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Bridge to Inclusion: Honoring Insight from Families with Lived Experience of Homelessness

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### **Bridge to Inclusion**

Historically, impoverished families face ridicule and stigma. There is a tendency to blame those who are disadvantage rather than considering the socio-economic inequalities impacting the affordability of stable housing. Thus resulting in a lack of opportunities for meaningful input from those with lived experience. Rebele Family Shelter (RFS) provides emergency shelter for Santa Cruz County residents. RFS staff provide support and coordination of resources toward permanent stable housing. Families at RFS have limited opportunities to contribute to program strategies or voice opinions on policies. Implementing a family satisfaction survey with RFS clients creates an opportunity for families with lived experience to contribute and feel included in a meaningful way. Utilizing suggestions from survey data is highly recommended to help foster inclusivity, engagement, and enact changes that will positively impact residents' lives. This action can shift the perceived power dynamic that has long-lasting negative effects on those without shelter.

*Key Words: Homelessness, community engagement, Lived experience groups, Stigmatization of poverty, Family shelter*

### **Agency Description**

The housing first model was developed using input from individuals with lived experience of homelessness. The Santa Cruz Homeless Services Center (HSC) is a nonprofit agency serving members of the community on a County level. HSC was one of the first agencies in Santa Cruz county to “realign its programs with the best practices of a Housing First model, proven to be the most effective, cost-efficient, sustainable, and humane intervention to homelessness” (HSC, 2018). The mission of the organization states, “Homeless Services Center partners with individuals and families to create pathways out of their homelessness into permanent housing” (HSC, 2018). There are three main program areas. These programs include, Transitional Shelters, Permanent Housing Programs, and Income and Employment support. Subsequent programs such as a hygiene bay, mail service, Cal-Fresh instruction, supportive services to Veteran families, along with a discount DMV voucher. Programs are intended to provide services other than housing to the community.

Residential services in the family shelter (RFS) are reserved for families and individuals with immediate need of shelter or medical care. HSC offers four diverse shelters on site ranging from family, single, transitional, and medical shelters. The HSC is the largest and longest running shelter service in the area working alongside other agencies including local nonprofit agencies Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and City Council members. Furthermore, “HSC is the lead agency in designing and implementing a county-wide Coordinated Entry system called Smart Path. In addition, for the past two years they have partnered with Homeless Persons Health Project (HPHP), local hospitals and healthcare providers to offer medical respite care for homeless adults at the Recuperative Care Center” (HSC, 2018).

### **Agency problem**

The crisis of homelessness has gotten increasingly worse. Change is desperately needed in the County of Santa Cruz and HSC has stepped up to this challenge in many ways. A problem area identified is a lack of opportunities for cross cultural communication and inclusiveness between participants and staff. According to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness this has become an issue of focus on a national level stating, “The first step is to ensure that there is a shared commitment and framework to include everyone — especially people with lived experience — in planning, implementation, and evaluation (USICH, 2019).

Creating opportunities and space for people with lived experience of homelessness allows for enrichment in building policies that have a shared vision of inclusion from the perspective of those who are directly impacted. These changes can be seen in micro levels within an agency like HSC and even reach greater heights in the macro levels such as policy change. Providing authentic opportunities can drive system change, enrich programs, and be a source of empowerment on personal client levels (USICH, 2019). The power dynamic currently in place has been established in a way that excludes input from the population directly affected. This goes against the value of freedom and autonomy.

A bureaucratic system created by people without lived experience leaves room for improvement. Repercussions of a program dynamic like this will stunt the growth of an agency and has the potential to further disenfranchise vulnerable populations causing more harm than good. The family participants at RFS feel a lack of communication along with a lack of opportunities to foster change. Table 1 outlines contributing factors to the problem and what consequences can follow.

**Table 1**

<b>Contributing factors</b>	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ <b>Lack of Communication</b></li> <li>→ <b>Stigma</b></li> <li>→ <b>Perceived Power Dynamic Outcomes</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>HSC Lacks Opportunities for Inclusion for Families with Lived Experience in Homelessness</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ <b>Needs Unmet</b></li> <li>→ <b>Fear to Speak Up</b></li> <li>→ <b>Low Staff Awareness</b></li> </ul>

### **Project Description and Implementation**

This project is centered on research collected through a consumer satisfaction survey created especially for this purpose. The survey evaluates the family shelter program in five main areas that include safety, staff, facilities, housing search, and overall experience. Data questions are focused on participants currently residing at RFS on the HSC campus. The RFS houses up to 28 families at a time in varying size. The survey is constructed to include a series of questions focused on personal experiences while staying in the shelter, opinions regarding becoming a resident, outside resources used, supports currently being received, and what more could be done to obtain permanent housing, along with detailed questions about case management.

The primary purpose or goal for this project is to create a space for inclusion while gaining insight on the personal experiences of families experiencing homelessness. The collection of this type of data informs critical decision making for the organization moving into

the future and fosters a feeling of inclusion and meaningful contribution to inclusive systematic change. Polling vital information will help streamline the intake process, meet unseen needs of families, as well as address the case management needs on the path towards permanent housing. Collaboration with outside agencies is a necessary part of RFS due to the inability to meet the variety of needs that occur while living within the shelter. By identifying what agencies are benefiting participants, RFS staff will be better equipped to offer resources and referrals.

Meeting people where they are at is an important aspect of providing shelter services. “To sustain this effort, communities should measure and report how effective they have been at including people with lived experience throughout their systems.” (Sawyer, 2016, p. 6). The benefits to implementing a project like this include raw data gained that will inform future procedures in case management. The survey pulls information that would not typically be asked of participants and thus brings a unique quality to the table. Furthermore, the information collected could have a positive impact on the process in which intakes are done as well as the work loads of case managers. Data collection is valuable to nonprofit agencies like HSC. The amount of data collected varies from one organization to the next; when it is gathered properly, and its integrity is kept intact it can be of great use in grant funding, community education, and customer service (Wells, 2018).

Conducting qualitative research gives an opportunity to use an unstructured data collection method, such as observations, surveys, and focus groups to help find information that will inform an understanding of the experience of families and the impressions they hold regarding the intake process, time spent on campus, search for permanent housing, and more. The process starts with a distinct question that is clear and concise to help guide learning and maintain the focus of the study. The question being asked in this situation is, do the families at

RFS have the resources and support they need to obtain permanent housing? Gathering research through a literature review gives perspective on what types of research is already out there and what questions would be beneficial to this research project. The survey is constructed using questions that are formed through informational interviews with staff members that work directly with the RFS families. After surveys are completed by residents they are collected to be analyzed and results from the findings are reported back to lead case managers at the agency.

The sample group for this research includes the Head of Household for participant families, adding up to roughly 20 families. Families will be made fully aware of how the data is utilized with full confidentiality. Participants sign a release of information before the survey is given and have a right to refuse participation. Resources that are needed will be provided through the HSC organization and the participation from families. A challenge to gathering research is participation from the individuals with lived experience. Another challenge is ensuring that feedback is represented accurately and presented in a non-bias and constructive manner. According to a recent study by Nonprofit Hub, “90 percent of nonprofits reported they are collecting data, but a surprising 49 percent stated they didn’t know how data was being collected” (Wells, 2018, para. 5). Throughout implementation one on one meetings were held with the RFS shelter manager to provide guidance, discuss progress, and offer support with scheduling survey meetings with families.

### **Findings and Results**

Although the implication of conducting a survey of 22 families may seem rather small, it can lead to big shifts in protocol as well as a great impact for inclusionary practices. The collection of qualitative data can be used to bridge the gap between staff and client participants’ communication. The sample included 14 surveyed out of 22 families at the shelter. This number surpasses the initial goal of eleven families surveyed. Through thematic analysis the data

collected was broken down giving way for a number of patterns, pinpointing unmet needs and identifying need for the program to grow in the area of collaboration.

Of the five concepts of all answers collected, six recurring topics became apparent. Families indicated concern surrounding the following areas: safety, staff engagement, parking, housing search, and meals provided. An important point to hit on is that the process of conducting survey interviews in itself is a tool of inclusion and can be seen as such. A majority of families, (90%, see appendix) feel the need for opportunities to prepare family meals. Currently there is one microwave and one toaster oven shared between twenty two families available for meal preparation. Another area of concern is a lack of staff to assist in the housing search. It turns out 37% of families surveyed reported not having started their search for permanent housing.

Subsequently, around 60% of families residing in the shelter have been there between three to six months. This length of time does not align with agency guidelines. Although all families reported feeling safe while in the shelter, more than 50% noted feeling unsafe while leaving and returning to the shelter due to suspicious and fear inducing activity occurring surrounding the campus entrance. The need, and subsequent lack of parking feeds into this sense of fearfulness amongst participants. The agency does not have sufficient parking available for residents and staff. Residents are given parking passes to park on nearby streets making it impossible to avoid areas that induce stress or fear for families.

The method used to gather information from families was successful in regards to offering safe and confidential opportunities to for participants to give feedback that they would not typically be forthcoming about. Assuring participants that their input would not be used against them and that no identifying information when reporting back to the administration was

an important aspect of collecting accurate data. The ability to identify areas of improvement for any agency are of great importance. An unfortunate limitation that came about involved the inability to survey two families at the shelter that were only Spanish speakers. In an attempt to maintain confidentiality no staff could be used to translate. A translated version of the survey was created with hopes that a translator could be obtained to meet the requirements of confidentiality set. A Spanish speaking translator was unable to be located and approved in time.

It is recommended that the HSC take the information gained from this study and consider the areas that are of utmost importance. Areas of concern include campus safety, adequate staffing, and permanent housing search. The agency has been looking to expand and grow as the need for homeless services continues to grow within the county. Opportunities for meaningful input from those with lived experience is greatly needed to make informed decisions to protocol. With the growth of HSC, comes a greater responsibility to provide informed services from the individuals most affected by the traumas of experiencing homelessness. HSC is one of the largest providers of services. This means that other smaller programs could be looking to HSC for ideas on how to expand and for best practice models. Creating a space for collaboration and inclusionary practices can set a precedent for fellow advocacy groups in the county, state and on the national level.

### **Personal Reflection**

Although I have gained a significant amount of knowledge through my time studying human and health services, I feel that my time spent at HSC was crucial to my professional growth and understanding of working with vulnerable populations. While interning, I was able to immerse myself in the work needed to service my community, gaining valuable experience through direct service with affected populations. The importance of self-care was stressed by the

management often. The agency even goes as far as to offer yoga, healing massage, and counseling services to all staff as a way to assist and motivate employees and reduce the effects of burnout. Working with such vulnerable populations is an emotionally taxing experience. Some days I felt disillusioned at the acknowledgment of suffering that comes with being unhoused. On the other end of the spectrum the relief and elevation of a family when approved for housing was heartwarming and helped the momentum needed to continue my advocacy work.

A vital takeaway is the great need for trauma informed care for staff. Many hours of service learning were spent setting aside what I had planned to do for the day so that I could assist the agency in a crisis situation. Examples of tasks included covering the front desk, dorm checks, connecting clients to emergency services, family intake assessment, and attending meetings in the place of others. Being able to step in at any moment to help the team of workers at HSC was a rewarding experience. The staff at HSC are well informed and supportive of each other in multifaceted ways. After spending many months getting to know RFS residents and staff I was approved to conduct my one on one interviews to implement the satisfaction survey. The time spent sitting with families, getting to know them on a deeper more personal level, was one of the most humbling experiences of my life. It created an immense sense of gratitude having the opportunity to advocate for these families.

Future Capstone students looking to work in direct services should keep in mind the importance of self-care, collaboration with community based organizations, and the need for training in trauma informed care. Additionally, future students should understand the value associated with inclusionary methods, such as collecting data from lived experience groups.

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## Appendix

### Scope of work

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Deliverables</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Estimated Completion Date</b>
Community and Program Research	Gain background knowledge of Program and work toward cultural awareness	August - December	December 1st
Start Working in Front Office at Family Shelter	Familiarize with families and introductions	September-March	March 1st
Research Qualitative Data Gathering	Meet supervising staff to identify program needs	October-November	November 1st
Conduct Waitlist Intakes for Family Shelter	Learn shelter process, gain understanding of Lived experience group, and Practice professional interview skills	October- April	April 1st
Creation/Approval of Consumer Satisfaction Survey	Consumer satisfaction survey	December	January 1st
Personal Interviews Family Participants	Data collection	January-February	March 1st
Analyze Thematic Data	Result write up to report back to RFS Staff	March- April	April 15th
Report Back to RFS	Provide staff with findings	April	April 15th
Final Meeting with Mentor	Discuss possible implementation	May	May 1st

**RFS Consumer Satisfaction Survey****Overall Shelter Experience:**

1. How did you find out about HSC?
2. What was the experience like for your family during the first intake to shelter meeting? Did you feel fully informed of rules and regulations?
3. What was the move-in process like?
4. How would you describe your interactions with other families/participants at RFS?
5. How has your stay at RFS positively impacted your family?
6. Has RFS met your expectations since move in? If not, in what ways

**Safety:**

7. How safe do you feel while you are on campus? (1-10 scale)
8. How safe do you feel while entering or leaving campus? (1-10 scale)
9. How safe do your children feel when leaving or returning from school/other activities? (1-10 scale)

**Permanent Housing:**

10. How long have you stayed in RFS? (1-3 mo., 3-6 mo., 6-9 mo., 9-12 mo., 12+)
11. How soon after move-in did you begin your housing search? (week scale)
12. How has RFS supported your search for housing?
13. What further support/guidance would you like to see?
14. Are any other agencies in the community supporting your housing search?
15. Are you interested in learning more or working with other agencies?

**Facilities:**

16. If there is an issue with the room, how do you respond? What about issues with other participants?
17. How promptly are maintenance issues addressed?
18. What are your thoughts on campus parking?
19. Tell me about the meals provided on campus. Do you participate in both breakfast and dinner?

**Staffing:**

20. How would you describe staff at the Homeless Services Center?
21. How often do you check in with staff at RFS?
22. What are common concerns/topics during meetings with staff at RFS?
23. Do you get adequate time to meet with staff?
24. Does any staff assist you with your housing search?
25. What is the biggest challenge you face in finding housing and how might RFS support your family more with this?
26. Anything else you would like to add about your experience in the family shelter?

## Ethical Statement

### TITLE OF STUDY

Rebele Family Shelter Consumer Satisfaction Survey

### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

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### PURPOSE OF STUDY

Thank you for your time and willingness to be a part of this research. The purpose of this study is to gain insight on the personal experiences of families during processes like intake, campus safety, staffing, housing search and facilities. The collection of this type of data informs critical decision making for the organization moving into the future. The information that you provide will give much needed insight into your personal experience and may help foster positive change for current and future residents.

### STUDY PROCEDURES

The survey focuses on 5 themes with 25 questions total. The information collected will be kept confidential and faculty from the Family shelter will not have access to this information.

Raw data will be presented to my supervisor after the information is collected from all participants. No names or identifying comments will be made available.

### RISKS

There are no foreseen risks in completing this survey. You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

### BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, I hope that the information obtained from this study will help give insight into unseen needs and areas of improvement.

### CONFIDENTIALITY

Your responses to this survey will be anonymous. I will not write any identifying information on your survey. Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about this study, you may contact me using the contact information provided on the first page.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not negatively impact you or your placement at the family shelter. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

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**CONSENT**

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_