Until recently, modern family homelessness has been primarily addressed with temporary shelter or transitional housing and services to families during their crisis of homelessness. In most communities, these programs were developed and operate separately from one another, not as part of a systemic approach to addressing family homelessness. Likewise, as funders, we have invested critical resources to support shelters and programs serving families experiencing homelessness and families fleeing domestic violence, affordable housing projects, and prevention programs. And like the programs, these investments have been made in isolation from one another.

As more research has become available and more communities have begun to plan for ending family homelessness, we have come to realize that a systems approach is necessary. This approach is about (1) looking at the needs of all families experiencing homelessness, (2) targeting the resources available to address their crises more effectively, and (3) measuring the outcomes of the system in a common and shared way. Funders are key players at the local, state, and national levels to lead the movement toward a systems approach to ending family homelessness.

**Overview of Family Homelessness**

On a single night in January 2013, just over 222,000 people in families were homeless; approximately 71,000 households. Since 2010, family homelessness has declined nine percent at a point in time. Even with rising poverty and increased housing costs in many parts of the country, homelessness among families has been reduced with successful strategies and approaches.

The progress is not enough, however, to reach the national goal of effectively ending family homelessness by 2020. To increase the pace, we will need to do more in every community to bend the curve.

Families that fall into homelessness are typically facing a crisis, or the climax of a series of crises, such as job loss, domestic violence, or family dissolution. They are usually extremely low income, and are frequently headed by a single mother. Parents and children of all ages can experience homelessness, although on average, mothers who are homeless tend to be younger than other low-income mothers, and they tend to have younger children.

Most of the factors associated with families that experience homelessness are common in the low-income population as well, so it is very hard to predict which low-income families will become homeless at any point in time. Nearly 49 million people live in poverty in the United States, and it is estimated that over the course of a year, 5% or more of the lowest-income families may lose their housing. However, despite the tremendous challenges families face, most do not become homeless — nearly 95% will remain housed despite poverty and other challenges.
Because the factors and crises that can lead to an episode of homelessness continue to be widespread and also somewhat unpredictable, an end to family homelessness as we experience it now will mean that some at-risk families still, on occasion, temporarily lose their housing. Our goals for ending family homelessness are that: (1) no family is without shelter and (2) family homelessness is a rare and brief occurrence. Family homelessness should be treated as a true crisis that has an appropriately-developed system to respond to it quickly and effectively. Keeping in mind the goals of the Federal HEARTH Act, we should strive to return all people who experience homelessness to housing within 30 days.

Why a Systems Approach is Needed

Historically, efforts to address family homelessness have not been strongly coordinated. Programs such as shelters and transitional housing were started by organizations and associations motivated to help families in need in their communities. As more programs developed, they did so largely in isolation from one another, each deciding on its own criteria. Programs were also responding to the requirements of various funders, each of whom may have emphasized a certain population or service or measure of success. Many of these programs focused on providing families a temporary place to stay and services intended to help them become more self-sufficient in the long run. Rarely were these same programs equipped to assist families back into housing as quickly as possible.

Today, these programs and agencies each serve some of families needing assistance and provide them with much needed help. But without a systems approach to the issue, we cannot ensure that the needs of all families facing an episode of homelessness are taken into consideration.

First, without a systems response, the burden falls on the families in crisis to find the help they need. In many communities a parent may need to call dozens of programs and shelters before getting help — if they receive help at all.

And the help that is offered isn't necessarily the best match for the household's needs or the best use of resources. Some families will receive longer or deeper levels of support than they need in order to become rehoused and stable, while others may be offered little or no support. Without a systems approach, we cannot effectively target our resources to meet the range of need, or work toward changing the array of services in the community to meet the need. In a coordinated system, gaps can be identified and resources can be reallocated.

A Crisis Response System to Address Family Homelessness

Implementing a systems approach to family homelessness means that we put in place the strategies known to effectively end family homelessness and link them to ensure that families in need can access support to end their homelessness as quickly as possible. The term “crisis response system” indicates both the recognition that being without a place to live constitutes an immediate crisis and that it needs an appropriate response.

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness' Family Connection includes a flow diagram of such a system. Families enter and leave the system at different times, some with very little assistance and others with more. The goal of every part of the system is to assist families to get quickly to permanent housing that they will be able to sustain. The following picture shows an example of how this type of system can look, and how it responds to the needs of different families seeking assistance.

For our response to be systematic and not just based on chance or persistence, families must have a clear means to access help. This is called Coordinated Assessment. One or more entry points are defined within a community, sometimes within shelter and sometimes outside, and a common assessment tool is used in every location so that the families are treated fairly and offered assistance in a consistent way. (More information about coordinated assessment can be found in our series of HEARTH Briefs.)
Some families in need can remain housed with support, or gain new housing without needing to enter shelter. This is called "diversion" as it diverts the family from the entering homeless services. This can be particularly appropriate for families who are not on the streets and not living in dangerous situations such as domestic violence. Families that can be diverted may get help negotiating their housing situation with landlords or family members, connections to other services such as subsidized child care or benefits, and/or financial resources to stay in or obtain housing.

Families that have nowhere safe or appropriate to stay may need immediate shelter or interim housing. The coordinated assessment system identifies a suitable shelter, and if possible, directly reserves them a place. Many families can and do leave shelter relatively quickly, sometimes with no assistance or with only information about where they can find housing and links to other services.

When families cannot secure housing on their own, they should be offered support and financial assistance — things like deposits, a few months’ rent, or a longer subsidy — while other resources are secured. This kind of program is called rapid re-housing. Rapid re-housing is effective for a significant majority of families, and is a more efficient use of resources than longer programs that do not focus on immediate returns to housing. Rapid re-housing can be structured flexibly to offer small amounts of assistance to most families, and provider greater assistance only for those families that after regaining housing still need more support to achieve housing stability.

Nearly all very low-income families would benefit from, and some families may require, ongoing assistance to secure and retain housing. Some places have made good progress with dedicating permanently subsidized housing to families who have experienced homelessness. Since such subsidies are usually scarce and always more costly, it is important that they be well-targeted as part of the broader system, particularly for those families with the greatest income barriers that are unlikely to sustain housing over time without support.

For a small number families that face both ongoing income barriers and other significant challenges such as serious and persistent mental illness, histories of substance abuse, repeated interactions with the child welfare system, and difficulty remaining housed in the past, well-targeted supportive housing may be indicated. Well-targeted means that this type of permanently subsidized housing with connected services is reserved only for those families that have 1) shown through difficulties remaining housed after rapid re-housing that they require deeper support, or 2) been determined to need this kind of support based on significant indicators, such as extraordinary rates of service interactions with other systems of care that need to be addressed concurrently with their housing in order to become stable.

In addition to targeted programs and strategies, a crisis response system also needs overarching goals, measures of success and failure, and commitments to accountability. Goals should be clearly stated and measurable with data available in the system. Important measures from the HEARTH Act include reducing new entries into homelessness, shortening the time it lasts, and ensuring that people who leave for housing don’t return to homelessness.

We must track these goals by measuring outcomes, for the system as a whole and the programs. Because the system is designed to provide support to families based on their needs and barriers, not every program should be expected to achieve the same outcomes. Each one should know its targets and accountability. The resources in the system, public and private, are allocated to achieve the goals, including reallocating from current programs or uses if it is shown over time that these are not achieving the outcomes.

Finally, this system needs links with other systems of support for low-income families. For the crisis response system to focus its efforts on ending the immediate episode of homelessness and getting families back into the community, families need to be linked to the supports they may need – for the adults and for the children.
The Roles of Philanthropy

Funders often see themselves as being “outside” of the system because they aren’t operating programs or serving clients directly. But funders are an essential part of the system. If funders don’t understand the strategies, the system goals, and how to track them, then the system can’t work. Agencies will continue to respond to the varying incentives and requirements of the resources they receive.

Funders Together to End Homelessness has identified four key roles that funders can play in the development and implementation of a systems approach to homelessness:

1. Leader/Convener
As leaders and conveners within a community, a region, or a field of investment, philanthropy can provide significant support for developing a crisis response system approach. Funders can convene community leaders, public and private funders, providers, and others to understand the model, generate the vision, and reach agreements. As parties that are seen as more neutral, funders can help to air what is often unspoken: the importance of looking at the real costs and outcomes of current efforts and programs, for example, or how turf conflicts can prevent collaboration from being successful. Leading philanthropic organizations and regional funders networks have been instrumental in bringing parties to the table that were not previously working together and forging commitments to a systems approach.

2. Knowledge/Capacity Builder
Funders are essential in the move to become more data-driven and outcome-oriented. Even without significant resources, funders can help build the knowledge in the community and develop capacity within organizations and across the system as a whole. Members of Funders Together across the country are supporting capacity-building initiatives such as improving the data functions of the system and training providers in the best methods of rapid re-housing.

3. Strategic Investor
Systems change efforts and collaboration require resources, and philanthropy’s investments can provide the initial seed money needed to support new infrastructure, especially when program models are changing or in need of expansion to new population groups or areas. In addition, philanthropic funders provide many of the resources that serve families now, but may not be aligned with the system vision or evaluated using common outcome measures. By making program investments consistent with the system vision and goals and insisting on accountability, funders help drive change.

4. Advocate
Funders are powerful advocates for new approaches, strategic shifts, and outcome measurement. Although limited in terms of direct lobbying, funders can use their positions as investors and their credibility to support the changes needed, encourage decision makers to support the systems approach, increase investments, create links between programs for homeless families and mainstream programs serving low-income families, and move to outcome-based approaches.

The systems approach to ending family homelessness is under development across the country. We need funders to help lead and support these efforts. Ending family homelessness will take the combined efforts and resources of each funder and program being directed in a concerted and coordinated way. The past has shown that well-meaning programs and funders are not enough to get the job done, but with shared goals and targeted resources applied with a systems approach in mind, significant change is possible.

2 Over the course of a year more families experience homelessness than on one day. The 2012 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR) shows more than half a million people in more than 160,000 families used shelter in Federal Fiscal Year 2012. The numbers are greater over a year because most families who lose housing are homeless for a fairly short period of time. The average stay in shelter is about one month.