



# Children's VOICE

March/April 2010

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Interviews with four  
school social workers

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How managers can help workers

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Excerpt from *Working  
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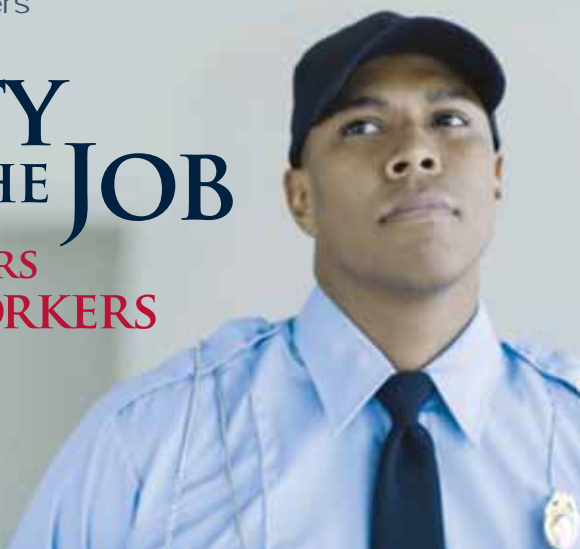
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## Connecting Families with Affordable Housing in Connecticut

By Meghan Williams

Much of the discussion about housing is based on numbers. No more than 30% of income should be spent on housing to consider it affordable.

Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom apartment in

Connecticut is \$1,123 per month. For this rent to be affordable, a household needs to earn \$3,745 monthly, or \$44,938 annually. The Housing Wage—the hourly wage needed to garner this paycheck—is \$21.60. These statistics, from the National Low Income Housing Coalition, are above the national average, but then again, so is Connecticut's minimum wage of \$8 an hour; federal minimum wage is \$6.55. Still, a single Connecticut worker making minimum wage must work 108 hours per week to afford the \$1,123 per month two-bedroom at Fair Market Rent. For a one-bedroom, 89 hours per week are needed; a studio necessitates only 73 hours a week, but that's still the equivalent of working 1.8 full-time jobs.

The Connection, Inc., a CWLA member agency, is working to support vulnerable families across Connecticut by placing them in affordable housing. At its founding in 1972, The Connection was a substance abuse treatment program, and so when the Supportive Housing for Families (SHF) program began, it was to serve families referred by the state Department of Children and Families (DCF) who had experienced substance abuse. But according to Chelsea Humphrey, a Connection case manager, the

agency and DCF realized more of their families could benefit from housing assistance. "It's not just substance abusing families who need help—nearly all of them do," she said during a workshop at CWLA's 2010 national conference. As child welfare research and experience show, housing can indeed affect family stability and influence neglect and abuse. Lack of stable housing can bring a family into the system and keep them there, delaying reunification. But by expanding to help other DCF families at risk of homelessness—not just those with substance abuse problems—The Connection aims to keep even more families together.



PHOTO BY KIM TYLER, WWW.KTPHOTO.NET

Cynthia Cruz and her family moved in to their new home in July 2008, with the help of CWLA member agency The Connection, Inc.

Humphrey is one of 43 case managers The Connection employs statewide in local community offices. Each case manager works with 12–15 families, whom they visit at least once a week. "We wrap them around with services," Humphrey said. Substance abuse treatment is still available, as is mental health treatment, parenting support, help with education and employment searching, and transportation. Goals set by DCF are reviewed with each family every three months. The Connection typically manages a case for one to two years.

The agency contracts with non-profit partners, but it provides centralized training, data collection, and reporting. The Connection's main

office can focus on statewide constants—especially requirements for funding—but doesn't need to have specialized information about housing availability in all areas of Connecticut. "We don't have to be the expert in every single city," Humphrey said. She outlined other benefits of this arrangement: more statewide presence for the agency; more access to local services and area resources for its clients; more opportunity for collaborations and inter-agency relationships; better ability to integrate families into

their own communities and neighborhoods; and an incentive for state government to fund the program, with one easy, centralized point of access and reporting, as well as standardized services across Connecticut.

The local offices maintain relationships with real estate agencies and rental communities. “We have landlords who come to us and say, ‘We want to rent to your families,’” Humphrey said. Many families benefit from housing subsidies when they first enter the program, organized through the state Department of Social Services, and as they progress they are moved from a subsidy to a voucher system. There are specific requirements for the vouchers, which use state funds in the Rental Assistance Program, as well as federal Section 8 money through the Family Unification Program. Generally, families pay a share of the rent based on what would be considered affordable: 30%–40% of the household income. “Part of every client’s care plan is to increase their natural supports,” Humphrey explained.

So far, the plans they have are working. Anne Farrell, a professor at the University of Connecticut, led an evaluation of the SHF program to empirically describe its first 10 years. “I like to say, I’ve knocked around a few nonprofits, and their commitment to quality is really impressive,” Farrell said. She and her colleagues discovered that, as in many



Chelsea Humphrey worked with Norma Rosa and her children to find stable housing.

PHOTO BY KIM TYLER, WWW.KTPHOTO.NET

facets of life, the best predictor of future behavior was past behavior. The clients who began the program with stable housing experiences in their past were more likely to successfully attain stable housing through the program.

SHF is also cost-effective by several measures, especially compared to the cost of foster care. Providing services to a family takes about

\$9200 a year, and in Connecticut serving one child in foster care takes about \$9800 a year. Humphrey was careful to point out that these are only rough estimates, but she also noted that The Connection has impressed the state with its long-term cost savings, earning reinvestment in the funding streams it uses. ■

Meghan Williams is a contributing editor to *Children’s Voice*.

Visit The Connection’s website at [WWW.THECONNECTIONINC.ORG](http://WWW.THECONNECTIONINC.ORG), or contact Chelsea Humphrey at [chumphrey@theconnectioninc.org](mailto:chumphrey@theconnectioninc.org) or Betsy Cronin at [bcronin@theconnection.org](mailto:bcronin@theconnection.org). For information about the outcomes study led by Anne Farrell, visit [WWW.FAMILYSTUDIES.UCONN.EDU](http://WWW.FAMILYSTUDIES.UCONN.EDU), contact [anne.farrell@uconn.edu](mailto:anne.farrell@uconn.edu), or read the recent article in *Children and Youth Services Review*.

## ALASKA

In its 2009 annual report, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, a CWLA member, celebrated several accomplishments, among them the beginning of the Foster Wear program. The initiative helps foster youth obtain quality clothing at a discount by asking retailers to provide discounts to foster families statewide. REI helped design the plan and was the first store to sign on. At the time the report was published, additional participating businesses included: Army Navy Surplus, The Prospector, Nugget Outfitter, Homer’s Jeans, Omni Enterprises, Alaska Commercial Company, and JCPenney. Individual retailers decide on the discount percentage, but the program suggests 25%. ■

## MISSOURI

Residents of Missouri may soon be able to contribute to the recruitment of foster and adoptive parents via their state income tax forms. State Senator Yvonne Wilson introduced a bill creating a fund for donations to public awareness and recruitment efforts. Between the 41 states and the District of Columbia with a state income tax, there are more than 310 check-off donation options. More than 25 of these states include options that help vulnerable children, many in the form of abuse and neglect prevention. West Virginia’s only check-off option is for child abuse and neglect prevention, the only state with this arrangement. ■

## PENNSYLVANIA

After the death of a child under its care, Pennsylvania’s Department of Human Services is considering following a system in place in Florida that tracks children and verifies caseworker visits. An article in this issue of *Children’s Voice* (“Safety on the Job,” page 20) mentions the Florida system, which enables Our Kids caseworkers to take photos of each child they visit. With date, time, and location stamps, the digital images are added to the child’s record in the statewide automatic child welfare information system. DHS will pilot the similar devices with 25 workers who investigate emergencies involving children under age 5. ■