how residents of a group transitional housing program use and develop skills and resources in this setting to secure self-sufficient housing re-occurrences and community re-integration.

Methodology

Employing a qualitative methodology to investigate this question, data was collected over a four and one-half month period (14 weeks), for approximately eight to ten hours a day for five or six days out of the week, at one group transitional house (House). The primary data collection strategies used included
Moving Along

multiple in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Data was triangulated through continuous review of agency documents, observations, informal conversations with residents, staff discussions, client records, and meeting notes. All interviews were transcribed. A reflexive journal was maintained by the researcher and reviewed with an outside source in order to ensure objectivity and maintain focus.

The sample consisted of twelve women. Six participants were current occupants of the data collection site (House). Six were former residents of the House. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select informants and determine sample size (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants had at least one of their children staying with them while they were in the House. Former residents were selected if they continued with House services and met the criteria above.

Demographics of the sample were as follows: five women were White, six were African-American and one was of Puerto Rican descent. Eight had been homeless before. Seven were still in contact with their families of origin. The average age of the participants was thirty-four and one-half years old. Among the families, there were sixteen children. Most of these children had other siblings who were not with their mother for various reasons when they entered the shelter. Two fathers remained in contact with their children. Only two women were employed at the time they entered the shelter.

A total of four resident participants were asked to leave the House prior to the completion of this study. These four residents did not want to continue to be interviewed in the community, however, they agreed to let their stories be used to defend the results. Other residents were asked to participate to keep the sample size at twelve.

Participants signed informed consent forms, as did the staff. The researcher developed an interview guide that was pre-tested with residents not used in the study. The staff of the House provided background information on their own job positions, experience with the population, their perspectives of the setting, and how the women moved toward self-sufficiency.

Permission for the study required the approval of the Board of Directors and the Executive Director. The researcher signed
agency forms used for volunteers which outlined issues and responsibilities of confidentiality. These forms allowed access to files, documents, and meetings in the organization. However, the researcher remained as a participant observer and did not fill the role of a volunteer or relief staff. This degree of involvement allowed the researcher great flexibility to develop and maintain relationships with the participants.

As Liebow (1993) eloquently writes, participant observation methodology transforms the researcher into the research instrument. Exposing one’s biases is important to the validity of the constructs. As the researcher, my interest in homelessness stems from multiple moves due to personal reasons, significant professional work with families in transition, and an awareness of the impact of issues of space and structural form due to years of travel and overseas living. The information selected for this article captures a portion of the richness and complexity of the process of living in a transitional housing setting while attempting to move toward self-sufficiency.

The participants developed a close relationship with the researcher, confiding their complaints and concerns about issues in the House and impending departure. It is also fair to say, that I, even though acting as a researcher, developed attachments with the participants and others who walked through the doors of the House. Because I was not an “official” of the House structure, I had great latitude with where I could go in the facility, and what I could do with the women. It was not always in the interest of science that women agreed to participate in this research. My availability to transport women to appointments, to view alternative housing arrangements, and to facilitate visits with their significant others generated many of the beginnings for the research relationships.

The women were supportive, gracious, and at times, incredibility factual about the realities of societal opinions of their situations, which they reported through lens of honesty, strength, and dignity. While the themes emerged into a speculative understanding of the experiences of these women as they moved toward self-sufficiency, they were confirmed by the participants. Information about the House structure was checked with the staff. A formal report was presented to the Executive Director and shared with all employees.
Limitations of the Study

The small sample of this study just begins to explore the experiences of this population in this setting. While this is often a liability identified with this methodology, this is also a characteristic of this setting. The number of residents in group transitional housing settings are restricted in order to offer comprehensive intensive case management services for extended periods of time.

In order to incorporate emergent issues or themes that developed over time as the researcher gained a greater understanding of the issues and setting, the design of this research was left flexible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which was important because of an unexpected event in the community which impacted services at the data collection site. The City Council recommended that the House be expanded due to a recognized need for more family shelter space. Some neighborhood residents resisted the expansion and organized to prevent it. The small staff worked to solicit the surrounding community and local officials for support. For two months, regularly scheduled resident programs were postponed or canceled. This frustrated the residents as they tried to conform to the rules and programs in the House.

The Research Site

The House is located in a predominantly African-American part of a university town located in the Mid-West. It is approximately three hours from three major metropolitan areas and attracts users from those cities and local surrounding towns. The shelter is a nonprofit organization that provides temporary residence for homeless single women and women with children for up to 120 days.

The facility, a large old house, had been remodeled to include five bedrooms which could comfortably sleep sixteen women with children. Frequently, the House exceeded this capacity housing up to twenty-two. All bedrooms had bunk beds. The kitchen was converted to reflect a restaurant-style cooking environment. The ground floor bathroom and bedroom were fitted to accommodate those using wheelchairs or with other special challenges. Bars on the ground floor windows prevented unwanted intrusions.
The five primary staff personnel were females. The Director had oversight responsibility. Every other staff member had responsibility for a service program component. There was an Aftercare Coordinator, a social worker with a Bachelor in Social Work degree, who led weekly support group meetings and provided follow-up services to former residents; an Outreach Coordinator, who screened and assessed calls for services; a Client Advocate, who provided on site counseling and monitoring services; and a 30-hour a week Volunteer Coordinator, who was also responsible for House supervision along with the duties suggested by the title. Furthermore, there were several part-time workers for evenings and nights, who provided House security coverage and additional assistance to the residents.

Data Analysis

The data rules to select salient themes were the following: at least three women had to demonstrate or articulate the activity, the data had to be generated from the action or perception of the participant, and coded data had to represent the transaction between the women and elements of the physical setting as well as the meaning associated with the activity. While the initial focus of the research was designed to explore resident activity toward self-sufficient living, the impact of prior housing places and the meaning attached to specific spaces in these homes created the outline for a matrix for the emergent themes—a procedure recommended by Bogdan and Bilken (1982) and Miles and Huberman (1994).

Themes were repeatedly compared against emerging patterns throughout the study and alternative hypotheses were explored. Beginning codes reflected coping skills used by these women in their home of origin that emerged as patterns of behavior in the research site. Codes were grouped into categories which reflected how the women interpreted their relationship with the service environment and their adaptation to new housing situations as they moved toward self-sufficiency. The major categories that emerged were: place-identity, safety, adaptation, alienation, and home. A conceptual model of the process of moving toward self-sufficiency was developed. The following segments highlight the
interpretation of the stories of these participants which led to the formulation of the model.

**On Becoming Homeless**

As other researchers have found, the reasons for homelessness for these families varied, but were predictable. Miss B, Miss N, and Miss D left their alcoholic husbands. Miss Be, Miss M, Miss R, Miss S, and Miss W were forced out of their living situations due to strained family or partner relations. Miss L and Miss C were homeless due to persistent poverty. Miss A and Miss J suffered from drug dependency issues. Despite all the associated stresses in lives of these families, for all these women, the realization that they were going to be homeless came as a shock. Miss D, a quiet, African-American woman with a two year degree in human services, echoed the sentiments of the women when she said:

> I never would have thought that I would be actually homeless and would need shelter, you know. I do have people that I consider good friends who maybe I could have stayed with but when have you children, it is hard to impose on people.

Miss L spoke of the impact of having her child with her as a reason to seek shelter. In her remarks, she elaborated on what became a recurring theme in the stories of the women. The codes for this theme suggested that the House had a meaning associated with it which generated a feeling that influenced how the women participated in the space.

> When I first moved in, I was scared to death to move in here. I didn’t want to but I didn’t have any choice. We couldn’t go any farther the way we were. We need help. I want help. I want to get out of the situation.

Prior to admission, each woman was screened and approved for services by the Outreach staff worker. This worker also provided a quick orientation to the physical layout of the House, staff, rules, and residents who were around.

**As a Shelter Resident**

For these participants, the initial days in the House were the most stressful. During this time, the women realized that this “home like” setting was a special type of social service.
I was very scared, unsure, didn't know what was going on, scared if I broke a rule or I did something that was wrong, I was going to be on the street (Miss L).

I was pretty quiet. My child was getting used to it so it was like I was trying to make her comfortable at the same time I was trying to make myself comfortable (Miss W).

Each woman had a different entrance experience. For some, it was easy to meet other occupants; others never were accepted into the resident culture.

The story of Miss M portrays a woman who had difficulty gaining support from the community. Miss M, a small, overweight woman with a wandering eye condition as well as an occasional hygiene problem, made other residents and some of the full-time staff feel uneasy around her. Miss M liked to sit at the dinning room table watching others in the main room. She would often be writing while observing her seven year old daughter play in the adjoining room. Rarely did she initiate conversation with others or have dialogue directed toward her. Furthermore, her constant writing at the table generated an uncomfortable message to others in the House. They called her a “spy,” an allusion to her eye condition.

I talked with her. She showed me what she was writing. They were poems capturing the despair of love lost, the hope of love found, and the need for community in difficult situations. This is just an example of one of them.

The Way is Long
Let us go together, The way is difficult,
Let us help each other, The way is joyful,
Let us share it, The way is ours alone,
Let us go in love, The way grows before us,
Let us begin (Miss M).

In addition to the stress of becoming part of a new community, the responsibility of completing chores in the house was difficult for some women to accept.

My first week here was rough because I was working. You know, I had to get up, I have to get my child. You have to do your chores (Miss D).
A working resident had to give the staff her schedule so that appropriate chores could be assigned. For example, if a woman worked in the morning, she would receive an afternoon or evening chore. However, if a woman had appointments with other agencies, these activities had to be arranged around her chore schedule.

**Rules**

As a resident of the House, a woman had to follow rules regulating everything from parenting, chores, living-mates, eating times, entertainment, sleeping and waking times, smoking locations, visitors, mail, medication, money use, supplies, overnights, and limitations on bedroom space. Each rule violation sustained a penalty. Residents quickly learned which rules carried the stiffest punishments and which would garner only a verbal warning. When a resident did not do her chore, this usually incurred a verbal reprimand. However, spending a night out of the House without permission could mean immediate expulsion from the House. A resident who did this usually had a "story" of a car breaking down or of the inability to get to a phone to call. These stories were attempts to minimize the penalty.

Most of the residents agreed that rules were needed; however, they complained when rules interfered with their own activities or plans. A former resident gave this perspective:

I got kicked out because of the rules. I didn't want to listen to nobody. And when I came here and I found out what kind of rules they had, that's when my boyfriend and I were going together and I couldn't deal with coming in at 10:30 and I couldn't deal with putting my money up in the savings. I stayed out, spending the night out, lying and telling them I was stranded in 'another town' or the car couldn't get started and they finally caught up with me. They said if you're out, you've found a place to stay, so I had to come and get my clothes (Miss R).

Conflict was a consistent theme in the stories for the women as well as the staff. It took time for the women to learn how to maneuver in the House. The staff of the House struggled to maintain harmony through a variety of organizational structures such as resident meetings, a verbal warning system, threats of forced leaving, and the delegation of additional chores.
Interestingly, the rules also created a map of how space was used in the House. For example, smoking was allowed only on the porch. This space became the primary gathering place for the residents, including those who did not smoke, because the porch had the fewest rules and staff were rarely there. Residents and any of the users of any House service bargained among each other for cigarettes, favors and shared "street" information on the porch.

Furthermore, all these women had experienced some form of threat in their homes throughout their lives which impacted how they perceived and used their immediate space in the House. In order to make sense out of the coded data, facts about "residential symbolism" (Moore, 1979) was used to interpret these transactions. This literature suggests that personal characteristics such as self-esteem, sense of belonging, and self-identity in part develop from and are connected with conditions of an individual's physical environment, particularly a home. (Cooper, 1974; Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983; Relph, 1976; Wapner, 1981; Wapner & Craig-Bray, 1982).

**Services and Roles**

All residents received social services to encourage self-sufficiency. These services included individualized counseling, parenting classes, house meetings, and a weekly evening support group meeting for current and former residents. Review of the case notes indicates that these goals could be simple, such as making a phone call, or more complex, such as setting up a budget or finding an apartment. Budgeting was a consistent problem for the women.

> I am going to have to be able to keep a budget. If I can sit down with somebody and set it up when I can keep my bills together and like on a calendar (Miss L).

It was expected that the residents would show some movement toward their personalized program goal by their next individualized meeting. Interestingly, in this one area there was no "penalty" attached to non-completion of a goal. Therefore, many clients did not actively attempt to accomplish their goals. In informal conversations, the residents seemed to think that these
counseling meetings were not useful toward moving them to self-sufficient living or independent housing opportunities.

However, the women did feel that participation in the evening support group was effective. This group was successful, they said, not because it provided information toward self-sufficiency, but because it was a bonding experience. One member's comment illustrates this.

We come together in that group and I don’t know - in a way, we don’t just come right out - yes we do! We do say that -thank you - you know, for the shelter and thank you for the help—we do say that. That’s our time to really explore and express and so we do, because whatever's stated there is really kept confidential and we really let it go sometimes (Miss D).

A local community group provided baby-sitting in the House during the evening program, which most likely contributed to its effectiveness as a bonding group.

Over time, it was noticeable how residents consistently exhibited predictable behaviors toward program services. These behavior patterns generated codes that reflected resident interpretation of their role in relation to staff expectations and rule accommodations. Some participants were clearly adept at demonstrating role complementarity which garnered them "privileges" with the staff such as extended shelter stays, chore readjustments, transportation favors, and overnight permits.

However, there were those that experienced the House environment as additional stress to their already tense situation. When frustration was expressed at the House services and program expectations early in a residents’ stay, a mutual distrust and avoidance of informal contact began between the resident and staff. For those residents who did not follow the rules in spite of the consequences, demonstrated behaviors were coded into the theme of role confusion.

Understanding Their Stories

According to Gruneburg and Eagle (1990), as shelter residents increasingly suffer from low-self-esteem, loss of will, little interest in self-improvement, or lacking motivation to re-enter independent living situations, individuals develop coping strategies to
facilitate staying in the shelter. This process is called "shelterization," in which individuals adapt to the helping environment.

Utilizing this concept creates opportunities to examine the process of moving toward self-sufficiency in a new conceptual framework — one that recognizes the impact of a persons' history of transactions with various environmental experiences, which along with physiological conditions, can integrate into a component of personal identity (Rivlin, 1990). This process has been called "place-identity" in the research literature from the environmental psychology field.

Place-identity is a substructure of the self-identity of the person consisting of broadly conceived cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings and conceptions of behavior and experience that relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day to day existence of every human being. At the core of such physical environment-related cognitions is the environmental part of a person, a past consisting of places, spaces, and their properties that have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of a person's biological, psychological, social and cultural needs (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983, p. 59-60).

This concept, combined with ecological principles, (Germain, 1983, Gutheil, 1992) was used to interpret the stories of how the participants of this study utilized their resources, particularly space, not only in the House, but in their prior housing situations, and in their adaptation to new residences for those that moved on from the shelter. In addition to adaptation, the concepts of alienation, safety, connections to home of origin and rehousing occurrences contributed to a fuller interpretation of the participants' stories and to perhaps a better understanding of residents in transitional housing moving toward self-sufficiency. The additional themes used to understand this process which were generated from the stories of these women follows.

Adaptation

Comfort and ease in the housing situation came with making friends and learning to adjust to the housing situation. This required the three skills of place-identity.
Knowing a physical setting, being able to detect changes in it and to grasp what has to be done about changing it involves skill of environmental understanding. The individual not only has learned to read his or her physical settings, but has become skillful in understanding what changes in it mean in relation to his or her own needs and behavior. Such understanding is necessary but not sufficient. The person must also have environmental competence, such that he or she knows what to do and how to behave in relation to the physical setting as dictated by his or her understanding of it. That competence includes using the setting as it is in light of all its properties including its objects and facilities as well as the presence of other people. Thus included are not only skills of talking in a routinely crowded space but how to use a variety of gadgets in it (e.g., telephone, intercom, etc.). But as we already suggested physical settings are subject to change over time, so not only must the person be ready to understand them, but he or she must also have skills of environmental control in changing the setting, the behavior of others or his/her own behavior (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983, p. 72).

The entrance experience of Miss A demonstrates this. She was cooking in the kitchen her first night in the House. She was preparing the evening meal for the House occupants, a chore usually given to residents after they had been in the House for awhile. I asked her how she happened to have this chore already, and she said:

I know that this is a good way to meet the House. Once the cooking gets going and the onions start smelling, people come in here to see what’s cooking, you know. I mean, they got to eat and they want to find out what it’s going to be. Then, the talking just starts happening, you know, comparing how to do it, what to add. So, I get to see those around.

Miss A’s knowledge of House patterns and use of the kitchen space to familiarize herself with the other residents demonstrate her use of place-identity skills. The story of Miss M presented earlier portrays an experience where these skills were not as developed.

While these skills are not articulated as a prerequisite for community living, they were expected to be used by residents to accommodate to the group living situation. The staff used
behavioral indicators, such as cleaning up after one's self, sharing space, and parenting patterns, to evaluate each residents' accommodation to the House, as well residents' compliance to House rules. All of the women who adapted to the House structure demonstrated more developed place-identity skills.

**Alienation**

Residents that could not or would not adapt to the House setting were asked to leave. These endings were not therapeutic, nor made with referrals to assist the homeless families in changing their status. These families left quickly and without fanfare.

Former residents also indicated that they had difficulty settling into their new dwellings. Their stories represent what Marcuse (1975) called "residential alienation." This psychological process is noticed when individuals are unable to symbolically shape, control, or indicate ownership of their residence. These women related stories of displeasure with landlords and problems with the places where they were living. They reported having maintenance request ignored and being told they could not hang pictures or paint the walls. Miss Be, a young mother with five children in a Section 8 single family house, said:

> The landlord is really pissing me off. And like I said I was not happy with the house when I moved into it in the first place. When I first moved in, nothing had been done. The rooms, none of the rooms had been painted like I was told that they would be.

**Safety**

A fear for personal safety in their living situation was a persistent theme for these women, whether they were in the House or in the community. It is not surprising that this strongly influenced how they perceived the House environment. The shelter represented the first place that these women felt protected, even though money and other items were stolen from the office lock box mid-way through this research project.

Former residents, in contrast, reported feeling unsafe in their current environments. Miss S slept in her car for a month parked in a friend's driveway rather than stay in the first place she was able to afford after the House. One woman had been robbed in her home (Miss Be). Another was in an apartment complex known
to be ridden with drugs (Miss C). This woman complained that she frequently heard gun shots. Miss Be and Miss C kept their children inside their homes, afraid to let them out. As a result, the women reported that their children got on their nerves. This feeling of being trapped with their children, challenged effective parenting skills taught at the House and heightened the participants' feelings of isolation and helplessness. For the women living outside of the House, the various safety constraints coupled with residential alienation diminished their sense of community and attachment to the new neighborhood.

Home of Origin

Each woman's experience in her childhood home influenced how she used space and services provided at the House. Eleven participants in the study experienced either physical assault, sexual assault, and/or emotional abuse in their home of origin.

Miss Be, a former resident, explained that she was forced to leave the House because she did not clean her room. She knew what the penalty was for not complying with this rule; however, she just could not meet staff expectations. When I explored with her what her room meant to her, she tearfully related her story of repeated sexual assault by a family member in her bedroom at home. She learned to stop those intrusions by keeping her room a mess. Her space became safe when it was unbearable to others. She continued this pattern in environments where she felt threatened and lacked control, including the House and her current Section 8 home.

Despite financial troubles, family problems, broken homes, and exposure to drugs and violence, the women remembered their home of origin as a good place. Memories of being with grandparents and siblings, climbing on trees, reading, and having cherished possessions evoked smiles and hopes for opportunities in the future. All the women identified a major life event (besides the abuse) in their home of origin that began their present troubles.

Leaving the House

For former residents, the experience of self-sufficiency was disillusioning. All the women reported feeling pressured to move
out of the House since most were unable to find a suitable place to live in 120 days. However, some were able to forestall their exit from the House thorough the use of place-identity skills that helped them follow the rules, adapt to the space, and show benefits from the various service programs offered. Miss L stayed at the House for seven months. Her longevity was seen as an asset to the staff. She facilitated newcomers' entrance into the environment, continued to make small progress on identified goals, demonstrated effective parenting skills with her son who initially demanded a lot of her attention, and remained faithful to the father of her child, who was also homeless, and spent the winter in the local jail for a misdemeanor.

Those who had to leave the House often made quick housing decisions. Only two former residents from the sample (Miss N and Miss D) were stably housed with employment that allowed them to support their families with minimal federal or state assistance. The others, due to a myriad of problems including drugs, health and mental health concerns, continued to receive various government support services and lived in substandard conditions, again one step away from homelessness.

The Re-Housing Process

Figure 1 shows a conceptual scheme to begin our understanding of the experiences of homeless women with children using transitional shelter services. The scheme is based upon analyses of the stories the women offered about their homeless episode and housing histories.

This diagram suggests two important findings. The first finding is that experiences of place-identity and safety acquired in prior housing experiences impact housing re-occurrence or self-sufficiency throughout the transition period. As a woman moves into a transitional environment, place-identity skills help her adapt to the physical space and expected roles. How one leaves the shelter environment is often based on whether the resident can accommodate to the housing structure and secure the services of the program. Self-sufficiency, evidenced by a housing re-occurrence, is promoted when one feel safe in the place defined as home. Otherwise, residential alienation evolves. The second finding is that the transition process from homelessness to
Figure 1

A conceptual representation of themes impacting residents in transitional housing settings as they move towards self-sufficient living.
self-sufficiency is a complex journey which necessitates the importance of using a holistic approach toward understanding the person-in-the environment.

Implications

According to Huttman and Redmond (1992), shelters can pronounce personal difficulties and heighten family insecurities due to the unique structural functioning of the daily operations in the temporary housing situation. Achieving self-sufficiency in a new housing environment may require transitional housing staff to access the place-identity skills of residents in order to accurately determine adaptation to program services. This suggests that additional service interventions may be necessary such as those that build place-identity skills to foster adaptation to roles specified by the housing situation and the physical environment. Those women who experienced role complementarity — the projection of behaviors and attitudes congruent with shelter expectations — stayed in the House longer and had better housing outcomes in the community. Miss L was able to wait until her partner finished his jail time and the whole family moved in with his a friend of his. Miss A was selected to be the first resident in a single family transitional house with the option of staying there for a year with continued services. Miss D received a Section 8 certificate and moved into a single family house when it became available, even though it was after 120 days. Miss W moved into a two room apartment with air-conditioning. She heard about this place on the “porch.” These residents were able to use the program services to acquire information for housing resources and wait for housing vacancies.

Those who did not adjust to the group housing situation and the expectations of the staff left the House sooner and moved to less satisfactory housing. Miss M was asked to leave and could find a friend who would let her spend only a few days with her. She was unclear of her plans after that. Miss B returned to her husband because she did not abide by the curfew rules of the House. Miss R also was asked to leave the House after breaking curfew and money management rules. Her immediate housing arrangements were not known. Miss S had a place but slept in
her car for safety reasons for over a month. Miss J lives in various welfare hotels.

Conclusion

As this nation embraces the concept of self-sufficiency for its safety net programs for the poor, and as families continue to find themselves homeless, transitional housing programs will be used more often. They will focus on services presumably associated with economic independence. However, as this research suggests, social workers and staff in shelters also need to incorporate strategies to build place-identity skills. These skills can promote personal and environmental resources to facilitate the goodness-of-fit between the resident and her next stable environment.

Finally, this research raises questions concerning transitional housing rules and the goal of self-sufficiency. Did the rules in this House promote self-sufficiency in residents? Or did these rules produce patterns of behavior that were adaptive only to the transitional environment, a goodness-of-fit? If a resident does not comply with rules of a shelter and has to leave, does that suggest an inability to be self-sufficient? Or does the goal of self-sufficiency in a highly-controlled, structured environment conflict with skills needed to obtain or maintain economic independence? Further research is needed in this area to answer these questions.

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