

# SERVICES WORK



FOR FAMILIES  
EXPERIENCING  
HOMELESSNESS  
IN PHILADLEPHIA

Stories of families and their struggles



*April 2016*

## ***Stories of Families who Experience Homelessness***

This report helps policy makers understand how families who experience homelessness overcome their struggles with assistance from social service agencies.

Some 1,500 families<sup>i</sup> enter emergency housing annually and 48% of the families who request housing are turned away.<sup>ii</sup>

Many families need services, many do not.

Philadelphia's homeless families are part of a national dialogue. According to **The Bassuk Center**, *"More families experience homelessness in the United States than in any other industrialized nation, with the numbers now reaching historic proportions. More than 2.5 million children, many below the age of six, are homeless each year. Despite these staggering figures, comprehensive strategies to end family homelessness have not been implemented, and the nature and mix of housing options coupled with services and supports continue to be debated."*<sup>iii</sup>

The stories collected here tell a narrative of the intersection of **temporary housing** and

**services**. The stories show remarkable people who have experienced hardship and homelessness and have worked hard to reclaim their lives with the assistance of Philadelphia's emergency and transitional housing system.



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## ***Robert and Alex***

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Robert and his 9 year old son Alex came to **ACHIEVEability's Haddington Housing Initiative**<sup>1</sup> from a shelter. They went to a shelter after being evicted from their apartment. Robert had lost his job six months prior and he could no longer afford the rent. The Haddington Housing Initiative provided Robert and his son with a nice, very affordable three bedroom home.

Robert came to Haddington Housing with a history of substance abuse and a criminal record. He grew up in a family where his father was addicted to drugs. Robert was introduced to drugs and alcohol as a young child by his father as way to “calm him down or keep him quiet”. Additionally, at the hands of his father, he and his mother experienced frequent incidents of domestic violence. Robert was raised in chaos in his young life, which resulted in “**out of home placements**” for him starting at the age of 10. As a result of the trauma of his childhood, Robert turned to drugs and alcohol as a way to cope with the pain in his youth life. Robert battled drug and alcohol addiction most of his life, and finally became clean during his incarceration. During his addiction he was charged with involuntary manslaughter as a



result of the accidental death of his girlfriend. Once released, he gained full custody of his son.

In the process of overcoming his addiction he was diagnosed with **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Depression**. He had not actively participated in **counseling** since his diagnosis, and these mental health challenges were exacerbated by the experience of losing his home and job. Robert received a screening of the **Beck Depression Inventory-II** by his self-sufficiency coach, which indicated that he was experiencing moderate depressive symptoms. He was referred to counseling with our **licensed psychologist** and worked weekly to manage his depression. His son also participated in the sessions to address the **trauma** that he had experienced as a result of their circumstances. He was also provided

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<sup>1</sup> Haddington I is comprised of 21 transitional rental homes.

support from a **Certified Addictions counselor** to help maintain his sobriety.

Robert's career goal is to be a business owner and have a contracting firm, where he can teach

*"It made all the difference  
in the world."*



Robert worked with his **self-sufficiency coach** to find employment and is currently working fulltime as a **Youth Advocate**, where he is able to use his story to inspire at-risk teens. Besides the **case management services**, as a result of HUD funding, ACHIEVEability was also able to provide him with a monthly transpass to get to work and to purchase basic furniture (beds, dressers and a couch). Once Robert was stabilized ACHIEVEability staff was able to help him start school at Montgomery County

Community College. He is working towards an **Associate's degree in Business Management**.

at-risk youth life skills.

He has participated in our weekly **Parenting Classes**, which are facilitated by Turning Points for Children<sup>2</sup>. His son has also received **tutoring support** to help him stay on track in school. The counseling sessions, **parenting workshops** and drug and alcohol sessions have given Robert the tools and skillsets needed to live a healthy and productive life. He believes that those services have had a positive impact and improved his mood and relationship with his son and remarks that *"it made all the difference in the world"* for him.

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<sup>2</sup> Turning Points for Children brings social and health services to vulnerable people.

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## **Tiffany**

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Tiffany came to ACHIEVEability's **Cecil Housing**<sup>3</sup> with an extended history of drug abuse, which led her to imprisonment and homelessness. She came to our program by way of "**Bridges Step-Down,**" a dual-diagnosis treatment facility, where she was court mandated to stay. While there, she was diagnosed with **opiate dependence** and **major depression**. Also as a result of her **incarceration**, custody of her daughter was temporally given to her sister through **Kinship-Care**<sup>4</sup>. She was eligible to regain custody once she found housing and completed her treatment program.

Cecil Housing became her opportunity for **reunification** with her daughter and an opportunity for a life of on-going sobriety.

Tiffany was raised by two parents who both were substance abusers and likely made her predisposed to addiction. She was in treatment for nine months, prior to moving into Cecil Housing. Four months after her entry into Cecil Housing, Tiffany experienced a **relapse** that was triggered by being on her own again and an unhealthy partner relationship. She again started abusing OxyContin. With the help of her

**self-sufficiency coach**, she was placed in Intensive Outpatient treatment at Jefferson Hospital, where she received **methadone maintenance** treatments to stabilize her. ACHIEVEability staff have also connected her to their therapist to help her work through her history of depression and deal with the setback she experienced. Tiffany has been sober since October, 2014. She continues to **progress** and is engaged in the 12-step process to strengthen her foundation in sobriety.

She is developing her **parenting skills** with her participation in ACHIEVEability's weekly parenting group facilitated by Turning Points for Children.

Without the support of Cecil Housing, she may have languished in her addiction and put herself at risk of further personal harm and at risk of permanently losing custody of her daughter.

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<sup>3</sup> Cecil Housing is comprised of 7 permanent supportive rental homes, mostly serving families where the parent has a history of drug or alcohol addiction.

<sup>4</sup> Refers to the care of children by relatives or, in some jurisdictions, close family friends

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## Debbie

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Debbie is an experienced employee of the Human Services field. She worked in the field for 15 years before returning to post-secondary education. She held many jobs, but she realized something would need to change if she ever wanted to advance her career. She earned a license as a commercial trailer driver and took business courses at colleges in Philadelphia and Virginia. She always found it difficult to stick to any one position because as she put it, “life always got in the way.”

Debbie has two children and has never been married. The father of her first child Diane, did not stick around long to help. When Debbie met Danielle’s father, she thought she found herself “happily ever after,” but that joy was short lived. Quickly his adoration turned into preoccupation, then eventually controlling and abusive behaviors. She stayed with him for two years before she fled the dangerous situation. She was **strong enough** to never return.

In the midst of all the personal stressors, she learned that her **daughter** had been a victim of sexual assault by a family friend. Debbie was devastated, and needed to address her own **trauma** as well as her daughter’s. She enrolled them both in therapy, moved to Virginia with

her mother and tried to make the best of the situation. That did not last long, so she came back to Philadelphia to stay with her grandfather. She began making some progress, she returned to work, managed the bills, and enrolled her children in school and therapy



services. Unfortunately her grandfather died and the family was eager to get control of the home. Although she **inherited** all of her grandfather’s **back utility bills** as a resident, Debbie did not have any legal rights to remain

in the house. She had no other choice than to enter the emergency shelter system in December, 2013.

Placed at the **Darlene Morris Love and Care Residential Services**<sup>5</sup>, she re-enrolled in school. She found out about ACHIEVEability's Appletree Housing<sup>6</sup> there and realized that she just needed stable housing so she could focus on her education. Since entering Appletree Housing in August 2014, Debbie has continued to struggle with life getting in the way. Immediately after signing her lease, her **work hours decreased** dramatically. The first few months were difficult to manage. She was unable to pay her rent and bills. She almost forfeited all her belongings at the storage company she used. She paid movers twice, after a family friend took her money and never followed through on the agreement. Once she obtained her items from storage, she learned that they were water damaged and bug infested. Her daughter's emotional distress increased and Debbie's **physical health decreased** after she was diagnosed with endometriosis<sup>7</sup>.

Debbie struggled but kept her **self-sufficiency coach** aware of all her challenges, who provided

assistance through every step. Her self-sufficiency coach assisted her in developing a **payment plan** and requesting assistance from the Philadelphia Department of Human Services to pay her back rent. Her coach referred Debbie to the Baring House<sup>8</sup> for emergency **childcare**, as well as used Appletree funding to subsidize her childcare costs. Debbie's coach referred her to **onsite therapy** to support her family in working through the trauma they had experienced. They have made great progress and Debbie's symptoms of depression have diminished.



Debbie has participated in **enrichment events** for her and the children, including our weekly parenting group. Debbie also received a **furniture voucher** to help replace some of the items damaged in storage. Debbie worked with her coach to secure new employment, and apply for the **LIHEAP** and budget programs for her utilities. Debbie recently obtained new

<sup>5</sup> Emergency housing provider in Philadelphia.

<sup>6</sup> Appletree is comprised of 19 transitional homes for families coming directly from shelters

<sup>7</sup> An often painful disorder in which tissue that normally lines the inside of your uterus — the endometrium — grows.

<sup>8</sup> Provides respite care and 24-hour emergency care for families with young children from birth through age five.

employment as a Residential Counselor. She has started to catch up on her finances and is working with her coach to enroll in school.

Debbie remains appreciative of the services provided and continues to work hard to meet the goals she set.

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## ***Destiny***

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**Destiny and her daughter** were experiencing homelessness as a result of a recent domestic violence situation with her partner when she came to the **Red Shield**. The Salvation Army's **Red Shield Family Residence** is a shelter that provides comprehensive and trauma informed Case Management services to 41 families residing in Philadelphia.

Soon after Destiny came to Red Shield, she was able to gain employment and achieved her Associates Degree at Community College. Red Shield **Case Managers** meet with each of their families weekly to develop realistic and obtainable goals to achieve housing and self-sufficiency. Red Shield also provides each family their own room, three delicious meals a day, **Bright Space** and **After School** homework help/enrichment programming for the children.

Destiny is now **currently employed** at Comcast in their repairs department, as she continues her **education** at Holy Family. She wants to become a Pharmacist and is pursuing her Bachelors of Science in Biology. Destiny still keeps Red Shield staff updated on how things are going for her and her daughter and still resides in the permanent housing she received through **Rapid**



*“It wasn’t always easy, but when I had doubts or didn’t have the energy to go to school staff stepped in and helped me see the big picture.”*

Rehousing<sup>9</sup>. *“I consider the Red Shield staff a part of my extended family. They have always had my back, and I’m blessed for knowing them”.*

*“All of the staff made me feel safe, welcomed, and strong. They helped me obtain my goals and were very encouraging”.*

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## **Charles**

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The Red Shield also believes in **reunifying** families whenever possible, and this is how we met **Charles**. Charles joined his partner at the time and son at Red Shield after his partner requested that her family be reunified. He recalls how his family initially became homeless when they were staying in an apartment that was deemed uninhabitable by DHS, and the family was forced to come into shelter when Charles couldn’t find employment to support his family or find affordable housing.

Charles recalls how the Red Shield gave him

direction and guidance. Charles overcame many obstacles while residing at Red Shield, and with staff support was able to step into the role as a single parent when his partner decided to end things, find gainful employment, and ultimately permanent housing.

Charles now resides with his son in permanent housing through the Philadelphia Housing Authority’s **Blueprint** program. Charles says that he “loves” where he lives and is thankful that he can finally provide his son a clean, safe, and happy home.

*“Before I came to Red Shield I was living in really bad conditions. I didn’t even have running water. What parent wants that for their child?”*



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<sup>9</sup> Rapid Re-Housing is a program that is used for families who have more than \$600 income a month. They work with another program to find a house or an apartment and are given a 12 month subsidy. Once the time is over they are expected to be able to take on the house or apartments full rent and utilities.

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## ***A Client Served By Women Against Abuse***

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A family (mom and 2 children) transitioned into Sojourner House<sup>10</sup> from **Women Against Abuse's** (WAA) emergency shelter. The resident faced significant barriers, in addition to the trauma of abuse, including **lack of employment** due to her criminal background, no stable permanent housing options due to **limited fixed income**, and **past evictions** due to her abuser continuing to live at their family's shared property without paying rent after the resident and her children fled.

These barriers left the resident vulnerable, depressed and feeling like she had no options. While in WAA's emergency shelter she was diagnosed with **Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome** (PTSD) and depression.

Through supportive services at Sojourner House, the resident was connected to **on-site therapy** with WAA's Behavioral Health staff. She also learned **budgeting skills** from individual meetings with her case manager and financial workshops provided by WAA's financial services partner, **Clarifi**<sup>11</sup>. Staff also connected the resident with legal representation, through **Community Legal**

**Services**<sup>12</sup> (CLS), for assistance pardoning the charges she acquired while in her abusive relationship.

Her **case manager** assisted her in job preparedness and resume building skills. Consistent encouragement and empowerment in **weekly case management meetings** helped boost her confidence to advocate for herself

**WOMEN  
AGAINST  
ABUSE**

when she went on job interviews. She went on several interviews, and was able to obtain a part-time home health aide position.

Prior to the improvement of her employment outlook and legal situation, the resident had

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<sup>10</sup> Transitional housing program.

<sup>11</sup> Nonprofit offers free financial counseling in 13 local offices, serving Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley.

<sup>12</sup> Provides free legal services, in civil matters, to low-income Philadelphians.

been denied permanent housing due to past evictions. **Sojourner House**<sup>13</sup> staff helped the resident complete **appeal paperwork** and prepare documentation to present to the **Philadelphia Housing Authority** panel. Sojourner House staff connected with CLS to assist the resident in preparing for this appeal, including helping her secure copies of her past leases, details within her credit report, documentation of her history of abuse, and copies of paperwork where her former partner used her name and social security number under fraudulent circumstances. The resident felt empowered to advocate for herself at her housing hearing, and her appeal was **successful**.

Additionally, the resident worked closely with her WAA case manager and WAA therapist to learn about the impact her abuse has had on her two pre-teen sons. They have connected with WAA's on-site children's programming, including our after-school program and summer camp. These on-site services allow her sons to feel connected to the Sojourner House community and supported by staff. They are given an opportunity to express their own feelings and struggles related to relocating, not

seeing their father regularly, and wanting to protect their mother from future abuse and pain.

The family is now awaiting **placement in an affordable, permanent housing unit** and expect to vacate their transitional housing unit soon.

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### ***Christine at the Eliza Shirley House***

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We all have them, hopes and dreams for a bright future; health, wealth and a happy family. **Christine** was no different; working hard as a cook to provide for herself and her daughter. **Getting laid off** was certainly not part of her plan; in fact, far from it. Nevertheless, Christine found herself out of a job surviving on her savings to make ends meet until the funds became depleted. Although she qualified for unemployment benefits, she was not eligible to participate in job training programs so she would continue to apply for employment but to no avail. Christine knew she could not afford to stay in the home she loved so she made the only decision she could to ensure her family would survive.

***Christine's daughter wrote: "I built a new 'family' that truly has my back and sets me straight when I get lost. I have hope that the future can and will be better."***

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<sup>13</sup> Transitional housing provides services with housing up to 18 or 24 months.

Residing at The Salvation Army Eliza Shirley House Emergency Facility (ESH) was a scary thought at first; Christine had no idea what to expect and the thought of not knowing anyone frightened her even more. She was familiar with the building and the clientele, however, as she would walk past it most days when she would venture out to the well-known “Reading Terminal Market” looking for a sale on food items. Although Christine never imagined she would be residing at The Eliza Shirley House she was thankful that it was available to her.



The Eliza Shirley House **specializes in helping stabilize residents** by assisting them to become more financially independent, by providing **educational programs**, by **reaching out** to them **emotionally** and **spiritually**, by providing an avenue to release their frustration, by providing events and entertainment to both women and children. Residents are offered a **multitude of programs** to support the overall well-being of the individual or family. Christine’s case was reflective of so many others that had come through the doors looking for hope and new beginnings. Each day Christine would do her best to find work along with any other resources that might be able to assist her to get back on her feet. She also met many women from all different backgrounds while residing at ESH and soon discovered that they were a great support system. Christine also found comfort

with the staff at ESH as she would often seek guidance, wisdom or just an ear to listen. After several weeks, Christine and her daughter were placed at another Salvation Army facility, the Red Shield Family Residence, where her transformation and **healing continued**. She developed close relationships with staff who continued to encourage and support her goals. After months of residency, a **job opportunity finally** presented itself; the director of Red Shield suggested that Christine apply for a position with The Salvation Army Eliza Shirley House, the very same place her journey began. Immediately following her job interview, Christine was offered the position.

It has been seven years since that life changing event which had Christine transition from resident to employee with The Salvation Army.

Christine credits her continued success to The Salvation Army and its staff for coming along side of her during one of the most difficult times of her life. She believes a total healing of mind, body and spirit took place which was exactly what she needed to make her transformation permanent. Today, Christine shares her testimony with current residents of

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## **Talana**

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Talana, 27, and her two children, Samiyah (age 10) and Jabreel (age 3), came to **Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network (PIHN)** with some trepidation in April, 2015. Talana survived a difficult childhood, and had *“never had anything handed to her.”* A trauma survivor as a child and teen, a runaway at 13, and an emancipated minor<sup>14</sup> by 16, Talana was used to working and struggling on her own.

When she lost her home health care job, Talana was no longer able to sustain her residence in North Philadelphia, where she and her children had lived for 2 years. The family slept on couches and floors in other people’s homes for eight months before coming to PIHN.

Now, facing long-term homelessness with scant resources, Talana did not know how to provide

The Eliza Shirley House to encourage them to never give up on their dreams because if she could do it, so can they. As for Christine’s daughter, she is currently enrolled in college and actively pursuing her own dreams and mom couldn’t be more proud.

for her family. Talana had lost hope that things would get better.

Her cousin, a PIHN alumnae, learned of her situation and referred her to PIHN.

On the day Talana was getting the keys to her new home, PIHN staff asked her to speak about what the program meant in her life: *“At first, I thought PIHN would be only a way to get an apartment so that my family could have a place to live. But, I learned that it was so much more than about getting a house.”*



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<sup>14</sup> Emancipated minors are no longer considered to be under the care and control of parents

*It was difficult moving between congregations, but I met many uplifting and resourceful volunteers to lift my spirits. The PIHN staff and programs helped me with some deep personal issues that were stumbling blocks I did not even know about. The links to community programs helped get my son who did not speak for months in the program into a Head Start School. Now, he's doing great and has a lot to say! My daughter was matched with a wonderful theatrical summer camp, something I never would have found on my own. And, after a long search, I have a job once again!*

*The most important learning for me was about the importance of devoting my energies to my children. While it was a long eight months, the outcome was great. I left with a talking 3-year-old son, a very engaged 10-year-old daughter and an idea of what a home should be. With PIHN, I built a new 'family' that truly has my back and sets me straight when I get lost. I have hope that the future can and will be better."*

It was **case management, housing counseling, employment supports, therapy (2x /wk), parenting education, linkages to Head Start, art**

**and garden therapy** for children and a lot of hand holding.

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## ***Jada's Reading Journey at PEC***

Jada and her mother and younger brother resided in PEC's emergency housing program.



Participating in PEC's Afterschool program, Jada showed significant signs of academic delay, particularly in reading. She had difficulties recognizing letters and numbers.

Our Afterschool program staff coordinated with Jada's mother, the family's case manager, and Jada's school to develop a plan to improve Jada's reading. The plan included daily reading support from a certified teacher from the School District of Philadelphia who visits the PEC. Jada's elementary school also provided a small group reading program and modified homework assignments.

Jada is now able to identify sight words and short and long vowel sounds. She passed second grade, and is showing great academic growth on her educational journey.



## Conclusion

We hope policy makers understand that services matter to a parent and a child who are homeless. Their needs are complex and varied.

No one program or one way of approaching homelessness can address such a variety of needs.

At first, agencies do not know who is in their shelter or why they are there. It takes a few weeks for **assessments** to be completed, and **trust** to build between the family and the case managers and other staff.

Incorporating this knowledge into a plan to **end family homelessness** in

Philadelphia is highly important for these vulnerable families.

The Bassuk Center: *“It is clear that along with housing, families require services and supports that address the reasons for their homelessness, and prepare them for self-sufficiency. The realities of limited education and job skills, trauma exposure, sexual and physical violence, mental health conditions, and substance use cannot be ignored because they may be costly to address. Spending less money on a solution that fails will not save a dime. It will only deepen the crisis and suffering.”<sup>1</sup>*

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## Appendix A: The Agencies Mentioned

The **Family Service Provider Network** (FSPN) is an advocacy network of agencies that provide services to families and children from across Southeastern Pennsylvania who are experiencing homelessness. Read more at <http://www.pec-cares.org/index.php?page=leadership>. We thank the following member agencies for contributing to this report:

**ACHIEVEability:** Since 1981, ACHIEVEability has been breaking the cycle of poverty by helping low-income, single parent and homeless families to achieve self-sufficiency. We believe that housing is a necessary first step to ending poverty, and we develop our own program housing to help stabilize families. We know that in order to truly achieve permanent self-sufficiency and financial freedom, education is the key. Read more at <http://www.achieveability.org/about-us.html>

**People Emergency Center:** PEC provides comprehensive supportive services to homeless women and their children, revitalizes our West Philadelphia neighborhood, and advocates for social justice. Read more at <http://www.pec-cares.org/index.html>

**Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network:** The PIHN is comprised of over 1,500 caring volunteers, 48 congregations, concerned citizens of the community, community businesses, and institutions to provide assessment and referrals, emergency housing, supportive service and transitional housing to families who experience homelessness. Read more at [www.philashelter.org](http://www.philashelter.org).

**The Salvation Army Red Shield Family Residence:** The Salvation Army Red Shield Family Residence is a safe and welcoming emergency housing program offering loving, respectful, compassionate, and non-judgmental services in

order to empower residents to strive towards self-sufficiency. Read more at <http://pa.salvationarmy.org/greater-philadelphia/6533738B6ED9A47E852573A900788FDC>

**The Salvation Army Eliza Shirley House:** The Salvation Army Eliza Shirley House provides emergency housing services for homeless families 365 days of the year. We provide temporary accommodation for families for approximately 30 to 60 days at which time they are placed into long term City of Philadelphia housing programs. Read more at <http://pa.salvationarmy.org/greater-philadelphia/F9769F780B997245852573CA0079C00E>

**Women Against Abuse:** Women Against Abuse is the largest domestic violence service provider and advocate in Pennsylvania. They operate the only emergency safe havens in Philadelphia for abused women and their children, the nation's first legal center for domestic violence victims, as well as transitional and supportive housing, the Philadelphia Domestic Violence Hotline, and community-wide education, technical assistance and advocacy to prevent domestic and teen dating violence. Women Against Abuse's services reach approximately 15,000 people each year. Read more at: <http://www.womenagainstabuse.org>.

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This report was produced by the People's Emergency Center for the Family Service Provider Network (FSPN). For additional information, contact us at [policy@pec-cares.org](mailto:policy@pec-cares.org).

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<sup>i</sup> City of Philadelphia Office of Supportive Housing Annual Assessment on Homelessness Report, 2013

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Conference of Mayors 2013 Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness. 2013

<sup>iii</sup> The Bassuk Center: Services Matter, 2015.