

**Housing and Child Welfare.** Most families in child welfare live in poverty, and many experience housing concerns. The lack of safe, stable, affordable housing complicates a family’s involvement in the child welfare system. Housing can be a factor in the decision to remove children from a family’s care; housing problems can also delay reunifications from foster care. Interventions for families with these “dual vulnerabilities” have not typically been coordinated. Compared to families in unstable conditions, children in stable housing evidence better educational, developmental, and health outcomes, and their parents demonstrate less parenting stress, better health, and greater parenting satisfaction. Housing is one component of a systemic approach to shoring up vulnerable families, and it is a valuable tool for promoting family service engagement.

Recognizing the need for better service integration, Connecticut’s Department of Children and Families (DCF) and The Connection, Inc. (TCI) have long partnered to run the Supportive Housing for Families Program (SHF). Since the 1990s, DCF and TCI have worked with researchers from the University of Connecticut to study SHF, which integrates housing supports and case management for families. In 2012, the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) funded **Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing (SH) for Families in the Child Welfare System**. Connecticut is one of five national demonstration sites in this five-year program, and there is a strong evaluation component in the form of a randomized study.

Within Connecticut’s Housing and Child Welfare project, families who meet specific eligibility criteria are randomized into one of three experimental conditions: (1) TCI’s Project SHF (PSHF), (2) TCI’s Intensive Supportive Housing for Families (ISHF; an enhanced version of the model, with additional case management intensity, vocational supports, and access to evidence-based interventions), or (3) a Business as Usual (BAU) control group that receives typical DCF case management without a specific focus on housing. The project was first implemented in the DCF Region 3 of the state (Middletown, Norwich, and Willimantic; mostly rural and small cities, covering the entire eastern half of the state) and expanded to Region 4 (including Hartford; mixed and more urban, covering the central part of the state). Interviews with DCF Managers and Social Workers indicate that the new screening tool (described below) is easy to use, takes little time to complete, and provides a concrete measure of housing need that enables “energies [to be] directed elsewhere to the benefit of permanency outcomes.”

**The QRAFT Screening Tool.** The CT Housing and Child Welfare project staff wished to ensure that every family had housing needs reviewed early in its child welfare involvement, enabling prompt referral of families with housing problems. To aid DCF workers in assessing housing concerns, the *Quick RAFT* -- a short version of the *Risk Assessment for Family Triage (RAFT)* tool – was created. The QRAFT asks workers to rate families on three housing domains: Current Housing, Housing Condition, and Housing History. Items are scored on a 5-point scale, from 0 (an asset/not a barrier) to 4 (severe barrier). Clients with a score of 3 or 4 on any item (i.e., significant or severe barriers) are referred for further evaluation. Assessment of housing issues, even for diverted (Family Assessment Response, FAR) or unsubstantiated cases, helps DCF understand and document family housing needs.

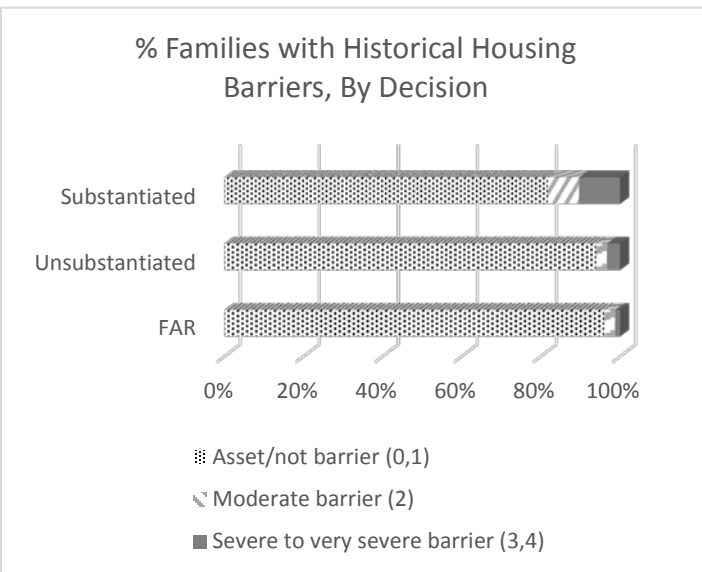
**Applying the housing lens early in child welfare involvement.** Following an initial 3-month pilot, the Investigations Units of CT DCF Regions 3 and 4 completed over 5,000 QRAFTs on families with whom they had contact (from November 2014 through March 2016). The table below summarizes the array of housing assets and barriers (i.e., current barriers, current housing condition, and housing history).

*Table: Current Housing, Housing Condition, and Housing History*

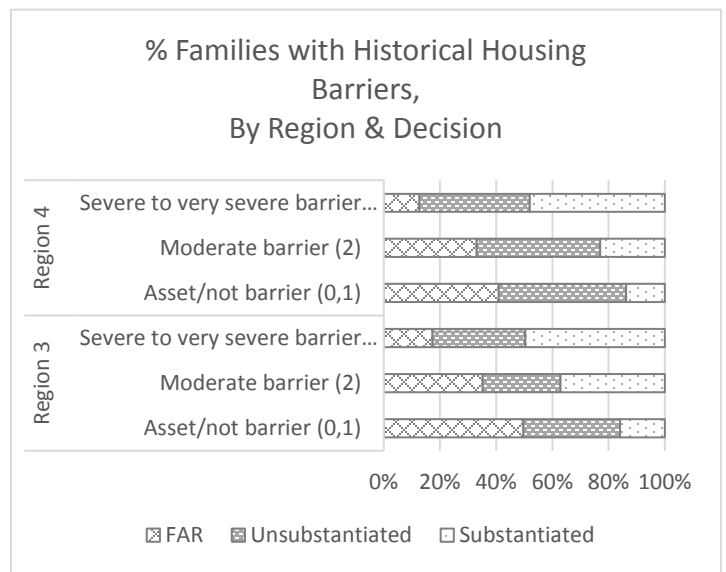
Description	Current Housing		Housing Condition		Housing History	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
0 Asset/Not barrier	4419	76.5%	4972	86.1%	4886	84.6%
1 Mild barrier	761	13.2	504	8.7	473	8.2
2 Moderate barrier	264	4.6	173	3.0	207	3.6
3 Significant barrier	251	4.3	100	1.7	169	2.9
4 Severe barrier	78	1.4	24	.40	38	.70
Total	5773	100.0	5773	100.0	5773	100.0

**Figures 1 and 2** below show the various degrees of housing assets and barriers across these three groups, by region. Among all the families referred to the investigations units (i.e., substantiated, unsubstantiated, and diverted to FAR), the proportion of significant to severe housing problems was less than 5%. Considering only the children whose child welfare cases were substantiated, the proportion of significant to severe housing concerns is approximately 10%; when unsustainable housing conditions ("moderate barrier") are considered as well as significant to severe concerns, the proportion of families identified rises to nearly 20%. The mean scores (higher barriers) for families with current housing challenges, poor housing conditions, historical housing instability and homelessness is higher among substantiated child abuse cases (means of .86, .55, .67) compared with families whose case was unsubstantiated (.39, .15, .16) or diverted to alternative response (FAR; .30, .14, .16). Housing characteristics of families in the FAR and unsubstantiated groups were better and more similar to each other.

**Figure 1.**



**Figure 2.**



**Extrapolating Housing Need.** During this 17 months, the number of child welfare referrals was 5,773 (4,080/year), with a substantiation rate of approximately 16%. In 2013-2014, DCF observed 30,577 accepted child abuse reports and allegations and 4,930 substantiations statewide, for a rate of 16% (i.e., equivalent to what was observed here). At comparable substantiation and housing risk rates, CT might observe 250 families with open cases and significant or severe housing issues and nearly 1,000 families with moderate to severe housing concerns (i.e., substantiated child protective services cases, high service needs, and moderate/unsustainable, significant, or severe housing problems; in other words, near or frank homelessness). This exercise in extrapolation is useful as it might assist in the assessment of child welfare cases and in the allocation of resources with respect to housing and child welfare.

**Implications and Recommendations.** We draw the following conclusions, based on discussions among the project team (DCF, TCI, and the UConn/Chapin Hall evaluators) and evaluator-led focus groups with case managers, case supervisors, and vocational, housing, and assessment specialists:

- 1 - **Housing screening can be effective, quick, and easy.** A brief screening for housing assets and problems early in child welfare involvement is possible and useful.
- 2 - **There is more to learn.** Collecting information about families as they progress will enable us to understand more about the impact of housing condition and stability on child and family well-being.
- 3 - **We recommend** prompt, universal housing screening of families in child welfare so that efforts to "shore up" their overall functioning will occur in safe, stable homes.
- 4 - **Policy and practice needs to address safe, affordable housing as a critical platform for healthy families.** More experience with the QRAFT will help us understand the overlap among housing and child welfare concerns, enable allocation of housing resources, and inform policy to address shortages of safe, affordable housing for families.

**To learn more:** Contact Anne Farrell at [afarrell@chapinhall.org](mailto:afarrell@chapinhall.org) or the UConn CARHD at [www.appliedresearch.uconn.edu](http://www.appliedresearch.uconn.edu). This work (July 2016) is made possible by support from The Connection, Inc., The CT Department of Children and Families, and the Administration for Children and Families, HHS-2012-ACF-ACYF-CA-0538.