

Frequently Asked Questions About Family Promise

How many host congregations are needed to form an Affiliate?

Ideally, an Affiliate has 13 host congregations, with each having an adequate number of volunteers to complete their week. This number is usually between 35-50 volunteers. Fewer congregations than that could overtax some congregations, jeopardizing their participation. Having more than 13 can dilute the experience for congregations, resulting in a loss of continuity and focus. With less experienced volunteers, an Affiliate would be harder to operate, and recruitment of volunteers would be more difficult.

What is a support congregation?

This is a congregation that does not have the physical space or cannot dedicate the space to families for one week. They do however have volunteers, money, or other resources that is used to help host congregations who may need assistance during their hosting week.

We don't have a day center in our community. How should we go about finding one?

Actually, most operating day centers for homeless people are not appropriate for the program; they are drop-in centers that serve a mixed population, often including single men who live on the streets. These day centers are not suitable for homeless families.

More than likely, you will be looking for space for a day center, rather than an operating day center. Most Affiliates find space for a day center in downtown churches, "Y"s, or social service agencies. Some Affiliates use one large room, while others find a place with access to several rooms. Essential facilities are a lounge area for families, a play area for children, a small room or cubicle for the Director (who will provide most of the supervision of the day center), and showers. If showers are not available, the Affiliate needs to install them.

How do we handle transportation?

Affiliates usually purchase a van, or a van is loaned or donated to the Affiliate. Some Affiliates contract with a transportation company that takes care of the van, driver, insurance, and maintenance. Affiliates that purchase a van usually get the money from foundations that fund capital expenditures.

Can we use volunteer van drivers?

Family Promise does not recommend using volunteer drivers. For safety and reliability, it's best to use paid drivers with verified driving experience and safety records. Scheduling problems, which can be time-consuming when volunteer drivers are used, can usually be avoided or minimized by using paid drivers.

What facilities do host congregations need to have for guests?

Facilities must include a lounge area (with sofa, chairs, tables, TV), a dining area, a kitchen, bathrooms, and sleeping accommodations. Ideally, congregations provide a separate room, such as a classroom, for each family. If that isn't possible, a fellowship hall or other large room can be divided by partitions to provide privacy.

Our building is in use almost all the time. How will we find the space?

Churches and synagogues are busy places with many demands on their space. Rarely does a perfect space exist. Hosting almost always means making some scheduling adjustments for activities and meetings. For example, four or five times a year, AA or the Bible Study Group may need to move their Tuesday night meeting to another room.

Can families' belongings be moved in the morning and moved back in the evening to permit the congregation to use the space during the day?

No. The sleeping accommodations need to be dedicated to the families for the entire host week. The beds and the guests' belongings must not be moved in the morning and put back in the evening. Besides being cumbersome, moving the beds and the guests' belongings would be difficult for guests. When guests arrive on Sunday, they come with their belongings and perhaps a few of their children's favorite toys. They want to arrange their space as if it were their home.

How long do families stay in the program?

The Guest Guidelines call for a maximum stay of 30 days. However, Directors often extend the stay as long as families are making good-faith efforts to find housing. In some communities, families can find housing within 30 days. In other communities—where there is a severe shortage of low-income housing, and waiting lists for public housing and Section 8 are closed—finding a home can take 60 days or more.

Where do guest families stay during the day on weekends?

In most Affiliates, families stay at the day center.

How are families referred to the program?

Two weeks before the Affiliate opens, the Director meets with potential referring agencies—shelters, public assistance offices, the Red Cross, and the Salvation Army. The Director describes the program and provides printed material on how to make referrals.

When a homeless family seeks shelter through an agency, a social worker conducts a brief interview and may contact the Director to find out if space is available. If the answer is yes, and if the family seems appropriate for the program, the agency refers the family to the day center. At the day center, the Director conducts an in-depth interview before accepting the family into the program.

Isn't it difficult for families to move week to week?

Moving every week isn't ideal, but most families say that the homelike setting and the support of volunteers more than compensate for the moving. While host congregations change every week or two, the day center remains the same, providing continuity and a home base for families as they look for housing and jobs. The day center also provides a permanent address that families can use in their housing and job searches.

Will the children miss school because their families are staying in different congregations every week or two?

No. The Director works with the school system to ensure that all children attend school. The day center is the permanent address of the Affiliate. Children go to the school they have been attending or to the school nearest the day center. Arrangements are made locally with the school system.

In 1987, Congress passed the McKinney Act, legislation that requires all states and school districts to provide for the education of homeless youth. Each state has developed a plan to implement the Act. Most of the state plans are flexible and allow children to attend the school they last attended or the school closest to the shelter (day center).

What are the insurance implications of participating in the program? Does the congregation have to amend its policy?

Each local Affiliate must carry general liability insurance. Congregations are usually covered by their own property and liability policies because Family Promise is considered to be an outreach ministry, a regular activity of the church like a youth sleepover or Friday night supper. Most congregations find they do not need extra insurance to be hosts. To be certain, each congregation must contact its insurance agent.

How much money is needed to start an Affiliate?

First-year budgets can vary, depending on whether a van is purchased and whether rent must be paid for the day center. Most Affiliates find that first-year operating budgets are about \$110,000. Family Promise recommends that Affiliates have at least half of this amount with a well-defined funding stream before opening.

How do we raise the money?

Funds are raised locally from individuals, congregations, foundations, and corporations. Religious judicatories (regional denominational offices, such as the Presbytery, Methodist Conference, and Episcopal Diocese) often provide seed money, as well as ongoing funds. Local foundations within your county or state may also provide seed money.

How long does it take to develop an Affiliate?

Some Affiliates have developed in 10 months, while others have taken a year and a half, or longer. The average development time is normally 18 to 24 months after the Community Meeting. However, with the support of the community and dedication towards the effort, it can be accomplished much sooner. The most important and time-consuming part of forming an Affiliate is recruiting the host congregations. Affiliates that plan for and emphasize recruitment get there faster.

Do we really need to hire a full-time Director? Can't a staff member from another agency manage the program on a part-time basis?

You will need to hire a full-time Director. A unique strength of the program is the intensive case management that a full-time Director provides to homeless families. In addition to case management, the Director coordinates and trains volunteers and is responsible for the overall management of the program. Without a dedicated professional in the Affiliate, families would not receive the services that help make the program so successful.

What are some advantages of the program over a more traditional shelter?

- An Affiliate can be developed quickly.
- An Affiliate is cost-effective because it utilizes existing community resources.
- The Family Promise doesn't institutionalize shelter as a solution to homelessness.
- In Affiliates, about 80 percent of the guest families find permanent housing, often with volunteers' help.
- For congregations, the Affiliate is a vital outreach ministry within the walls of the members' own church or synagogue.
- An Affiliate is a catalyst for other community initiatives. Many active Affiliates go on to create new programs in areas such as parenting and mentoring, transitional housing, and housing renovation.