



ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY PROJECT

LESSONS FROM HUMBOLDT GARDENS

THE PROGRAM

Humboldt Gardens is a public housing development produced via the HOPE VI program. It was initially seen as blight replacement in a poor neighborhood but became a key source of affordable housing when the neighborhood in which it was located rapidly gentrified. As a consequence, GOALS, the self-sufficiency program offered by Home Forward, became an important tool for preserving access to the neighborhood for existing residents.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS?

The lessons from the Humboldt Gardens experience can be helpful for

- Public housing authorities seeking to maximize the positive impacts of their self-sufficiency efforts;
- Public housing authorities with projects located in rapidly transforming and gentrifying neighborhoods; and
- Non-profits and others offering services that complement and support self-sufficiency efforts.

THE RESEARCH

The research sought to understand how the program design of the GOALS program interacted with the lived experiences of work-oriented families receiving housing assistance from Home Forward to shape outcomes. A focal point of the research was long-form semi-structured interviews with 10 Home Forward households, who were a mix of GOALS participants and non-participants. Researchers also conducted focus groups with older, nonworking residents and with Humboldt Gardens residents with children to get perspectives on the nature of the neighborhood changes. They also attended community events to better understand how Humboldt Gardens functions as a community.



LESSONS LEARNED & PRACTITIONER TAKEAWAYS

LESSON 1. CHOICE IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The GOALS program provides participants with an enormous menu of choices for services and programs. Case managers work with residents to help them set their own goals, which results in a tailored program that can meet resident needs. Residents very much appreciate the individualized approach, but also reported being overwhelmed initially by the choices on offer, which sometimes results in them overlooking or not fully taking advantage of some offerings.

Recommendation for practice.

Programs should consider expanding program orientations over multiple sessions so as to avoid information overload on the part of participants. This could help participants consider their plan in a more structured and deliberative way.

LESSON 2. POSITIVE CASEWORKER INTERACTIONS AND CULTURE ARE KEY

A recurring theme was that the structure and execution of case management had material effects on participant experiences that has implications for program success. Program participants strongly preferred that the mentor and compliance roles required for conducting the program be assigned to different case managers, because the potential conflicts associated with property management may cause participants to withdraw from deeper engagement. Moreover, coordinating goal-setting and tracking in multiple arenas could be enhancing to self-sufficiency progress if GOALS coordinators could engage with case managers from other agencies and programs.

Recommendation for practice.

Program administrators should establish the set of case managers that participants engage with as part of their support infrastructure and work to coordinate management to minimize redundancy and overlap.

LESSON 3. MARKET FORCES AND A HISTORY OF HOUSING INSECURITY REPRESENT MAJOR CHALLENGES

The broad transformation of the local neighborhood has created a situation where residents are unlikely to envision a future where they are able to remain in the neighborhood, even if they are successful in achieving their goals, because there is little to no affordable housing there. Moreover, success in achieving self-sufficiency can expose participants to more risk rather than less, owing to the greater housing instability that lower-income families face.

Recommendation for practice.

Programs should consider expanding program orientations over multiple sessions so as to avoid information overload on the part of participants. This could help participants consider their plan in a more structured and deliberative way.

RESEARCHERS

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