

CHICAGO NEWS COOPERATIVE | CAST AWAY

Homeless Families in Illinois Walking a Hard Road



John Konstantaras/Chicago News Cooperative

Samantha Caballero shares a bed with her children at a friend's apartment in Logan Square. Ms. Caballero, 32, has been in and out of shelter programs since 2004.

By MERIBAH KNIGHT
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Samantha Caballero cannot remember the last time she slept well. Some nights she nods off in a chair. She has slouched in the front seat of her brother's station wagon or huddled between boxes in her mother's storage unit. Sometimes she squeezes onto a friend's extra bed with five of her six children.

There are seven of them: Six children. One mother. No home.



On most days, when she wakes at 6 a.m. from a half-sleep, Ms. Caballero must get her 12-year-old daughter, Lajuanese, and her three boys, Jovany, 11; Deangelo, 6; and Jaden, 3; ready for school. She makes sure they have school assignments in their book bags, toothbrushes and a change of clothes; the family may change addresses during the day.








As with any large family, everything requires planning. With her two youngest, Devonta, 4 months, and Samantha, 3, Ms. Caballero spends her day navigating a maze of bureaucracies: cash assistance, food stamps, [Social Security](#), schools, shelters and health care.

Former Mayor [Richard M. Daley](#)'s 10-year plan to end homelessness focused on the chronically homeless,

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A series of articles on the rising number of homeless youth and families in Chicago, often living beyond the reach of helping hands.

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substance abusers and the disabled. But nine years later, many young people and families are still on the streets. Mayor [Rahm Emanuel](#) plans to update the plan early next year.

The number of homeless families is rising in Illinois, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness. Between 2008 and 2010 their ranks swelled by more than 7 percent, to 6,827. “Anecdotally, we have seen a significant number of single mothers entering the Chicago system of care,” said John Pfeiffer, the deputy commissioner of Chicago’s Department of Family and Support Services.

A nearly three-year evaluation of Mr. Daley’s program by researchers at the University of Chicago and Loyola University tracked more than 500 homeless people for a year and found a fragmented system that inhibited progress.

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John Konstantaras/Chicago News
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Ms. Caballero and the children carry groceries from a food assistance program. They could afford only one-way bus fare.

In 100 calls to the city’s 311 referral system, the researchers found help-line respondents passive and largely unable to link callers to the appropriate resources. Attendants often directed them to the nearest police station or hospital. In only 16 percent of cases did workers give more detailed information. The study also reported that no test caller was “offered a well-being check, callback or pickup for families with young children or unaccompanied youth.”

When the researchers disclosed their findings last week at the annual breakfast for the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, Mr. Emanuel, who was at the event, expressed astonishment.

“That seems crazy that we can’t get 311 trained correctly,” he said.

Ms. Caballero, 32, is often frustrated by the system. She has been in and out of shelter programs since 2004, more than a fifth of her life. A conviction on her record — she stole \$6,000 from a gas station where she worked — has made it difficult to find a job. Over the years, she has encountered a labyrinthine, opaque system in a city that offers few rights to publicly financed shelter.

In contrast to Chicago, cities like New York, Washington, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Louisville have regulations to protect the homeless. In 2002, a judge’s ruling forced New York City to give financial compensation to families forced to sleep on the floor and benches of the city’s Emergency Assistance Unit.

“Her situation exposes flaws in every level of the system,” said Emily Benfer, director of the Health Justice Project and clinical professor of law at the Loyola School of Law. “There are no consistent regulations governing shelter, and she has no rights.”

Ms. Caballero, who is of Mexican descent, grew up in the Humboldt Park neighborhood in Chicago. Pregnant with her first child at 19, Ms. Caballero dropped out of high school. Her oldest child is 12.

Ms. Caballero said that not all her children were planned. She considered terminating one of her pregnancies but did not have \$1,000 for the late-term abortion.

When her public aid arrives without snags — a rarity, she said — she receives \$674 in Social Security, \$623 in cash assistance and \$723 in food stamps each month, plus support from the federal Women, Infants and Children program. The public support covers food and clothes, but it is not enough for a security deposit on an apartment.

Dealing with the red tape of public aid eats up her days. Recently, it took Ms. Caballero five hours and eight bus rides, her children in tow, to make a court-mandated meeting with her parole officer and a food run to W.I.C.

After Ms. Caballero unlawfully lost her cash assistance and food stamps early this year, it took four advocates at the Health Justice Project working 380 hours between February and July to replace the lost benefits, according to the Health Justice Project's database.

A run of recent trouble began Sept. 1, after Ms. Caballero's mother was evicted from the one-bedroom Cicero apartment they had shared. Ms. Caballero called 311 after the eviction and explained she was homeless with no relatives to help, according to records kept by Health Justice Project lawyers.

A 311 operator referred her to the Trina Davila Community Service Center, one of the city government's six warming and referral centers. The operator then proceeded to "admonish Ms. Caballero for not saving enough money for a security deposit," said Ms. Benfer, who listened in on the call.

A two-week tangled web of missing paperwork, unreturned voice-mail messages and dead-end referrals to shelters followed, according to records kept by Justice Project lawyers of calls made by Ms. Caballero and lawyers to 311 and shelters. Ms. Caballero wound up in a storage unit rented by her mother. Though the storage company prohibits overnight stays, she hid her children behind the unit's locked door, kept them quiet and arranged a sleeping area among the boxes.

On other nights, the family slept in her brother's station wagon, most of the children in back, she in the driver's seat, and her 4-month-old son, Devonta, in a car seat on the passenger side.

Several times during that two weeks, Ms. Caballero and Justice Project lawyers said, workers cited a shortage of beds in Chicago's shelters. On Sept. 14, space in a shelter became available, but by the time she collected her children from school and rode buses there, their beds had been given away and she could not get in, she said. City officials contend she never arrived at the West Side shelter.

Anne Sheahan, a spokeswoman for the city's Department of Family and Support Services, said once the agency had realized that Ms. Caballero had been without shelter for two weeks, workers from several departments devoted two days to finding shelter space, only to have Ms. Caballero reject it, saying the shelter was too far from her children's schools.

Mr. Pfeiffer, of Family and Support Services, said the agency immediately found shelter for families in 90 percent of the cases. "Our policy is not to turn away," he said.

Despite her itinerant life, Ms. Caballero is able to keep four of her children in public school — three in the Cicero district and one in Chicago. Every day the Cicero school district picks up and drops off Jovany, Deangelo and Jaden from Logan Square. Federal law ensures homeless children free school transportation, regardless of where the family stays.

Data collected by the Illinois State Board of Education shows 42,608 homeless students enrolled in Illinois at the end of the 2011 school year, an increase of 64 percent since 2008. In Chicago Public Schools, the enrollment for homeless students reached 15,289, an increase of 24 percent.

The constant movement and stress take a physical toll on Ms. Caballero's children. Deangelo has asthma, and Samantha is showing signs of the disease. Jaden has developmental and speech delays, medical records show. Lajuanese recently spent a week in the psychiatric ward of Saints Mary and Elizabeth Medical Center and has a learning disability.

On Nov. 18, Deangelo suffered an asthma attack that put him in the hospital for three days. The week before, the family had slept in the rain on a friend's back porch.

"How hard your life is is probably going to affect your health status, especially vulnerable people — older people and children," said Richard Warnecke, director of the Center for Population Health and Health Disparities at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

On Dec. 1, Ms. Caballero strapped Devonta to her chest and gathered the other five children for a trip to W.I.C. She had no money for return bus fare and needed everyone to help carry bags to a friend's house, where they were staying the night.

"This situation doesn't give my kids a chance to be kids," Ms. Caballero said.

She handed 3-year-old Samantha three boxes of cereal and divided three gallons of milk, apple juice, more cereal, fruit, bread and eggs among the others. Their hands full, the family set off on the mile-long walk.

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