



# Home Visiting as Part of a Holistic Approach to Supporting Unhoused Families

## Introduction

Despite an overall drop in homelessness over the last decade, many families continue to experience housing instability amid a nationwide shortage of affordable housing (Parrott & Zandi, 2021). In 2022, more than 1.2 million children in the United States were unhoused; more than 58,000 of these children were under 6 years old (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Contributing factors include homeownership and rental costs that outpace income, rising mortgage interest rates, and near-record lows of homes for sale (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2023). These factors disproportionately affect communities of color who face gentrification, exclusionary zoning policies, and disinvestment in their communities.

Unhoused families may struggle to access health care, childcare, food assistance, and other government programs that rely on participants having a fixed address. This service gap is especially concerning for families with young children because rapid brain development during the first 3 years of life sets the stage for future learning, health, and behavior (Bethell et al., 2014; Center on the Developing Child, 2007). The stressors of being unhoused can harm children's well-being and achievement. Children who have been unhoused are more likely to have asthma or visit the emergency room than their peers (Clark et al., 2019); they also score significantly lower on language and communication skills (Haskett et al., 2015).

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Home visiting can support unhoused families in meeting their immediate, basic needs while encouraging parents to strengthen skills that support healthy child development. Although most visits are intended to be delivered in the family's home, models can adapt their curricula to accommodate varied living situations and gaps in family engagement due to housing instability.

This brief introduces three agencies that take a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of unhoused families, including the delivery of home visiting services:

- ✔ New Moms
- ✔ Lydia Place
- ✔ Reach Dane

It also takes a statewide look at Minnesota, which collaborates with the Ojibwe Nation and various nonprofits to connect home visitors to unhoused children and families.

## Defining Unhoused

The term unhoused describes a person who does not have a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. It encompasses both sheltered houselessness (e.g., emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, safe havens) and unsheltered houselessness, in which a person's primary nighttime location is a space not intended for sleeping accommodation (De Sousa et al., 2022).

## New Moms

**About:** New Moms connects young mothers in Chicago, Illinois, and its western suburbs with resources, training, and support to break generational cycles of poverty. The agency's Family Support Program offers doulas, prenatal support groups, parent support groups and education, and home visiting services. Home visitors work with mothers under the age of 25 using the Parents as Teachers (PAT) model.

**Goals and Purpose:** New Moms aims to strengthen families by "putting mothers in the driver's seat" as they set and achieve goals related to housing stability, economic mobility, and family well-being. Its comprehensive approach centers on an Executive Skills model grounded in a racial equity lens.

**Notable Details:** Families participating in the New Moms housing program are matched with a housing coach. They can also co-enroll in the Family Support Program to be matched with a home visitor (referred to as a Family Support Coach). Home visitors encourage moms to focus on child development and family goals, even in times of crisis. Home visitors working with families who are unhoused have reduced caseloads so they can continue visits, regardless of location or travel time. To support engagement, New Moms also offers families \$50 per quarter if they attend 75 percent of model-prescribed home visits.

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*“Moms are parents first. There’s always feeding, diapering, hugs and kisses, and boo-boos. We are connecting with moms who are experiencing the abnormal circumstances of homelessness while being . . . parents. At New Moms, we hold space for moms to be parenting during a home visit and meet them where they are, partnering both on their needs around parenting and housing stability.” –Katie Wise*

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New Moms approaches its work from a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) perspective. All employees set an annual DEI-related goal and are encouraged to discuss with participants, co-workers, and the broader community how race or prejudice may affect families’ experiences. Home visitors often live in the same communities as the families they serve.

**Accomplishments:** New Moms participated in two [pilot programs](#) that explored enhancements to their home visiting model for mothers who are unhoused. Findings suggest the programs made progress in increasing that group’s access to home visiting services.

**Upcoming Activities:** The agency will continue its efforts to expand the availability of mental health services, particularly for unhoused families. New Moms recently received its designation as a community-based behavioral health provider from the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services and hired a director of clinical services and their first staff therapist. Administrators are working toward Medicaid billing and reimbursement for some of these services.

The agency has also implemented a pilot program that connects doulas with pregnant women in the Cook County jail system to provide prenatal and postnatal services. Finally, a newly hired financial coach will work with program participants and agency staff to support the financial goals of families.

**For More Information:** Contact Katie Wise ([kwise@newmoms.org](mailto:kwise@newmoms.org)), director of family support, Chicago, at New Moms.

## Lydia Place

**About:** Established in 1989 in Bellingham, Washington, Lydia Place serves families experiencing homelessness and housing instability in Whatcom County through its Housing, Parent Support, and Mental Health programs. The agency incorporates the PAT home visiting model into its Parent Support Program for local families with children up through their kindergarten year. Home visiting services are funded in part through Washington’s Department of Children, Youth and Families; foundations; and community support.

**Goals and Purpose:** Lydia Place uses a preventive, holistic approach to serving families across programs. Both the Mental Health Program and the Parent Support Program focus on trauma-informed care that seeks to mitigate early trauma by addressing adverse childhood experiences and building on parenting strengths and protective factors.

**Notable Details:** Home visiting staff complete an intake with every family entering Lydia Place housing services to create a space to intentionally discuss parenting and start building relationships. The Parent Support Program has capacity to reach 55 families and is staffed by 1 supervisor and 4 home visitors (known as Family Support Specialists)—one of whom speaks Spanish.

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*“That’s a big lesson we’ve learned with our Parenting and Mental Health programs: how crucial it is to not drop people . . . people are used to [being dropped by] other systems if they no show. We’re different, we understand, and we expect that. When you’re ready, we’re here.” —Jennifer Hooper*

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The Parent Support Program strives to ensure that home visiting services are not a burden to families who may be interacting with multiple providers and services as they work to stabilize housing. Home visitors remain flexible, providing services wherever they are most convenient. For example, they may meet families in hotels, parks, and other community settings.

Recognizing that life stressors can impact when families choose to enroll and participate, home visitors also let families know they are waiting and ready to engage whenever the family is ready. As a practice, they do not discontinue families from services when they are nonresponsive for periods of time. Lydia Place is available to support families after they graduate from the program, sometimes several years later.

**Accomplishments:** PAT home visiting services are an integral part of Lydia Place’s broader set of supports for unhoused families. Program staff reach out to the larger community, including local school districts, early childhood education programs, and other home visiting programs, to increase community awareness of home visiting and other Lydia Place supports. Lydia Place also partners with other home visiting programs to offer community events designed to build community and social support among families.

**Upcoming Activities:** Lydia Place aims to better reach the growing number of Spanish-speaking families in Whatcom County and to deepen its capacity to provide culturally tailored resources, connections, and services.

**For More Information:** Email Jennifer Hooper ([jenniferh@lydiaplace.org](mailto:jenniferh@lydiaplace.org)), program manager at Lydia Place.

## Reach Dane

**About:** Reach Dane is a nonprofit organization in Madison, Wisconsin, that offers several programs—including Early Head Start (EHS) and Head Start center-based and home-based programming—in Dane County and Green County. Reach Dane currently serves nearly 700 children and their families, including unhoused families, through EHS and Head Start programs.

As part of a public-private partnership, Reach Dane offers EHS home visiting in designated Early Childhood Zones, neighborhoods determined to have a significant need for early childhood services. Families in each zone have access to enhanced resources with education, employment, housing, and mental health services.

**Goals and Purpose:** Reach Dane’s mission is to change the lives of underserved children and families through education and supportive services. Reach Dane’s home-based programs meet the diverse and growing needs of families experiencing homelessness. Community members know that Reach Dane has home-based programs that “travel with you when you don’t have a home.”

**Notable Details:** Reach Dane employs a housing specialist who provides intensive case management and information on community housing resources, flexible landlords, shelters, and eviction prevention. The housing specialist connects families experiencing emergencies to an internal fund supported by local grants and private donors. Families can use the money to fill any gaps in their resources (e.g., rental assistance, hotel stays, gas and food cards). Partnering with the housing specialist enables home visitors to focus on child development during their sessions and to remain adaptable when families are in crisis. For example, home visitors may drive families to the center to have sessions rather than meeting where the family is staying. They also use several resources to support their work with unhoused families, including a [toolkit](#) developed by the Wisconsin State Task Force on Homelessness in Early Childhood.

**Accomplishments:** During the 2022–2023 school year, Reach Dane served 47 unhoused families through Head Start and 28 families in EHS. From January 2022 to June 2023, the in-house support fund helped prevent 61 evictions and pay for 17 emergency hotel stays, in many cases preventing families from sleeping in cars or outdoors.

As part of the local Early Childhood Homelessness Work Group, Reach Dane has raised awareness of housing insecurity and homelessness through panels and education for teachers, family services staff, and childcare providers. For example, Reach Dane, the local school district, and the Wisconsin Head Start Association hosted a statewide professional development workshop for early childhood providers on how to collaborate with the community to serve families who are unhoused.

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*“Despite unimaginable difficulties when families are experiencing homelessness, I have heard story after story of what parents do to comfort and keep routines in place for their children. Parents have shown up to our parent policy council meetings while facing homelessness, wanting to give back, out of gratitude for the support they have received from our staff. I find all of this to be remarkable.” –Amy Selenske*

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**Upcoming Activities:** Reach Dane plans to continue raising awareness and honoring the stories of families who are unhoused. It will continue partnering with local school districts to expand family access to Head Start and EHS services through the [National Head Start Association’s SchoolHouse app](#)—with a focus on prioritizing referrals for unhoused families.

**For More Information:** Contact Amy Selenske ([aselenske@reachdane.org](mailto:aselenske@reachdane.org)), comprehensive services director at Reach Dane.

## A Statewide Perspective: Minnesota

More than one-third of children in Minnesota belong to a Black, Indigenous, and Populations of Color (BIPOC) community, according to a report analyzing data from the 2016–2020 American Community Survey. Black and American Indian children in the state are more likely to experience poverty than their White, non-Hispanic peers (Minnesota State Demographics Center, 2023). Statewide, families of color are 6.2 times more likely to be unhoused than White families (Pieper, 2023).

To better serve these diverse populations, the [Minnesota Department of Health](#) works with several types of entities that deliver home visiting services to unhoused children and families:

- ✔ **Sovereign Ojibwe Nations.** Four Ojibwe tribes in northern Minnesota provide home visiting services to enrolled residents. Some offer housing programs, such as [New Moon](#), which provides onsite, outpatient treatment for substance use disorders, case management, alternative therapies, and mental health services.
- ✔ **Indigenous-led nonprofits.** Four Indigenous-led nonprofit agencies (three urban, one rural) provide home visiting in Minnesota, along with housing initiatives and advocacy. [Little Earth of United Tribes](#), the largest Native-owned and Native-built housing project in the United States, houses mostly young families in Minneapolis.
- ✔ **Other specialized nonprofits.** Ten additional evidence-based nonprofit agencies (eight urban, two rural) deliver home visiting in the state, primarily to BIPOC or immigrant and refugee families. One of these agencies, [Simpson Housing Services](#), provides housing services and Family Spirit home visiting services to up to 38 families referred from the shelter system. Housing advocates help participants with their housing search, then transfer case management to home visitors once housing is secured.

Due to the scale of the housing crisis in Indigenous communities, people remain on housing waitlists for months or even years. This scarcity exists in urban areas and on tribal reservations. People living on the northern Ojibwe reservations experience the highest infant mortality rate in the state, potentially affected by their lack of access to housing with safe sleeping conditions (Division of Child and Family Health, 2021). Because Ojibwe households often take in community members who would otherwise be unhoused, the rate of houselessness is higher than reflected by the data.

The Minnesota Department of Health recently launched the Promising Practices Family Home Visiting initiative to develop services tailored to specific priority populations. Of the 10 new programs funded, 3 have housing components, including a program focused on survivors of intimate partner violence.

For more information, email Kristen Tharaldson ([kristen.tharaldson@state.mn.us](mailto:kristen.tharaldson@state.mn.us)), tribal and nonprofit grants manager and community initiatives coordinator at the Minnesota Department of Health.

## Conclusion

Addressing the complex needs of unhoused families requires an informed, adaptable approach that accounts for myriad challenges. The agencies described in this brief use key strategies to support families through home visiting, among other services. Other home visiting programs can consider adopting these strategies to better serve unhoused populations:

- ✔ Establishing partnerships between home visiting programs and local housing services
- ✔ Continuing to serve families through housing transitions
- ✔ Using different communication and outreach strategies to recruit unhoused families
- ✔ Visiting families at nontraditional locations
- ✔ Reducing home visitor caseloads to allow extra time to support families and accommodate travel times
- ✔ Providing specialized staff (e.g., mental health specialists, financial coaches) to help address specific needs

These strategies add tailored support to home visiting services for unhoused families and recognize that for many families, basic needs must be addressed before turning to other family goals. For other families, home visiting services may be useful throughout a crisis period when they are coordinated with housing services and informed by the family's context.

Families with young children are unhoused because of systemic issues like gentrification, displacement, rising housing costs, unlivable wages, and lack of affordable housing options. Like any form of service delivery, home visiting can only remedy some of the effects of systemic issues on individuals; advocacy and policy changes are needed to address houselessness and its root causes fully. However, innovative and dedicated home visitors can make meaningful differences in the lives of children and families experiencing the challenges of housing insecurity.

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