

# The Life We Deserve: A Model of Supportive Housing for Teen Families

Final Report

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## Context

### Teen Parenting

Teen pregnancy and parenting can involve a range of complex challenges. In particular, teen parents are often experiencing their own developmental changes while they learn to navigate their children's development and assume their new parental roles (Bohr, Dhayanandhan, Summers, & Kanter, 2011). Understandably, teen parents may also lack accurate child development information and confidence in their parenting skills as compared to older parents (Bornstein & Patrick, 2007; Dallas, Wilson, & Salgado, 2000; Letorneau, Stewart, & Barnfather, 2004). Many teen parents report dealing with stigma and judgment in the school setting, as well as from social service and health care providers (McDermott & Graham, 2005; SmithBattle, 2013).

Related to these challenges, teen parents are at heightened risk for a variety of poor outcomes such as low educational attainment, mental health concerns, and difficulties with parenting (Bonell et al., 2005; Harden et al., 2006; Molborn, Lawrence, James-Hawkins, & Fomby, 2014; Lehti et al., 2012). Furthermore, a number of teen families find themselves isolated from social support networks (McDonald et al., 2009). A lack of social support can make it increasingly difficult for teen parents to continue their education, thus reducing their chances of acquiring employment and upward mobility (Graham & McDermott, 2006). This can in turn interfere with effective parenting (McDonald et al., 2009).

Overcoming these challenges depends on the level of supports and services available to teen parents (Furstenberg, 2005). Indeed, teen mothers who have access to supports are better able to develop strong attachments with their children (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Flaherty et al., 2011), leading to better long-term outcomes for the children of teen parents. Unfortunately, research on successful methods for supporting teen parents and their children is limited (Karabanow & Hughes, 2013). The lack of an evidence base in this area undermines effective decision-making given the specific needs of teen families and the high number of young people who become parents in Canada compared to other Western countries (McDonald et al., 2009).

### The Need for Supportive Housing

The provision of safe and secure housing has been identified as a key factor in supporting the success of teen families (Corlyon & Stock, 2011). When parents and their children lack access to safe, secure, and affordable housing, families can become stuck in a cycle of poverty, with negative implications for healthy child development (Graham & McDermott, 2006). Teen parents often struggle to attain housing and, for many, it is an unaffordable luxury (Terra Talk Back Survey, 2015). This challenge is exacerbated by the stigma that surrounds teen parenting, which contributes to reluctance from many landlords to accept teen families as tenants (Graham & McDermott, 2006). This problem has become more pronounced due to housing shortages across Edmonton and other Canadian cities (Gaetz, Gulliver, & Richter, 2014) and has left a significant number of teens with few alternatives but to raise their children in unstable circumstances (Karabanow & Hughes, 2013).

There is evidence to suggest that participation in supportive housing initiatives can result in significant benefits to people experiencing vulnerable circumstances (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Supportive housing is the provision of long-term, affordable, independent housing in combination with flexible, individualized, accessible supports (Rog et al., 2014). Despite the documented benefits of supportive housing, most approaches to

homelessness have been emergency responses rather than preventative (Gaetz, 2013). However, preventative approaches that focus on the coordination of services and investment in supports can reduce the likelihood that young people and their children will become homeless in the first place (Gaetz, 2013). There is currently a limited understanding about the best forms of support that should be provided alongside housing (Kirsh et al., 2011). In addition, no model currently exists outlining the best ways to provide supportive housing for the specific needs of teen parents and their children.

### **Terra-Brentwood Partnership**

The Terra Centre for Teen Parents and Brentwood Community Development Group partnered in 2014 to offer safe, secure, and affordable housing to teen parents and their children in combination with wraparound supports in the Edmonton neighbourhood of Woodcroft. This supportive housing program is known as the Successful Families program. Terra Centre is a non-profit organization that has been supporting teen parents in Edmonton since the organization's inception over 40 years ago, with the general goal of helping pregnant and parenting teens to develop self-reliance and skills to reach their full potential as parents. Brentwood Community Development Group was formed in 1977 with a vision of affordable housing for Edmonton communities. Brentwood owns and manages 207 townhouse units in the city of Edmonton.

### **Research Objectives**

With the intent of building knowledge regarding the model of supportive housing being delivered, Terra Centre and Brentwood Community Development Group contacted the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP) at the University of Alberta. The objectives of our research study were to:

- Build a partnership between the Terra Centre, Brentwood Community Development Group, and CUP;
- Create an external funding application to support our research partnership; and
- Develop a supportive housing model for teen families that could be implemented and studied.

### **Approach: Community-based Participatory Research**

Our collaborative research process was guided by the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR; Israel et al., 2003), which integrates research, action, reflection, and communication (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). CBPR brings researchers and community partners together to develop mutually beneficial knowledge intended to create meaningful social change. CBPR is also intended to generate critical understandings of the root causes and consequences of the issues being researched by applying local knowledge and experience to data. In the spirit of CBPR, this project was an equitable partnership among multiple stakeholders who worked together to complete all project activities.

### **Objective 1: Partnership Development**

Our research team from CUP worked together with Terra and Brentwood to achieve our goal of developing a research partnership through the current project. With this goal in mind, we developed and carried out a number of strategies and project activities. Primarily, attending bi-

weekly housing meetings, monthly Capture meetings, and annual reflection meetings was instrumental to developing our partnership. Conversations at initial meetings shaped the development of our research plan and program logic model, and allowed for the clarification of partnership priorities and expectations. Ongoing meeting attendance provided the opportunity to continue our collaborative reflection and learning processes. Having one or more research team members physically present at the Successful Families office at least on a biweekly basis, either for team meetings or photovoice groups, facilitated relationship and trust building between our teams. In addition, one of our research team members frequently attended ongoing program activities such as barbeques for participants and field trips, which facilitated the development of rapport. Importantly, we learned that conducting individual staff interviews was useful for clarifying individual experiences, goals, and expectations of our research partnership. Together, these activities resulted in the formation of a strong research relationship whereby our research learnings were available to staff on a continual, real-time basis in order to inform ongoing adjustments to program policies and practices.

### **Objective 2: External Funding Application**

During the course of the current grant, our research team applied for and received funds for two MITACS-Accelerate internships, one at the post-doctoral level and one at the doctoral level. In addition, a post-doctoral fellow working on the current project received funding through the 2016 Women and Children's Health Institute Patient and Community Engagement Training grant. Finally, our research team worked in collaboration with partners from Terra and Brentwood to develop a successful grant proposal to Employment and Social Development Canada to fund Successful Families staff positions along with further program development and evaluation.

### **Objective 3: Model Development**

#### **Data Sources**

**Literature review.** Our research team set out to conduct an integrative review (Torraco, 2005) of academic and grey literature. The goal of the literature review was to map the existing field of knowledge regarding supportive housing for teen families in order to inform the development of our own model. Toward this goal, University of Alberta Libraries databases were searched (e.g., Social Sciences Citation Index, Academic Search Complete) using combinations of relevant search terms (e.g., teenage parents, supportive housing, child development, wraparound support, evaluation). This review revealed a limited body of literature related to supportive housing for teen families. As a result, a brief annotated bibliography of relevant literature was created in place of a full literature review, and we changed the focus of our review to areas which researchers have more fully investigated. In particular, two literature reviews were completed that focused on (1) early childhood development for the children of teen parents; and (2) effective methods for research with vulnerable youth.

**Team meetings and interviews with staff.** As part of ongoing program implementation, the Brentwood Executive Director, Brentwood administrator, and Successful Families manager meet on a bi-weekly basis to provide updates on current and prospective participants and discuss program activities. A member of our research team from CUP attended these bi-weekly housing meetings to learn about the program and partnership. Learnings were documented with meeting

minutes. In addition, the Successful Families manager met with the three front-line program staff members on a monthly basis to reflect on program activities, successes, and challenges. One or more members of our CUP research team joined these “Capture meetings” to participate in their reflective processes, ask probing questions, and record program learnings with meeting minutes. Also, on a yearly basis, the Brentwood leadership and administrative teams, Terra leadership team and front-line staff members, as well as our CUP research team met to engage in reflection on the Successful Families Program as well as strategic planning. Reflections and learnings were documented with meeting minutes.

In addition to documenting learnings at team meetings, staff interviews were conducted to understand critical factors in providing supportive housing for teen families, toward our broader research objective of developing the supportive housing model. A post-doctoral fellow from CUP (Dr. Kingsley, listed as a contributor for the current project) conducted individual interviews in person. Six front-line and supervisory staff from Terra and Brentwood participated in individual interviews. Interviews were held at staff offices and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. The research team developed the semi-structured interview guide, which included questions about staff experiences with and knowledge of the supportive housing program; program challenges and successes; as well as hopes and recommendations for moving forward. Interviews were audio recorded with participants’ permission and transcribed verbatim.

**Photovoice with teen parents.** The photovoice method was used to provide teen parents with the opportunity to share their perspectives on supportive housing, again toward our broader research aim of developing the supportive housing model. Photovoice involves a group of community members taking photos in response to an issue of importance to the community (Wang & Burris, 1997). We began by asking teen parents to take photos that answered two general questions: (1) what is important to you as a parent? and (2) what do you need in order to help your children grow and develop in healthy ways?

Between December 2016 and May 2017, two members of our research team met with teen parents on a bi-weekly basis to complete the photovoice portion of our project. In total, thirteen teen parents attended photovoice groups. Typically, between four and six participants were present at each group. We began with a group session during which the purpose of the photovoice project was outlined, and logistical details around choosing the subjects of photos and sharing photos were discussed. Before subsequent group meetings, participants took photos and sent them to a member of the research team to print. During bi-weekly meetings, we engaged in group discussions with teen parent participants regarding their printed photos, their perspectives on the supportive housing program, and their experiences as teen parents more generally. Group discussions were audio recorded with participants’ permission and transcribed verbatim. Each meeting began by sharing a meal with teen parent participants, their children, program staff, and the researchers. Program staff provided childcare for participants’ children during biweekly photovoice groups.

### **Data Analysis**

**Team meetings and interviews with staff.** A preliminary thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2007) was carried out with data from interviews and team meetings. This involved organizing the data into meaningful groups, as well as searching for overarching themes and sub-themes. Emerging themes were noted and discussed, before which a “learnings document” was created and shared with our community partners. Community partners provided feedback on the

learnings observed by our research team and discussed how to adjust their policies and practices accordingly. Our preliminary analyses have resulted in a conceptual summary of our data, presented in this report, which will be further reviewed and refined in consultation with partners from the Successful Families program.

**Photovoice with teen parents.** Holding multiple photovoice groups allowed for data collection and analysis to occur concurrently. Wang and Burris (1997) described three general methods for analyzing photovoice data. These include (1) selecting photos, where participants choose the photos that they deem to be most representative of their experiences, and that they wish to be displayed; (2) contextualizing, where participants tell stories about what the photos mean to them; and (3) codifying, where data are sorted into codes, categories, and themes. All three of these methods were used for the current project. Selecting photos and contextualizing occurred during biweekly photovoice groups. The codifying stage was carried out in alignment with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2007). Similar to our interview data, our photovoice findings are currently in a preliminary stage and will be refined and finalized in consultation with our community partners.

## Results

### Literature Review

Our research team completed literature reviews in two distinct areas, which provided information relevant to the development of our partnership and program model. More specifically, we examined literature related to (1) early childhood development and teen parenting; and (2) methods for research with vulnerable youth. Below is a brief summary of the literature review across these two topics.

**Early child development and teen parenting.** There is a robust body of evidence that describes the extent to which early childhood experiences shape subsequent growth as well as later health and wellness (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). For parents and children who are at heightened risk for failing to develop quality relationships, such as teen parents and their children, supporting the development of early secure attachments and healthy relationships is particularly critical (Lutz, Anderson, Pridham, Riesch, & Becker, 2010). However, there is a distinct lack of research that examines the development of quality relationships between teen parents and their children.

Research has largely highlighted disparities between the children of teen parents and the children of older parents, with the children of teen parents demonstrating more negative outcomes across academic, cognitive, social, emotional, and overall health-related domains (Beers & Hollo, 2009; Molborn & Dennis, 2012; Slomski Long, 2009). Importantly, however, studies examining the outcomes of children born to teen parents have often failed to distinguish between the impacts of the economic and social disadvantages associated with teen parenting and the impacts of teen parenting per se (Lawlor & Shaw, 2002; Mayers et al., 2008). Indeed, research has documented substantial challenges associated with teen parenting including significant alterations to teens' own developmental trajectories, tensions between the roles of typical teenagers and those of parents, experiences of judgment and stigma, as well as fewer academic and vocational opportunities and an associated increased risk of poverty (Bohr et al., 2011; Corlyon & Stock, 2011; SmithBattle, 2013; Slomski Long, 2009).

Despite an urgent need to understand how best to support teen families, evaluations of programs that target teen parents and their children are typically unsystematic, and it is not clear how many such programs exist (Sadler et al., 2007). With regard to housing in particular, we did not find any North American studies that systematically evaluated the impacts of supportive housing programs on teen parents or their children.

From the information gathered through our literature review, we concluded that there is a clear need to implement and evaluate programs that address the higher rates of poverty among teen families, including housing programs. Moreover, rigorous, participatory, strength-based research is needed to understand teen parents' experiences and the ways that innovative programs, practices and policies can support the health and development of teen families.

**Methods for research with vulnerable youth.** Researchers have documented a number of challenges related to research access and engagement of vulnerable youth, which can interfere with project timelines (Alderson, 2004). Despite challenges with research recruitment, however, it is important to provide opportunities for vulnerable young people to participate and contribute to research that impacts them (Curtis et al., 2003). Building relationships with parents, participants, and agency staff members is critical for providing these opportunities, while maintaining awareness of potential ethical hurdles relevant to recruitment (Abebe, 2009).

Data collection with vulnerable youth can also pose challenges. Overall, because it can be difficult to predict which data collection and participant retention strategies will be effective, the use of multiple strategies is most prudent (Taylor, 2009). Promising strategies include building trusting relationships with participants, using effective interpersonal skills in interacting with participants, including flexibility and patience, working with agency staff members to collect data, and employing youth as peer researchers (Newbury & Hoskins, 2008; Zayas et al., 2009).

Although an increasing focus on the meaningful participation of youth in all stages of the research process has been emphasized, many researchers find that, in practice, initiating and sustaining such participation can be very challenging. However, participatory approaches to knowledge translation can be particularly effective in research with youth. Involving youth in knowledge translation can provide an opportunity for participants to discuss sensitive topics, learn about how to encourage change in their communities, and actively participate in the creation of locally relevant knowledge (Yonas et al., 2013).

Overall, whereas a wide variety of methods can be employed for research with youth, participatory and arts-based methods represent promising approaches with recent increases in popularity. Visual arts-based methods can be especially engaging and effective for generating meaningful knowledge. Arguably, there is no particular research method that always works best with vulnerable youth; rather, the most useful approach is to critically question and reflect on all aspects of the research process (Darbyshire et al., 2005). In general, there is a need for researchers to employ developmentally appropriate, flexible, and innovative methods that allow for a full spectrum of research participation (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010).

### **Interviews and Team Meetings with Staff**

Data from interviews and team meetings were organized into four categories, consisting of (1) approach to service delivery; (2) structure of the program model; and (3) the Terra-Brentwood partnership.

**Approach to service delivery.** Through interviews and team meetings, staff reported providing a wide range of supports to participants, which mainly take the form of **home visits** and **support and educational groups**. Through these means, staff provide **eviction prevention education, child development information, teaching and modeling parenting skills, teaching independent living skills, discussions about healthy relationships, goal planning, crisis planning, and community referrals**.

In order to carry out these activities, staff reported that, primarily, it was necessary to develop **strong relationships** with families. Strong relationships facilitated the ability to use an **individualized wraparound approach** in the work with families. This involved operating from an understanding that a uniform definition of success cannot be applied across participants, but rather that all participants have different capacities and require staff to “*meet them where they are at.*” In this way, staff recognized the importance of using a **flexible approach** in their work with families. This must be balanced with the need to **communicate clear expectations to participants**, including the need for participants to demonstrate **accountability** to program expectations. As one Terra staff member explained:

...you have to be willing to put in the work. You can't move in here and expect, okay, it's independent living and now you move in here and do whatever you want... We're not just giving you a suite that's subsidized. It comes with other things.

On a related note, a Terra staff member described:

I think taking responsibility is a huge piece of that work for [parent's] engagement in the program... we're not saying if you move in here and you've got some mental health concerns that are limiting you from going to school or getting a job, we're not saying we're going to kick you out because of it but you need to be willing to engage with something to move your life forward. So if you need to take a few months off to go do some intensive counselling or whatever that's fine but you need to be willing to work with us and show us that you're also willing to move forward and to do that.

Additionally, in a relatively early stage of program implementation, staff reflected on the importance of achieving a balance between **supporting participants and building their capacity for independence**. As one example:

...intervening isn't always the right thing. We have to make sure that we're not setting people up for being unsafe but we have to help them understand that they have responsibility in this. If they don't pay rent, they're going to get a letter [from Brentwood]. I mean, if we jump in every time they don't pay rent, they don't learn that they have responsibility.

As another example, staff found that many participants had difficulty communicating face-to-face with Brentwood as their landlord. Rather than advocating on behalf of participants, staff began to help participants write letters to Brentwood as a method of communication. In this

way, participants were building their capacity for self-advocacy, aligned with an overarching program goal of **empowering participants**. One Terra staff member described how:

...it was really difficult for the participant to see themselves as capable... they don't recognize that they have those skills to make changes in their lives and if we take the time to do the work beforehand...so that you have those skills necessary and when things come up, you're able to deal with it. You don't need to feel like you need to come here and get me to deal with it for you. I think that's the biggest thing is that whole empowerment piece.

The population of families served by the Successful Families program are often in crisis. However, staff found that being in constant response to crises took away from the use of a **strength-based approach** and from **capacity building**. Conversations in this area highlighted the need for staff to **establish and maintain boundaries with participants**, and for staff to incorporate a **focus on prevention** into their work with participants. As one Terra staff member described:

It was kind of like a constant crisis piece...I went a little overboard in sort of doing things for them instead of doing things with them...it's not serving them in the long-term if they don't know how to do the things I was doing for them like when they need to call their [income subsidy program] worker to keep getting funding because they've got mental health concerns...instead of letting them take responsibility for that. Which just enabled them to keep living how they're living because they'd just know that I'd be there to just pick up the pieces.

In this vein, Terra staff increased their focus on **developing natural supports** in order for participants to have a support network to rely on before challenging circumstances escalated to crisis situations:

we need to help young people understand that they need people in their lives that aren't service providers. And that we should not be taking it at face value when they say I don't want any contact with my family... That as we're having conversations about everything else with the young people, we should say, so who if you're sick tomorrow, are you going to call? And if you don't have anybody, then who would you like to call? And how can I help you build that relationship?

With the intention of **building natural supports and a sense of community**, staff reported encouraging participants to develop positive relationships with neighbours. In one instance, a neighbour reportedly provided a reference letter in an effort to prevent a participant's eviction. Staff also worked to establish and maintain **connections with community agencies** (for example, the local food bank, library, Head Start), toward having the ability to refer families to other appropriate services as needed.

**Structure of the program model.** An important program learning relates to the program's staff composition. Given the complex work that Successful Families staff engaged in

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with participants, it was discovered that a **full-time manager** was required to adequately meet the supervision needs of staff:

... having somebody that's physically here and, like, mentally, emotionally here for us as well...so [staff] know where they're supposed to be and [the housing manager] can sort of lead them there.

A full-time manager was also necessary to grow the Terra-Brentwood partnership and add elements of structure to the program:

I think the relationship with Brentwood and the relationship with the staff and the participants, it's making such a difference having somebody there Monday to Friday 9 to 5. It's what that program needs. Especially when we're in the development stage of it...

In the initial stages of program implementation, a number of evictions occurred stemming from critical incidents with participants. As a result, more rigorous **screening processes and entry criteria** were put into place to determine if participants were a fit for the Successful Families program and to set families up for success. As described by one Terra staff member:

We want to make sure that the [parents] we screen in have capacity to be successful. Cause it's not good for the young person either if they show up there and then they have to be evicted. It's just another failure in their eyes and that just does a lot of damage. So...wanting to empower the youth to be successful so that they feel successful. And that they feel like they can move forward and that it's not another, I didn't do well.

In addition, a **phased program structure** was implemented, with different phases having requirements for various levels of support and program participation. In particular, participants enter the program in phase one, requiring them to attend at least two groups per month, engage in at least two home visits per month, demonstrate active participation in a day program (typically school or work), active goal planning, and no tenancy-related warnings or evictions for 15 months. Successful completion of phase one requirements allows participants to move into phase two, where one home visit and one group per month, active participation in a day program, active goal planning, and no tenancy-related warnings or evictions are required for 20 months. In phase three, only one home visit and one group per year are required, and participants can continue accessing Terra support as required. As a Terra staff member mentioned:

...we can move [participants] backwards and forwards through the phases. And so that will be a discussion between the Terra staff and Brentwood so we'll decide that based on their...they'll be held more accountable for their actions....hopefully that means that we can just sort of work toward this goal where they can live at Brentwood, they can graduate into phase 3, they can live here independently.

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Staff reported that implementing a phased model assisted in clarifying participant expectations. Relatedly, implementation of the Successful Families program began while the program was under development. As a result, staff roles and program goals were being developed while the program was being implemented, and ambiguity regarding roles was experienced as a challenge. An important learning that resulted was around **staff having a clear understanding of their roles and program goals** to support the program model.

Related to staff roles, in the initial stages of program development and implementation, staff reported that lines between landlords and support staff were becoming blurred. As a result, it became very difficult for front-line staff to balance the need for relationship building and supporting participants with feelings of obligation to report circumstances that could impact participants' tenancy. An important learning, then, was the need to **maintain a separation between the roles of landlord and support staff**. In other words, Brentwood assumed the role of landlord, while Terra staff provided support. As one Brentwood staff member stated:

As a landlord, [you] don't have the ability to go have a conversation about... your drug addiction or whatever...so Terra brings that other side. That compassionate side, that can talk to you, that can point you in the right direction, that can do all those things that landlords have to stay one legal step away from. But that also does the same thing for Terra. Cause they can't come in and have to play landlord as well...That's why it works.

From a Terra staff member's perspective:

What that allows us to do is really focus on the families...And so directing our staff resources and energy and focus to those places. As opposed to, let's say if that had been in a community apartment, all of the advocacy work, we would be doing with the landlord...all the work to try to find them alternate sources of funding because they got evicted...we had like 20 staff working on housing in different ways as opposed to now we can consolidate that, Brentwood does all of that, they do all the applications, all the screening, all the paperwork...because we're not the landlord in this. Brentwood is the landlord.

Although Successful Families staff and Brentwood have demarcated roles, both Brentwood and Successful Families staff are located in the Woodcroft community. It was recognized that having **staff office space in close proximity to participants' homes** was highly valuable to the program model. Successful Families staff converted a residence owned by Brentwood to office, program, and child care space. This allowed for participants to easily access programs, Successful Families staff support, and to feel at home in the program space.

Similarly, staff identified the importance of the Successful Families program taking place in a **safe, family friendly community**:

A lot of places that our families have lived in, they've felt judged just being young parents...It's really, truly community development happening. It's the tenants that are living there helping to... change their focus on the community of young parents...The one real big advantage in the sense that it's close to transportation, it's a very...established, mature neighbourhood, there's not a lot

of exposure to poverty and crime, it's a very safe community. So it's something that might even be a relatively new experience that way for some of our families.

In addition, the neighbourhood where the Successful Families program is located became designated as "crime free," so that housing was required to abide by certain standards such as having quality locks on doors and motion sensor lighting outside, and all residents were required to obtain criminal record checks before moving in. Importantly, the results of criminal record checks were examined on a case-by-case basis. If tenants had relatively minor offenses on their record that would not foreseeably impact their tenancy, Brentwood could enact flexibility around this policy.

Another unique aspect of the program was the potential for tenants to receive subsidy indefinitely, provided that their income level continues to fall within Brentwood criteria. A goal for participants was to make Brentwood their long-term home. It was also possible for participants to **continue living at Brentwood on a long-term basis** without needing to receive subsidy. As one Terra staff member stated:

Another goal would be really, truly to support those families in maintaining long-term housing so they see Brentwood as a community that they can stay in, even though as they gain skills, gain employment, and their subsidy would be adjusted as their income gains, that they would feel that sense of community and stay there. Because so many of them have had so much transition in their life moving and their kids are so young and a lot of times they've already moved 4 or 5 times like in two years. So the goal of really supporting families to be long term tenants at Brentwood and seeing themselves as part of the community.

**Terra-Brentwood partnership.** Staff identified that a critical element of the Terra-Brentwood partnership was the presence of **shared values and a common vision**. Leaders and front-line staff members from both Terra and Brentwood shared a common focus on providing supports that drew on the strengths and capacity of teen parents to work toward independence, raise resilient children, and foster healthy families:

I think the one thing that stands out most is the common and shared values that...both Terra and Brentwood share around really, truly believing in the capacity of these young parents...what they need is...the right support at the right time around housing and that's really fundamental to them moving their lives forward.

In this way, it was identified that Terra and Brentwood **complemented the work of one another**. As a staff member described, Terra and Brentwood are "*organizations with similar missions doing opposite sides of the work.*" Along these lines, partners demonstrated their full investment in the program with a **willingness to work through challenges**. As one Terra staff member noted about Brentwood:

And it's not just going to be a throw up your hands and let's just quit then. Like, that has never been their response and I think that is really reassuring for

everybody in that housing program...knowing that it's okay to address some of the concerns because Brentwood is so open to working through things or helping to come up with some ideas. I think that's really important.

On a related note, staff identified that **trust** between partners was critical for the effective operation of the program. Relatedly, **transparent communication** between partners was reportedly essential. When asked to explain why she felt that the partnership between Terra and Brentwood was strong, one Terra staff member explained that:

I think just our capacity to have those really kind of candid conversations...more specific around just being really honest about what's happening...before, it seems like there was a little bit of tentativeness around what to share and how much to share and if things were going wrong for the families, being worried about sharing that and I think that's changed. I think we've become more clear about, we have to be sharing some of these things to alert them...sometimes we need to be really clear about, we see this going down a path that's not going to be helpful to anybody.

Staff discussed that strong communication processes were aligned with the ability to **share information** regarding participants. As one Brentwood staff member stated:

Before, a lot of [parents] were lost through tenancy because we'd just go, we're frustrated. We're done. Whereas now, Terra's in there and they go, okay. This person's falling down right now because her mother died last month. Let's give her another month. Let's see if we can pick this back up. And we're going to pick them back up and you know, maybe we help someone that otherwise wouldn't have been able to help.

A Terra staff member similarly shared that:

...our young families... they're all still on a journey... And so they do have occasions where perhaps they don't make the best decisions, and that might impact the Brentwood community or their neighbours. But [Brentwood staff] have a very balanced way of understanding and looking at that and making decisions about, how do we respond to that...collectively we've looked at to try to salvage and maintain that housing for that family...despite the fact that maybe in some other arrangements, with other landlords...certain kinds of activities may not be tolerated.

**Summary: Interviews and team meetings with staff.** Overall, staff described their approach to service delivery which, through engaging in home visits and group programs, allowed them to form strong relationships with participants. Staff provided support to families that was individualized, flexible, strength-based, and worked toward empowerment and capacity-building. Staff also reported that it was important for them to communicate clear expectations for participants to ensure accountability, that demonstrating appropriate boundaries with participants was essential, and that a focus on prevention assisted in lessening crisis situations. Staff also

described working with participants to develop their natural support systems and to build a sense of community.

In terms of the structure of the program model, a full-time manager proved beneficial for the program in order to meet staff supervision needs and focus on building the Terra-Brentwood partnership. The program also put in place a phase structure as well as screening processes and entry criteria toward setting up families for success. In order for the program to function well, it also became important for staff to have a clear understanding of their roles and the program's goals, and to maintain a separation between the roles of landlord and support staff. Other important aspects of the model included staff having office space in close proximity to participants' homes, the program being situated in a safe, family-friendly community, and the ability for participants to continue living in the community over the long-term.

The Terra-Brentwood partnership itself also deserved attention as a critical aspect of the model. According to staff and the researcher's observations, the model functions successfully because partners' work is complementary, partners are willing to work through challenges, and partners have a relationship that is based on trust, transparent communication, and information sharing.

### **Photovoice and Focus Groups with Parents**

Teen parents used photographs to describe what helps them to raise their children in healthy ways as well as their additional needs for raising their children in healthy ways. Data from biweekly group discussions were organized into three categories: (1) independent living; (2) structured support; and (3) community.

**Independent living.** For many participants, moving into housing with the Successful Families program represented their first home away from their own parents' home, a group home, or other forms of care. Participants **appreciated the ability to live independently** with their children, cook their own meals, use their own appliances, and enjoy their own furniture. As one participant noted, *"my son has toys in the basement, his room, and all over the house. He gets to choose where he wants to play because we have our own rooms, so he has independence. That's huge. He's happier here."* Another participant described valuing the opportunity to celebrate Christmas in her own home with her own children and partner.

Another parent provided her perspective on some of the challenges of independent living:

Transition from a group home was a culture shock. I was going from always being with people to always being by myself. That was challenging. But what I appreciate about living here is the space. I do not miss living in a group home at all. Here, you have more room to parent in your own style without being criticized.

A number of parents talked about how **empowering it felt to be able to parent their children in their own way, and to give their children stability in housing**. One participant was able to begin running her own day home to take in other neighbourhood children as a result of having her own place to live.

Parents also emphasized the importance of having a **positive relationship with a supportive landlord**. Although it could feel intimidating to speak to their landlord about housing issues (for example, repairs needed in their suite), participants relayed that program staff

helped them develop the confidence to raise issues with Brentwood in a respectful way. Parents also communicated that stability in their housing situation was paramount to reducing their stress levels and stabilizing their mental health. According to parents, **receiving a subsidy** to make safe and secure housing accessible was also essential for raising healthy children.

However, parents admitted that independent living did come with challenges. Despite receiving a subsidy being critical to easing financial burdens for participants, finances remained a challenge for participants. As one participant described, *“budgeting is hard, and even harder when you’re on your own supporting a child...sometimes it’s hard to focus on [my son] when I’m worried about money and whether I budgeted enough.”* As another participant shared:

The first weekend I was alone, I made a bunch of cookies and binge ate because I didn’t know what to do with all my freedom. Crazy amount of responsibility compared to living in a group home. In a group home, you don’t have to do grocery shopping, all the cooking and cleaning.

Challenges with living independently could be addressed with staff support and program structure, as discussed next.

**Structured support.** Although participants deeply valued the opportunity for independence, they also appreciated the opportunity to access a **structured form of support** through the Successful Families program. One participant shared that, *“because of [my housing worker] helping me with a budget, I actually have money for once in my life.”* Another participant described her experience with support from program staff:

What I like is an equal balance of the support and recognition that you’re an individual figuring out stuff yourself. Support is really important as long as it’s not overbearing. I like knowing they’re there to answer questions...the staff here go above and beyond.

This support came with requirements for **structured expectations**. As one participant described:

If you live here, you need to make sure you’re living a clean lifestyle, you’re not partying, your parenting is up to par, you’re not rowdy. People who aren’t responsible don’t last here. It gives people who might not know how to live responsibly the opportunity to learn. If you don’t come from a stable background, you might not know how to live that way, but having rules can help. Anyone who wants to can change their life. That’s the good thing about living here. People who live here are in a more stable place.

Another participant emphasized a similar concept: *“stability not just of housing but of routine. So you need to come to group, have a day program, pay your bills.”* Some participants described how being encouraged to develop a routine, in part through structured program support, helped them to begin *“doing something productive,”* which could mean attending school or employment.

Importantly, the structured support offered by the Successful Families program was made accessible by **program staff being located across the street from participants' homes**. Participants often joked about staff being able to simply peer out the windows of their offices to check on participants. However, they did not report this as an invasive experience; rather, they reported being grateful that their support workers were close by, and enjoyed knowing that they were able to drop into the Successful Families office and program space freely, as necessary.

In order to accept and benefit from structured support, **relationships with program staff** were reportedly critical. Participants described strong, trusting relationships with Successful Families staff, and shared that staff worked with them in a way that felt **supportive and non-judgmental**. Participants reported that they felt comfortable sharing "*anything and everything*" with program staff. One participant shared that "*[my housing worker] changed my life.*" Similarly, as a result of the structured support that she had received, one participant described how, "*having my son made me learn how to turn my life around. I still make mistakes, but I know how to live a stable life now and I'm going down a good path.*"

**Community.** Parents described how, in order to raise their children in healthy ways, it was necessary to live in a **safe community** where participants and their families could feel a sense of **connection and belonging**. Having other teen parents living close by contributed to this sense of community. For some participants, transitioning from a group home was accompanied by feelings of loneliness. Developing **friendships and connections with other Successful Families participants** was helpful in this regard. As one participant shared, "*It gets so lonely. So I'm happy I have other moms around here for other human contact.*" As another parent described, "*...as a result of these friendships and connections, I feel a part of the community and like I have someone close by to be friends with.*" With her own description, another participant similarly shared how, "*the most important part of this program for me is stabilization and integration in the community...finding and networking other resources which could include other moms in the complex, to get a hold of your sanity again and give the kids someone to play with.*"

Some parents additionally described amicable **relationships with neighbours** who were not part of the Successful Families program. Parents gave examples of their neighbours shovelling snow from their sidewalks, tidying up their yards, and swapping babysitting services. However, some parents described less positive relationships with their neighbours. As one participant described:

...as young mothers, we're often worried about what people think about us when they hear our kids screaming. You know how kids are; they're loud. I think subconsciously, we're always worried about what the neighbours think. And then you're just always policing your child's behaviour in a way so that no one can call social services. You're always worried about that. People judge teen moms more than older moms. Sometimes I feel under surveillance from my neighbours, like they could call children's services at any time.

Parents were clear that they wished to work toward establishing positive relationships with all neighbours in order to avoid **feelings of being under surveillance by neighbours as well as feelings of being stigmatized**. According to participants, they wanted neighbours and others to know that, "*we have the same values and concerns as older moms do.*" Another participant took a photo of her front door, noting that, "*it is locked, but a lot of times, young*

*moms don't have the chance for privacy. We have no choice but to allow a social worker into our home if a false accusation is made or if our age raises suspicion.*" Participants described feelings of judgment while in public, receiving invasive personal questions from strangers, and generally worrying about the way they were parenting in front of other people due to being young parents. According to participants, building understanding on the part of neighbours and the wider community, as well as bridging relationships with neighbours, was necessary in order to address some of these concerns.

Despite some challenges related to **stigma and judgment**, participants spoke at length about the positive aspects of their community. For example, participants reported that living in a safe community was very important to them as parents. Living in a neighbourhood that was designated as crime-free gave participants peace of mind. Participants reported being grateful for a neighbourhood where their children could play and explore, and where they could feel safe visiting the playground, even in the evenings when it was dark outside.

Having **amenities such as nearby playgrounds** was also noted by parents as a positive aspect of their community. As one parent described, *"I was lucky enough to find a wonderful day home within the community. Living in a community with so many close amenities is important to me."* Having accessible public transportation close by, a public library, a shopping centre, and other amenities was also noted by parents as beneficial. On this note, a participant shared how, *"it's nice that we live near parks and an open field so [my son] can play freely."*

**Summary: Photovoice and focus groups with teen parents.** Overall, participants reported that they valued the ability to live independently and to give their children stability in housing. It also reportedly felt empowering for teen parents to have the ability to raise their children in their own way. Having a positive relationship with a supportive landlord and receiving a subsidy were described as critical to living independently. Challenges with independent living, such as newfound freedom and difficulties with budgeting, were also reported, and could be addressed with the structured support offered by the Successful Families program. Structured support included being required to meet expectations for program participation and responsible living, facilitated by non-judgmental, supportive relationships with staff who were located in close physical proximity to participants' homes. In addition to relationships with staff, participants highlighted the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with other program participants and neighbours in the community in order to feel a sense of connection and belonging and to lessen feelings of stigma and judgment. Finally, living in a safe, crime-free neighbourhood with a variety of amenities was reported by participants as being important for raising their children in healthy ways.

### **Knowledge Dissemination**

In line with a CBPR approach, knowledge dissemination was an important aspect of the current project. Because our research team worked closely with partners on the current project, knowledge dissemination was integrated into our project activities. We shared emerging research findings at regular meetings on an ongoing basis. In addition, we provided partners from Terra and Brentwood with a bi-annual report of research progress.

As part of our photovoice process, we also held a photo exhibit as a community-relevant form of knowledge dissemination. In May 2017, we printed and framed photos captured and chosen by teen parent participants, and hung them on the walls of the Successful Families house

with accompanying captions. Program participants, stakeholders, partners, and members of the wider community were invited to attend our photovoice celebration, during which attendees toured the Successful Families house, viewed photos, engaged in a dialogue around the photos, and listened to two program participants speak about their experiences. In total, more than 60 people attended our exhibit. Photos and accompanying captions were subsequently displayed at the Edmonton City Hall, which represents an exciting opportunity for our project to reach an even broader audience than originally anticipated (<https://terracecentre.ca/blog/photovoice/>). Furthermore, CBC Edmonton recently interviewed the Successful Families manager, a member of our research team, and a teen parent participant to learn about our photovoice project and the Successful Families program more generally (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/photovoice-exhibit-teen-mothers-1.4224748>). CTV Edmonton also featured a news story about our photovoice project (<http://edmonton.ctvnews.ca/video?clipId=1179623>). In addition, we created photobooks of the photos and accompanying captions, which have been distributed to stakeholders and residents of the Woodcroft neighbourhood in order to bridge relationships between Successful Families participants and the wider community.

With respect to formal presentations, our research team was invited to deliver a presentation to the CUP steering committee, and to deliver a talk as part of the Women and Children's Health Research Institute (WCHRI) Connecting Through Research series. We have also delivered six presentations at local, national, and international conferences. In particular, members of our research team delivered presentations on the Successful Families program at the Banff International Conference on Behavioral Science, the Canadian Evaluation Society Annual Conference, and the American Evaluation Association Annual Conference. Members of our research team also collaboratively delivered presentations with partners from the Successful Families program at the 7 Cities Conference on Housing First and Homelessness, the Alberta College of Social Workers Annual Conference, and the High Risk Youth Conference.

Using multiple knowledge dissemination methods allowed our research team to communicate our research findings and the Successful Families program model to a broad range of academic and community audiences.

### **Summary and Implications**

Through the current project, our research team established a strong partnership with the Terra Centre for Teen Parents and Brentwood Community Development group toward developing a model of supportive housing that is currently being implemented as the Successful Families program. Members of our research team attended meetings with front-line Successful Families staff as well as leadership teams from Terra and Brentwood, conducted interviews with staff, and carried out a photovoice project and focus groups with program participants. These processes resulted in a number of key learnings that were incorporated into the Successful Families program model (see Figure 1).

Primarily, teen families have complex needs and strengths that require relationship-based, flexible, strength-based, relational approaches delivered by non-judgmental staff. While there is a clear need for responsive and individualized supports, it was discovered that the Successful Families program also requires structure, accountability, boundaries, and a focus on prevention, empowerment, and capacity-building in order to serve families well. For the current program, this structure has taken the form of a phased approach as well as clear expectations placed on families that provide the opportunity to remain in the program and progress through phases. It is

also important for staff to have a clear understanding of their own roles and program goals, which has been facilitated by the presence of a full-time housing manager on site. In addition, it has been critical for roles between support staff (i.e., Terra staff) and the landlord (i.e., Brentwood) to be distinct. In this way, Brentwood takes care of landlord responsibilities, provides subsidies to families, and maintains positive relationships with tenants.

In addition, the presence of a well-functioning partnership between Terra and Brentwood is important for the model itself to function. Trust, common values, a shared vision, information sharing, transparent communication, and a willingness to work through challenges are characteristics of the partnership that staff attribute to its success. Terra and Brentwood also conduct participant screening together as an important element of their collaboration.

The program model is situated within the Woodcroft community, which participants reported experiencing as a safe, family-friendly place to live. Participants have established relationships with neighbours as well as friendships with other Successful Families participants, which has led to a sense of connection and belonging. Together with the various amenities that the community has to offer, Woodcroft has become an important aspect of the Successful Families program model.

It appears that the Successful Families program is making a difference by contributing to positive outcomes for teen families. However, there is a need to more systematically research and evaluate the program to understand how the Successful Families program is impacting families. This will not only serve to improve the program itself, but will contribute to the lack of extant research on supportive housing for teen families, as noted by our literature review.

There are very few programs available for teen families that focus on the provision of supportive housing and preventing homelessness. The Successful Families program uses an innovative approach to address the needs of participants by providing them with safe, secure and affordable housing as well as wraparound supports. This program has the potential to provide a much-needed model for serving teen families that can be used by non-profit agencies and other human services systems. Systematic evaluation of the project will inform the development and enhancement of appropriate services and supports by providing new insights into how to tailor interventions and services to address the unique needs of teen families. Ultimately, the Successful Families program model could inform programming and policy across sectors, and be used to optimize homelessness prevention and housing services for teen families across Canada.

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