



Bringing Families Home Program Evaluation

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Executive Summary

Bringing Families Home (BFH) is an innovative program that aims to reduce the number of families in the child welfare system who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness by providing various forms of housing assistance under a Housing First model. It is funded by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and administered on a local level. The program was designed with the goal that improved housing security for program participants would reduce the need to place children into foster care (out-of-home placement), as well as increase family reunification (return to parents) for children that were already in an out-of-home placement. We compare housing and child welfare outcomes for families participating in BFH in its first two years relative to similar families involved with the child welfare system who did not receive BFH services.

Results indicate that BFH served a vulnerable population who were not otherwise connected to the broader homeless response system. The program helped to connect families with housing assistance services (e.g., case management) and rapid re-housing programs, while reducing their use of shelter services. Most families that exited the program exited to a permanent housing arrangement.

The program yielded mixed results with regard to child welfare outcomes six months after starting BFH services. Among families with children in foster care when they began receiving BFH services, BFH increased family reunification. However, families whose children were initially receiving in-home services (when they began receiving BFH services) had higher rates of the children later being placed out of the home.

This policy brief summarizes an accompanying report, "[Bringing Families Home Program Evaluation](#)."

Key Findings

- Enrollment in BFH reduced the use of emergency shelter and transitional housing by half and doubled the use of rapid re-housing services in the 6 months following program entry.
- BFH children who were in foster care and receiving Family Reunification services were 68% more likely to reunify with their families at the 180-day mark than non-BFH families.
- More BFH families that were initially receiving in-home family maintenance services were either still receiving family maintenance or were in foster care receiving family reunification services at the 180-day mark than non-BFH families.
- Slightly more than half of BFH families (52%) that exited the program by the end of the program's second year left to a permanent housing arrangement and only 3% reported exiting to homelessness.

Background on the child welfare system

The California child welfare system serves more than 70,000 children and their families at any given point in time. Families that are involved in the child welfare system have a child with an open child welfare case, meaning that there has been a report of child abuse or neglect in the home (“child maltreatment”) that has been substantiated through a caseworker’s investigation and the family is currently receiving child welfare services. These services are typically involuntary (e.g. “court-ordered”) and families are required by law to comply. There are several types of child welfare cases; BFH primarily served families with either a Family Reunification or Family Maintenance case.¹

Family Reunification (FR) corresponds to court-ordered, out-of-home placement services and activities provided to children in a foster care placement with the goal of reunifying the child with their family. While the child is not in the home, families receive services aimed at reducing the risk of future maltreatment, such as referrals to court-ordered services and visitations between children and their parent(s)/guardian(s). FR cases are those in which the child cannot safely remain at home and tend to follow more severe instances of child maltreatment than Family Maintenance cases.

Family Maintenance (FM) corresponds to voluntary or involuntary services and activities designed to provide in-home protective services. In FM cases, children remain with their families – the goal is to prevent separation while improving children’s current and future safety. FM services may include parental education, child care, substance use or mental health counseling, or crisis care services.

Background on Bringing Families Home

A family’s housing situation is an important consideration in FR and FM cases. Stable housing helps ensure that a child’s well-being and safety considerations are met, thereby helping children remain, or reunify, with their families. Yet families in the child welfare system often face housing instability or barriers to secure housing. Addressing these housing challenges has the potential to improve both housing and child welfare outcomes.

With these objectives in mind, the BFH Program was established in 2016 under Assembly Bill 1603. The program began as a pilot in 12 counties and has since expanded across the state. As of 2023, 53 of California’s 58 counties and one tribe provide BFH services, and 24 new tribal programs began offering BFH between 2023 and 2024.

Families eligible to receive BFH services at the time of this evaluation were those that:

- 1) were receiving child welfare services;
- 2) were experiencing homelessness or were at risk of homelessness;
- 3) had voluntarily agreed to participate in the program; and
- 4) were either in FR, or in FM and safe and stable housing would prevent the need for FR services.

Among this population, localities were strongly recommended by CDSS to prioritize, first, families in receipt of FR services and that met the official HUD definition of being literally homeless.² The next priority tier was literally homeless families receiving FM services and families receiving FR services who were at risk of experiencing homelessness. The final priority was families at risk of experiencing homelessness who were receiving FM services.

BFH is locally administered by counties and tribes (grantees), with each grantee determining the specific mix of services it offers participants based on the local infrastructure, available resources, and the needs of the population. These services can include rental assistance, housing navigation, case management, security deposits, utility payments, moving costs, interim shelter assistance, legal services, and credit repair. Common across all grantees is a model of housing assistance that is consistent with a Housing First philosophy — that is, county services are provided to participants as quickly as possible without preconditions such as employment, sobriety, or participation in case management services.³

Research Questions:

To understand the effects of BFH on housing and child welfare, in coordination and collaboration with the Housing and Homelessness Division at CDSS, the research team addressed three questions:

1. **Who was served by the BFH program?**
2. **What were the housing services they received? What were the housing outcomes?**
3. **What were the child welfare outcomes of BFH program participants? How did this compare with non-BFH child welfare participants?**

Research Methods:

To assess the effects of BFH on housing and child welfare outcomes, we linked anonymized BFH program data, administrative child welfare data for all 12 pilot counties, and Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) records for adults in a subset of 4 counties. We implemented a matched control research design that compared BFH participants to child welfare-involved families in the same county and of the same gender, race, and ethnic group, who were of a similar age and who had similar prior involvement in the child welfare and homelessness systems. By comparing differences between individuals that received BFH services and those that did not, this quasi-experimental evaluation provided preliminary evidence of the short-term effects of BFH, relative to the previous status quo of “services as usual.”

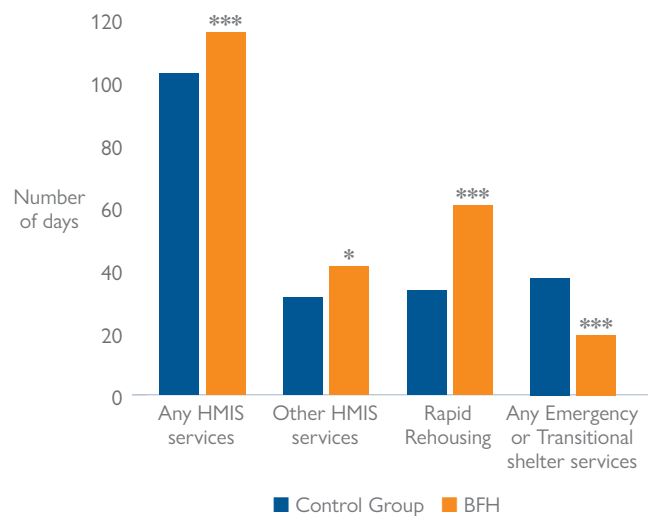
The study followed outcomes for 2,200 children in 1,700 families that participated in BFH during the program’s first two years. This treatment group was compared to a control

group of 300,000 similar children that did not participate in BFH because they entered the child welfare system when BFH services were not available, primarily before BFH was implemented in their county.

Key Findings

1. **BFH served a particularly vulnerable and high-needs population, even compared to other families involved in the child welfare system.** Compared to children whose families did not receive BFH services, children in BFH families had more involvement with the child welfare system prior to BFH enrollment. This was measured by the average number of prior referrals (7.9 vs. 5.5) and the share with a prior foster care placement (76% vs. 61%).
2. **Families were not otherwise connecting to the broader homeless response system prior to BFH enrollment.** Even among the population that would eventually receive BFH services, most families (73%) were not receiving homelessness services at the time that they enrolled in BFH. BFH increased connections to the homeless response system across California.

FIGURE 1: Effect of BFH on number of days of homeless systems use, adults with any HMIS involvement

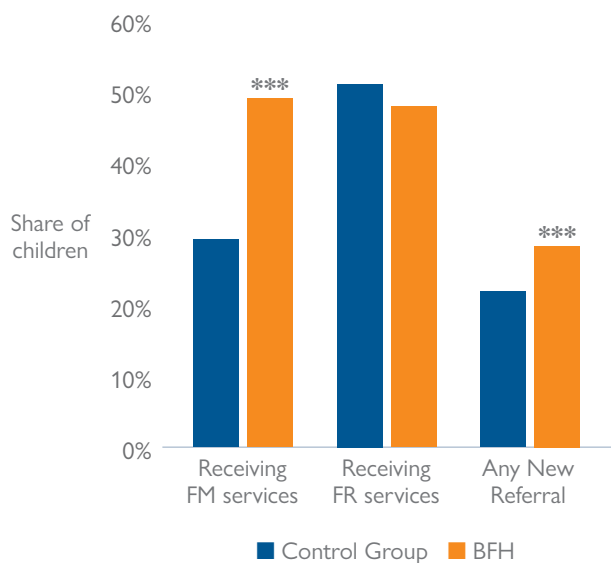


Note: Figure shows the average number of homeless service days the control (blue) and BFH (orange) group had received 180 days after BFH entry. “Other HMIS services” includes those not categorized as rapid re-housing or shelter services, such as case management. Stars denote statistically significant differences at the 10% (*), 5% (**), and 1% (***) level.

3. BFH reduced use of shelter services and increased use of rapid re-housing services. 180 days after BFH entry, BFH participants had received nearly twice as many days of rapid re-housing (RRH) services than the control group (60 vs. 33 days). As shown in [Figure 1](#), during this same period, the number of days BFH participants spent in emergency shelter or transitional housing was significantly lower than the control group (18 vs. 37 days).

4. Among families who exited the BFH program, slightly more than half exited to a permanent housing arrangement. Of the 1,700 families served in the first two years of the program, about half (808 families, totaling 1,686 children) had exited BFH by the end of the second year of the program, either of their own accord or because they had procured housing. For children whose families exited the program, 52% reported exiting to a permanent housing arrangement and another 14% exited to either community-provided or temporary housing. Only 3% reported exiting to homelessness. The housing outcomes for one-third (31%, n = 517) of children whose families exited were unknown (which is not uncommon for programs serving vulnerable people experiencing homelessness).

FIGURE 2. Effect of BFH on participants' experiences with child welfare services at the 180-day mark among children receiving family reunification services at BFH entry

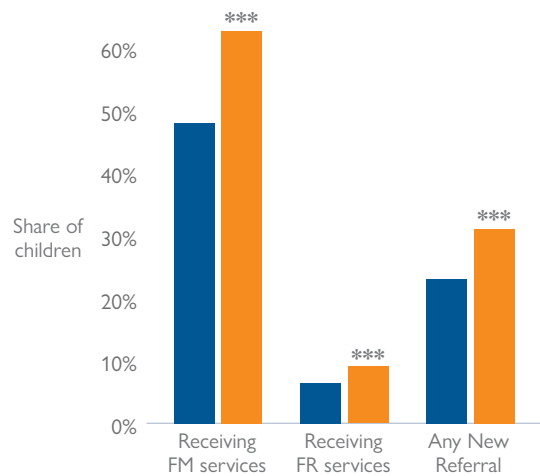


Note: Figure shows the share of children initially in FR in the control (blue) and BFH (orange) group who were receiving each type of child welfare service 180 days later. Stars denote statistically significant differences at the 10% (*), 5% (**), and 1% (***) level.

5. For families that entered BFH with a child in foster care and receiving FR services, family reunifications were higher than among control-group families by approximately 20 percentage points at 180-days after BFH entry. As shown in [Figure 2](#), nearly half (49%) of BFH families with children in out-of-home care (i.e., receiving FR services) had their child(ren) transition back into in-home care (i.e., receiving FM services). In contrast, only 29% of control-group families made this shift. The higher rate of reunifications is particularly noteworthy as the families enrolled in BFH had more child welfare involvement upon entry to BFH than the control group and the broader child welfare population.

6. For families that entered BFH receiving in-home services through FM, more BFH children were still receiving services through FM or were receiving FR services at the 180-day mark as compared to the control group. [Figure 3](#) demonstrates these differences between BFH-participating children and the matched control groups. After 180 days, 48% of control group children who were initially in an FM placement were still receiving in-home (FM) child welfare services. In contrast, 63% of BFH children continued to receive these services after 180 days. Involvement with the child welfare system was also higher among BFH children when measured by the share of cases that were receiving FR services after 180 days of BFH: 6% of control group children compared to 9% of those receiving BFH services.

FIGURE 3: Effect of BFH on participants' experiences with child welfare services at the 180-day mark among children receiving family maintenance services at BFH entry



Note: Figure shows the share of children initially in FM in the control (blue) and BFH (orange) group who were receiving each type of child welfare service 180 days after starting BFH. Stars denote statistically significant differences at the 10% (*), 5%, (**), and 1% (***) level.

Conclusion

Bringing Families Home provides a housing-first approach to families involved in the child welfare system who have historically not benefited from these services. In the program's first two years, approximately 1,700 families in 12 counties participated in BFH. The findings from this research indicate that BFH substantially changed the ways in which families interact with both the homelessness services and child welfare systems.

Families that participated in BFH spent fewer days in traditional shelter services and received more rapid re-housing services compared to similar families who did not participate in BFH. Children who were in an out-of-home placement when their families entered BFH were more likely to be reunified with their parents than similar children whose families did not receive BFH. These findings suggest that BFH met its objectives of providing families with more stable housing and reunifying families. At the same time, families with children that were in an in-home placement when their families entered BFH were more likely to remain involved with the child welfare system through both in- and out-of-

home services 180 days after beginning BFH services. This difference in rates of child welfare involvement could reflect greater involvement from BFH families receiving additional attention from case workers and program staff, or their higher intensity of involvement with the child welfare system at baseline. As BFH continues to serve families, further research examining a longer time horizon could be useful in understanding families' full trajectories. Given the short-term nature of these outcomes and several data limitations (see the full report for more details), a critical question for future research is how these initial changes in service use and child welfare case lengths affect families' long-term outcomes among broader swaths of the population.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank our government partners at the California Department of Social Services, including Pia Basudev, Lori Fuller, Marta Galan, Nena Nascimento, Aparna Ramesh, Eric Schroer, and Laura Yen. We also thank Jonathan Hoonhout at the Children’s Data Network for facilitating the data collection process, and Erika Brown and Dean Obermark at the California Policy Lab.

The findings reported herein were performed with the permission of the California Department of Social Services. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and should not be considered as representing the policy of the collaborating department, agency, or any department or agency of the California government.

CPL is grateful to the University of California Office of the President Multicampus Research Programs and Initiatives, M21PR3278, The James Irvine Foundation, and the Woven Foundation for their generous support. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders or the departments providing the data. All errors should be attributed to the authors.

For more detailed findings and information about the methodology, please consult the accompanying report: [“Bringing Families Home Program Evaluation.”](#)

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Endnotes

- 1 3% of children had a case in emergency response (short-term services typically provided at the start of a case while case managers determine whether family reunification or family maintenance is more appropriate) when their families entered BFH. These children are not included in the analyses below due to small sample sizes.
- 2 Literally homeless is defined as an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, meaning: the family has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation; or is living in a publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including congregate shelters, transitional housing, and hotels and motels paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state and local government programs); or is exiting an institution where (s)he has resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution. This definition follows the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (S.578.3).
- 3 California’s Welfare and Institution Code (WIC) section 16523.1