Low-Income Single Parents, Postsecondary Education, and Access to Unilateral Support: A Case Study of THEA

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Abstract: Education is hailed as the great equalizer. Yet, research shows an unequal distribution of educational opportunities, particularly among low-income, single-parent families. This study uses data from 32 in-depth interviews to evaluate the process through which single-parents access educational resources provided by a unique non-profit organization in a large city in the Midwestern U.S. The House of Educational Advancement offers unilateral social support, including housing and academic mentoring, to low-income, single parents as they pursue baccalaureate degrees. Our results suggest that, while the program likely has a significant impact, scheduling conflicts and role inundation make the process of gaining residency difficult for single parents..

LOW-INCOME SINGLE PARENTS, POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION, AND ACCESS TO UNILATERAL SUPPORT: A CASE STUDY OF THEA

Scholars, policy analysts, and the lay public often promote education as a great equalizer, and Ratner (2004: 45) argues that education is the "foundation of equality." Yet, research often shows that educational opportunities are unequally distributed (e.g., Kahn et al. 2004; Reardon 2011), and low-income families face significant barriers to education (e.g., Kahn and Polakow 2000). Among others, educational barriers include instrumental supports and, of course, income. For many low-income people who want to earn a college degree, and especially those who have experienced homelessness and who are low-income single parents, these barriers may feel insurmountable. Ultimately, for truly disadvantaged (Wilson 1987) single parents, educational barriers may impede intellectual growth and economic mobility (Johnson 2010). While a large body of literature examines barriers (e.g., Newman 1999; Kahn and Polakow 2000; Lareau 2003; Reardon 2011), less is known about the factors that contribute to educational attainment among low-income, single parents. In terms of educational support to low-income single parents, the contributions of nonprofit organizations have been essential since 1996—when welfare reform legislation prioritized work requirements over education (e.g., Ratner 2004).

Studies show that some social programs have attempted to help low-income parents who seek out educational opportunities. For example, a state-funded, instrumental support program in Maine (i.e., Parents as Scholars Program) provided transportation and childcare to low-income parents who returned to school (Smith et al. 2002). While the Parents as Scholars Program (PSP) certainly addressed select parental needs, many parents' basic needs remained unmet. For example, a key limitation of social programs like PSP is that parents who need assistance with affordable housing do not receive it. Research shows that

stable housing among low-income, single parents is difficult to attain (e.g., Desmond 2016), which often exacerbates the other stressors that low-income parents face when they return to school. Social programs that attempt to help low-income parents (who return to school) with a wider range of social and economic supports have not been examined in the extant literature. That is, we know of no study that examines a social program (from the perspective of participants) that combines housing, for example, with a range of other social and educational supports. This study seeks to fill this gap.

To address the gap in the literature, we explore a nonprofit organization in a Midwestern city in the United States named The House of Educational Advancement (THEA)[18]. THEA was specifically designed to foster the educational success of low-income, single parents by providing a range of unilateral instrumental supports, including access to housing for parents who pursue a college degree. While a college education is at the core of THEA's aims, the housing component is an important precursor to educational success, particularly because many THEA participants struggle with residential stability and subsequently completing their education. Therefore, this paper explores the organizational process through which low-income parents become student residents at THEA.

Employing a process evaluation (Rossi et al. 2004), we examine whether THEA's screening process was implemented effectively enough to reach its target population of single parents who live in poverty and want to earn a college degree. Specifically, we draw on the perspectives of THEA applicants and residents to examine the following questions: 1) How do THEA applicants perceive the accessibility of THEA staff and residential prerequisites (e.g., information, workshops)?; and 2) Is THEA reaching its target population of single parents who live in poverty and seek to earn a college degree? Our exploration of these questions addresses an important gap in the extant literature by evaluating the process through which low-income parents who return to school experience the

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[18] The House of Educational Advancement is a pseudonym used to protect the confidentiality of the organization and its staff members.

screening process associated with a wide-range of instrumental supports. Findings from this study inform organizations similar to THEA about the needs of low-income parents who seek acceptance into their program. The study also underscores the importance of these types of programs for helping low-income parents become more self-sufficient by addressing unmet needs.

BACKGROUND

Education for Single Mothers amid Changing U.S. Social Policy

The 2013 Current Population Survey (CPS) data show 9.9 million households with children under age 18 as female-headed and 3.1 million as male-headed, with no spouse present (http://www.census.gov/cps). Approximately 58% of single mothers live 200% below the poverty line, and research suggests that 61% of single mothers who live 200% below the poverty line have a high school degree or less (Mather 2010). Over the past two decades, poverty policy, particularly affecting single parents, has changed dramatically. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Under PRWORA, AFDC (a needs-based cash assistance entitlement program with no time limits), was replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF is a time-limited cash assistance, work-based "self-sufficiency" program. Under TANF, block grants are awarded to states and include funds for childcare supplements and other work-based supports (Cancian and Danziger 2009). While TANF had some success promoting self-sufficiency during prosperous economic periods (e.g., Bane 2009), economic downturns affected disproportionately low-income men and women with limited education and who work in less secure, lower-skilled jobs (Adair 2001; Hays 2003).

Low-income parents face significant barriers to improving their labor market options through education. Under TANF, attending school is difficult. Parents must secure childcare and work placements *before* they can enroll in school; and this happens alongside confusing, withheld, or tacit instructions from caseworkers (Kahn and Polakow 2000). Finding consistent, high-quality childcare is difficult, as carework tends to be underpaid, short-staffed, and is typically offered during traditional business hours (Williams 2010). Hays (2003) argues that childcare available to those who use state subsidies may be denied, unavailable, or not up to state standards. This, coupled with inflexible employers, means that low-income single parents struggle to maintain low-wage work while caring for their children (Hays 2003; Edin and Shaefer 2015).

Policies that prioritize low-wage work over education significantly reduce the likelihood that single parents can pursue higher education (Christopher 2005). Indeed, the effects of welfare reform on education were immediate, with about 50% to 80% of low-income women withdrawing from colleges and universities only a few years after the policy change (Adair 2001; Kahn et al. 2004); thus, "for welfare recipients, education—particularly post-secondary education—is a dream they are seldom allowed to pursue" (Ratner 2004: 45). Under TANF, vocational education can count toward work requirements if it leads to employment (Kahn et al. 2004), but these credits are limited as state caseloads with this incentive may not exceed 30% (Kahn et al. 2004). Moreover, instructors or institutional agents (e.g., the Registrar) must verify students' hours in—and outside of—the classroom, and caseworkers may monitor student progress toward degrees (see http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/q-a-counting-and-verifying-hours-of-work-participation). These requirements pose challenges for students, instructors, educational institutions, and caseworkers.

Adhering to state requirements is difficult for many single parents, especially in the context of a range of competing responsibilities—education, employment, and family life. After school and work, single parents then have to meet the needs of their children and often find it difficult to maintain their studies at home (Jennings 2004; Christopher 2005). These competing responsibilities and accompanying schedules are similar for many single mothers, whose vantage point is important when implementing social programs to address their needs in a post-welfare reform era.

Studies tend to emphasize the implementation of various welfare programs from the vantage point of administrators and caseworkers (Latimer and Colyer 2010; Seale 2011; Latimer and Plein 2013). Hong's and

colleague's (2009) argue that understanding former TANF recipients' needs—from their vantage point—would improve self-sufficiency outcomes, particularly within structurally limited labor markets. Jennings and Santiago (2008), for example, found that Latina women experienced insurmountable obstacles in their pursuit of work, including limited access to information about training services and discrimination. Parisi et al. (2008) further found that even though TANF's goals were to increase self-sufficiency, the implementation of policy changes in Mississippi did not reflect the intention of the policy—reducing welfare rolls took precedent over reducing barriers and identifying pathways to work.

In the wake of policy changes and the implementation of new social programs, single parents who are members of support groups (versus those who are not) may fare better (Christopher 2005). In the absence of formal support to attend school, for example, mentoring may help single parents build a range of skills (e.g., time management) needed to improve their chances in college (e.g., Erickson et al. 2009; Cherng et al. 2013). Not only do support groups provide single parents with access to such instrumental support, they give parents opportunities to build beneficial social capital (e.g., a fellow group member shares information about a course or job). While economic and social mobility are extremely difficult without human capital (i.e., education), research suggests that social capital is also important to improve one's life chances (e.g., Gerber and Cheung 2008; Cherlin 2011). Even so, single parents who try hard, but still cannot meet their families' most basic needs, struggle the most with educational attainment.

The Significance of Residential Stability

Housing is among the most important of basic needs, and it is frequently insufficient for low-income families. The replacement of public housing units with mixed-income housing (DeLuca et al. 2013) resulted in fewer units available for displaced low-income families (Rice and Sard 2009)—three-quarters of eligible low-income families do not have access to affordable housing. Among families who do receive housing assistance, the requirements are often difficult to navigate. For example, applicants may be required to participate in a voucher program, participate in prosocial classes (e.g., how to be a good neighbor), and submit to drug and background checks. Moreover**,** research suggests that evictions followed by multiple residential transitions (e.g., temporary housing, shelters) are common among economically disadvantaged families (Desmond 2016). Multiple residential transitions exacerbate the challenges associated with educational investments.

Amid housing insecurities and the social, economic, and policy context (e.g., education cuts under TANF) in which low-income single parents are embedded, social programs that offer housing assistance (like THEA) stand to increase the likelihood that low-income single parents pursue and earn college degrees. The goal of THEA is to increase the number of single parents who earn a college degree through educational supports and stable housing. Specifically, THEA's target population includes single parents who live in poverty and seek a college degree; and understanding the extent to which THEA adequately reaches its target population is an important research endeavor.

The House of Educational Advancement (THEA) and Its Screening Process

In 1995, THEA was incorporated to provide support for low-income, college-aged students with dependent children complete their baccalaureate degrees. THEA's mission is to contribute to the community by helping parents who are currently or soon-to-be matriculated at colleges/universities, achieve long-term self-sufficiency through educational attainment. The belief is that support for single parents' educational careers through services, such as academic guidance and housing, promotes graduation rates and long-term success. THEA is a unique organization in that it is the only program in the U.S. specifically designed to provide unilateral support in the form of housing, child-care assistance, and other services as single parents pursue college degrees. It is financed through rent, private donations, and foundation and other grants. Residents are discouraged from working; however, those who work at least half-time, pay a minimal rent.

THEA residents receive instrumental support in two forms. First, residents receive academic support through the following: hands-on

mentoring with academic advisors; monthly workshops, such as financial, cooking, and stress management workshops; opportunities to interact with other single-parent scholars through social gatherings; opportunities to engage their children in extracurricular activities (e.g., Girl Scouts, educational activities like Goldie Blox). Second, residents receive instrumental social support such as assistance with food and clothing, and most importantly, housing. Non-resident, single parents with dependent children who qualify for Section 8 housing may apply for the residency program and/or take advantage of other forms of support, such as help with applying for TANF and other benefits (e.g., childcare). THEA does not have a formal recruitment process, but the application process is competitive.

THEA has supported approximately 1,500 single parents towards earning a four-year college degree, either as residents or as non-residents. There are currently four houses with a total of 215 apartments; and the number of residents cannot exceed the number of available units—partners, friends, and family members (other than dependent children) may not live in the units. Units become available when residents graduate, move out for personal reasons, and when THEA builds new units.

Prior to residency at THEA, candidates must first complete a screening process, which serves the following purposes: 1) introduce the organization to potential residents, ensuring that pre-residents understand that THEA is an education program with a housing component rather than a housing-only program; 2) eliminate those who do not qualify based on educational attainment and financial need; and 3) accept those who are most qualified and tenacious. As the findings below highlight, THEA staff prioritizes tenacity, which is defined in terms of active pursuits of residency through participation in—and continued engagement with—the organization. The screening process includes an orientation, four academic and four financial workshops, various other workshops, social events, and an interview. Pre-residents earn points toward residency by participating in workshops and for "checking in" with the organization. Applicants, who demonstrate a willingness to work for their placement, as evidenced by an accumulation of points, are selected for housing.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

To examine whether THEA workshops are accessible to pre-residents, we conducted a process evaluation (Rossi et al. 2004) of the screening process, which relied primarily on semi-structured interviews (although we include below participant observations to supplement interviews). Face-to-face interviews were conducted once with both pre-residents ($n = 7$) and current residents ($n = 25$). Participants in the study held less than a college degree, fell below the official poverty line in terms of income, were primarily white and African American, and were single parents (see Table 1).

The role of the interviewer in both the pre-resident and current resident interviews was to facilitate discussion, probe for detail, and follow-up with clarifying questions (Gillham 2000). Although, an interview guide was used, single mothers discussed other aspects of their lives. In terms of recruitment into the study, pre-residents volunteered during THEA's pre-resident orientation by either communicating personally with the interviewer, agreeing to participate during workshops, or through contact with THEA staff members. Residents, all of whom completed the screening process, were recruited using convenience sampling. To begin the recruitment process, a THEA staff member contacted current residents via email. Email correspondence included the purpose of the study and the interviewer's contact information. Residents were asked to contact the interviewer directly to participate. This attempt resulted in 12 participants who were current residents; and THEA staff identified one additional participant during academic advising. Twelve participants were recruited during other workshops and referrals from other participants.

Pre-resident interviews were conducted at a location agreed upon by both the interviewer and the participant, and each lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Participants received informed consent prior to each interview. Following informed consent, participants answered closed-ended demographic questions (see Table 1) and a range of open-ended questions such as whether or not THEA offers workshops that are easily accessible, the process through which participants got clarification about pre-resident and resident

program requirements, and others. The goal of the guiding questions was to use the pre-residents' perspectives to evaluate the screening process. Interviews also assessed the orientation process to determine if the information was clear and useful.

As an incentive to participate in the study, THEA offered pre-residents two points toward residency—participants only received .5 points for attending orientation.

Table 1. Summary of the Pre-resident and Resident Interviewees' Demographic Characteristics[1].

	Percentage	
Demographic Characteristics	Pre-resident (*N* = 7)	Resident (*N* = 25)
Race		
Black, African-American	29	72
Hispanic	0	8
White	57	20
Biracial	14	0
Education		
High school diploma	14	4
Some college	86	72
Associate's degree	0	16
Bachelor's degree	0	8
Relationship status		
Divorced	14	8
Legally separated	0	4
Single	85	88
Income		
Less than $5,000	43	56
$5,000 - $9,999	43	28
$10,000 - $14,999	0	16
$15,000 - $19,999	0	0
$20,000 - $24,000	14	0

[1]All participants were female.

Resident interviews followed the same protocol (albeit with a $10 Kroger gift card as the incentive) and assessed the screening process (and their successful experiences with it) and the residential experience that followed. Residents were also asked about their lived experiences prior to and during their tenure at THEA. The goal in asking about experiences prior to living at THEA was to gain a more holistic understanding of residents' lives, including information about their children, extended family networks, and relationship statuses with their child(ren)'s fathers. Pseudonyms replaced all participants' names, and all identifiers collected during the time of the interview were from these data. To address issues associated with reliability, interviews were coded twice; and errors and inconsistencies were identified and corrected. Lastly, we used a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006) to analyze these data. Field notes and interview data

were coded line-by-line to identify themes and patterns that were either consistent with, or distinct from, those in the extant literature (Charmaz 2006).

RESULTS

We begin with the results from the in-depth interviews with pre-residents and residents, which were conducted over a period of four months. Three primary themes emerged from our interviews with participants, which were: I) confusion about expectations, II) inaccessibility, and III) role inundation.

Theme I: Confusion about Expectations

When asked if participants understood the requirements after attending orientation, many said "no." For example, Devon, a mother of two who was enrolled in school and held a full-time job, commented:

> When you go to the orientation, you're given a lot of information. But, it's like [sighs], you're just lost. You're like, 'ok, so, I know all this basic, the outline.' But, you have a million questions and it's just like, 'we're done. Do you have any questions?'…no one should be unclear of anything after they leave orientation…This needs to be fixed…the orientation isn't as effective as it should be.

Katie, a mother of one said, "…I was like, 'ok, so, I've taken these classes and I have no idea what that means or where I am on the point scale…I just feel like I'm kinda floatin' around, lost." Debbie, a pre-resident mother of three who was enrolled in school at the time of the interview, echoed Katie's comments:

> Honestly? No…basically, you know nothing. You go through all these classes. 'Oh well, you need these points, you need this class for this points and points and points and points. And, you have no clue what is really expected until you get through all these so-called points and get to your interview and your intake, where they actually go over the rules. To me, that stuff should come first.

Compared to pre-residents, those who have received approval for residency and residents themselves, often felt that the screening process requirements were more easily understood. Odessa, for example, a mother of three who previously lived with her brother and sister-in-law, effortlessly listed the requirements and went on to say, "It's just a lot of participation, attending things, showin' that this is something that you want, something you're willing to work for. You don't expect to go to orientation and sign-up and wait for them to call."

Even though there were residents who understood the requirements, many of the pre-residents seemed confused and sought clarification on the process from the interviewer. Other pre-residents, like Debbie for example, relied on the experiences of current residents for clarification. Debbie noted that "Typically if I have a question, I call my friend [who is a resident], just because it's easier to get ahold of her and ask her and get the bottom line." Debbie is not the only pre-resident who believed that THEA's requirements were not communicated clearly. Devon also noted that a resident informed her that "you have to attend all of those … financial success and all of the academic success workshops in order to get in, before you even qualify. I didn't know that. Apparently, that's a little hush-hush." Michelle, a resident mother who previously lived with her mom, stepdad, and two half-brothers had a different perspective when asked if the pre-resident screening requirements were easily understood, she responded "Yeah, it was. I mean it was laid out for you".

Indeed, some pre-residents looked to resident mothers for information; however, one resident, Samantha, a previously homeless mother of one, felt the complaints from some pre-residents were not warranted, noting:

> I know that some people say that they don't understand ... I don't know how they do it now, but before I even walked into the 'come visit me,' it was made clear to me two times what was going to be required; therefore, I had an option to not even schedule a meetin'. Because, I'm mulling this over, 'Am I gonna want to do this? Am I gonna wanna show up? Am I gonna want to go to these meetings?'…So, that was made clear to me twice. So that I could understand that.

Compared to the pre-residents, many of the residents seemed to have a better understanding of the program requirements. It is, however, difficult to determine the extent to which residents recall

accurately what they knew during their own screening processes, and how they felt about the requirements at the time. It is possible that the pre-resident process became clearer to residents once they became residents, but not prior to it. For example, when probed about the requirements for residency, many residents shared more about the post-residency program requirements (e.g., GPA, overnight guest policy), but recalled much less about the pre-resident requirements. When asked about –pre-residency, Nandi, a mother of one who previously had her own apartment said, "Um, what are some of the other…you have to be active in the program, so going to the…you have to do a financial class, you have to, oh, there's another, oh, accreditation!" Thus, the requirements, which were no longer an "immediate obligation," may not have been as clear as they recalled (Hays 2003:70). Along similar lines, Hays (2003) found that welfare recipients were better at knowing rules and requirements that affected their lives. In other words, because the pre-residential requirements no longer pertained to them, perhaps they could no longer recall them.

While there were some key differences in opinion about the pre-resident program among pre-residents and residents, one pre-resident requirement that seemed to confuse both groups was the point system. When asked how many points pre-residents needed for residency, many pre-residents responded that they did not know. Marcia, a pre-resident mother of one, who was enrolled in school and working part-time, said, "Is there a number of points? I don't even know. I just know that, it's just, it matters. It moves you up the list." Janice, another pre-resident mother of one, who does odd jobs to pay the rent, said, "They just say the more the better. Some people have a lot, because they can attend all the workshops. They just say do as much as you can." Without knowing how many points one needs, some parents may find the process to be futile.

Similar to pre-residents, resident mothers, like Odessa, commented, "I don't know how the points system worked. I know we get points for checking in, for attending things, for doing things. Um, but I was never fully explained like how many points you have to have to move in." Tashia, a resident mother of one who previously lived with her paternal grandmother, also did not know,

responded, "No, I just called every day so I'd know if I called every day then it'll add up." Even though the point system was unclear, there were some residents who thought it was equitable. Olivia, a resident mother of one who previously lived with her boyfriend, said:

> I think that's why I liked it so much, because you didn't just get on a list and wait until your turn. You had to prove to them that this…you wanted to do this. And, so it's nice to know, you know, my neighbor did the same thing I did. She didn't just sit on a list and wait…you have to work for it.

Once mothers became residents, the point system seemed less important. The vagueness of the point system was no longer a concern; rather it was viewed as an important system to determine who was "working" toward residency. Although the point system was a mystery to the residents during their pre-residency, when reflecting back on the screening process, they often viewed it as a fair metric for determining who qualified for residency. Moreover, when asked about the point system during orientation, a THEA leader responded, "There is no set number, people would drop off. Seeing and hearing from [pre-residents] is important." Even so, accumulating points appears to be an important part of getting into the residency program, and thus, regardless of residents' hindsight (which may be subject to recall bias), many pre-residents may benefit from improvements in THEA's communication about the point system.

Theme II: Inaccessibility

A second theme to emerge from these data has to do with the inaccessibility of the program. Many of the pre-residents and residents found the pre-residential program to be inconvenient or difficult to manage with other responsibilities. For example, Devon found it hard to attend the workshops. She commented that:

> The financial success workshops that I *have* to have… they're at 4:00[pm], and I get off work at 3:30[pm]…is what I'm scheduled to get off and I don't ever get off until 4:00[pm]. And, even if I tell [work] that I need to be out at 3:30[pm] exactly so that I can make it [to THEA] at 4:00[pm], I have to get my stuff done

before I leave. And, they won't let me
leave until it's done.

In order to attend the mandatory workshops, Devon ended up requesting Tuesdays off from work. However, she acknowledges that having the privilege to request days off from work may be limited to very few participants.

Along the same lines, some of the residents recalled that they also struggled to attend the mandatory workshops. Bailey, for example, a resident mother of one who previously lived with her mother, commented, "Their times were really hard. [The screening process] was easy, but their times didn't work for me, because it was like … I was working during those hours. They classes is like 4:00-4:30, 4:00-5:00, I was at work. So, it took me longer." Nandi agreed suggesting that:

Some of the activities…are set in stone.
Like, you basically have
to miss class or have to miss work in order
to attend them, because they're during the
day and they are for a certain amount of
time. And, so, I, I struggled with going and
meeting. Because, if you miss…like
they're four financial classes. So, if you go
to one and you miss two, you can't go to
three, because they're, they're in order. So,
I would probably have to wait until the
next month...

Other residents, like Odessa, thought workshops were accessible, but not all of them. She found herself needing to schedule one-on-one time to make up some of the requirements. Some mothers were only able to attend the once-a-month, all-day pre-resident workshop. During this day, pre-residents can participate in several workshops; however, usually only one workshop is a prerequisite for residency. It should be noted that the mandatory events scheduled during the pre-resident day are not offered in sequence from month-to-month; thus, posing a problem for parents who can only attend the once-a-month event. This was true for Sandy, a resident mother of four, who was homeless before moving into THEA. The screening process took 12 months for her to complete. Many mothers, who were uncertain about expectations, and who found the pre-residential workshops and THEA staff inaccessible, said that the pre-residential program was an extremely long process.

The mandatory workshop schedule seemed particularly inaccessible to some single parent, pre-residents. Katie, for example, said, "I drug my feet getting here, because I was like 'I'm never going to make these classes, because I work during the day.' And, I can't afford to take off work to take these classes." Although there was some variation in pre-residents' experiences with workshops, many faced numerous scheduling conflicts given the inflexibility of when THEA's workshops were offered. One interpretation of such scheduling conflicts was that pre-residents were not "doing what they are supposed to be doing". Sydney, a pre-resident mother of one, said, "You work for [residency]. Like, what I loved about it, is it's not 'first come, first serve.' You have to attend the workshops; you have to get points to do it. Like, if you're not attending the workshops, obviously it's showing that you're not interested." Sydney was a full-time student with a strong support system and did not to have to work. She lived with a close friend's parents who assumed grandparental roles. When asked if she had help juggling multiple roles, she praised the family for their help, particularly with childcare.

Another resident mother, Olivia said "I don't know how easy it was for other people…my work was very, um, lenient with me…with letting me miss a decent amount…but, that's also why I got in so quick." Sydney's strong supportive system and Olivia's flexibility at work gave them an advantage in terms of meeting the requirements of the pre-residential program. Moreover, in Olivia's case, she was employed at a local college that supported her pursuit of higher education; others who worked in industry received far less support, as their work within these organizations was prioritized over education (e.g., Webber and Williams 2008). Therefore, in many ways, accessibility seemed to select on more advantaged pre-resident mothers, whereas less economically advantaged single parents struggled the most with accessing the pre-residential program.

Indeed, for some participants, support was not as strong. Sydney's and Olivia's pre-residential experiences were quite different, for example, from Andrea's. Andrea is now a resident, but her pre-residential experience highlights the challenges faced by many single parents. She lived

approximately 20 miles from THEA, was a single mother of two children, a full-time college student who worked as many hours as she could, and lived with unsupportive grandparents who nagged her for rent money. When asked why it took her so long to earn residency at THEA, she explained, "after like a certain amount of time with school and everything else going on, I just kind of forgot about it and stopped calling… like I told you with the money and the gas and stuff. And, timing and whatever. It'd be harder for me to get there." Along with other pre-residents, Andrea's story suggests that fulfilling the requirements of the pre-residential program may be less a matter of determination or level of interest and more a matter of lacking social support in a context of navigating multiple roles. Among single mothers with multiple schedules, seemingly simple tasks required forethought, planning, and resources (e.g., transportation, gas).

Although the workshops were often inaccessible because they were offered during business hours, the majority of the pre-resident interviewees said that THEA staff offered to meet with them one-on-one, or to rearrange the workshop dates and times. Sydney, for example, said that staff worked with her to help her meet the requirements. She said, "Yeah, you talk to 'em and they'll help you out. The academic success thing I'm doing today, I was supposed to do a month ago, but I couldn't. And they've just worked around me. They're awesome." Lee, a mother of two, who is currently enrolled in school and works a part-time job, also noted that when she informed THEA staff that events coincided with her school schedule, they "still designated [the series] on a Tuesday, but at a more appropriate time." Even though THEA staff was willing to meet with pre-residents one-on-one, these meetings only solve conflicts for those who ask; presumably for a number of reasons, many do not ask for—nor benefit from—flexibility in scheduling. Pre-residents who also struggled with uncertainty about THEA's expectations of pre-residents may also have benefitted from asking more questions. However, THEA staff members were often unavailable or otherwise hard to talk to, which made inquiries difficult.

Indeed, in more ways than one, many pre-residents talked about the inaccessibility of staff members. Lee, for example, commented that she feels uncomfortable in THEA's office, suggesting that, "it's like almost sitting in a bread line, like I'm a homeless bum or something." When Lee met the staff member overseeing the pre-residential program, she said she thought, "this is the person we have to talk to?" Debbie also felt uncomfortable, and complained:

> Who do you ask? The person that I should be able to go to anytime, no. You have to catch her on the right day. Um, I was down here one day, pretty much all day, she didn't say one word to me. Like, I'm sitting in the office waiting for a class to start. Didn't acknowledge me, didn't notice I was sitting there. 'Hi, how are you doing today?' Nothing.

Devon had a similar reaction. She said, "They're not very open. People could be more like excited to help people. They could be a lot more welcoming." Other participants suggested that staff members do not return messages. Residents also reported negative experiences with staff members. Nickie, for example, a resident mother of one who was previously homeless, said:

> [The staff] made you feel uncomfortable. Uh, it's like when you come in, like somedays…I don't know if they are having bad days, but, you know, you come in, you already pushin' comin' from work...or straight from school…when you come, it's like you invisible… Like, they really made me feel uncomfortable.

Nickie's, Lee's, and others' experiences may simply reflect that THEA staff are overwhelmed, or that the organization is understaffed; however, given the structure of the program and the need for pre-residents to earn points to gain residency, improvements in communication between staff and participants may be warranted. Moreover, the inaccessibility of THEA staff may have exacerbated the degree to which some pre-residents felt uncertain about expectations.

Theme III: Role Inundation

A third theme to emerge from these data is what we refer to as role inundation consisting of an overwhelming multitude of roles, none of which is optional. In other words, single parents performed multiple roles simultaneously with little to no room for negotiation. For example, one pre-resident had two children, worked full-time, and had a full

academic course load. Although she had childcare during work and school, she was solely responsible for her children's care at other times. She found herself enmeshed (Gilbert 1992) in three different social systems: work, school, and home, where she concurrently navigated childcare responsibilities with work and school.

Sociologists often align this type of role strain or conflict with the negotiations social actors use to decide which role they will perform in a given moment. However, for those who experience role inundation like the single mother enmeshed in three different social systems, choice is often not a factor. Rather, single parents tend to feel inundated and simply move from one role to another with little or no reprieve; and in the case of single mothers who participated at THEA, their role inundation was exacerbated. Even so, most mothers viewed the additional role at THEA as temporary and beneficial in the long-run, particularly given that the social safety net in the U.S. does not provide formal supports for single mothers to earn a college degree.

For many pre-residents, role inundation combined with extreme poverty further reduced the likelihood that mothers could navigate multiple roles, overcome barriers, and meet pre-residential program expectations. Many single parents lived with extended family members—at the time of the interview, Janice lived with her maternal grandmother and acknowledged "it's just a place to stay and I have to pay $200 every month for a room." Even though Janice viewed living in her grandmother's home as only a place to stay, she went on to say that her grandmother expects her to cook, clean, and share her food stamps. Janice often cut hair and wrote term papers for friends to pay rent to her grandmother. Janice found herself inundated in the role of housekeeper, hairdresser, granddaughter, and single mother—all while seeking to earn a college degree and obtain residency at THEA.

Like Janice, a number of pre-residents are enmeshed in extended family systems, where their presence is often necessary and reviled. Pre-resident Devon shared one room with her two children at her paternal grandmother's house. Although she does not pay rent, she believes she pays a high price in terms of the overwhelming role inundation she feels and her involuntary resignation of parental control. Pre-residents' often feel that their parental roles are in abeyance while living with elder generations who assume parental roles. Entrance into THEA, a new system, may be a way for pre-residents to regain their parental roles, even though they may feel their adult roles will remain somewhat limited (e.g., no overnight guests, mandatory meetings).

Although the pre-residential program exacerbated single parents' role inundation, most understood it to be temporary and worth it. Indeed, many pre-residents worked and went to school while providing primary care for their children and viewed THEA as a pathway to self-sufficiency. Even so, accessibility was often difficult—THEA's operating hours and schedules (i.e., traditional business hours) made the screening process particularly challenging for these pre-residents who found themselves navigating many roles in difficult social and economic contexts, often with limited to no social support. Still, there appears to be a notion that these single parents had no choice but to endure, and on this point, Michelle says:

> There is literally no time to waste. And, I struggle with that now. Have to stay moving, have to stay moving, have to stay moving. And, then, um, I guess another challenge would be, always having to be present. Um, because I do have a lot on my plate. Being a single parent and being as active as I am, requires a ridiculous amount of emotional maturity. I can't just shutdown. Because I have to function for myself and I have to be present for my child.

Navigating multiple roles in the context of extreme economic hardship and social disadvantage was a reality for a number of pre-residents. Nearly one-fourth of the residents had been homeless and two-thirds were living in multi-generational households. Frances, for example, recalls, "I ended up at, uh, right here at Salvation Army and went into their transitional housin'…I was there for like six months." Nickie lived for a period in a women's shelter. She said, "I stayed there, it was a shelter. And, uh, you got…you have like your own room. It wadn' where you had to share beds with everybody else. Like, I had my own apartment key."

Also in an extremely difficult economic and social situation while navigating multiple roles,

Sunni, a resident mother of one, said she and her daughter lived with her mother, who earned all of the household income until she went to prison. Sunni recalled, "What happened, I'm the only child and my mom got sent to prison. So, me and my daughter was homeless. We didn't have a bed. So, who wanna keep sleepin' on the floor?" Sunni suddenly found herself navigating a new, extremely difficult, role of homeless mother. The circumstances for Sunni and her daughter were dire, and for other homeless mothers, still extremely difficult even when they managed to secure a place to sleep. Without their basic needs met, many mothers like Sunni were enrolled in college courses and pursued self-sufficiency. Despite suffering from extreme poverty, and confusion about the expectations of pre-residents, finding the schedules and staff to be inaccessible, and role inundation, The House of Educational Advancement was a beacon of hope for these single parents.

Participant Observations

We were unable to conduct interviews with THEA staff[19], which may have provided more insights into service delivery and implementation of the pre-resident program. Therefore, by only including the vantage point of the pre-residents and residents, our results may be biased to the extent that THEA staff members have a different perspective than participants. While this is certainly possible, our participant observations of pre-residents, residents, and staff provide additional information about the experiences of each of these groups. Jorgensen (1989) argues "it is not possible to acquire more than a very crude notion of the insiders' world…until you comprehend the culture and language that is used to communicate its meaning" (Jorgensen 1989: 14). Thus, we present results from participant observations to supplement the findings from our in-depth interviews with THEA participants.

Observations come from interactions between pre-residents, residents, and THEA staff at six different events. These included: 1) pre-resident orientation; 2) four academic workshops; 3) four financial workshops; 4) two pre-resident days; 5) one town hall conversation; and 6) a full-day information fair. Moreover, while we did not conduct interviews with staff, the first author had ongoing communication with THEA staff about the study over a period of four months, and observations from those interactions are included here.

Overall, the pre-residents did not have a good understanding of the structure of the pre-residential program, and based on our observations, it was indeed confusing. Participant's confusion at both the orientation and the workshops was easy to see. First, while pre-residents understood that they were responsible for attending events and accruing points, the point system was not intuitive—some events, which seemingly should have been included in the system, were not (e.g., mandatory workshops). Second, the orientation provided an overview of pre-requisites for residency; however, the information was not communicated clearly, was difficult to follow, and was often cumbersome. Third, the financial aid workshop (i.e., part of the academic workshop series) was held in an open computer lab with numerous distractions, and participants often felt confused by the presenter's choice of words and style of communication. In addition, there appeared to be limited access to workshops/events and the guidelines were often unclear, which may have impeded pre-residents' progress toward residency.

Mandatory events such as orientation, academic success workshops, and financial success workshops were indeed scheduled during business hours. Four of the nine workshops were held from 3:30-4:30 p.m. on Tuesdays. Many of the pre-resident single parents could not attend during this time, as it coincided with work schedules and the dismissal time at public elementary schools. In addition to which, on more than one occasion (at the end of a month), pre-residents would request the schedule for the upcoming month's workshops, but they were not available. The staff passively took note and said that they would be available soon. The pre-residents complained that this made it difficult for them to plan—and given the role inundation that many of the pre-residents experienced—not having schedules in advance reduced the likelihood that they would be able to

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[19] THEA did not want staff members to be interviewed. They were primarily interested in learning about the pre-residential program from the vantage point of the participants in it.

manage their work, family, school, and THEA schedules.

In addition to schedules, we observed on several occasions that the staff did not take care in communicating the content of the workshops. Even when arriving at a given workshop, there were pre-residents who were generally confused about which workshop they were attending and the sequence and purpose of the workshops. On one particular occasion, the researcher explained the purpose of the workshop that was underway and the sequence of the workshops to a pre-resident while the workshop leader meandered outside of the classroom. At the same workshop, the presentation slides were difficult to read and a pre-resident complained that at the workshops "everything is always so hurried." This certainly appeared to be the case. It further appeared that the workshop leaders were not prepared, had little patience, and even shouted, "you all don't listen either" at the workshop participants.

Our observations further corroborated pre-residents' claim that THEA staff were often unavailable and hard to reach, along with claims of difficult or awkward interactions. Specifically, we observed firsthand that THEA staff were sometimes unwelcoming. On several occasions, we found that the staff were not at all friendly and were even dismissive. For example, a participant asked if it would be acceptable to arrive to an orientation event a little late (after receiving the schedule, which included events for the following day) and the staff member responded, "if you are 15 minutes late, don't bother." In addition, we did not receive responses to phone messages and emails within a reasonable amount of time—it sometimes took up to four days to receive a response, and a number of our calls were not returned.

Overall, our participant observations suggest that THEA is understaffed, making it difficult to meet the needs of, and recruit, the most economically and socially disadvantaged pre-residents (a large proportion of THEA's target population). In order to serve the lowest income single parents, more staff members would increase the likelihood that workshops—which single parents have to balance multiple schedules to attend (e.g., work, school, childcare)—are held and not canceled. We witnessed firsthand a late

cancelation of a workshop, which was rescheduled for the following day. For single parents who navigate multiple, complex roles, attending rescheduled workshops during business hours may not be an option.

DISCUSSION

This paper explored the pre-residential screening process at The House of Educational Advancement, and how well the pre-residential program was implemented and reached THEA's target population—low-income, single parents pursuing baccalaureate degrees. Interview data from 32 low-income, single mothers and participant observations suggest that the requirements for residency are often difficult to manage and/or inaccessible to pre-residents. This may mean that single parents who have access to the fewest supports may be the least likely to meet the pre-resident requirements and obtain THEA residency.

We extend the literature in two ways. First, we conduct a process evaluation that emphasizes the vantage point of the program participants/single mothers rather than the program administration, staff, or funding agencies. Second, we evaluate the screening process of an educational program for low-income single mothers, which uniquely includes a housing component to meet the basic needs of single parents—something not yet explored in the extant literature. Our findings further extend the literature by showing that three primary themes emerge around THEA participants' experiences with the pre-residential process, uncertainty about expectations, inaccessibility, and role inundation.

The overall need for programs like THEA has increased over the past two decades. The political efforts to reduce TANF caseloads have forced many single parents into the low-wage workforce; thus, placing greater demands on single parents (Newman 1999; Edin and Shaefer 2015). Prior research has emphasized programs that provide a limited number of instrumental supports to low-income single parents who pursue higher education, such as childcare and transportation (Smith et al. 2002). However, consistent with prior research, our study shows that many low-income single parents need a much broader range of support (e.g., Hong et al. 2009) to earn a college degree. These supports include housing and a range

of others, and single parents often face great challenges to gain access to such supportive programs.

Also consistent with prior research (e.g., Newman 1999), data from this study further show that many single parents struggle tremendously to fulfill the duties of the multiple roles (e.g., mother, employee, student) that they assume in pursuit of higher education. The multiple roles that THEA pre-residents assume often are navigated alongside the difficult circumstances of living in deep poverty. Prior research (e.g., Stack 1973; Edin and Lein 1997) shows that even daily subsistence for low-income single parents requires forethought and a strong supportive network. The pre-resident and resident mothers at THEA were no different—selection into residency at THEA appeared to be linked to mothers who were more advantaged in terms of social support.

With respect to gaining access to residency, there was a significant disconnect between the theory of implementing THEA's pre-residency program and the reality of the target population's life circumstances. Some scholars argue that fidelity criteria (i.e., conforming to prescribed elements of a program, McGrew et al. 1994) for program implementation is central to the success of a program (see Mowbray et al. 2003), while others acknowledge that a lack of documentation on implementation may impede one's ability to assess the merit of a given program (McGrew et al. 1994; Orwin 2000). That is, it is difficult to determine successful implementation of THEA's pre-residential program in what appears to be an absence of specific implementation criteria against which to judge the delivery of its services. On the other hand, while some social programs may adapt program implementation from existing, similar programs, the unique housing component of THEA did not allow for such replication. Therefore, the components of THEA's pre-residential program likely conformed to more formal support models (such as those under AFDC or TANF) with a high-fidelity specificity (e.g., Orwin 2000).

The more formal support model did not appear optimal for pre-residents who lived in deep poverty, suffered from role inundation, and were confused by the program requirements. Like many parents who successfully leave TANF for work,

single mothers who made it into THEA's residency program may have had advantages that others did not (e.g., strong supportive networks, college credits), despite being economically disadvantaged. That is, the more formal structure of THEA's pre-residential program may have selected on those already on a path to self-sufficiency prior to applying for THEA's educational and housing supports. Therefore, the high-fidelity implementation (e.g., Owin 2000) of the pre-residential program and overall lack of flexibility associated with such criteria (e.g., workshops schedules), reduced the likelihood that THEA's program reached the most economically and socially disadvantaged group of single parents—a core part of THEA's target population.

Many pre-residents suggested that the workshop locations, times, and dates were inaccessible to single parents overwhelmed with work, school, and parental obligations. In order to attend workshops, pre-residents often had to negotiate with employers, professors, and childcare providers. Therefore, pre-residents' housing was delayed, either temporarily or permanently. Overall, these findings are consistent with prior research (Hong et al. 2009; Jennings and Santiago 2008; Parisi et al. 2008), which suggests a bottom-up approach to implementation may better serve clients.

In her landmark study *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life,* Annette Lareau (2003) highlighted low-income parents' tendencies to defer to authority, and therefore not speak up for their own needs. We speculate that some pre-residents did not negotiate with authority figures at THEA, and certainly would not have requested one-on-one workshops with staff, a strategy employed by some pre-residents with scheduling conflicts. As an example, Laura, a mother of two, commented that the workshops were not that accessible. However, she says, "It doesn't matter. [The staff] would take time out of their day and set up an appointment with you." Even though these accommodations were admirable, it is important to note that these individualized sessions were not offered widely, as they would have taxed an already overwhelmed and understaffed program.

Many pre-residents eventually terminate their applications for residency. Without explicit communication about how THEA could

accommodate pre-residents with conflicting schedules, many who struggled felt that the program was not designed to support them, and eventually gave up on it. Thus, the process of transitioning pre-residents into residency may not function as well as it could. In order to capture the availability of pre-residents who may be reticent and/or defer to authority, again, a bottom-up approach to scheduling may improve outcomes over time. In our report to THEA, we recommended an initial assessment of the availability of pre-residents and an increased effort to be more flexible with when workshops are offered.

THEA certainly did not appear intentionally to hold workshops/events at inconvenient times, nor as a mechanism of exclusion. Staff members were present during the day to coordinate events, welcome new pre-residents, and offer services and amenities to current residents. On the other hand, offering workshops during non-business hours may be a good option for pre-residents. However, this could put additional strain on both the organization and staff members. To reduce this possibility, we recommended that THEA offer mandatory workshops on a limited basis (i.e., maybe one evening a month and one Saturday a month) during non-business hours to better serve pre-residents who found it difficult to make the weekday events. We argue that this would potential improve the likelihood that THEA would reach a wider range of disadvantaged single parents and thus more of its target population.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of both pre- and current residents show that acceptance into THEA's residential program requires significant dedication, ability to navigate competing schedules, and access to support. Even so, there are currently more than 1,000 pre-residents on the waitlist, but only 215 housing units; thus, the demand for residency outweighs the supply of available housing. Therefore, the reality of supply and demand alone suggests that THEA may have little incentive to rearrange schedules for mandatory events nor increase the frequency of workshops; and many pre-residents, who hope for residency, are not likely to secure it given the low supply of units. The result may be that those who are already on a

path to self-sufficiency, rather than those who are struggling the most, are more likely to benefit from the program because they are able to find ways to navigate the program requirements as they are currently. This is particularly plausible given that THEA staff, who organize the pre-residential screening process, also facilitate the process through which residents achieve their educational goals. Thus, staff may prioritize the needs of residents who are already on the path to self-sufficiency over pre-residents who may need additional assistance to become THEA residents.

We turn now to the limitations of our study. First, our sample is limited to people who live in an urban area. Rural residents may be more restricted than urban residents in their ability to participate in organizations like THEA—transportation, for example, may impede rural mothers' ability to attend THEA workshops in ways that may not affect urban mothers. In addition, rural residents may be more enmeshed in their family systems, as their incomes may be lower and they may rely more on informal social support. Second, this is a convenience sample and was not randomly drawn, so our results may not be generalized to the population of THEA pre-residents and residents. Even so, our in-depth examination of the lived experiences of THEA pre-residents and residents highlights the significance of role inundation that single parents experience in pursuit of a wide range of postsecondary educational supports.

A third limitation is that THEA staff assisted with the identification of study participants; thus, our findings may be biased to the extent that study participants were unwilling to participate for this reason, or that their responses were altered due to THEA's involvement. It is important to note that we made every effort to protect the confidentiality of study participants (removing all identifying information from our report to THEA and elsewhere), and thus reduced the likelihood that THEA staff could connect our findings to a particular participant. Lastly, while we include participant observations to supplement findings in relations to staff, our study is limited in that we were unable to interview THEA staff members.

The perspectives of THEA staff were important because they may have helped to

reconcile some of the opposing viewpoints of THEA pre-residents. In addition, interviews with THEA staff would have allowed us to examine whether communication styles differed between staff and different participants, and whether this influenced some participants' confusion about the requirements. While THEA did not give us access to interview staff members in this phase of the project, future research should try to account for staff perspectives. In addition, future research may also explore pre- and post-residency perspectives to better understand whether single parents' views about the pre-resident program changed once they were residents. Follow-up studies should also consider a formalized questionnaire to reach a larger sample of THEA participants.

Overall, while THEA may not fully reach its target population, it is increasing the life chances of many single parents. The most economically disadvantaged single parents may be better reached if modifications are made to the pre-residential program (e.g., scheduling of activities). Low-income, single parents struggle with role inundation, navigating parenthood, work, and school, and often in unstable, environments with few social and economic resources. Even though the screening process is difficult to manage for some pre-residents, the organization consistently offers stable housing to more than 200 families and educational resources to nearly 1,000 pre-residents. Our recommendations for improvement are that THEA implement more flexible schedules for the pre-resident orientation events and workshops, make schedules available to parents well in advance, and improve attention to the most economically and socially disadvantaged parents who pursue residency in the program. Moreover, similar programs that offer support to single parents who pursue a college degree (e.g., Parents as Scholars Program) may want to consider increasing the flexibility of their programs so as not to miss the most disadvantaged parents, and pursue avenues to expand their range of supports to include a housing component. As our data from THEA participants shows, unstable housing exacerbates the seemingly insurmountable barriers single parents face to earn a college degree.

Organizations like THEA are extremely valuable, both to the low-income, single parents that they serve, and to the communities in which parents live. While some modifications to the pre-residential screening process are certainly needed, overall, THEA contributes tremendously to its community and the wellbeing of its participants. The importance of THEA, and similar programs, is underscored by the reality of growing economic inequality in the U.S., and the likelihood that low-income single parents will experience extreme difficulties maintaining low-skilled work in an economy that increasingly requires a college degree to earn a livable wage (Blank 2009). The unilateral, instrumental support that THEA offers means that many single parents will be self-sufficient by earning a college degree. THEA is making a difference in its community, and paving the way for other organizations to follow its lead.

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