

How a two-generation approach, supported with organizational strength, and community philanthropy can prevent homelessness for families with children: *A case study of promising practices of an Arkansas nonprofit organization, Our House, Inc.*



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## How a two-generation approach, supported with organizational strength, and community philanthropy can prevent homelessness for families with children: A case study of promising practices of an Arkansas nonprofit organization, Our House, Inc.

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**Georgia Mjartan** is the Executive Director of Our House, Inc., Little Rock.

Georgia Mjartan is Executive Director of Our House, a nonprofit that empowers over 1,800 homeless and near-homeless families and individuals annually to succeed in the workforce, in school, and in life through hard work, wise decision-making, and active participation in the community. In 2010, Georgia was named Nonprofit Executive of the Year by *Arkansas Business*, and in 2015, the same publication recognized

Our House as Nonprofit of the Year. In 2006, Georgia completed the Harvard Kennedy School of Government’s Senior Executives in State and Local Government program. Georgia is a Little Rock native. Georgia is married to Dominik Mjartan, and they have three children ages three and under. They are foster and adoptive parents.



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Ben Goodwin is the Assistant Director of Our House, a comprehensive program for homeless and near-homeless families in Little Rock, Arkansas, that has been nationally recognized for its success in lifting families out of poverty and homelessness. As Assistant Director, Ben manages fundraising, communications, performance measurement, capital projects, and other strategic initiatives of Our House, as well as

finances, facilities, and information technology. Ben joined Our House in 2009 after previous experience at Southern Bancorp (a CDFI development bank) and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. He is a Rhodes Scholar with bachelor’s degrees in Politics, Philosophy, & Economics (Oxford University, UK) and Mathematics (Hendrix College).

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### Research affiliation and partnership:

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# Two-generation approach, organizational strength, and community philanthropy in preventing homelessness for families: Promising practices of Arkansas nonprofit Our House, Inc.

## Abstract

Homelessness remains a major social issue affecting communities across the United States. While the harsh realities of homelessness and its effect on the lives of adults are severe, its ramifications on families with children are extreme and unacceptable. Homeless and near-homeless families can be rescued from the severity of poverty through preventive social programs specifically designed and implemented to address their needs. Our House, Inc., an Arkansas nonprofit organization, has adopted a successful two-generation approach model to resolve homelessness in Little Rock. This article highlights the operations of Our House as a promising, nationally replicable practice model.

**Key Words:** Homeless services, homeless prevention, two-generation approach, organizational impact, community philanthropy

## Introduction:

Homelessness is a major issue affecting economically distressed and disadvantaged communities across the United States. Caused by factors including loss of occupation, extreme poverty, lack of affordable housing and health care, mental illness, drug addiction, and domestic violence, the severity of the consequences of homelessness varies, with families being affected the most. Disturbingly, families with children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, with the segment representing 23% of all homeless people (2007), but increasing in recent years (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2015). According to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's *2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR)* to Congress, on a single night that year 549,928 individuals experienced homelessness across the country and 22% of them were children (HUD 2016). Due to the complexity of issues that result in homelessness, especially for children, strategies to address them need to come from multiple sectors.

The mission focus, community network, and grassroots approaches of nonprofit organizations enable them to be at the forefront of addressing the causes of homelessness and near-homelessness, and providing targeted services for the affected populations more efficiently than the public sector. In addressing the root causes of the issue, the traditional methods of providing immediate relief through shelter, food, and clothing are slowly giving way to a systematic approach toward reintegration and prevention of homelessness through education, individualized case management, workforce development, and child services, especially for affected families.

## Review of Literature:

As a social issue with multiple dimensions, homelessness among adults has dire consequences on their quality of life. Homeless families with children experience intense consequences on the social, economic, emotional, and physical aspects of their lives. Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, and Berman (2015) report that about 2.5 million U.S. children are homeless each year. Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbwana, and Collins (2009) report that children who suffer homelessness

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and persistent poverty are more likely to become poor adults. Another serious outcome of family homelessness is child hunger and malnutrition, with food insecurity affecting physical and mental health, educational attainment, and economic empowerment (Weinfield et al., 2014). All these factors lead to the vicious cycle of generational poverty for homeless families, necessitating strategies that address issues through a two-generation service and prevention approach.

Ascend, an initiative of the Aspen Institute, is a major proponent of the two-generation approach toward educational attainment and economic empowerment ([www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/ascend](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/ascend)). The two-generation model has major implications for services to and prevention of distress in families with children affected by homelessness or near-homelessness. Family-focused interventions of the two-generation approach target both

the parent and child in a continuum, providing children with high quality early childhood and after-school education, food, and nutrition; parents with job-readiness skills, work support, parenting skills, and social capital; and families with housing and parent-child relationship enrichment (Lombardi, Mosle, Patel, Schumacher, & Stedron, 2014).

In addition to the direct social and quality-of-life benefits to homeless families, the two-generation approach provides major economic benefits to the larger society, by helping limit taxpayer dollars spent on public services to the homeless. One study estimates that while the annual public cost of one homeless person per year can range from \$35,000 to \$150,000; the cost of creating paths out of homelessness for the same individual ranges from \$13,000 to \$25,000 (Henwood et al., 2015). These estimates for individual homeless adults do not include the higher public cost and benefits of early childhood interventions. A White House report estimated that by providing early childhood interventions to a child in an at-risk family, the benefit is roughly \$8.60 for every \$1 in investment (White House, 2014). This is in addition to benefits like social inclusion, workforce integration, health benefits, and general well-being.

## Methodology:

The research utilized the case study methodology to highlight a promising practice model for homeless services and prevention. This study was undertaken at the Center on Community Philanthropy, Clinton School of Public Service, in Spring 2016 as part of its researcher-in-residence program. The program was designed for the researcher to work with local nonprofits to build awareness around the importance of sector data, assessment tools, and consistent feedback to help advance philanthropic and nonprofit practice. The research team comprised of the researcher-in-residence, director of the Center on Community Philanthropy, and two executive leaders from Our House, Inc., thus providing a multi-disciplinary approach to the research. The mission, policies, functioning, and processes of the nonprofit, Our House, Inc. (Our House), were studied, even as the research team supported the data collection, analysis, and implementation by the nonprofit's staff members.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed in a mixed research method framework. The various programs of the nonprofit were identified and quantitative data on program outputs and outcomes were analyzed to assess client impact. Qualitative data were collected from donors, practitioners, and recipients, and analyzed to identify the program and organizational strengths and delivery mechanisms. Data collection methods included a

review of quarterly output and outcome data on various programs of the nonprofit; and sixteen structured interviews with Our House's management team, governing board members, and employees. A survey was administered to all employees of Our House, and a focus group of clients conducted to ascertain their views on Our House's operations.

The research went a step further than program impact analysis, by studying the organizational context and community support that were key to the success of the programs. Thus the results of the study are viewed holistically, including programs, organizational management, and community support, each of which contributed directly and in collaboration to the promising practices of Our House.

Our House uses the two-generation model, modified to adjust to local conditions, to structure its services. The overall aim of the study was to understand and analyze the nature of the applied two-generation model and its outcomes on poverty elimination, while documenting possible best practices to create a leadership model of technical assistance and capacity building for nonprofits working on homelessness issues.

## Study partners:

The three partners of this study, Clinton School Center on Community Philanthropy; Our House, Inc.; and the researcher-in-residence, Dr. Kumaran, from University of Florida, formalized a collaboration to conduct this research. The Center on Community Philanthropy is a unique academic center for teaching, research, and outreach on the concepts and practices of community philanthropy. Our House, Inc., is a nonprofit located in Little Rock, Arkansas, with a history of excellence in homeless prevention. Dr. Kumaran is the Assistant Professor of Nonprofit Management and Community Organizations, University of Florida. This partnership brought a multi-faceted approach to this study.

## The two-generation approach to homelessness: promising practices of Our House:

Shifts in local, regional, and national economies have increased the demands for services provided by nonprofits, but their supportive resources have not kept pace. A competitive environment necessitates that nonprofits show high levels of program excellence and efficient organizational management practices to receive strong community support for resources. As a nonprofit with the mission to empower local homeless and near-homeless families, Our House has shown consistent growth and sustained excellence in all operational areas. The following sections highlight their promising practices resulting in program and organizational excellence, and resource mobilization through community philanthropy.

### *Program excellence:*

As reported by Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, and Berman (2014), a recent report by the National Center on Family Homelessness ranks Arkansas at 29th (1=best; and 50=worst), with the state ranking worse in several issue-exacerbating indicators. Arkansas is ranked 47th in overall child well-being, and 41st in risk for homelessness or being in the state of near-homelessness. In terms of the state government's policy and planning to stem the issue of family homelessness, Arkansas ranks 48th (Bassuk et al., 2014).

A two-year needs assessment study conducted by the local United Way in the 1980s found three key insufficiently-met needs in the community for homeless families: longer-term housing; better programs for families; and programs to help adults find and maintain work.

United Way partnered with the Arkansas Interfaith Council to launch Our House in 1987, to provide housing programs serving homeless individuals and families; with a two-year limit on assistance; and reserved for adults who were “willing and able to work a full-time job” (as stated in Our House intake documents completed by all entering residents). Adult housing clients were (and still are) required to find a full-time job within 16 days of arrival and to remain employed for the duration of their stay. Our House initially offered a day care for children while their parents worked or looked for work, but has expanded dramatically since then. Job search assistance, job training, and adult education have been provided by Our House from its inception.

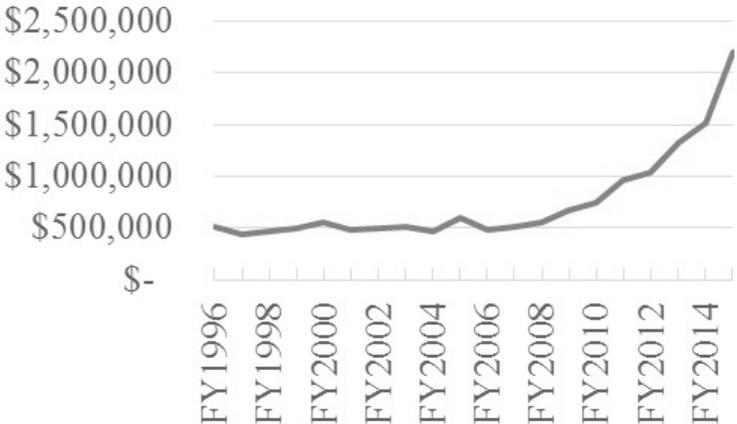
The basic model endured for the first nineteen years of the organization’s history, with Our House maintaining a relatively stable service profile and budget size. In 2006, the organization opened a new 80-bed shelter, consolidating all its programs on one four-acre campus in south Little Rock, and hired a new Executive Director with a broader vision for the organization. The next decade saw accelerated growth in the scope, scale, and impact of the organization, with milestones including:

- Splitting of the day care into two separate programs: an early childhood education center (0–5 year olds) and an out-of-school-time program (6–17 year olds) (2007)
- Launching a homelessness prevention program providing case management and supportive services (2012)
- Expanding the campus and opening a \$5 million Children’s Center, tripling service to needy children (2014), and
- Adopting a new five-year strategic plan and mission statement reflecting its expanded goals (Our House 2015 Strategic Plan):

*Our House empowers homeless and near-homeless families and individuals to succeed in the workforce, in school, and in life through hard work, wise decision-making, and active participation in the community.*

Currently, Our House, with a \$2.7 million annual operating budget (Fig. 1) and an 82-member team (40 employees, 30 VISTA and AmeriCorps members, and 12 homeless job trainees), serves 1,800 people annually and more than 350 each day.

**Figure 1. Our House Operating Budget Growth**



Our House has achieved this level of growth by building a broad and diverse funding base, which provides the organization with the resources and flexibility to adjust and improve its programs on an ongoing basis.

<b>Table 1: Diversity of Our House Funding Sources (2015 Operating and Capital Donations)</b>				
	<b># of Unique Donors</b>	<b>Total \$ Donated</b>	<b>% of Total</b>	<b>Average Total \$ Per Donor</b>
Foundations	22	\$1,222,382	42.0%	\$55,563
Government	11	\$795,876	27.4%	\$72,352
Individuals	1,069	\$533,804	18.4%	\$499
Corporations	121	\$301,070	10.4%	\$2,488
Congregations	24	\$54,795	1.9%	\$2,283
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,247</b>	<b>\$2,907,928</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>\$2,332</b>

Source: Our House, Inc.

An example of this flexibility is the broad, cross-cutting target population for the organization’s services. Our House, while following federal guidelines for Department of Housing and Urban Development and Department of Education funds, is not restricted by the same regulations in spending private funding dollars. This allows the organization to provide the same services to all needy families, irrespective of their federal classification. Our House’s target population excludes only unaccompanied children, while including the traditional subpopulations of the homeless—people with mental illness and substance abuse issues; domestic violence victims; families; and individuals. Our House’s focus within each group is on helping people who are willing and able to work a full-time job. In the organization’s experience, the precision of subpopulation categorizations begins to blur upon closer inspection. Classifying clients as families or individuals is challenging, with most of the “single adults” served being either noncustodial parents or those with state-terminated parental rights. The two-generation perspective can be incredibly effective in such populations, simply because of the strong likelihood of parents wanting to be reconnected with and be more involved in their children’s lives, either immediately or in the future.

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To acknowledge but simultaneously cut through the many complex definitions of homelessness and subpopulations, Our House uses “homeless and near-homeless families and individuals” to describe its target population. In this context, “near-homeless” includes clients qualifying as homeless by any one federal definition; clients at imminent risk of homelessness; or those exiting out of homelessness but remaining engaged in the programs to ensure long-term success and independence.

Our House’s commitment to performance measurement and continuous ongoing program improvement reflects in the quarterly meetings with all program staff to review detailed metrics of outputs and outcomes for each program. Key performance measures for Our House programs are included in Table 2.

<b>Table 2. Our House Key Performance Indicators – 2015</b>			
<b>Program</b>	<b>Total Served 2015</b>	<b>Average Daily # Served</b>	<b>Key Performance Indicators</b>
Housing Programs	804	101	<b>70%</b> of exiting clients moved up the housing ladder on exit
Early Childhood Center	180	43	<b>98%</b> of preschool children met their developmental milestones on Arkansas’s Kindergarten Readiness Checklist
Out-of-School-Time Program	209	61	<b>91%</b> of school-age children improved or maintained their report card grades in math and English
Career Center	636	35	<b>499</b> adults found full-time jobs, with <b>288</b> different central Arkansas employers
Homelessness Prevention Program	624	278	<b>95%</b> of families avoided homelessness
<b>Total (Unduplicated)</b>	<b>1,895</b>	<b>400</b>	

Source: Our House, Inc.

Our House also tracks a host of additional measures to analyze program impact and find ways to improve services. A closer look at the Central Arkansas Family Stability Institute (CAFSI), a homelessness prevention program launched in 2012, reveals the tremendous measurable impact of this program on struggling families (Table 3). The overall 48% increase in household income, and 57% increase in earned income, attests to the success of Our House’s strong focus on employment in the creation of this new program. Further, the federal poverty rate for a family of four in 2015 was \$24,250 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015), which means that the average family participating in the program went from 68% of the poverty line to 101% of the poverty line during their one year in the program.

**Table 3. Our House Homelessness Prevention Program Cumulative Impact  
(June 2012 – December 2015)**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Total Served 2015</b>
Total Number Completing the Program	127 Families (161 Adults and 336 Children)
Average Family Size	3.9 (1.3 Adults and 2.6 Children)
Average Length of Enrollment	369 Days
Average Household Income at Entry	Total: \$16,515 Earned: \$8,815 Unearned: \$7,700
Average Household Income at Exit	Total: \$24,522 Earned: \$13,874 Unearned: \$10,647
Percent Increase in Household Income	Total: 48% Earned: 57% Unearned: 38%
Percent of Families Showing Improvement on the Financial Stability Index of the Arizona Self-Sufficiency Matrix	77%
Percent of Families Avoiding an Episode of Homelessness	87%
Percent of Children Avoiding a Disruptive School Transfer	88%

Source: Our House, Inc.

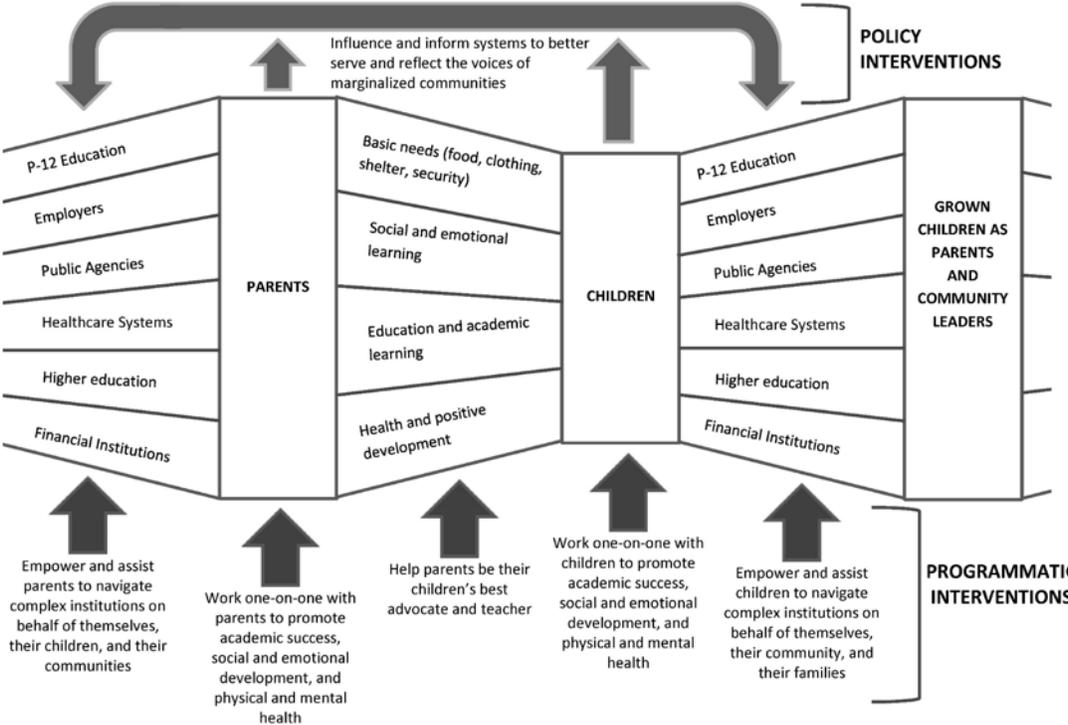
Program strength and the integrating of goals to provide individualized service to each client family are the keys to Our House’s outstanding success. Strong case management is vital to this program integration and is achieved through a team of full-time staff case managers, and Bachelor’s and Master’s of Social Work interns, who meet one-on-one with each client, assessing their needs and helping them identify/articulate their short-, medium-, and long-term life goals. The case managers then help the clients access the best-suited programs; and identify and access community resources, including through partner agencies. Our House’s Director of Client Services sets the standards by which all case managers operate. The case managers and the program staff meet weekly to compare notes about clients and to coordinate resources. Our House’s model of the two-generation approach to ending extreme poverty and family homelessness includes intertwining programmatic and policy components.

The comprehensive program structure of Our House enables parents and children to engage across all areas of their lives within a single agency, thus providing a platform for full integration of the two-generation approach. Programs for adults and children, ranging from workforce training and adult and child education to mental health and case management, are provided on a single campus and are intentionally woven together by staff at all levels to create total integration and clarity of purpose for the recipients. Parents and children are viewed as equally important clients, with adults and children treated as individuals (apart from their parent-child relationship) with assets and challenges, goals and needs. The family unit is treated almost as a “third” entity, thus encompassing the relationship and allowing parent-child interplay.

Our House intentionally instills buy-in to the two-generation approach among all its staff through focusing on the topic in annual all-staff retreats and providing common trainings for all staff; motivational interviewing training for all program staff; and the TIPS training on providing brief interventions to help hone parenting skills. Further, Our House’s children’s programs offer quarterly family fun nights, parent-teacher conferences, and opportunities for parents to be involved in the planning and implementation of the programming for their children—giving children’s program staff opportunities to develop relationships with the parents. One indicator of the success of this approach came in the all-staff survey conducted as part of this research, with 31 of 32 children’s program staff members stating that they “worked with parents and children equally,” as opposed to “primarily with children” or “primarily with adults.”

Figure 2 below demonstrates Our House’s conceptual framework on how the two-generation approach leads to dynamic positive change for clients:

**Figure 2. Our House Two-Generation Approach Conceptual Framework**



To illustrate how this model plays out within Our House, imagine a single, homeless family with two parents and their four children—twin three-year-old girls and two elementary-school-aged boys. Both parents work and have used the Career Center to further their goals, including establishing a small business and asset building through better financial management. Their case manager helps them work through the issues that led them into homelessness. The three-year-olds are in the early childhood center, a five-day-a-week program, working toward kindergarten readiness through a quality-rated program focused on academic, social, and emotional development. They are taught by a state-licensed educator, receive additional enrichment programming from AmeriCorps members, and are provided three meals daily, each prepared on stringent nutritional guidelines; on-site developmental screenings; and if qualified, speech, occupational, physical, and behavioral therapy on-site at no charge. The boys participate in the out-of-school-time program daily and during breaks, receive academic enrichment—including tutoring and homework help—and participate in interest-specific clubs, including sports, music, art, technology, and cooking. The oldest boy (8 years) is a member of the center’s Y.E.L.L. (Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning) program.

### *Connecting programs:*

Rather than operating siloed programs on the same campus, the Our House model formally integrates traditionally parent-centric or child-centric programs through intensive case management, and connecting programs, such as “Be Your Child’s Best Advocate.” This program addresses the whole family, with emphasis on the parent-child relationship. Structurally, this is a four-part workshop series involving a cohort of 30 parents and their children (on average 60–80 children per cohort). Philosophically, this approach addresses parents as people who are being trained to advocate for their children’s best interests, teaching them to navigate the complex systems of healthcare, finance, education, and justice on behalf of themselves and their children. So while each of the family members receives individual required services as illustrated above, they also participate for four months as a family in this evening program, dining together and participating in age-relevant activities (i.e., college savings planning for parents and age-appropriate financial literacy programs for children hosted by a local bank). At the conclusion of the program, parents receive an incentive to save for their children’s college provided by matching dollars offered by Our House and the state; and the children receive seed funds for their own savings account, provided by the bank partner. In summary, Our House has modeled the two-generation approach in its programs, tactically using the children as motivators to their parents’ learning and progress toward goals like financial stability.

The comprehensive program structure of Our House enables parents and children to engage across all areas of their lives within a single agency, thus providing a platform for full integration of the two-generation approach.

Policy change is a part of the two-generation model in two ways. First, to empower clients, Our House helps clients build confidence and find the “voice” they need to have a positive impact on their community. Second, Our House directly engages in policy improvement initiatives to improve clients’ success. A recent example is the organization’s work with the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) to identify and overcome barriers preventing homeless and near-homeless families from accessing state child care vouchers. Our House hosted a DHS caseworker once a week for more than a year to enroll clients and also learn to streamline provider enrollment across the state. Future plans include helping the Arkansas Department of Workforce Services develop an improved program for enrollment in the state’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program.

### ***Organizational excellence:***

The operational efficiency of Our House plays a vital role in sustaining its program delivery. Our House meets and/or exceeds in the seven key hallmarks of nonprofit excellence, including good board governance, responsive executive leadership, strategic planning and implementation, efficient human resource management, conducive organizational culture, high levels of transparency and accountability, and goodwill of the community for resource mobilization, as listed by Renz & Herman (2010).

### ***Good governance:***

The framework of a good governing board allows effective work by individual members through which they make significant contributions to the organization's operations (Masaoka, 2003). Our House's board is a "working board" with sufficient diversity and expertise, lending good governance practices. Board members play active roles in exercising their fiduciary and policy-making responsibilities, in being ambassadors of the cause, and in mobilizing support from the community and businesses for Our House programs. The board meets bi-monthly, and members also attend an annual planning retreat. Five sub-committees take deeper responsibilities within their specific areas of finance, programming, fundraising, and other priorities. There are open lines of communication and engagement between the board and the Executive Director. The chair of the board has weekly discussions with the Executive Director to keep abreast of various organizational and operational details, a level of engagement rare in the nonprofit sector. Interviews with board members revealed their active engagement in the daily operations of the organization through committees, personal support, and regular volunteering, with the following words demonstrating their mindset:

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*"I asked to be on the board and wanted to be a part of Our House. It was truly a calling for me. Our House changed my life and made me a better person."*

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*"Our House has brought a culture of change in our community and made forward progress on homelessness."*

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*"We have a great staff who are caring and compassionate."*

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The visible involvement of the governing board motivates employees and positively impacts the overall culture of Our House.

### ***Executive leadership:***

The Executive Director of Our House, serving for the last decade, possesses the five important characteristics of an exemplary nonprofit executive leader outlined by Carlson and Donohoe (2003), including being a visionary, change agent, relationship builder, community creator, and resource wizard. Combined with the passion for the organization's mission and focus on client outcomes is a charismatic leadership style and an uncanny knack for hiring the right employees. These qualities have been recognized by the community through several prestigious awards, including the Arkansas Nonprofit Executive Leader of the Year Award, and being one of the "40 Years 40 Leaders for Arkansas" named by Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation in 2014.

Another key organizational component is the energetic management team, comprised of the Executive Director, Assistant Director, and Directors of Client Services, Housing, Children’s Programs, and Operations. Members of this core management team are uniquely qualified and experienced in their program areas and discuss day-to-day operations and program components at weekly meetings. In addition, the team also emphasizes systematic data collection, quarterly and annual analysis of organization-wide outcome analysis, and utilization of data results for future program development, thus ensuring relevant real-time modifications.

***Human resource management and national service:***

Human resources play a significant role in Our House’s program excellence, including participation of well-qualified employees with professional and personal alignments toward the organization’s mission. Visible and often profound program outcomes on clients were cited in interviews as a major motivating factor among employees. Adequate orientation, training, supervision, and clear communication are provided and account for the high level of employee satisfaction at Our House. There was a 100% response rate from the employees (n=67) to the survey included in this study. Analysis of the survey and verbal affirmations as sampled below indicate high levels of employee job satisfaction (Table 4), and satisfaction with key organizational characteristics (Table 5).

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*“Staff who work here are committed to the mission of Our House. We are here because we want to help our clients who are in a homeless crisis. We believe in what we do.”*

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*”I joined Our House because I wanted to be a part of a team that generates and applies solutions to families in the community who are going through issues...in this case homelessness.”*

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**Table 4: Job satisfaction level of employees (n=67, answered=65)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Very dissatisfied</b>	<b>Dissatisfied</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>Very satisfied</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Overall job satisfaction at Our House	1.54% 1	6.15% 4	4.62% 3	33.85% 22	53.85% 35	65	4.32

**Table 5: Satisfaction level of employees with organizational characteristics**

Response	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Total	Mean
Work environment	0% 0	3.08% 2	16.92% 11	21.54% 14	58.46% 38	65	4.35
Organizational culture	3.03% 2	6.06% 4	15.15% 10	19.70% 13	56.06% 37	66	4.20
Team work	3.03% 2	0% 0	9.09% 6	28.39% 19	59.09% 39	66	4.41

Another major source of human resources for Our House has been the members of national service programs, notably AmeriCorps and VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America). Administered by the federal Corporation for National and Community Service, these service programs are often not known or under-utilized by community nonprofits. However, Our House’s steady recruitment of these volunteers and its provision of a nurturing learning environment in the adult and children’s programs make the organization a preferred location for new and future VISTA and AmeriCorps members in Arkansas. National service members, in turn, make significant contributions to Our House’s programs and client services and become an integral part of the human resources of the organization. Excerpts from interviews reveal their commitment and motivation:

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*“I worked in a law firm and was not satisfied with that. I wanted to make change in society by helping to address community issues and reached out to Our House for my AmeriCorps service.”*

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*“Serving one year as a VISTA member with Our House is a true asset for my future.”*

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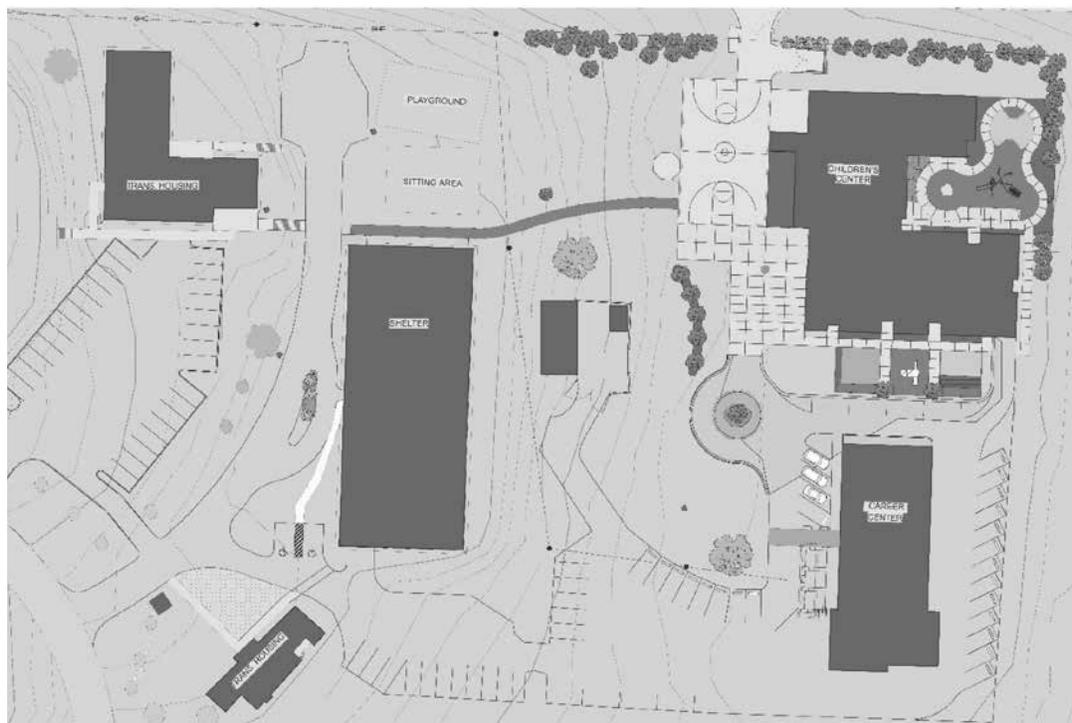
**Organizational culture:**

As a social service nonprofit agency, Our House has a vibrant organizational culture, which promotes a supportive and caring environment for its clients, employees, volunteers, and other community stakeholders. Weekly meetings of **all** employees reinforce the internal cooperative organizational culture. Open channels of communication between the board, executive leadership, supervisors, and employees afford Our House a cohesive workforce that has understanding and mutual respect for all programmatic elements. National service members, who are predominantly recent college graduates, also add vibrancy to the organization’s culture.

Our House’s organizational culture also holds individual employees accountable for their assigned roles and responsibilities. Performance expectations and professional shadowing/mentoring opportunities within the organization enhance inter-program understanding and unity. Overall, this structure contributes to a high level of employee job satisfaction, translating

to superior client satisfaction. The physical location of Our House includes separate buildings for the Shelter and Family House programs, a state-of-the-art Children's Center housing preschool and after-school programs, a Career Center for job training, and an administrative building. All these facilities, encompassed in a one-stop-shop model campus that sprawls over a seven-acre property, make the organization's physical appearance more like a community center than a traditional homeless shelter. The proximity of facilities within one campus facilitates smooth operations of both program delivery and administration.

**Figure 3. Our House Campus Map**



***Strategic growth:***

Our House has incorporated a systematic process for strategic planning and implementation, resulting in steady all-around growth. During the past five years, the organization's annual operational budget tripled (Fig. 1) and its programs expanded. Between 2012 and 2016, Our House successfully completed two large capital campaigns, raising over \$6 million for the new Children's Center and the renovated Career Center. In addition to providing enhanced services, these centers showcase good, relevant fund expenditures.

Our House's current strategic plan cycle (2015–2020) has set out specific goals for propelling the organization further through enhanced programs and mission impact; advocacy for homelessness through policy interventions; community engagement; organizational strengthening; financial management and fundraising; and implementation and accountability.

## ***Mobilizing community philanthropy:***

### ***Understanding community assets:***

Housing is a vital part of any community and defines the characteristics of a community (Green & Haines, 2016). Homelessness at any level is a serious social issue, and family homelessness necessitates the wider support of community residents and other institutions. Community philanthropy is broadly defined as local residents giving their time (volunteering), talents (expertise), and treasures (monetary and in-kind donations) to promote the well-being of their communities (Williams, West, & Klak, 2011). Even during economic decline, leveraging high levels of community philanthropy can sustain the operations of community-based nonprofit organizations (Besel, Williams, & Klak, 2011). By raising awareness on the extent and face of local homelessness and the severity of its consequences, Our House has steadily improved its engagement with local residents to mobilize community philanthropy. The social capital that the organization has mobilized further enhances its goodwill and community philanthropy. Some of the practical and replicable approaches of Our House in mobilizing community philanthropy are highlighted below.

### ***Approaches to community philanthropy:***

Our House has a deep recognition of the values of time, talents, and treasures that can come from local communities, with a third of its annual budget coming from philanthropic giving by community residents. Through strong marketing messages, two major fundraising events, United Way campaigns, regular and year-end email and direct mail appeals, and through social media, Our House constantly engages with local communities for support.

### ***Marketing the cause:***

Our House's strategy to market its cause is based on the assumption that many community residents do not know the extent and severity of homelessness, and informing them about the plights of the homeless in their midst can ignite their philanthropic and charitable spirit. But in doing so, Our House consistently puts forward a positive image of the people it serves—hard-working adults and happy children. Practicing awareness-building, a budding area in nonprofit management, Our House uses segmented marketing messages that reach and appeal to the affluent, civic and faith-based groups, small businesses, and the corporate sector. Our House utilizes an appropriate combination of traditional and social media to let the community know about its impacts and needs. One powerful example of Our House's portrayal of family homelessness and their solutions is "Project Voice," a twelve-part micro-documentary of clients talking about their experiences with homelessness and their pathways out of it through Our House interventions (created by a VISTA volunteer).

### ***Community support through in-kind contributions:***

Due to the nature of its clients and their need for food, clothing, and other essentials, Our House strategically targets in-kind donations from the community. Most of the meals provided to residents of the shelter come from volunteer groups representing churches, civic groups, and community organizations. These meal servers provide 40% of all lunches and 100% of all dinners served to clients. With donated meals provided to nearly 100 clients every day, and additional meals for about 240 served at special events for children and their families such as family fun night, the total value of in-kind food donation is substantial.

Our House also receives steady donations of clothing, furniture, and other items from community residents. In-kind donations that are not used by clients are sold through a thrift store that provides a portion of the revenue to Our House. The organization also distributes clothes to anyone who needs them in the community, not just shelter residents, through occasional “Open Closet” events.

In-kind donors are targeted through social media and newsletters with wish lists of items needed and through requests to volunteers and requests from volunteers to the community. Three national service members coordinate the meals and other in-kind donation efforts.

### *Mobilizing and managing volunteers:*

Volunteers are the lifeblood of Our House in its various programs. The organization mobilized the service of about 2,649 volunteers in FY2015, who contributed a total of 16,851 hours of voluntary service to various programs, translating to about 10% of Our House’s total employee work hours. Most of the volunteers are committed long-term volunteers, with some episodic volunteers representing schools and other institutions during specific periods of the year.

Volunteering opportunities are posted through social media, newsletters, and the organization’s website. A monthly open house allows community members to take a tour of the facilities to identify their volunteering options. Our House invites all its monetary donors to volunteer and provides various opportunities to volunteer.

## **Conclusion:**

The extent of homelessness and near-homelessness, and the demand for services to address them, are overwhelming. Like any other social service nonprofit, Our House’s need for resources always exceeds their availability. The organization also faces issues such as employee turnover, competition for funding and other resources, and growing overhead costs. However, Our House has continued to provide quality services to address homelessness through innovative approaches in funding, program design, and implementation, constantly reinventing itself for operational sustainability and growth. Realizing the importance of diversified funding sources, it devised specific goals to pursue those sources and then obtain wider community support. With targeted strategic goals and high impact programs for homeless services and prevention, improved organizational efficiency, and strong community support, Our House has shown impressive and sustained growth in the last decade. Out-of-the-box thinking supported by tireless, coordinated efforts of all hands on deck has made their vision a reality. In terms of intertwining program excellence, organizational efficiency, and mobilization of community philanthropy, Our House has created a highly promising, easily replicable, and fluidly adaptable model useful to prevent homelessness in any community across the United States and beyond.

Homelessness at any level is a serious social issue, and family homelessness necessitates the wider support of community residents and other institutions. Community philanthropy is broadly defined as local residents giving their time (volunteering), talents (expertise), and treasures (monetary and in-kind donations) to promote the well-being of their communities.

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**The Center on Community Philanthropy at the Clinton School** has a vision to expand the knowledge, tools, and practice of community spawned and community driven philanthropy. The Center promotes community philanthropy as the giving of time, talent, and treasure that when invested in community results in positive change and long-lasting improvement.

The Center is unique in its mission to study philanthropic concepts and acts emerging from within communities. It is a place for learning about philanthropy in a way that becomes understood and practiced by a new wave of donors, foundation board and staff members, community leaders, and policy decision-makers.

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