



COMPASS FAMILY SERVICES
Housing. Support. Hope.

POLICY AGENDA



2024

2027

Introduction

Compass Family Services' (Compass) mission is to help homeless and at-risk families achieve housing stability, economic self-sufficiency, and overall well-being. Compass believes that every child deserves to grow up in a stable home.

Housing is central to our mission and service delivery strategies, but lasting stability requires more than a lease and a key: it requires living-wage work that can support the whole family, high-quality early care and education, and physical and behavioral healthcare to help families stabilize following the traumatic experience of homelessness. Covid-19 exacerbated the struggles and challenges facing families experiencing homelessness—particularly among communities of color. How policymakers and social safety net providers respond to the inequities highlighted by the pandemic will have long-term implications for low-income children and families in San Francisco (City) that will reverberate into the future.

There is a critical intersection between racial justice and family homelessness. The experience of homelessness is inherently traumatic; often, the impact of this trauma is compounded by systemic racism that has an outsized effect on Black and Latinx families, as well as undocumented immigrants. These families' different traumas require tailored interventions and care, not a blanket solution.

Compass developed this policy agenda in collaboration with families, community partners, and staff across the organization. Compass' policy priorities are based on feedback gathered through this process. In the next three years, Compass will work to drive the following systems change at the city, state, and federal policy levels:

- Strengthen access to prevention services, including affordable housing and eviction prevention;
- Improve Coordinated Entry and augment system transparency;
- Invest in homeless interventions commensurate with the true size of the problem;
- Invest in supportive programs that address underlying inequities, including workforce development, child care, behavioral health, and GBI;
- Center family voice and choice.

Tracking Population Trends

Significant Racial Disproportionality

89.6% of families served by Compass are led by individuals who identify as Black or African American, Indigenous or American Indian, Asian, Hispanic or Latin/x, or Multi Racial

Single Women Head of Household

89% of families served by Compass are headed by a female identifying person; the overwhelming majority of these individuals are single heads of households

Documentation Status

A 2021 internal Point in Time count reflected nearly 1/3 of families served by Compass are headed by individuals who reside in the United States without legal status

More Families Need Help in San Francisco

Citywide, 902 families were assessed into the City's homeless response system in Fiscal Year 19-20

Citywide, 1228 families were assessed into the City's homeless response system in Fiscal Year 22-23





Methodology

Compass administered a three-question online survey to all families currently enrolled in any Compass program (excluding families who only access drop-in services), via Compass' Salesforce texting system. Given that 35% of families in Compass programs are headed by monolingual Spanish speakers, families had the option to complete the survey either in English or Spanish; 185 families (25%) responded to the survey. [1] Compass conducted compensated one-hour, semi-structured interviews with six respondents; four of the interviews were conducted in English and two of the interviews were conducted in Spanish with the help of an interpreter.

Compass additionally administered a four-question online survey to all staff via Compass' all staff email listserv. 58 staff members responded to the survey (35%). Compass conducted one-hour, semi-structured interviews with nine of the respondents and five community partners.

For families, staff, and community partners, interviews were held either in-person or on Zoom and were conducted over the course of two weeks in October 2023. The interview prompts for families were separated into three topics: housing experience, social services experience, and barriers and challenges to permanently exiting homelessness (based on survey questions). The interview prompts for staff were separated into two topics: family participants' barriers and challenges to exiting homelessness (based on survey questions) and working at Compass, while the interview prompts for community partners focused on the former topic.

Findings & Recommendations

Compass asked families in Compass programs, staff, and community partners what challenges homeless families are currently facing, as well as what San Francisco needs to do to better support families, among other questions. The below reflects what Compass heard and offers solutions to key systemic concerns.

I. We must strengthen access to prevention services so families do not become homeless in the first place; this includes addressing the dearth of affordable housing in the City and nine-county region.

Preventing a family from becoming homeless is less expensive and less traumatic than supporting a newly unhoused family through the stabilization and re-housing process. Homelessness prevention efforts start with galvanizing local, state, and federal funds to create enough family affordable housing. Needed homelessness prevention also includes robust, consistent safety net benefits for low-income families and aggressive work to keep families in their homes via eviction prevention, Emergency Rental Assistance Programs (ERAP), legal representation, and support for survivors of domestic violence.

Affordable Housing

Housing is the solution to homelessness, and California needs more affordable housing.[2] In the Bay Area, this is especially true for Extremely Low-Income (ELI) families (households that earn below 30% of the Area Median Income). Many ELI households in the Bay Area are living on the razor’s edge of homelessness: over 60% are severely rent burdened, meaning they pay more than 50% of their monthly income on rent.[3] These are the families in the homeless response system and in Compass programs: in 2022, 97% of families with children assessed through San Francisco’s Coordinated Entry System reported being ELI.[4] In San Francisco, there are 18,146 low-income renter households that do not have access to an affordable home as of 2023. [5]

Without “outflow”—routes that move families from the shelter and service coordination phase into long term housing solutions (including rental subsidies or Permanent Support Housing)—the homeless response system, and the families moving within it, cannot succeed.

Compass asked: “What should San Francisco focus on in the coming year to help families with housing instability?”

87% of Compass parents chose: “Build more affordable homes.”

We just put families in the shelters and leave them there; there are many little kids living in the shelters. Families are waiting and waiting for an answer for where they could live with their little kids; the dads work, the moms work, but nothing can happen. - Compass Parent

I want stable housing that I know I can afford, that understands my income ... We need a bigger pay rate, but how much can you get in San Francisco? We need opportunities to get more money, but if the minimum wage increases, the rent needs to stay the same ... The wealth difference is so extreme, so out of reach. - Compass Parent

It seems like it’s harder and harder for families—even when both parents are working—to find apartments they can afford. - Compass Case Manager

Overwhelmingly, we just need more: about \$8.1 Billion per year more.[6] The California Homeless Housing Needs Assessment charges that while unprecedented levels of investment into affordable housing and homeless services have been made in recent years, the lack of a comprehensive plan at the state leadership level and decades of underinvestment limit local jurisdictions’ ability to meet surging unmet need. Compass supports Housing California’s “Roadmap Home 2030” effort to implement short-, medium-, and long-term goals to meaningfully address homelessness.[7]

Compass supports regionalized efforts to address the dearth of affordable housing in the nine-county region in coalition with advocacy partners, including Housing CA, Bring California Home, and Corporation for Supportive Housing. Assembly Constitutional Amendment 1 (ACA 1) would lower the voter threshold for the passage of bonds to fund public infrastructure—including affordable housing—from two-thirds to 55%. This adjustment would make it easier to pass the 2024 Regional Housing Bond organized by the Bay Area Housing Finance Authority (BAHFA), directing up to \$20 Billion in affordable housing funding to the nine Bay Area counties and their large cities.[8]





RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Galvanize local, state and federal funding streams to drive affordable housing development for ELI families
- Continue to advocate for sustained funding to address homelessness in California that allows for long-term planning at the regional level; move away from pattern of one-time investments

Safety Net Benefits

Poverty in California among families with young children decreased significantly during the Covid-19 emergency due to expanded state and federal protections—including augmented Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants & Children (WIC), and the expanded Child Tax Credit. California’s child poverty rate was cut by two-thirds in 2021.[9] Federal and state benefits have been reduced to pre-pandemic levels: between 2021-2022, poverty among California’s children aged 0 to 12 rose by 166%.[10] This dramatic increase in experiences of poverty is disproportionately affecting Black and Latinx families.[10] San Francisco is witnessing the daily impact on families in this tumultuous period: 36% more families are seeking emergency support from the City’s homeless response system in 2023 than in 2019.[11] A growing proportion of homeless families in San Francisco are led by parents without documentation; often, they cannot receive federal safety net benefits due to documentation status.[12]

The City should prioritize supporting folks who are newly arrived; [the homeless response system] needs the ability to support them and there's not a lot of resources out there for that, especially for safe and long-term income generation opportunities - Compass Program Director

It seems like it's harder for families even when both parents are working to find apartments they can afford; they need SNAP to depend on, [Social Security] to depend on, and when those things, and the eviction protections, went away even before Covid was really over—we saw families losing housing immediately. - Compass Staff

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Streamline administration of safety net benefits for low-income families, including undocumented families
- Consistently invest in safety net benefits and poverty reduction initiatives as a frontline prevention effort to keep families out of homelessness

Eviction Prevention

In San Francisco, eviction has become one of the primary causes of homelessness.[13] 52% of Compass families cite eviction as being the cause of their homelessness.[14] While the pandemic brought with it a nationwide eviction moratorium, local eviction protections for non-payment of rent expired in San Francisco as of August 29, 2023.[15] The California moratorium did not include debt forgiveness, and thousands of households accrued significant rent debt during the moratorium. In the Bay Area, 137,500 households were behind on rent in January 2021.[16]

Low-income renters, families of color, Native American families, and immigrant families were disproportionately cost burdened even prior to the pandemic, making them more vulnerable to eviction. [17] People with disabilities are also disproportionately cost-burdened and therefore more likely to face eviction.[18]

The impact my health had on our jobs left me and my husband without the funds to get caught up on rent, leading to an eviction ... Because of the eviction, it was almost impossible to find another landlord that would rent to us. - Compass Parent

African Americans are evicted at disproportionate rates, subjected to higher real estate speculation, and are more likely to be displaced. By design, the system is very complicated and difficult to access as a way to keep the numbers down and give a false sense of accomplishment {to policymakers and city administrators} where none should exist. - Compass Community Partner

If I don't fill out my housing recertification paperwork within 10 days, I will get a 90-day eviction notice and would lose my subsidy if I get evicted. - Compass Parent

I have been seeing landlords creating new requirements that make it much harder for families with lower credit, no credit, or previous evictions to be eligible for housing. - Compass Program Director

I want rent control and for the government to have more control over what landlords can charge. - Compass Parent

Aggressive eviction prevention support—including back rent resources, legal representation, and landlord mediation offered by multi-service organizations like Compass and via city-funded programs such as the Eviction Defense Collaborative—are the first line of defense against family homelessness. At present, these resources are not available at a scale commensurate to actual need in San Francisco.

Looking ahead, city departments—including the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing and the Mayor's Office of Housing and Urban Development—must more adequately resource low-threshold eviction prevention programs to keep families in their homes, and uphold tenant protections that defend against predatory and illegal landlord practices. Further, tenant protections and back rent support must also be made available to families living in Public Housing Authority (PHA) and other publicly-funded housing projects to mitigate new entries into homelessness.





The eviction prevention component of Compass is very true and dear to our mission because it takes into consideration all the families who are not literally homeless but are living paycheck to paycheck and do not have enough savings for an emergency ... Move-in and back-rent assistance are pillars that prevent families from falling into homelessness and this sector amplifies the idea that housing is a human right. - Compass Program Director

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Invest in eviction prevention and tenant protection programs at a scale that is commensurate with actual need
- Ensure information about available eviction prevention supports is available to low-income families at imminent risk of homelessness

Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP)

The Federal American Rescue Plan and resulting opportunity for California's statewide Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) brought needed relief in 2021 to low-income renters facing significant pandemic-related rental and utility arrears, as well as looming eviction, in San Francisco and participating counties in the region. ERAP supported 15,649 households in San Francisco; 79.25% of participating households were at or below 30% of local AMI.[19] San Francisco's ERAP program offers a concurrent opportunity for back rent relief for low-income San Francisco residents at the greatest risk of eviction and housing instability.

Both programs faced delays in disbursement that failed to prevent evictions when moratoria ended, and both drew criticisms related to language and technology access issues.[20] Crucially, neither were funded to comprehensively meet the scale of need; however, both offered targeted opportunities to disrupt the flow of extremely rent-burdened (or back rent-burdened) families from entering homelessness. ERAP continues to provide a first line of cost-effective defense to mitigate new entries into the family homeless response system via a low-barrier application process. It is crucial that San Francisco sustain programs like ERAP, jointly distributed via city department and community-based organizations. As one of many ERAP providers in the City, Compass can get needed assistance to families quickly, before eviction proceedings begin.

Legal Representation

Roughly 90 percent of landlords in the country have legal representation in eviction court, but only 10 percent of tenants do.[21] Many tenants facing eviction cannot afford counsel and have limited options in the form of underfunded legal aid.

Tenants with representation are significantly more successful at receiving favorable judgments and avoiding eviction. When tenants have representation, they are more likely to receive favorable judgments, stay in their homes, and keep eviction filings off their records. Keeping these filings off their records can preserve credit scores, which is critical for accessing housing. Beyond just favorable judgments, attorneys can also negotiate for a reasonable amount of time to move out, find alternative housing, reduce debt owed to the landlord, and aid tenants in rental assistance applications.[22]

Without a lawyer, the legal jargon, processes, and resources related to tenant rights can be extremely difficult to navigate, particularly for those with language barriers. This leaves tenants vulnerable to unfair and even illegal evictions that place them at high risk of homelessness.

While the right to counsel for eviction cases has yet to be fully implemented in any jurisdiction, San Francisco's pilot program has shown success. In San Francisco, Proposition F (Prop F) requires that all tenants have a right to counsel in eviction cases, regardless of income. Prop F led to the launch of the Tenant Right to Counsel program in 2019, making San Francisco the second U.S. city to offer renters free legal counsel to fight eviction orders, as well as the first city with universal access to that assistance.[23] However, although the right is in theory universal, the Eviction Defense Collaborative notes that there are times when an attorney is not available due to a shortage of attorneys and high demand.

The latest data from the Eviction Defense Collaborative, which covers the period between March 2021 and December 2021, shows that the Tenant Right to Counsel program has been able to deliver results for tenants who received full scope representation:

- 59% of fully represented tenants were able to remain in their homes;[24]
- Of the 30% who did not remain in their homes, 70% received a favorable settlement, such as a move-out with sufficient time and money.[24]

Because of the eviction, it was almost impossible to find another landlord that would rent to us. - Compass Parent

Landlords and some of their tactics aren't fair [towards low-income families]. They can be predatory and have requirements that make it harder for families to get housed—[families] can't have evictions, or bad or no credit. - Compass Program Director

Representation in eviction proceedings matters. San Francisco must continue to invest in the Tenant Right to Counsel program to ensure that families at risk of homelessness are able to receive full representation and therefore a fair chance at remaining in their homes.





RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Continue to invest in the Tenant Right to Counsel Program
- Ensure that all tenants can access full representation from attorneys

Domestic Violence Support for Survivors

Nationally, more than 80% of women with children who experience homelessness have also experienced domestic violence.[25] The 2022 San Francisco City and County Point in Time (PIT) Count reflects that among homeless individuals in families, 38% have experienced domestic violence, 40% of whom attribute their current homelessness to an argument with family or friends who asked them to leave.[26] Economic recessions serve to increase rates of domestic violence.[27] The need is growing: per the California Department of Justice, total calls in San Francisco for assistance in response to domestic violence rose from 2,863 to 3,357 between 2020 and 2021 (most recent years data available).[28]

So many of the moms we see are fleeing abuse, like a really dangerous living situation they had to stay in. Often, we don't learn they are fleeing domestic violence until we have worked with them for a long time. - Compass Family Resource Center Staff

I was resistant to telling people 'my status.' I lived unsheltered and was four months pregnant on the streets. But when I got to [the domestic violence shelter] and could have my own space—that was huge. - Compass Parent

Family homelessness is fundamentally a gender equity issue; supporting the social-emotional and physical safety of caregivers fleeing interpersonal violence is essential to any family homelessness care continuum that is truly responsive to the drivers of new entries into homelessness. San Francisco's homeless response system for families is under-equipped to address this growing need. Meeting this need requires additional resources to respond quickly to families arriving at Access Points and Family Resource Centers who are fleeing domestic violence, as well as strengthening linkage between the Family Coordinated Entry System and Domestic Violence Emergency Shelter System. Compass hopes that the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing will consider the addition of 4-6 bilingual case managers stationed across the City's access points to drive linkage from Family Coordinated Entry into the Domestic Violence Shelter system.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Strengthen link between Family Coordinated Entry System and San Francisco's domestic violence service system
- Embed trauma-informed, responsive care for families fleeing domestic violence into the homeless response system at every Access Point

II. We must improve Coordinated Entry (CE) and augment system transparency. Too often, families do not know any help is available to them. Or, they are not “homeless enough” to get help.

Coordinated Entry is a mandated assessment and triage system that serves as a “front door” into shelter, housing, and support services for homeless households. Continuums of Care—regional or local planning bodies that coordinate housing and shelter services—must have a working Coordinated Entry system to receive federal homeless assistance dollars from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). San Francisco’s Coordinated Entry system operates across three discrete populations—single adults, youth, and families.

When a family is homeless and needs support, they are directed to one of three “Access Points” for the family-specific Coordinated Entry system in the City. Prior to the implementation of Coordinated Entry in 2014, homelessness resources were made available on a first come, first serve basis. Following the implementation, Coordinated Entry prioritizes families based on need. Families come to an access point, are assessed and given a score based on a universal assessment, and entered into the City’s Online Navigation and Entry System (ONE). Based on a family’s score, a family might be placed in a queue for a Rapid Rehousing voucher or Permanent Supportive Housing—or, given nothing at all.

Critics of Coordinated Entry argue that the new system only serves families that are “homeless enough”; only those ranking above a threshold assessment score can access services. To make things more confusing, this threshold is not a fixed number—it goes up or down based on the housing units or shelter beds available across the City on a given day. Moreover, families are referred to what is available and not necessarily to what is best suited for their needs. Mary Kate Johnson, former Compass Policy Director, puts it this way:

In any human services system, definitions and eligibility criteria play a role in shrinking the problem: they regulate who—and by extension, how many—can access the system’s limited resources. In Coordinated Entry systems, prioritization goes much further: it provides the rationale for using digital tools to shrink the pool of people who are eligible for housing down to the number of people actually prioritized for and placed in housing.[29]

On the issue of being “homeless enough,” families in Compass programs and staff shared:

There’s a lot of people that live in one room or in really bad conditions, but because they live in a room with ten people, they aren’t considered homeless so are at the bottom of the list. To get a subsidy, you have to go into a shelter, but a lot of people don’t want to go into a shelter. - Compass Parent





Because I lived with my children in an RV and was not literally homeless, I was sorted into problem solving at [Central City Access Point] multiple times. - Compass Parent

For families who need services, the challenge is that they have to qualify based on their score ... We're scoring suffering—If families don't suffer enough, they don't qualify for help ... There are no clear paths to lay out a family's options and choose the best route. - Compass Program Director

We need to open [Coordinated Entry] responses and resources to all, including those who are living from paycheck to paycheck, couch surfing, and who do not fall under the category of literally homeless. - Compass Staff

Compass' Central City Access Point is the busiest entry point into Family Coordinated Entry in San Francisco. Compass frontline staff witness the myriad impacts Coordinated Entry has on real families. Families in Compass programs and staff shared feedback for this Agenda that stronger communication and collaboration between city departments and providers, and between providers and families, would be improvements for the homeless response system. Families in Compass programs and staff also emphasized the need for more comprehensive, client-centered, and transparent systems to better support families.

The system seems clear as mud to me as a therapist, and I struggle with who, when, etc. to refer my clients to. - Compass Behavioral Health Staff

We need better communication between agencies so there is a proper exchange of information to clients. - Compass Parent

We need serious prevention efforts that are coupled with a lot of advertising. People need to have access to information in bus shelters and have an easy number to call. - Compass Community Partner

It feels good to have [my case manager] behind me looking for resources and sharing them. My main barrier for accessing housing is access to resources ... Some people are homeless, and they don't know who to call. I had to Google for resources on my own and was referred from one agency to another agency, and it feels like a stroke of luck that I just called the right number one day and found emergency shelter. My husband had to use his retirement savings for us to stay in a hotel for over a year [before we found emergency shelter], and we would've saved on his retirement if we knew of the right resources sooner. - Compass Parent

I wish [the City] would bring help to the families in the shelter, like information about housing. We didn't get information on how to get out of there. - Compass Parent

In order to counter lack of accessibility, we have to start from the beginning. The system is confusing, and we need to look at accessibility of the way things are communicated for those with language barriers. It's hard for me to read contracts, and it's even harder for clients ... We need to put a human perspective to these contracts. - Compass Central City Access Point Staff

We need to figure out better ways to educate folks in a way that isn't overwhelming about specific resources ... The processes for accessing resources can be really confusing for anyone, but especially for the clients I work with who have limited literacy and access to technology ... It's intimidating to do the whole process. - Compass C-Work Staff

There are federal mandates around Coordinated Entry that are not moveable; however, there is significant local control over elements of the system that can make the process more humane, expedited, and transparent. Compass does not support tactics that use criteria, definitions, and other tools to shrink family needs until they fit the available inventory of housing and services. Putting people—not inventory—first requires a sustained commitment to racial equity and data transparency across our homeless response system and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Compass hopes to see the full implementation of the San Francisco Coordinated Entry Redesign Workgroup Recommendations in 2024.[30] Crucially, these recommendations call for:

- Augmented support in training for Access Point staff
- More robust efforts to make Access Point spaces that are trauma-informed, welcoming, and equitable
- A paradigmatic shift in Coordinated Entry Assessment and service matching
- Elimination of the flexible scoring threshold for family assessment scores
- More transparent and streamlined movement of families from Access Points into services

III. We must comprehensively invest in every type of homelessness intervention families need at a scale that is commensurate with the true size of the problem.

Because homeless families are difficult to count, it is challenging to scale policy and service responses to the true size of the population. However, Continuums of Care can invest in mechanisms to gauge the true size of this population, including meaningful use of administrative data sources from school districts and HUD-Compliant Homeless Management Information Systems. Failing to pursue a comprehensive estimate of the number of homeless families in a community or city—and in turn, removing a layer of systemic accountability to those families—is a policy choice.

Parents in San Francisco facing homelessness with their children may be reluctant to admit their housing status to representatives of public agencies for fear of punitive responses, including intervention from the child welfare system.[31] Concerns about immigration status can compound a homeless parent's reticence to seek help. Homeless families are less likely to seek emergency shelter. They are more likely to be living “doubled-up,” in their car, or in a place not meant for human habitation.[32] Thus, they are less likely to be counted in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Point-In-Time (PIT) Count—the primary source of information used by Continuums of Care to pull down federal funding for homeless services.





Varying definitions of homelessness used by the myriad family-facing service systems create confusion and conflicting population estimates. Different public entities capture the size of the homeless family population using different time scales, localities, and eligibility criteria. As a result, San Francisco’s systemic response to family homelessness over-relies on one artificially low, single data source—the HUD-mandated Point-in-Time Count. Compass and our colleagues in the Homeless Emergency Service Providers Association (HESPA) published “Voices of the Unseen: A Real Count for Homeless Families” in December 2024, calling on our partners at the City Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing to meaningfully count, and invest in, all homeless families in San Francisco.

Once there is a universally utilized population estimate of homeless families, San Francisco’s homeless response system and stakeholders can continue the work of building enough homelessness interventions—from prevention to aftercare—to meaningfully support families in achieving permanent exits from housing insecurity.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Invest in a cross-system data-collection mechanism to capture a single, accurate number of families experiencing homelessness in San Francisco
- Utilize this “Real Count” of families to make decisions related to, and plan for the future of, the family homeless response system
- Resource a robust response system for families that is commensurate to the true level of need

Care Continuum—Wide Capacity

Across the continuum of supportive service types for homeless families in San Francisco, there is not enough program capacity to meet the real need—from emergency shelter to permanent supportive housing.

The emergency response system for homeless families in San Francisco includes shelter referrals. The family shelter portfolio includes opportunities for “congregate” or “non congregate” shelter, and it additionally includes a limited number of Urgent Accommodation Vouchers that offer short-term motel or hotel stays for families.[33] There are not enough shelter beds for families in San Francisco; in 2023, the waitlist of families seeking shelter frequently topped 200.[34]

Permanent supportive housing offers families site-based or scattered-site permanent subsidized housing with on-site or mobile support services, typically including job training, child and youth programming, and basic needs support. Families who no longer need intensive case management can utilize the Housing Ladder program, which transfers households into subsidized housing settings to open units for unhoused families who would benefit from site-based stabilization services. Transitional housing offers time-limited, site-based housing for families who would benefit from intensive, short-term support to bolster parents’ overall stability, job readiness, and self-sufficiency toward the goal of best supporting their children. At present, there are not enough units for families across transitional or permanent housing models to meet actual need.

Further, too many families enter shelter and are not linked to any additional housing intervention. Families utilizing the shelter system in San Francisco are often not supported with the resources they need to link to permanent exits from the emergency catchment system. Compass and proponents of Housing First believe a full continuum of re-housing interventions—short term, interim, and long-term—are necessary to meet a family’s specific needs and achieve permanent exits from homelessness.[35]

Emergency shelter beds and programs should not be positioned as antithetical to the Housing First model, but rather, as crucial, low threshold entry points into the rehousing continuum. Compass supports investment into the family system that aligns with, but does not mimic exactly, All Home's "1-2-4" Framework, referring to capacity additions to the family response system in a ratio of 1 new interim housing slot: 2 permanent housing interventions: 4 prevention interventions.[36]

We have an outflow problem—we need to be better about getting those beds moving. As soon as someone enters shelter, we need to be working hard with them to become document-ready. Making sure they're on DAHLIA, every Section 8 waitlist, every document they need for when they are at the top of the queue; so many families have zero idea what is available to them, and languish in shelters because of preventable administrative delay. - Partner Nonprofit Director

I won't stay with my baby in [congregate] shelter; I'd rather stay in my car. I've seen and heard from other friends that they had been raped or experienced really bad treatment by staff in shelter. - Compass Parent

There are many [undocumented] families that are just abandoned in the shelters. We just put families in the shelters and leave them there; families are waiting and waiting for an answer of where they can go with their little kids, but not getting any support to get out of there. - Compass Parent

Finally, Compass supports driving the San Francisco homeless response system for families away from the traditional 18-24 month Rapid Rehousing Subsidy period towards longer opportunities of tapering rent support for families. Compass understands that families contending with homelessness in San Francisco in 2024 are navigating competing needs that require more than 18-24 months of support to address. Our experience is supported by colleague providers in San Francisco and amplified in the report produced by the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing in early 2023, "Rapid Rehousing: A Landscape Analysis." The report concludes, "In conjunction with other changes, programs should be lengthened to 3-years minimum and should offer added time for document-readiness and aftercare." [37]

Further, the "one size fits all" approach of Rapid Rehousing as the intervention offered by the City's response system most frequently to all populations—notably both to families who are documented and undocumented, those fleeing and not fleeing domestic violence, and those with and without significant opportunities for increasing their earning potential over the program period—does not meet the unique needs of different populations and result in lasting exits from homelessness. Compass encourages our partners at the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing to implement the changes articulated in this report as part of the Coordinated Entry Redesign process underway.

Further, Compass hopes that the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing will expeditiously implement the 125 five-year subsidies approved by the Our City Our Home Commission in November 2023, leveraging unprogrammed but prescriptive Family Prevention funds to add medium-term subsidy capacity to the family response system.





RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Create enough emergency and private-room shelter capacity in San Francisco to meet the level of need reflected by a “Real Count” of homeless families
- Prioritize future investments in subsidy programs that last beyond the traditional 12-36 month program period upheld in traditional Rapid Rehousing Models

IV. We must invest in workforce development, social safety net programs, and evidence-based poverty reduction programs, including Guaranteed Basic Income, to ensure families who are extremely low-income can thrive.

Aside from building more affordable homes, families in Compass programs shared that their highest priorities are job training and employment support, investments to help homeless families, and rental assistance programs.

Compass staff emphasized the importance of a comprehensive, holistic service approach that addresses income, housing, childcare, mental health, education, and community support to help families permanently exit homelessness and housing instability. As one staff member shared, “There is not just one thing for permanently exiting homelessness, it is all encompassing.”

Workforce Development

Our workforce systems must provide permanent pathways out of poverty for job-seeking parents, particularly for people with disabilities, single mothers, and undocumented families. Many families in Compass programs and staff expressed that a main barrier for accessing affordable housing among families is the inability to get and keep a job based on documentation status, domestic violence, health issues, or the need for childcare:

I have had jobs in the past but when I got sick, I lost my job and shortly thereafter lost my housing. I have been homeless on and off for more than ten years, and it's hard to maintain steady work because of my health. - Compass Parent

The main barrier [I face] for maintaining housing is the job search ... A lot of people lose motivation for finding and maintaining jobs. The City should prioritize having access to programs where moms can go to work while their child is in childcare. - Compass Parent

The City should prioritize barriers to entering the workforce ... The change that would have the biggest impact is the ability for folks to be able to work and for people who are newly arrived to easily obtain a work permit. - Compass C-Work Staff

Even when families have the right to work documents, they're unable to find work. - Compass Shelter Staff

Publicly funded workforce programs must prioritize homeless job seekers and provide them with career-track opportunities to participate in San Francisco's economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Compass believes in tailoring opportunities to meet parents' particular interests, needs, and challenges. Compass' C-Work program supports parents with job readiness, barrier removal, skill building, job placement, and other resources to help families find stable work and earn a livable wage. Specifically, C-Work's Early Childhood Education (ECE) pathway supports parents on the first step to becoming childcare providers and preschool teachers. Compass parents and those who meet eligibility requirements participate in a sixteen-week compensated course, as well as a compensated internship once they have completed and passed the course, to prepare them for childcare jobs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Create job opportunities tailored to the needs of people with disabilities, single mothers, and undocumented parents, in addition to worker cooperative or business ownership opportunities
- Expand paid training and flexible funds to remove practical barriers (i.e. childcare, food, transportation) to finding and keeping a job

Subsidized Child Care

Without affordable and accessible child care, families cannot exit homelessness; the success of the family homeless response system is inextricably linked to the success of the City's subsidized child care continuum. Consistent, high quality childcare defined by developmentally appropriate routine and consistent teacher and classmate relationships mitigates the potentially damaging developmental impacts on children who experience homelessness.[38]

In San Francisco, the Early Learning Scholarship (ELS) System provides fully subsidized child care vouchers for families experiencing homelessness. Compass' Childcare Support Services Program supports families in locating childcare sites that accept these vouchers and meet a family's scheduling and access needs, including relevant language capacity. While ELS vouchers are a lifeline for families who need to work and cannot afford very high child care costs, there are fundamentally not enough spaces to meet the need.

I want the government to invest in affordable child care, [so] people who need to work won't have to spend half their money on child care so they can work ... You need to be low-income to have [a] subsidy, but not all child care [centers] want to take subsidies at times. - Compass Parent

I have a kid with special needs and a learning disability, which requires a lot more time, resources, and support. - Compass Parent

The main barrier to affordable housing is the inability to find work due to hours of child care offered. - Compass Staff





In San Francisco’s subsidized child care system, there is a dearth of enrollment slots for all young children, but the shortage is most acute for infants. Infant care requires lower staff to child ratios and is, in turn, more expensive than toddler care.[39] The Department of Early Childhood, which oversees child care for low-income families - must expand opportunities for Family Friend and Neighbor Care sites to receive ELS vouchers. Concurrently, DEC must endeavor to leverage “Baby” Proposition C (2019) funds to support existing ELS providers in expanding capacity to serve infants.[40]

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Invest in fully subsidized child care for homeless and at-risk families
- Ensure adequate capacity in the City’s subsidized child care system to support infants

Behavioral Health

Our homeless response and healthcare systems must coordinate to bring trauma-informed, low-barrier behavioral health treatment to parents and children alike. Homelessness is an inherently traumatic experience, often caused by traumatic episodes such as domestic and family violence, social disconnection, extreme instability, and unmet basic needs. Compass Behavioral Health Services (CBHS) offers confidential emotional support and therapy for families who are experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness, newly housed, or engaged in any Compass program—and is the behavioral health provider for homeless families served by other HSH programs. CBHS has served as a crucial program in helping families address challenging personal obstacles while navigating homelessness.

Our daughter blossomed from Compass therapy and was ready to go back to public school because of it ... The extra support with the weekly therapy was very helpful since Medi-Cal only offers therapy once a month. - Compass Parent

I have been receiving ongoing therapy at Compass, and it has been the most useful help I’ve received. - Compass Parent

Behavioral health services can help intervene in generational trauma, as homelessness can have an enormous impact on children in regard to their education, health, sense of safety, and overall development.[38] Compass staff have observed an increasing need for behavioral health services among both parents and children since the start of the pandemic:

The main barrier my clients face is ‘keepupability’ ... A lot of people can’t keep up with the growing pains in life, and it causes trauma if people can’t keep up. - Compass Shelter Staff

The level of special needs of kids and families having other stuff going on seems to be increasing ... The length of homelessness for families has gotten much longer, driving trauma and families’ inability to bounce back. - Compass Community Partner

Just because you can't afford going to [expensive, private] therapy doesn't mean you don't deserve very high quality therapy ... At CBHS, we want to make sure we're working around clients' needs and not closing them out. - Compass Behavioral Health Staff

Despite their critical importance, existing behavioral health services require greater investment. CBHS has up to 40 clients waiting to see a therapist at any given time. Staff continue to have huge capacity and training needs in order to respond to evolving demographics and ensure that everyone is receiving quality services. Most recently, CBHS has seen an increase in undocumented families seeking behavioral health services, requiring additional language capacity support and training for staff on navigating immigration trauma.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Flexible funding streams to meet both parent and child demand for programs like Compass Behavioral Health Services
- Ensure that behavioral health services are low-barrier and offered in accessible locations with childcare provided as needed
- Investment in specialized trainings for staff to meet evolving demographics and needs
- General investment in health care resources that acknowledges the critical intersection between health and family homelessness

Poverty Reduction Programs

Families in Compass programs and staff support continued investment in wrap-around services and basic needs supports, such as protecting food security, for families. Families must be given the autonomy and resources to meet their own particular needs; Compass knows that unrestricted poverty reduction programs work well as a low-barrier intervention for housing insecure families who often already navigate tremendous administrative requirements to access benefits and entitlements.

In California, there has been a push for guaranteed basic income (GBI) as prevention within the family homelessness system. A study in 2022 provided GBI to people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles and San Francisco for one year, in which they received \$750 per month. The study found that those who received GBI for six months were:

- Less likely to be unsheltered as compared to those who accessed usual services.
- Closer to having enough money to meet all of their basic needs as compared to those who accessed usual services.[41]

Moreover, those who received GBI used the additional unrestricted cash to catch up on bills, purchase healthier food, and help with housing expenses and transportation.[41] GBI helps people experiencing homelessness meet their basic needs and expenses, and can significantly lower the system-wide, net cost of service provision.

Compass has also launched its own GBI programs in an effort to demonstrate how creating citywide GBI programs could serve as crucial prevention for families.





In October 2023, Compass launched the Bay Area Thriving Families evaluation, in partnership with Hamilton Families, the New York University Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, and The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab. The program works to supplement rapid rehousing programs by providing modest monthly unconditional cash payments that continue after the end of rental subsidies.

The purpose of the Bay Area Thriving Families evaluation is to create the evidence-based argument that all families exiting rapid rehousing should receive this type of direct cash transfer—as it could provide a soft landing after their subsidy is over and help them achieve long-term housing stability. - Compass Impact & Learning Staff

The program aims to enroll approximately 450 households in the study, with approximately 225 in the treatment group and 225 in the control group over the span of three years. Compass launched a previous GBI program in 2021, but the program was smaller in scope and focused on reducing barriers to housing, such as banking. Unlike other GBI programs, the Bay Area Thriving Families evaluation does not attempt to overlap services with money in order to better understand how additional unconditional cash itself can improve family outcomes. The program is a randomized controlled trial, in which half of participating families are given \$1,000 per month, and the other half are given \$50 per month as part of the control group for a total of one year. At the end of the program, researchers will use administrative data and information collected from surveys to measure how outcomes differ between participants who received \$1,000 monthly versus \$50.

Everyone deserves to be stably housed. As rent has been returning to pre-pandemic levels and benefits continue to shrink, there is an even greater need for ongoing support to help stabilize families once they are housed. A year of monthly unconditional cash transfers may make the difference between leaving a subsidy in an untenable economic situation or staying stably housed for years to come.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Invest in citywide unrestricted poverty reduction programs, including GBI
- Lower eligibility barriers for those who can receive unrestricted cash, including those who lack identification
- Provide families with ongoing support once they are housed, including wrap-around services and support for meeting basic needs, to sustain lasting exits from homelessness

V. Family voice and choice can and must be central to planning processes to improve the homeless emergency response system; parents who have navigated the homeless response system should have access to the policymakers and decision-making processes that will improve this system.

Family survey respondents were asked about their biggest challenges while experiencing homelessness. Parents consistently cited the importance of feeling heard related to their family's unique needs, and how feeling unheard, judged, or misunderstood posed a challenge to accessing or accepting needed services. Parents and staff shared similar sentiments in their interviews.

[The most useful help I've received is] feeling like I'm heard and like the other person on the other end of the line really cares and hears what I've said ... that my situation was really a concern. Instead of [saying] 'no,' [my case manager] would say she'd try to find some resources to help me. - Compass Parent

Most families don't have personal resources and have burned those bridges, so some families just need an ear to be heard. - Compass Central City Access Point Staff

In improving the homeless emergency response system, it is imperative to not only listen to families when providing services, but to also center and prioritize their voices during planning processes. One way to do this is to provide compensated leadership opportunities for families. At the beginning of 2024, Compass launched the Family Advisory Committee (FAC) to give families the compensated opportunity to have their feedback integrated in both Compass and citywide planning processes.

As a part of the FAC, families meet twice a month for six months to engage in advocacy and build relationships with community partners. FAC families additionally have a platform to meet directly with policymakers to voice their perspectives on needed investments into the family social safety net via the city/county and state legislative and budget processes. The voices and lived experiences of families provide crucial insight that cannot always be captured by numbers and data, ensuring that policymakers are aware and informed of the nuances of family homelessness and can adjust future service delivery accordingly.

Compass is committed to implementing anti-racism and equity interventions to help ensure that families of all backgrounds, identities, and experiences are able to access needed services. The FAC brings together a diverse group of families that represent the intersectional experiences of mothers of color in San Francisco navigating the homeless response system. The FAC serves as a crucial body to elevate family voices, demonstrating the importance of ensuring that all families feel heard and cared for as a necessary foundation for improving the homeless response system. As such, Compass is pursuing ongoing funding for the FAC to ensure that it is centrally embedded into Compass' core continuum of services.

I joined [the FAC] because I experienced homelessness a lot as a child and as an adult, I always worked really hard and never thought it would happen until it did. I'm passionate about family homelessness prevention. - FAC Member

I joined [the FAC] because I am a single mother of five children and I'm homeless ... I feel like I need to be the voice for single mothers and people in general that don't have a home ... More needs to be done and more should be done, and if I don't speak up, then who will? - FAC Member

Too often, parents turning to social services are treated as though they don't know what is best for their families. At Compass, we know that parents are the experts; overwhelmingly, they know what they need, which programs have and have not worked, and how our care systems need to be improved. The Family Advisory Committee is one way we center the expertise of the families formerly or currently involved in our programs to improve Compass' continuum of services, and how we advocate upstream to drive systems change at the city and state level. - Compass CEO





RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Center family voice in efforts to update and improve nonprofit service delivery and local, state, and federal homeless response systems
- Create opportunities and bodies to prioritize family voice as not just a one-time occurrence but as a consistent and continuous investment

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