

HELP FOR THE HURDLES: PROGRAM EVALUATION

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the City of Philadelphia’s Office of Homeless Services (OHS) launched an employment initiative called *Help for the Hurdles* (H4H). The program connects households staying in emergency shelters to employment opportunities and long-term career planning services. Given the ongoing housing crisis, the ultimate goal of the program is to help unhoused individuals establish steady employment and income so that they can live independently and support themselves and their families. The program does this by providing support to overcome some of the major obstacles that prevent the unhoused and individuals with little to no steady income find and retain employment, specifically: (1) lack of job opportunities; (2) lack of transportation; and (3) lack of childcare. The program addresses these issues by providing participants with: (1) job placement and career counseling; (2) monthly mass transit passes for a three month period; (3) three months of private child care.

The program is open to single adults experiencing homelessness, ages 18 and older; young parents, ages 18 to 24, experiencing homelessness; and families experiencing homelessness. Upon completion of the first 90 days, youth ages 18 to 24 receive a stipend to assist them with housing or other supplies they need.¹

OHS has partnered with First Step Staffing (FSS) to provide job placement and job coaching to H4H participants. In addition, Spring Point Partners, the Office of Children and Families, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Office of Early Childhood Education, PA CareerLink, University of Pennsylvania Fels Institute of Government, and Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority are also program partners.

¹ This stipend was made possible by a philanthropic gift from Spring Point Partners.

While this evaluation was originally to be based on objective data related to the individual's personal history and the consequences of their participation in the program, owing in part to the COVID-19 pandemic and a variety of other factors discussed below, the program to date has been significantly undersubscribed. As a result, the evaluation is qualitative, based on a series of focus groups the authors conducted with: (1) the case managers who are the "recruiters" for the program; (2) program participants with children; (3) newly enrolled program participants; and (4) FSS employees, all with the aim of identifying problems that can be addressed to make the program run smoother as well as successes that can be further developed and elaborated on to increase both the program's effectiveness and overall subscription rate.

II. BACKGROUND

A problem as old as the country itself, homelessness first became a national issue during the 1930s, when the economic devastation of the Great Depression put millions out of work, plunging them into poverty, hunger, and homelessness. With the passing of the New Deal and the creation of a significant social safety net, these problems were substantially addressed and the United States went on to experience decades of unprecedented economic growth and well-being in the post-WWII period.

While the stage for the current homeless crisis was set in the 1960s with legislation releasing psychiatric patients into SROs and community health centers that did not have adequate support services, the consequences of this policy did not come to national attention until the 1980s, when a deteriorating economy and massive housing and social service cuts caused the homeless population to explode and became an endemic societal problem. This was all but guaranteed by federal policy that drastically cut both funds to cities where the problem was growing fastest as well as to low-income housing programs that in the past had helped keep the problem at bay.

Even though in the 1990s a range of support services (shelters, soup kitchens, support services) were created to address the homeless issue, these services did not seem capable of addressing the root problems of homelessness,, as the number of homeless remained steady and even increased in these years.

One increasingly popular approach to the homeless issue that has become official policy in some states is "Housing First." The goal of the Housing First approach is to break the cycle of homelessness and indefinite dependence on support services by moving unhoused individuals into permanent housing as quickly as possible – the idea being that stable housing is the fundamental and primary need. While such an approach has gained prominence in recent years and chalked up some notable successes, most recently in cities like Houston, it obviously requires

the availability of significant low-income housing inventory. While cities like Philadelphia also subscribe to this model and do have rapid re-housing and other housing services available, due to oversubscription and low inventory there are significant waiting lists for these services and a general lack of low-income housing in which to place unhoused individuals.

The disruption and devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly exacerbated this crisis, pushing many out of jobs and homes and straining already overmatched social and health services.

H4H is designed to help unhoused individuals attain their own permanent housing by removing the major obstacles (lack of employment, transportation, and child care) to obtaining steady employment. First Step Staffing works with dozens of employers and is able to place most individuals in a job within twenty-four hours. H4H also not only provides SEPTA passes for individuals so that they can get to and from their job, but also, in many instances, direct van services. Finally, while Child Care Information Services (CCIS), the state agency that assists low-income families with their child care issues, provides free daycare services for children aged 0 – 13, these services are typically only provided once the parent is employed. However, H4H alleviates this requirement. The program uses federal funding to pay local child care centers to provide up to three months of private child care while the participant begins work and acclimates to their new routine before formally applying for child care through CCIS.

III. PRIOR REPORT

This analysis to evaluate *Help for the Hurdles* builds on a foundation developed by a previous Fels Institute of Government consultant, Andres M. Celin. As part of his evaluation in the Spring and Summer of 2021, Celin drafted a research design that would be used for quantitative analysis of program successes and shortcomings, creating surveys that are currently employed at regular intervals for both program participants and case managers. Celin’s research design was undoubtedly beneficial to this current research as a background perspective. Ultimately, the aforementioned under-subscription of participants would have resulted in quantitative findings that were statistically insignificant due to a lack of observations. Therefore, this research pursued a qualitative approach to answer the critical questions.

IV. ANALYSIS

A. First Focus Group – Participants With Children

Given the added difficulties of finding affordable housing and employment when caring for small children, particularly as a single parent, the first focus group was dedicated to discussing the experiences of H4H participants dealing with child care issues.

While CCIS provides free child care for children 0 – 13 years old, there are certain conditions a parent must meet in order for their child to qualify. Most significantly, the parent must be employed. Since this often creates a Catch-22 (as it is very difficult to hold down a job when you don't have child care), H4H provides free child care for up to three months while the participant is looking for, securing, and starting a new job – at which point children can be enrolled in the CCIS child care program.

While the focus group attendees generally had a very positive view of the H4H program, particularly around the job placement services, there seemed to be some confusion around the child care aspect of the program. Specifically, the attendees seemed not to be aware that H4H provided funding for private child care for three months as the participant is connected to employment opportunities through First Step Staffing as they applied or waited for the CCIS child care slot for their child. Consequently, this information gap created significant delays in the participant's starting and progressing through the H4H program, as time was lost in unnecessarily dealing with CCIS and other entities. Finally, it was noted that even with the provision of free child care, there were scheduling difficulties that had forced at least one attendee to leave a position.

B. Recommendations

Based on the issues raised in the first focus group, the authors make the following recommendations:

- Make it more readily apparent in published informational guides and verbal communication with participants that H4H can pay up to 3 months of child care to help them transition into the CCIS child care system
- More training\information for case managers so that they clearly and adequately convey the benefits of H4H, particularly around child care issues (i.e., telling participants that they don't need to wait for CCIS to be fully approved, H4H child care can get them started working in the interim)
- More communication\check-ins with participants about child care options to increase awareness and troubleshoot issues

- Provide list of child care providers (including those providers previously utilized by participants and newly-vetted providers) upon completion of H4H application
- Provide H4H participants with a resource guide\pertinent phone numbers and website addresses so that they can quickly troubleshoot issues they are having in order to avoid delays in their moving forward with the program
- Identify and funnel participants with children to positions with more accommodating schedules or positions that are more willing to accommodate participants with child care issues

C. Second Focus Group - New Enrollees

A second focus group for newly enrolled participants in the H4H program was held about six weeks after the first focus group. The authors originally intended to have the second group focus on participants who had fully completed the H4H program and could thus discuss their experience. Unfortunately, scheduling issues and a dearth of program graduates led the authors to change course and focus on newly enrolled participants.

Overall these individuals seemed to be having a better time of navigating the program, but they also seemed to be in more continuous communication with the First Step Staffing team. This increased attention may have been the result of the feedback received during the first focus group.

While the majority of the focus group had been informed about H4H by their case worker shortly after arriving at the shelter, some said that they weren't told about it at all and found out from friends after being in the shelter for several months. While it was encouraging that the case workers were having the discussion about H4H right away in the majority of cases, the fact that some eligible participants were slipping through the cracks highlighted the need for further and better training of case managers.

The new enrollees were also dealing with child care issues as well (scheduling, location, etc.) but were not having the issues with child care discussed by the first focus group, as they seemed to have understood that the child care offered by H4H did not have the typical CCIS requirements and could be accessed before they were employed. Again, it is unclear whether this was purely random or if OHS\First Step Staffing had made a point of stressing this to new participants after the feedback received in the first focus group.

As for job placement, while the participants in the second focus group were all still looking for work, they had all just enrolled in the program within the last month but were all actively looking and optimistic that they would find something soon. All the participants seemed very engaged and focused on their employment and future goals (careers, housing, etc.).

The participants also all stressed how important the services were that H4H provides. Not only the job placement, but particularly the child care and the transportation. In particular, more than one participant emphasized how critical the transportation aspect was, particularly when jobs they were applying for were at different ends of the city and money was so tight that they would not be able to afford a transit pass to even go on interviews. These discussions highlighted the razor-thin margins on which these individuals often operate, and how even seemingly small obstacles can dramatically affect outcomes and make the difference between success and failure.

Lastly, all of the participants stressed the importance of H4H as a support system and a critical help in getting back on track with their lives. All of the focus group participants seemed to be in very close and routine contact with First Step Staffing, not only about job placement but also child care and other issues that may arise, and all were amazed at how much help H4H was providing. While this was very encouraging, it leads to the question of how feasible this intense focus on individual participants could be if the program was to scale up.

D. Recommendations

Based on the issues raised in the second focus group, the authors make the following recommendations:

- Additional and more uniform communication with case managers to ensure they are actively recruiting eligible participants into the program
- Making sure case managers emphasize the “wrap-around” service that H4H provides
- Continuing to calibrate the most efficient level of communication with participants as the program scales up to balance assistance and availability. Ideally, a structure for larger uniform communications updates can address multiple participant questions at a time while preempting similar concerns from other participants that have yet to air their problems

- Continuing to identify obstacles that participants are facing and coming up with responses\information that can be incorporated into a FAQ sheet or resource guide that would then require less one-on-one attention

E. Third Focus Group - Case Managers

The third focus group the authors conducted was with the case managers who work with the residents of the emergency shelter system. The case managers work for agencies that contract with the city to manage a given shelter and work with the individuals who are residing there. The case managers are critical since they are the ones who (1) identify individuals who meet the criteria for participating in H4H; (2) “pitch” the program to these individuals; and (3) assist in getting the individual signed up for the program. As a result, it is important that the case managers are well-versed in the program and can explain it comprehensively, address any questions the individual may have, and set realistic expectations about what the program can do and how it will work.

During the course of the focus group, it became apparent that the case managers do not have a firm grasp on the scope of the program and all the assistance that it provides. For instance, several of them mentioned that participants did not like the particular jobs and types of jobs being offered by First Step, and therefore were discouraged from continuing with the program. However, First Step not only provides listings for jobs that they believe are a good fit for program participants, but are willing to work with the participant to find the particular job or type of job they are looking for. Additionally, the participant is free to look for jobs on their own, acquire the job, and then take advantage of the other benefits of the program (transportation, child care, and career counseling).

Several case managers also stated that participants were frustrated with other aspects of the jobs on offer as well, including wages and hours. But again, the participants are not confined to the specific jobs provided by First Step. They are free to look for jobs on their own or work with First Step to find work that is more suitable for them.

More fundamentally, the case managers did not seem to grasp that rather than simply providing job listings or a transit pass, H4H offers wrap-around services to assist participants in getting out of the shelter system and getting back to living on their own. In the focus groups with participants, it was abundantly clear that participants heavily relied on the check-ins and support that the First Step staff provides, and that this support is a significant value-added – above and beyond the discrete services the program provides (transportation, child care, job placement).

Some of the disconnect between the case managers and OHS\First Step is no doubt owing to the substantial number of cases each case manager has to deal with at any given time, which means that their discussions about H4H are likely often truncated or hurried. Additionally, the case managers revealed that they only had an initial information session about the program without any follow-up, meaning their knowledge of the program was patchy and fading with time.

F. Recommendations

Based on the issues raised in the third focus group, the authors make the following recommendations:

- Ensure that the case managers fully understand H4H, the nature of the program, and the benefits that it offers. This may involve creating a one-pager for the case manager laying out the program in detail and providing contact information should they have questions
- Keeping in contact and following up with the case managers. Given the volume of cases and the constraints on their time, case managers need to be reminded to continue to steer eligible participants into the program and to have accurate information to address participant concerns. This can be done with weekly or bi-weekly email blasts along with a monthly video call that can both highlight recent participant successes as well as underline program services and dispel any confusion or misunderstandings around the program.
- Encourage accountability by tracking and publishing referrals and participation. If the case managers see that their referrals are being kept track of and are on group emails about program participation, this may encourage them to take a greater interest in the program and to enlist more participants into H4H.
- To improve clarity and understanding about the program, designate a point person at First Step to reach out to case managers to answer case manager questions, provide information, and gently “nudge” the case managers into providing more recruits for the program

G. Discussion with First Step Staffing

The authors also had a discussion with the members of First Step Staffing responsible for running the H4H program to get their thoughts and hear about what their takeaways are from the program so far. The biggest frustration they are dealing with is getting people to complete the

program. While there is a lot of initial interest, most participants get stuck while looking for work and fail to progress through the program and graduate.

While much of this reticence or inability to follow-through may be accounted for by the vicissitudes a given individual who finds themselves in a shelter is facing (abusive relationships, bad family dynamics, addiction, mental health issues, etc.), the First Step team stated that they believed that a lot of people who start the program are simply not prepared to start working, i.e., they are not “work ready.”

The way that First Step typically works, shelter residents hear about the job placements services the company offers through a third-party and that individual then takes the initiative to reach out to First Step, set up an appointment, and then go to First Step to set up their online accounts and begin applying for jobs. In other words, they are motivated individuals that are actively looking for work.

In contrast, the H4H participants are not necessarily looking for work, and may be attracted to the program for the other benefits it provides, such as the transit pass and/or free child care, or may believe that participating in the program may help them with their housing situation in some direct or indirect manner. Thus, when these participants join the program, actually getting and keeping a job may not be a priority.

H. Recommendations

Based on the issues raised during the author’s discussion with First Step Staffing, the authors make the following recommendations:

- Create an additional intake form to establish the participant’s interest and ability to begin employment. The form could include education level, employment history, and questions gauging their willingness to look for and secure work
- Have case managers make clear that finding\retaining employment is a necessary part of the program and make sure that the individuals have realistic expectations about types of jobs, hours, pay, etc.
- Create a work-readiness workshop to help encourage participants to prepare to work

- Make sure new participants in the program are aware of the parameters for receiving the free childcare, i.e., that the children cannot be kept at childcare over forty (40) hours a week, and the children need set and consistent schedules to create stability
- Make sure new participants are aware of the importance of budgeting relating to their job search and childcare. For instance, the child's transportation costs are not paid for by H4H and need to be factored in when considering providers
- Offer work-readiness classes that could offer lessons (e.g., job searches, interview skills, successful routines, etc.), discussions, and troubleshooting for participants who have been out of work for an extended period of time. Have First Step success stories (individuals who got work through First Step) come and talk to these classes to discuss their experiences and help personalize the process
- Have individuals outline their job "game plan" before they begin applying, including: type of work they are looking for; their availability, and short and long-term work goals
- Create weekly or bi-weekly in-person meetings for H4H participants to get together and discuss what they are going through, obstacles they are facing, job leads, and generally offer support and camaraderie to help the participants feel less isolated and part of a community that wants them to succeed and is pulling for them

V. CONCLUSIONS\CLOSING REMARKS

Given the low overhead costs of maintaining the H4H program and the significant upside to both the participants and society for each graduate of the program that is able to maintain steady employment, there is a strong argument for keeping the program in place. However, every program, no matter how inexpensive, involves significant opportunity costs and should thus not continue indefinitely if it is failing to meet its basic metrics. While H4H is being asked to do some heavy lifting in terms of addressing endemic social problems, more regular successes in greater numbers will provide continued justification to the program's operation. Hopefully the recommendations offered here, if implemented, can lead to these results.

While this evaluation focused on qualitative methods, future research will hopefully have access to enough participant administrative and survey data to conduct quantitative analysis. This approach would build more directly off of Andres M. Celin's quantitative foundation. A

quantitative approach would not be a repudiation of the qualitative methods herein described but would be an additional complement to existing H4H research and findings.