

When 2 + 2 = 5:

How co-enrollment in public assistance programs leads to stable housing for America's young children

When most people think about the best way to prepare America's children to learn and thrive, stable housing may not be the first thing that comes to mind—yet it lays the foundation for children to be healthy and learn. Children's HealthWatch research shows that stable housing (moving no more than once in a year, living with 2 or fewer people per bedroom) can have a tremendous positive effect on the health and educational potential of very young children. Compared to children who move two or more times per year, children who are stably housed are more likely to:¹

- **Have a healthier weight**
- **Be on target developmentally**
- **Be in good health**

Other research shows that housing stability can prevent children from falling behind in school or repeating a grade, and increase the likelihood of graduating high school.² When children experience homelessness or unstable housing, respectively, they are two and four times more likely to be chronically absent from school.³ Compared to high school graduates, students who do not graduate high school are less likely to have success in the workforce:^{4,5}

- **Earning approximately \$375,000 less over the course of their lifetime**
- **Having more than twice the likelihood of being unemployed**

Families who received housing subsidies, SNAP, and WIC were

72% more likely to be housing secure than those who received a housing subsidy alone.

> **New Research: Combined public assistance programs can keep kids stably housed**

Children's HealthWatch investigated how different combinations of public assistance programs (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and housing subsidies) influenced families' housing security.⁶

While the study found families receiving only housing subsidies were **39 percent more likely** to be housing secure than those receiving neither housing nor nutrition subsidies, it was the receipt of SNAP and WIC benefits combined with housing subsidies that had the strongest protective effect. Families receiving all three benefits were **72 percent more likely** to be housing secure than those receiving just a housing subsidy. Receiving support for two essential expenses – housing and food – likely allowed families to dedicate what they would have spent on those bills to other basic needs, like utilities, health care or child care.

While receiving these benefits increases housing security and is important to children's health, loss of housing and nutrition subsidies can be equally de-stabilizing. Compared to families with a housing subsidy, families who lost a housing subsidy within the last two years were 62% less likely to be housing secure. Additionally, compared to families who received SNAP, families who lost SNAP benefits were 27% less likely to be housing secure, regardless of whether or not they received a housing subsidy.

> **The prescription for stable housing**

By virtue of America's disjointed patchwork of social safety net programs, many families who are eligible for one public assistance program are often eligible for others as well. While we know combining enrollment in multiple programs helps protect low-income families from adverse health outcomes, many families who are eligible for multiple programs are currently not enrolled in one or more additional programs.

Requiring low-income families to navigate multiple government agencies and offices to piece together the same eligibility documentation for various benefits, including nutrition and housing benefits, is inefficient and increases the administrative costs of each program while creating barriers to access for vulnerable families.⁶ **Co-enrollment**, or **horizontal integration*** of government assistance programs, helps low-income families access the most comprehensive coverage and benefits for which they are eligible.⁷

Both state and federal governments are beginning to streamline and integrate policies and practices that enroll eligible families in multiple public assistance programs at once.⁸ In 2011, approximately 35 percent of children were eligible for both SNAP and Medicaid/CHIP nationwide.⁹ Currently, 40 states have integrated the eligibility and intake process for SNAP with Medicaid, allowing families to file a single application and attend a single interview for multiple programs.⁶

*The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities defines horizontal integration for health and human services as the "sharing of data, policies, processes, technology, and/or staff across programs to streamline eligibility and enrollment."

> State and federal agencies can support co-enrollment between public assistance programs

Researchers and advocates have suggested a variety of ways that both states and the federal government can achieve horizontal integration. System-based changes currently being implemented in various states include:

- Client portals and eligibility screenings that inform users when they are eligible for certain programs; using central call centers with staff trained in all programs; and improved data management and matching.¹⁰
- Advocates in California suggest state agencies enter into an agreement to share data between their cash assistance, SNAP, and WIC programs. In California, WIC and Medicaid are already linked, so this would be an expansion of the existing agreement.¹¹

Challenges and potential barriers include:

- Demand for housing vouchers far exceeds the number available. For example, there are 6,000 housing vouchers available for families in the Boston area, but 30,000 families are on the wait list.¹²
- States should take precautionary measures regarding privacy and confidentiality when sharing data between agencies. California advocates suggest the need to obtain consent from clients before their data is shared.⁹

> Next Steps

Stable housing is the essential foundation for children's health and development – supporting children's physical, socio-emotional and educational development.¹³ However, we know housing in combination with other supports, like nutrition, has the most effective impact on very young children and their families, ultimately supporting higher educational attainment and greater lifetime achievement. Providing families with streamlined access to the most effective combination of benefits is key to ensuring that the children of today have the best chances at a successful, stable tomorrow.

A Missed Opportunity

State and federal co-enrollment efforts often include large-scale entitlement programs, such as SNAP and Medicaid, but tend to leave out other vitally important programs such as subsidized housing, WIC, and childcare assistance due to difficulty resolving funding, re-certification, data and technology issues. In the case of housing, lack of subsidy availability creates an additional barrier. However, the payoff for solving these challenges is potentially large - for individual families and for communities and government entities.

Children's HealthWatch is a nonpartisan network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and children's health and policy experts. Our network is committed to improving children's health in America. We do that by first collecting data in urban hospitals across the country on infants and toddlers from families facing economic hardship. We then analyze and share our findings with academics, legislators, and the public. These efforts help inform public policies and practices that can give all children equal opportunities for healthy, successful lives.

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