

**Prepared  
Statement  
before the  
House  
Committee  
on County  
Affairs**

**Brazos Valley  
Council of  
Governments**

This is a summary of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program administered by the Brazos Valley Council of Governments. In September, the Family Self-Sufficiency Program received the 8th largest grant award nationwide from the Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD) for its work to transition families off government assistance. The program is a model for other Councils of Governments throughout the State of Texas that administer social service programs.

**Room E2.016  
10:00 AM  
Wednesday,  
October 24,  
2012**

**Mr. Chairman and Members of the House Committee on County Affairs:**

It is an honor to be here today to present the work of the Brazos Valley Council of Governments (BVCOG) to transition assisted-families off of government assistance to self-sufficiency and independence.

**About BVCOG:**

First let me familiarize you with the BVCOG. It serves over 315,000 citizens and covers an area of 5,109 square miles in central Texas roughly the size of Connecticut. Our region consists of seven counties: Brazos, Burleson, Grimes, Leon, Madison, Robertson and Washington. The region includes Bryan-College Station and is the home of Texas A&M University and the A&M University System.

The BVCOG is a one-stop shop providing client and community based services. The “regular” COG planning programs that are consistent with other COG’s are 911, solid waste and homeland security and our award winning Citizen’s Emergency Response Team (CERT) training to name a few. In addition BVCOG provides certain **client-based** services often provided by other agencies that include the Housing Choice Voucher Program of which the FSS Program is a part, Workforce Solutions Brazos Valley, the Area Agency on Aging with its newly opened Aging and Disability Resource Center, County Indigent Healthcare, HIV Administrative Services, and TexHealth Brazos Valley.

Our other non-typical **community based** programs include, the Regional Planning Organization an entity dedicated to regional transportation planning, Brazos Valley Affordable Housing Corporation, Purchasing Solutions Alliance a national purchasing cooperative, and the Regional Advisory Committee a regional EMS, public health, and medical provider planning group.

**Background:**

The Family Self-Sufficiency Program (FSS) was enacted under the National Affordable Housing Act of 1990. It is a sub-program of BVCOG's Housing Choice Voucher Program (also known as the Section 8 program). The BVCOG is authorized to provide housing assistance through HUD's Housing Choice Voucher Program to 1,901 families but is only funded to serve 1,650 families. Of the 1,650 families that BVCOG serves each year with housing assistance, 20% (1 in 5) of those families are voluntarily enrolled in the FSS Program.

The FSS Program is a voluntary employment and savings incentive program for families that have Section 8 vouchers. An assisted-family registers to join the FSS Program by signing a 5-year Contract of Participation that specifies the long-term, medium-term and short-term goals they will achieve to attain self-sufficiency and independence from all forms of government assistance. Since its creation in 1990, the FSS Program was modified by Congress in 1992 and again in 1998.

The Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act (QHWRA, pronounced “Q’wē-r-a”) in 1998 weakened the requirements of the FSS program. According to the legislation, local agencies could administer an FSS Program “at their option” and FSS Program sizes could be reduced “one-for-one for each FSS graduate fulfilling the contract of participation obligations” (QHWRA Summary 1998, 4). After the adoption of QHWRA, housing assistance programs could therefore voluntarily choose to work with their assisted-families to transition them off of housing assistance. Even though it is no longer required, BVCOG believes in and administers the FSS Program for the benefit of those whose goal is to become self-sufficient.

In a 2001 report, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) found that the FSS Program benefits assisted-families and local agencies while also promoting welfare reform goals. The report finds that, “Every FSS participant who increases earnings enough to leave public housing or cease to receive Section 8 assistance frees up a housing subsidy for a new eligible family” (Sard 2001, 9). The CBPP report concludes that the operation of an FSS Program can increase available housing assistance dollars by increasing Section 8 voucher turnover.

In 2012, Congress drafted (not passed) the Affordable Housing and Self-Sufficiency Act (AHSSIA, pronounced “A’see-a”). AHSSIA does not make any significant policy changes to increase responsibility or

accountability of assisted-families receiving housing assistance. In this draft bill, Congress proposes that the FSS Program be mandatory for “each housing agency that administers 500 or more units” (AHSSIA 2012, 83). However, administering a FSS Program would still be voluntary for any agency with less than 500 assisted-units. For those agencies with more than 500 units, the proposed legislation only requires the agency “to provide for the filling of one full-time family self-sufficiency coordinator position, [for] not less than 25 assisted families” (AHSSIA 2012, 84). In other words, AHSSIA requires only 25 assisted-families (5% or 1 in 20) to participate in an FSS Program at a local agency.

BVCOG has four full-time coordinators assisting 330 families (20% or 1 in 5) in its FSS Program, going far beyond the requirements of HUD and AHSSIA.

## **Results:**

Over the past three years, BVCOG has been awarded \$1.6 million dollars from the Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD) for the FSS program. The BVCOG FSS Program is recognized for transitioning more assisted-families off of government assistance than any housing authority in Texas and estimates that it has the highest proportion of families participating in an FSS Program nationwide. 20% of BVCOG’s 1,650 assisted-families participate in this program and are

actively working towards self-sufficiency. On Friday, September 21, 2012, HUD awarded the 8<sup>th</sup> largest FSS grant nationwide to BVCOG, behind only major cities like Dallas, Chicago and Los Angeles.

BVCOG has graduated 30 families over the last three years from the FSS Program. Graduation occurs when a family becomes independent of all government assistance for a minimum of 12 months after receiving their last HUD rental assistance payment. Each new graduate for the program opens up a new Section 8 voucher for another family in need of housing assistance. These 30 graduates have opened up over \$30,000 in housing assistance to new families on our 5,250 family waiting list.

The difference at BVCOG is the commitment of its Board and Administration to enable the FSS program to be a success. The initial approach begins when the FSS coordinator conducts an assessment with the applicant. It has been BVCOG's experience that families do not have just a housing need in their life they have multiple needs causing the family to require more than just housing assistance. If the family is to be successful all of these multiple needs must be addressed. Our counselors have access to bring Workforce/job training, Aging, Childcare, GED and other resources to the applicant. The applicant does not have to leave our office because BVCOG is truly a "one-stop-shop".

The commitment to the applicant does not stop with the initial assessment, once the needs are identified, goals to fill the needs are agreed on and families are enrolled in their own unique program. They are required to meet one-on-one with their counselor once a month to gauge their progress and to keep them on track to attain their goals.

BVCOG found that only a limited number of slots were available locally for gaining a GED. To correct the problem two computer labs are set up in BVCOG allowing two training simultaneous sessions. We are now an accredited facilitator for gaining a GED with instruction available both daytime and in the evening. The labs are also used for specialized job training. Job counselors from Workforce Solutions Brazos Valley, another BVCOG agency, help to put family members in job training and into job interviews. Other programs through BVCOG can provide day care or can refer them for treatment for addiction.

Other innovative practices include, on occasion, bringing in outside inspirational speakers, holding FSS graduation banquets, and featuring stories of success from other participants who have graduated from the FSS Program to expand support of the FSS Program. Participants have been featured by the local media six times over the last two years.

Using data from 1996 – 2000, HUD conducted a longitudinal evaluation of the FSS Program. In their study, HUD found that,

“Between 1996 and 2000, FSS participants experienced a 72 percent increase in their median income, from \$6,936 to \$11,960”, while “among non-FSS participants, the increase was half as large, at 36 percent, rising from \$6,606 in 1996 to \$8,996 in 2000” (HUD FSS Evaluation 2004, 31). HUD’s report finds that the FSS Program increases the assisted-family’s income and decreases the housing assistance required per family. The FSS Program therefore allows local agencies to assist more families within a limited budget.

## **Collaboration**

The BVCOG FSS Program is a model of collaboration for other Councils of Governments and/or agencies that provide social service programs. Having so many community and client based services under one roof provides a unique opportunity to address the many needs of each family. The BVCOG FSS Program is one testament to the innovation that occurs at the regional level. COG’s are uniquely qualified in their structure and capacity to react to local needs and to tailor state and federal programs for the maximum local effect.

## **Conclusion:**

The only thing Councils of Governments have in common is that we are all different. We are highly tailored to the region we service. The COG is a direct result of the local elected officials taking an active role in bringing services to the region. BVCOG’s example of the FSS



program reflects our board's desire to see more of our families move from dependence on government to self-sufficiency. The administration of the FSS Program at BVCOG is a model that can be replicated by other local agencies or Councils of Governments. Thank you for the opportunity to present the work of BVCOG and its FSS program today.

### Citations

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Robert C. Ficke, Andrea Piesse. 2004. *Evaluation of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program, Retrospective Analysis 1996-2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research.

Sard, Barbara. 2001. *The Family Self-Sufficiency Program: HUD's Best Kept Secret For Promoting Employment And Asset Growth*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

The Committee on Financial Services. 2012. *Affordable Housing and Self-Sufficiency Improvement Act of 2012*. Draft of H.R. \_\_\_\_.