

How can we leverage Social Capital on behalf of families we serve?



Who do you call when your car leaves you stranded....and you're not sure how you'll manage repair costs into your budget? Perhaps it's your co-worker whose husband is a mechanic and he comes to lend a hand, free of charge. Your college-aged son is looking for an internship opportunity and so you make a few phone calls to some colleagues and help him land that job. Your friend experiences a serious illness and you use your social connections to help her navigate appointments or help with the children. You're able to get through the crises and challenges of life because of the support network you've accumulated over the years through various friends, relatives, colleagues, and experiences. This is your [Social Capital](#).

Social capital is mutual, social relationships which are used to connect to quality resources and opportunities. For those living in the middle class, social capital is often defined by social connections. But for many living in poverty, it is having access to vital, tangible supports. Families facing homelessness often lack these supports and connections or they may have exhausted their networks. When these resources have been exhausted or are nonexistent, homelessness may become inevitable. In order to become stable, families need resources and the ability to call on networks that can help them move forward. Social capital is needed to help find those resources.

When families are facing homelessness, having a network of connectors to assist in obtaining employment, locate an affordable mechanic, or find sustainable housing is vital. With social and tangible supports, families reach housing and financial stability more quickly and can navigate future crises that allow them to remain housed. Dr. Ellen Bassuk, states that: "All families regardless of their socioeconomic status need supports and services at various points in the life cycle and especially during periods where inevitable life stresses, especially losses, may become overwhelming. Few people can live alone, isolated from support, compassion, and instrumental assistance....Support networks are women's social capital, a resource which poor women and women in crisis must often draw upon very heavily." (Bassuk, E.L., DeCandia, C.J., Richard, M.K., (2015). *Services matter: How housing and services can end family homelessness*. Needham, MA: The Bassuk Center. Retrieved from: <http://www.bassukcenter.org/services-matter/>)

A lack of social capital and supportive relationships also increase feelings of hopelessness and depression, additional barriers to long-term housing and financial stability. According to Robert Putnam's book, "Bowling Alone" social capital is vital to family wellbeing. Social capital provides a sense of belonging, bridges families to networks, creates feelings of trust and safety, and allows for reciprocity.

Homeless service providers can help the families they serve by enhancing their support networks and helping them to rebuild or establish social capital. Providers can assist families facing homelessness in

developing social capital in two ways. First, providers can guide families in developing social networks – formal and informal – that are stable, built on mutual trust and reciprocity, and consist of others with resources that can make a difference in their lives. Second, providers can guide families in how to develop their own constructive personal and interpersonal resources that have value and can be shared with the network. (*Social Supports 2003*)

Homeless Service Providers can also use their own social capital as an organization (i.e. landlord networks, connections with other providers, etc.). Many providers also have established relationships with volunteers in the community. Volunteers who collect or provide donated items, or help out with events or programs. Volunteers who believe in the mission of the organization. Providers can utilize this great resource to build networks of support for the families they serve. Engaging a small group of volunteers for each family served can expand that family's networking availability and provide tangible supports that will move them out of homelessness and toward stability more quickly and with successful outcomes.

Providers can implement formal training to ensure volunteers provide informed and compassionate support for the families they are walking with. Training that educates volunteers to the effects of trauma, what it means to live in poverty, and the importance of meeting both tangible and emotional needs. In their attempts to use their social capital to open doors for families and in other interactions, volunteers can be trained how to be discreet and respectful of families' privacy. Volunteer training can also cover cultural humility, strengths-based support, and relationship-building. Service providers will want to inform volunteers that they accept families without discrimination, extending compassion and grace to families facing homelessness who may be used to being excluded and judged.

These extended personal and professional networks of support multiply the level of assistance available to families. Job leads, housing opportunities, medical assistance, or donations of items like a couch or bed are often provided through the social capital networks of volunteers within your community. The effect of social capital can be a game-changer for families with few or no connections of their own.

Learn how Bridge of Hope engages [Neighboring Volunteers](#) to provide social capital in ending family homelessness or please visit; <https://bridgeofhopeinc.org/our-model/>.

