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The Impact of Housing and Services Interventions on Homeless Families

Baseline Survey Pre-Test Report

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Introduction

In August 2009, Abt Associates and AbtSRBI completed a pretest of the Baseline Survey for the study of the *Impact of Housing Services Interventions on Homeless Families*. The purpose of the pretest was to confirm the length of time needed to complete the interview and to assess the question wording and flow. We also wanted to gather feedback about the clarity of the questions and any concerns about specific topics addressed in the questionnaire from homeless families in similar residential situations as respondents who will complete the interview for the study. The results of the pretest are summarized in this document.

Pretest Methodology

Heading Home, Inc., a homeless assistance provider in Cambridge, Massachusetts assisted Abt Associates with the survey pretest. Heading Home operates emergency shelters, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing programs for individuals and families throughout the Boston metropolitan area. Heading Home recruited pretest respondents from two of their programs—the Boston Family Shelter that provides emergency shelter, and from Homeless to Housing, a permanent supportive housing program for families that provides scattered-site permanent housing and services to homeless families. We completed pretest interviews with a total of nine families across the two programs, five from Boston Family Shelter and four from Homeless to Housing. All of the respondents interviewed were female. Two field interviewers conducted the pretests, one male and one female. From our assessment of the pretest interviews, it appears that the gender of the interviewer did not affect the respondent’s willingness to participate in the interview pretest.

We attempted to identify pretest respondents who are similar to future study participants. In two respects this pretest sample differs somewhat from the study sample who will be recruited during the evaluation. While all of the pretest respondents had been homeless, for convenience in scheduling and completing the pretest, some of the respondents were residing in a permanent supportive housing program. Participants eligible for PSH will not be included in the study, and the point of intake for the study will be the emergency shelter. However, we believe that by virtue of having experienced homelessness, these respondents provided a reasonable test of the baseline instrument question wording, question flow, and interview length, as well as valuable feedback on the topics addressed in the interview. In addition, for the study families will be defined as at least one parent and at least one child age 15 or under.¹ All of the pretest respondents except one (a pregnant woman with no other children) met this criterion. The interviewer did not realize that this pretest respondent did not have other children until midway through the interview. Since the interview was already in progress when the interviewer discovered this, the interview was completed.

The Heading Home program staff assisted the Abt interviewers to recruit the pre-test participants. The interviews were conducted one after the other over the course of two days, providing a test of the procedures that may be used during the study when one or more interviews will be conducted in a participating shelter in a given day. The method of recruitment varied somewhat across the two

¹ The age restriction will be applied to ensure that there will be at least one child under the age of 18 at the time of the follow up survey to serve as the focal child for parent interviews.

shelters. Boston Family posted a sign-up sheet inviting shelter residents to participate in the pretest interview. The sign up sheet explained the requirements for participating, indicated that up to five families were needed and that selection would be on a first-come first-served basis. Pre test respondents in the Homeless to Housing were recommended to the Abt interviewers by their case managers.

Pretest Results

Overall, interviewers reported that that pretest interviewing went smoothly. They reported that the flow of the instrument worked very well, and most respondents did not have difficulties responding to the questionnaire.

Length of Interview

The table below summarizes the average length of interview by section and overall for the nine pretest respondents. The average length of time needed to complete the interview was 40 minutes, which is consistent with the estimated length used to budget for the baseline survey and to calculate burden estimates. The longest interview took approximately 53 minutes, and the shortest just 33 minutes. All of the time estimates include a standard estimate of 5 minutes for Section M, Contact Information. Since the baseline instrument developed for this study uses a standard set of secondary contact questions that have been used in many other studies, we have reliable estimates of the time needed to complete these questions. In addition, contact information is not needed for the pretest respondents since they will not be enrolled in the study. As a result, we did not administer the contact information questions to the pretest respondents. The time estimates shown below also include a short debriefing module we administered to all of the pretest respondents to solicit feedback on the interview questions.

Section	Average Time to Administer	Minimum Administration	Maximum Administration
Section A: Pre-Shelter Housing	3	1	5
Section B: Housing Barriers	4	2	5
Section C: Housing History	4	3	7
Section D: Employment	3	1	9
Section E: Family Composition	4	2	8
Section F: Income and Income Sources	4	2	5
Section G: Adult Health	2	1	2
Section H: Other Health	5	3	6
Section I: Family Head Substance Use	2	2	3
Section J: Social History	2	1	3
Section K: THI	2	.5	4
Section L: Demographics	2	1	2
Debriefing Section	2	1	2
Section M: Contact Information (estimated)	5	5	5
Total Average Length	40	33	53

Detailed Comments/Recommendations

The interviewers reported that the interview instrument worked well. Interviewers did not encounter serious problems with the questionnaire, perhaps in part because many of the questions have been used in other studies to collect information from people who are homeless. Based on the results of the pretest we do not recommend substantial revisions to the baseline instrument. We list below the comments that interviewers provided and suggestions for improving the instructions provided to interviewers and interview probes, and in some cases minor changes to the wording of interview questions.

General Comments

- Pretest respondents did not appear to have any problems shifting between the various scales and different timing reference points used throughout the questionnaire. For example, Question B1 uses a three-point response scale while H2 uses a five-point scale. Question D1 asks about employment in past week; F2 asks about income in previous calendar year; G1 asks about health status in the past month; H2 asks about the previous two weeks. The interviewers believe that the probes and introductions to each question provided sufficient explanation about the scale and timeframe referenced in each question to avoid confusion among respondents.
- The recall effort required to calculate total time homeless in Question C6 was challenging for several of the pretest respondents. Interviewers provided assistance in calculating the total amount of time homeless for this question.
- For the most part, pretest respondents did not object to the length of the interview, nor did they exhibit fatigue. The exception was the respondent whose interview took approximately 53 minutes, who commented that the interview took a long time. The number of children in the family appears to be the most important factor that influences the length of the interview.
- The pretest respondents did not appear to be concerned about responding to the sensitive questions regarding alcohol and drug use included in Section I of the questionnaire. Some of the respondents laughed when asked the drug and alcohol questions, and one said she was surprised at being asked the questions, but was not offended by them. Most simply indicated that these questions did not apply to their situation, but they were willing to answer the questions.

Section A: Pre-Shelter Housing

- Question A1 asks the respondent about her living situation prior to coming to this shelter. In the study, respondents will be interviewed after seven days in emergency shelter, and the emergency shelter is expected to be the first point of contact with the homeless assistance system (unless referral to emergency shelter occurs through a centralized intake system). In contrast, all of the pretest respondents had resided first in a hotel prior to entering the shelter or permanent supportive housing program and were a bit confused as to how to respond to this question, with some answering the hotel and others referring

back to their housing in their own place or with others prior to the shelter hotel. The intent of the question is to collect the type of housing situation the respondent had prior to entry into the emergency shelter. The interviewers recommend adding interviewer instructions about the purpose of the question and instructions that respondents should report on the housing situation prior to entering the emergency shelter.

Section B: Housing Barriers

- Two of the pretest respondents answered yes for many of the questions in B1. Midway through the series, they stopped to clarify whether we were asking about barriers in general or if we were asking specifically about barriers they had experienced themselves. When the interviewer clarified that the questions refer to specific barriers that were relevant to the family, they asked to begin again to change some of their responses. The interviewers thus recommend emphasizing the qualifier “for you and your family” that appears at the end of the question, and they recommend that interviewers be instructed to repeat the qualifier for the first three items to remind the respondent about the focus of the question.

Section C: Housing History

- Question C1 posed some problems for both the respondents and the interviewers and will require additional review and careful training for interviewers. Although the question asks “*Just before you came to this shelter, this time, how long had you been homeless?*” all of the pretest respondents answered ‘this is my first time being homeless,’ and were confused about how to provide a length of time homeless prior to shelter entry. When interviewers probed, one respondent said she had been homeless for one week prior to entering the shelter. Since most of the pretest respondents spent time in a hotel prior to being referred to the program where the interview took place, it appears they did not count their time in the hotel as part of their current spell of homelessness. The interviewers recommend careful training for the interviewers on this question and additional probes to explain the question to respondents.
- Several of the pretest respondents had difficulty calculating the total time they had been homeless in their lifetime (Question C6). We will provide interviewers with a calendar for prior years to help guide respondents’ recall.
- When asked for their reactions to the questions about being homeless, one respondent indicated that she was confused by them, primarily because she had spent a great deal of time staying with friends and family and it was challenging to calculate the total length of time she had been in that situation. On the other hand, another respondent indicated that these questions were not difficult to answer, and she thought the questionnaire should have included more questions about her experiences with homelessness. On the whole, we do not recommend revising this section of the interview, except to add the detailed instructions for interviewers described above.

Section D: Employment

- Most pretest respondents did not have a job, and this section was completed quickly. A few respondents who were working asked for assistance to calculate earnings and income information.

Section E: Family Composition

- The interviewers did not encounter problems administering this section of the interview. The pretest respondents were able to respond without confusion or problems. One interviewer noted that the questions as structured do not capture situations where children spend some time each week in different situations. For example, a couple of the pretest respondents said that their child(ren) stayed with grandparents on the weekends, but with the custodial parent in the shelter or program during the week, to give the child(ren) some time away from the shelter environment. The questions as structured do not capture this type of special circumstance (the respondent would report that the child(ren) in these cases reside with the parent in the shelter). This can be addressed by allowing interviewers to provide supplemental comments about the special circumstances of respondents that are not captured in the structured questionnaire, using an interviewer comments form.

Section F: Income and Income Sources

- Some respondents requested help to calculate income information.
- Some respondents were confused as to whether the SCHIP insurance program was the same as Mass Health or Medicaid. When the survey is administered in the study, we will provide interviewers with local names of all public insurance programs, the TANF program, and other assistance programs to ensure they are equipped to answer such questions from respondents.

Section G: Adult Health

- Respondents asked if Hepatitis C should be counted in G3f. We will clarify the interviewer instructions to indicate that yes, it should be counted in G3f (problems with my liver).
- Some of the respondents commented that they wished the survey asked about some of the health care challenges they face while homeless, such as illnesses and medication costs.

Section H: Other Health (primarily Adult mental health)

- This section was one of the longer sections to administer. Some respondents seemed to answer without problems; others appeared to default to the “not at all” issues responses. To address this we will instruct interviewers to repeat the response categories for the first three items to remind respondents about the possible responses.

Section I: Family Head Substance Use

- I5 may need some modification. One respondent answered the question no, but then qualified it with a yes, but the yes was because of the partner's drinking, not the respondent's. We have reworded and clarified I5 to read "During the past year have you lost friends or boy/girlfriends because of *your* drinking?" This question will also include probes and instructions to interviewers to clarify that we are referring to the respondent's own drinking.

Section J: Social History

- No problems were reported in this section.

Section K: Types of Homeless Intervention Requirements

- No problems were reported in this section.

Section L: Demographics

- No problems were reported in this section.

Section M: Contact Information

- No problems were reported in this section.

Debriefing Questions

- No problems were reported in this section.