

# Keeping Trauma at Bay

## Parent and Child Well-Being Is Key at Compass Family Services

by Carol Ward

On a sunny Monday in February in San Francisco, a group of female employees at Compass Family Services' Clara House transitional-housing facility are abuzz with talk of a weekend newspaper article featuring one of their former clients.

The woman profiled, a forty-something former drug addict and convicted felon, has gotten clean, regained custody of her adolescent son, attended City College of San Francisco, and is waiting to hear about admission to a state university.

It's the kind of story that truly resonates in a city where the problems of family poverty and homelessness weigh heavily.

"It's so great to have a success story," says Erica Kisch, executive director of Compass Family Services, San Francisco's hub for families in crisis. "The odds are so stacked against our clients that it's often difficult for them to see their way out."

According to a point-in-time survey conducted in January 2013, the city of San Francisco — whose population is roughly 826,000 — had 6,436 homeless individuals, of whom more than half were unsheltered. The count showed 679 homeless persons in families and 1,902 unaccompanied children and youth under age 25. In short, getting by is difficult for many in San Francisco, the nation's most expensive metropolitan area when it comes to housing; the high cost of living and a tight housing market combine to make even the most modest apartment out of reach for a large swathe of the population. A study released in October 2013 by the Public Policy Institute

of California and the Stanford University Center on Poverty and Inequality found that when cost of living is taken into account, more than 23 percent of San Francisco residents live in poverty. The official U.S. government estimate is a bit more than half that figure, at 12.8 percent.

"The housing market is so out of reach for so many families, even if they're not the lowest of the low-income like our families are," Kisch says. "If our staff can't afford to live in San Francisco, how can we expect our clients to live in San Francisco?"

### Compass's Role

For 100 years Compass Family Services has been helping families living in poverty in San Francisco. The group was launched in 1914 as Travelers' Aid by members of prominent San Francisco families — the Crockers, Hearsts, Lillienthals, and Folgers. Its original purpose was to help young women coming across the country for the 1915 World's Fair; at that time, the young women traveling alone were considered very vulnerable and quite risqué, Kisch notes. Over the years, the organization has helped various populations in need, including refugees, immigrants, war brides, returning servicemen and women, the deinstitutionalized mentally ill, transient hippies, and, since the early 1990s, homeless families. Kisch says the mission hasn't changed much. "It really has always been to help the neediest San Franciscans," she says.

"Today our mission is to help homeless families and families at imminent risk for homelessness to achieve housing stability,

family well-being, and self-sufficiency,” Kisch adds. The budget for Compass Family Services came in at \$8.3 million for Fiscal Year 2013. Of that, 72 percent was public funding, and the remaining 28 percent came from private sources.

Each year the group provides 12,700 nights of shelter and holds 6,000 case-management sessions for families. Its success is apparent, with 95 percent of families in Compass housing programs not returning to shelters. Daniel Lurie, CEO and founder of Tipping Point Community, a Bay Area organization that provides grants to nonprofit groups addressing poverty, says that Compass’s “comprehensive approach and wide range of services address the many factors that contribute to homelessness in

our community.” He adds that Compass “has changed the lives of thousands of Bay Area residents in need.”

Compass provides services to more than 3,500 parents and children each year, using a mix of seven programs to address the variety of needs that land on their doorstep. “Almost 100 percent of our clients have some sort of trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder,” says Susan Reider, director of Compass Clinical Services, which is one of the seven programs offered but is also integrated into the other six.

“Homelessness is a trauma for children,” Reider says. “Not having a stable home, not knowing where you’re going to sleep,



A 12-year-old boy participates in Compass Family Shelter’s Youth Enrichment Project, one of several programs for children at the facility.

being cared for by a parent who is scared or worried and not able to be emotionally present and provide what would be normal childhood experiences, that can be traumatizing.”

The group’s focus on mental health services differentiates it from some other service providers, Kisch says. She notes that Compass, in all its programs, provides “trauma-informed care.”

Compass Family Services has collaborated for several years with mental health professionals at the Child Trauma Research Program (CTRP) at the University of California, San Francisco, to offer trauma-informed services to the city’s vulnerable families. Vilma Reyes, a clinical psychologist and associate director of the CTRP, says of the professionals at Compass, “They’re very open to thinking about how trauma impacts young children and their families,” and she notes that Compass’s in-house programs work parallel to and in conjunction with her program. Reyes says CTRP and other specialists advise teachers at Compass Children’s Center on how to respond to children’s difficult behavior in the classroom.

Kisch says about Compass’s clients, “We recognize that every interaction with us, from when a family walks in the door and talks to the receptionist, or when they ask the janitor at the shelter for cleaning supplies, to the most intense therapeutic session, has the potential to be either therapeutic or further traumatizing, and given this, we train all staff accordingly.”

Bertie Mandelbaum, lead case manager at Compass Family Shelter, says that the trauma a family has been through is always a backdrop for how she proceeds—and is sometimes front and center.

“Some of our case management is just people talking about themselves,” she says. “We’re not working on a housing application or something concrete. We’re trying to help normalize their situation so they can try to heal from trauma.”

Mandelbaum sees an array of mental and physical issues. “We have one woman with cancer—every symptom you can imagine,” she says. “It’s very difficult to deal with her, and how she interacts with her children reflects the pain she is in.” The solution, Mandelbaum says, is to try to help the mother channel her pain and have positive influences on her children. At the same time she must try to plan for a future—including housing and employment—that is far from certain.

The Compass Family Shelter is one of the group’s other six programs devoted to addressing varying needs, depending on where the family is in its search for housing. At any given time,

families can be involved in just one or, more likely, a handful of the programs offered, according to Juan Ochoa, director of programs.

“There are usually many needs that are competing,” explains Ochoa. “We have to prioritize the areas we are working on with a family at any given time. If you focus on too many things at the same time, achieving results becomes really difficult.”

## The Front Door

On that same February morning, a young couple with an infant and a preschool-aged child wait in the hallway outside the Compass Connecting Point office. The couple say they slept in a temporary shelter last night, as they have many nights, while waiting for a more permanent shelter room to become available.

“It’s really hard with the kids,” the young woman in the couple admits. “We don’t really have anywhere to go. We’re waiting to get into a shelter room but it takes a long time.” Neither she nor the children’s father is employed. The couple arrived this morning to collect food and diapers, as well as to meet with a case manager.

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All families begin their quest for services at Compass Connecting Point, the centralized assessment, counseling, and referral center for San Francisco families facing housing crises.

Liz Ancker, program director for Compass Connecting Point, says families are quickly assessed to determine the solution that best fits their needs. For some who have income, rental assistance—for example, move-in funds or one-time eviction prevention—is most appropriate. Other families qualify for ongoing rent subsidies and are channeled to Compass SF Home, which offers that assistance along with a case-management component.

The majority of families, however, need something more. Compass Connecting Point manages the waiting list for three city-funded shelters (including Compass), where clients are sent on the basis of space availability, and also works in conjunction with two privately funded shelters in the city, Raphael House and Star Community Home. All families on the shelter waiting list meet the definition of homelessness provided by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, which includes the lack of “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”

“Families on the waiting list can expect to wait six, seven, or sometimes more months for a shelter placement, which will be a private-room placement they can stay in for six months,” explains Ancker.

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Six months or more can be an awfully long wait for families who have no place to go. According to Ancker, those who wait go to emergency shelters, couch-surf, or sleep on the streets, in parks, in cars, or in other places not meant for human habitation.

James and Julie have experience with some of those scenarios. The couple and their three-year-old daughter moved to San Francisco from Georgia to find a better life and, they admit, to pursue the relatively generous benefits available in the city.

“We were told the resources here were the best for people looking to get on their feet,” says Julie. The family initially stayed with Julie’s sister, but the sister’s housing contract didn’t allow long-term guests, so they had to move on. They went next to an emergency shelter, then connected with Compass.

“This program has helped us a lot with bus tokens, food, hygiene, shelter,” says Julie. “In Georgia there are no resources and you’ve gotta know somebody to get a job.”

While waiting on a long-term shelter spot, Julie says she managed to get a job, although she was required to pass her GED exam for the job to become permanent. For help, she turned to Compass’s educational services, which provide GED training. James sought Social Security insurance benefits due to his diabetes and mental health issues.

## While They Wait

Kisch says families entering Compass Connecting Point are often completely overwhelmed when they learn about the wait for shelter.

“To have to tell families with small children and babies and pregnancies—families in a state of crisis—that it could take eight or nine months for them to get into shelter is a horrible message,” she says. “It’s a horrible message for our staff on the front lines to deliver. It’s very demoralizing for everyone.”

Families are prioritized within the list if extraordinary need exists, such as a recent or imminent birth in the family. Also, some families that appear to be a good fit for the privately funded shelters are funneled to those instead of to the city-funded shelters. Rafael House has a highly structured program that requires early curfew, house chores, and intense group participation, Ancker says. Star Community Home has a similar model and can house only single women with one or two young children.

Almost without exception, though, homeless families are in for a wait. They’re required to check in with Connecting Point at least once a week, but many need more support. To soften the blow and to keep families from falling out of touch during the wait time, Compass Connecting Point offers a scope of services to help, Ancker says.

“We have our drop-in center, so they can come in and pick up a bag of food, bus tokens, and diapers, and that can happen three mornings a week,” according to Ancker. Other services are rooted in Compass’s focus on trauma-informed care: “We also do a lot of counseling, a lot of resources and referrals, and a lot of crisis intervention.”

For the past two years, Compass Connecting Point has had funding for three housing specialists, who “allow families to get a start on their housing search from the moment they walk in our doors,” Ancker explains. “Before we had these positions the only time families could really get support around their housing search was after they got into a shelter placement.”

“When you look at the fact that most waiting lists for low-income housing are a minimum of two years long, six months



that they could have been on the waiting list is pretty significant,” Ancker adds.

## More Permanent Solutions

Ochoa opens a door leading to what appears to be a small abandoned lot adjacent to the Compass Family Shelter in the Tenderloin area of San Francisco. It’s not much to look at, but he’s hoping for a transformation by the end of this year.

“We just got a grant to build a garden,” he says. In a crowded family shelter with no outdoor space, that little plot of land may serve as an oasis of sorts.

“When you are in the city, having a space that is green is invaluable,” he says. “We want kids to feel like this is their backyard.”

Compass Family Shelter, which provides housing for up to 22 families at a time, shares a building with another tenant. Resident living quarters occupy two floors, with a common area and kitchen on the ground floor. Rooms are generally small but vary in size. Upon entering the shelter, each family member is issued linens and dishes, which they can take when they leave, six months later. Families prepare their own meals most days, obtaining items from a food bank on the premises, Ochoa says.

Shelter residents are required to take advantage of the services outlined by their case managers. The program’s benefits are cumulative as clients work through the various phases of services.

“Participation in our programs goes from lesser to higher,” explains Ochoa. “Initially there is some case management and some requirements. Then when they get into shelter the intensity of services and intensity of mandatory case management and mandatory community meetings increases. These are things they have to participate in.” Activities include therapy, parenting education classes, intensive work toward housing and employment, and others.

“If the family goes into transitional housing it’s going to be the same [requirements] in addition to employment services,” Ochoa adds.

After a six-month stay at the shelter, which can be extended another six months if circumstances warrant, clients may get their own apartments, often with rental subsidies. Others qualify for permanent supportive housing with on-site case management, while some enter the transitional program, which offers two years of residence with services including child care.



A child at Compass Clara House, a transitional-housing program for homeless families, enjoys a book in the common room.

The transitional program is offered at Compass Clara House. There, families live in small apartments that look onto an open courtyard. It’s a short walk from the shelter, but the pace of life on the street outside Clara House is less frenetic, more family-friendly.

Annette (not her real name), a resident at Clara House, is spending her two years at the facility trying to figure out how to move forward. The 33-year-old Annette, who struggles with alcohol dependency, transitioned from a residential recovery program into Clara House. For the first six months of her stay, she was required to take part in an outpatient program.

“That means no school, no work, just outpatient meetings and things like that,” she says. “At first I was like, are you kidding me? I just finished a year. But now I’m grateful that I got to relearn some things and also gain new tools, new coping skills, that help me deal with my day-to-day triggers.”

Annette lives at Clara House with her three-year-old daughter, who is enrolled in child care at the center. She is working to regain custody of two older children (ages 15 and eight), who were taken from her by Child Protective Services and currently reside with their grandfather.

Annette says she has “pretty much spent half my life battling my alcoholism” and hasn’t yet figured out how she will navigate a life of sobriety. “I’m not sure what I want to do, but since I



A toddler engages in an art project at the Compass Children’s Center, which provides enriched early childhood education and care to young residents.

moved here I’m working with case managers and the staff to figure it out. I feel more motivated.”

One daunting obstacle for Annette is figuring out her housing future. “We’re all supposed to be applying for housing but sometimes it gets to be too much,” she says. “But I’m going to focus on that. I want to get housing for myself and my children, something that is permanent and stable and safe. Not that I don’t have that here—it’s safe and wonderful but it’s not forever.”

### For the Children

One point of intense pride within the organization is the Compass Children’s Center, which provides child care to homeless and extremely low-income families. Because there is capacity for just 70 children, the state- and city-funded slots are hard to come by.

Kisch says that if a family wins a spot, “they’ve basically won the lottery,” given the cost of full-time child care in San Francisco. Per-student expenses at Compass Children’s Center amount to \$24,480 annually for preschoolers and \$31,440 a year for infants and toddlers. The high price is largely due to a licensing requirement of one staff member for every three children, Kisch says, but the center “also has a rich layer of support services in place in order to address the psychosocial needs of the families we serve, so that pushes the cost up a bit.”

For clients, winning slots means “being able to work or attend school, look for housing or do whatever is in their service plan to stabilize their family,” Kisch says.

Not all families who gain child care slots are Compass clients, but the agency manages the hefty waiting list for the city—numbering 3,305 children in April 2014, according to San Francisco’s Office of Early Care and Education.

Just a short walk from the Compass Family Shelter, the Children’s Center is in the heart of the Tenderloin. Grouped by age, the children work and play in an educational environment. The facility features a rooftop playground and a room where boys and girls can get exercise and strengthen motor skills. “A lot of our kids have deficits in that area,” Kisch notes.

Food is also a key component. “We provide breakfast, lunch, and snack, and a lot of the kids get their main nutrition from here,” Kisch says.

### Looking Ahead

With demand for resources for impoverished families showing no signs of abating, Kisch and others are trying to decide the best way to proceed in the years ahead. One ongoing issue is how, or if, the city can define San Francisco residency, and whether that should be a prerequisite for accessing services. The cities and towns within the Bay Area form one large urban/suburban region, making it nearly impossible to determine residency for those who don’t have homes.

Kisch says that city officials are frustrated with the relative lack of resources in nearby communities. “I think there is a lot of expectation that San Francisco will bear an unfair portion of the burden,” she says. One goal for the near future is to build better partnerships with surrounding communities.

Those same communities might offer better options for Compass clients, Kisch adds. “While San Francisco needs to be a place for low-income families and not just the wealthiest, the reality right now is that families have the most options if they look as far afield as they are comfortable with, and we’ll help them do that,” she says.

Weighing residency requirements against residential reach, along with deciding how best to spend very limited funds, is sometimes daunting when the problem looms so large. Kisch says it’s often helpful to block out the big picture and focus instead on small achievements.

“Literally it’s one family at a time,” she says. “Any family that we can help stabilize is a victory.” ■