Homeless to Housed: Qualitative Analysis of Permanent Supportive Housing Cohorts

James Petrovich, PhD, LMSW

Erin Roark Murphy, LMSW

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- Identify the characteristics of the Palm Tree Apartment permanent supportive housing program, with particular focus on its consistency with Housing First principles

- Comprehend the lived experiences of residents in a newly developed permanent supportive housing program

- Apply knowledge to local contexts to inform the development, operation, and evaluation of site-based permanent supportive housing programs

PALM TREE APARTMENTS IN FORT WORTH, TEXAS

Palm Tree Apartments

- Privately developed supportive housing community
- 24-unit apartment complex
- Originally built in 1955, renovated in 2016
- Local housing authority provides HUD-funded project-based vouchers for each unit
- Combines affordable housing and site-based case management and supportive services:
  - Referrals for medical and mental health evaluation
  - Individualized case management plans
  - Employment assistant
  - Budgeting
  - Crisis intervention

PALM TREE RESIDENTS

- Residents of the community had been homeless an average of 9 years

- More than 80% of residents had lived unsheltered- most in immediate geographic area

- More than 60% of residents are 50+ years old

- More than 75% of residents have at least one chronic health condition

CURRENT STUDY

- Interviews were conducted at program entry and every three months for one calendar year
- Qualitative, semi-structured interviews inquired about participants':
  - Housing-related challenges
  - Available support systems
  - Goals
  - Needs

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

- N = 21 at entry
- Mean age: 50.55 years (SD = 11.3 years)
- 52% male
- 48% white; 29% multiracial; 24% black
- 10% Veterans
- Average length of homelessness: 9.21 years
- 57% had been homeless for more than 5 years during the most recent episode
- 43% report no income
- Of those reporting income, average income is $794 per month

GRATITUDE FOR HOUSING

"It's a safe environment. Real safe. Police come by often. Only certain vehicles are allowed back here and a tow truck comes through, you know. Any vehicle that's not supposed to be back here, they tow it off. Plus the cameras, yeah the cameras. It's a pretty safe environment."

"Sleeping underneath the bridges, you know, the police messing with you, I'm glad that's all over with. Now we've got our own shower, bathroom, TV, you know. So, yeah, it was a hard transition at first....It was kind of rough the first couple of nights because I wasn't used to no noise, the people not being around. You know, but I got used to it. It was a little difficult, but it wasn't too bad."

GRATITUDE FOR HOUSING

"Well, I don't have to worry about the bridge any more, where when I wake up and there's a face looking at me that I don't know. And the police don't bug me much any more."

"I was ready to go home…That means a lot to me. I want to be with what's mine. I want to be in my home…I like to be home, I don't want to be anywhere else."

CHALLENGES

- Long waits to obtain housing
- Communication concerns and case manager turnover

- "Well I wish there had been a little more communication between the case worker and myself. Times they didn't answer the phone, ya know? And we would be left thinking they would be doing this here and we would hear today and we didn't. And when we called them we couldn't get them. What's happening? Did he stop? Are we out of the deal?"

CHALLENGES

- Creation of new community
- Chronic health conditions

- "There are a few people that are coming in and they're not the kind of people that you can socialize with. You can't. Jacob*—I like him. He's a good guy, but he's so deep in his depression that it's rough to get through to him."

- *Name changed to protect confidentiality

- "By and large it's a very homogenous [group] and…everybody gets along, pretty much. There are those who seem that they can't get along with anybody. And they are fringe people, they are fringe dwellers and they don't know how to act in a social situation. They are making faux pas constantly…They fight, they struggle to fit in."

CHALLENGES

- Employment barriers
  - Lack of transportation
  - Lack of access to technology
  - Perceived discrimination

- "It's not that I don't have skills. You see all of my [skills]. It's just, when they go to hire, they're looking for someone young who can work for more years. They see my grey hair and don't even give me a chance."

CHALLENGES

- "One of those places said, 'If you're on the bus, we're not going to hire you. You can sue us if you want.'"

- "My laptop broke, so it's been a big strain on me."

AVAILABLE SUPPORT

- Minimal support from family or friends
- Reliance on formal, institutional supports

- "I have street friends which I socialize with to a certain extent. I'm having a difficult time because if I go to Lancaster because I have friends there, but they are kind of like a leach. It's like, give me, give me, give me. I'm like, 'come on, man. Ain't you doing something?' 'I need a place to sleep. Give me, give me, give me.' Like, come on, wait a minute man…"

Goals

- Employment
- Education
- Self-sufficiency
- Volunteering
- Bettering health
- Addressing substance use

- "My number one goal right now is my health. Getting my health back up to par. I just want to get out and live life."
- "My health, you know, it's--well, it's better. It's not exactly where I want it to be because I just recently found out that this limp I've been having in my leg, it's been going on for a while, it's a pinched nerve. It's a pinched nerve. So that's, well I wanted to get rid of this walker. That's a goal I had, so I'm working toward it."

GOALS

- "I just don't like feeling like a drain on the system, you know? I've been using government assistance for so many years or panhandling, but I've been living off of charity for about the last eight years, well, not the whole time, but most of it. I just don't feel, I feel like I'm sucking from the system, instead of supporting myself. It has an effect on how you feel about yourself."

- "There's a whole lot of things I would like to do. Volunteering is one of them. I do make it a point when I go out around the community here to try to be an ambassador and let them know I'm human and I do understand. So far I've done pretty well. They know me at the fiesta dollar, at the convenient store and we actually say hello."

GOALS

- "I'd rather be on my medication than self-medicating."

- "Giving up drinking is going to be a big challenge, but I put my mind to it. I'm gonna start going to mental health classes, you know, and some AA meetings. So that's going to help out a lot. You know, and I've just got to figure out other ways to entertain myself."

NEEDS

- Transportation
- Food
- Clothing
- Additional support from staff

- "When somebody moves in here with the starter kit, the gift is so much, but I would give up this sofa right here to have a fridge full of groceries, being homeless I learned what hungry meant. I can do anything but hungry. I can't do hungry and I've been hungry for the last week."

NEEDS

- "They (case manager) said a food truck was going to come and give us fresh vegetables and fruit, but that never happened. They've just fizzled out."

- "Every time I go [to the food bank], there's things that are really bad....The cheese tasted really bad. Everything I get tastes weird...I had to throw it away. It was a huge bag of cheese from there and, well, I'm never going back there."

- "Food pantries. All they offer is bread, rolls, and pasta which is the worst thing for a diabetic. So I panhandle when I can for money throughout the month. Today is a panhandle day because I'm out of money."

DISCUSSION

- Participants remain grateful for their housing
- The transition into housing is unique for each individual
- Organized activities can help build community but process moves slow
- Even with housing, extreme poverty remains a serious concern for participants
  - This poverty leaves participants struggling to meet basic needs
- Despite being self-motivated to seek employment and self-sufficiency, participants are still heavily reliant on program staff
  - As time passes, this high level of reliance is stressing capacity/structure of the program, revealing opportunities for program improvement

Discussion

- Once housed, participants seem to become more health conscious, rethinking substance use and attempting to access needed health care

- Program staff have discussed that an implicit goal of the program is to build a sense of community among residents

- However, while participants are supportive of each other, concerns around meeting basic needs, overcoming challenges to employment and health care, and their continued acclimation to housing continue to take priority

DISCUSSION

- Based on findings of this study, program has made several programmatic innovations

- Local faith-based organization has been recruited to organize additional on and off-site social activities

- Program has become a distribution site for the local food bank

- Program is working with local university to develop a "Last Week" box of healthy food provided to residents

- Program is piloting the use of Amazon where community can purchase food and have it sent to resident

Discussion

- Low incomes and lack of employment opportunities remain a significant challenge
- They are no longer homeless but remain extremely poor
- Inhibits community reintegration
- Impacts sense of identify and self-efficacy
- Additional programmatic supports are needed
  - Facilitate labor market participation
  - Identify opportunities for volunteering

Questions or comments?

James Petrovich – j.petrovich@tcu.edu
Erin Roark Murphy - eroarkmurphy@gmail.com