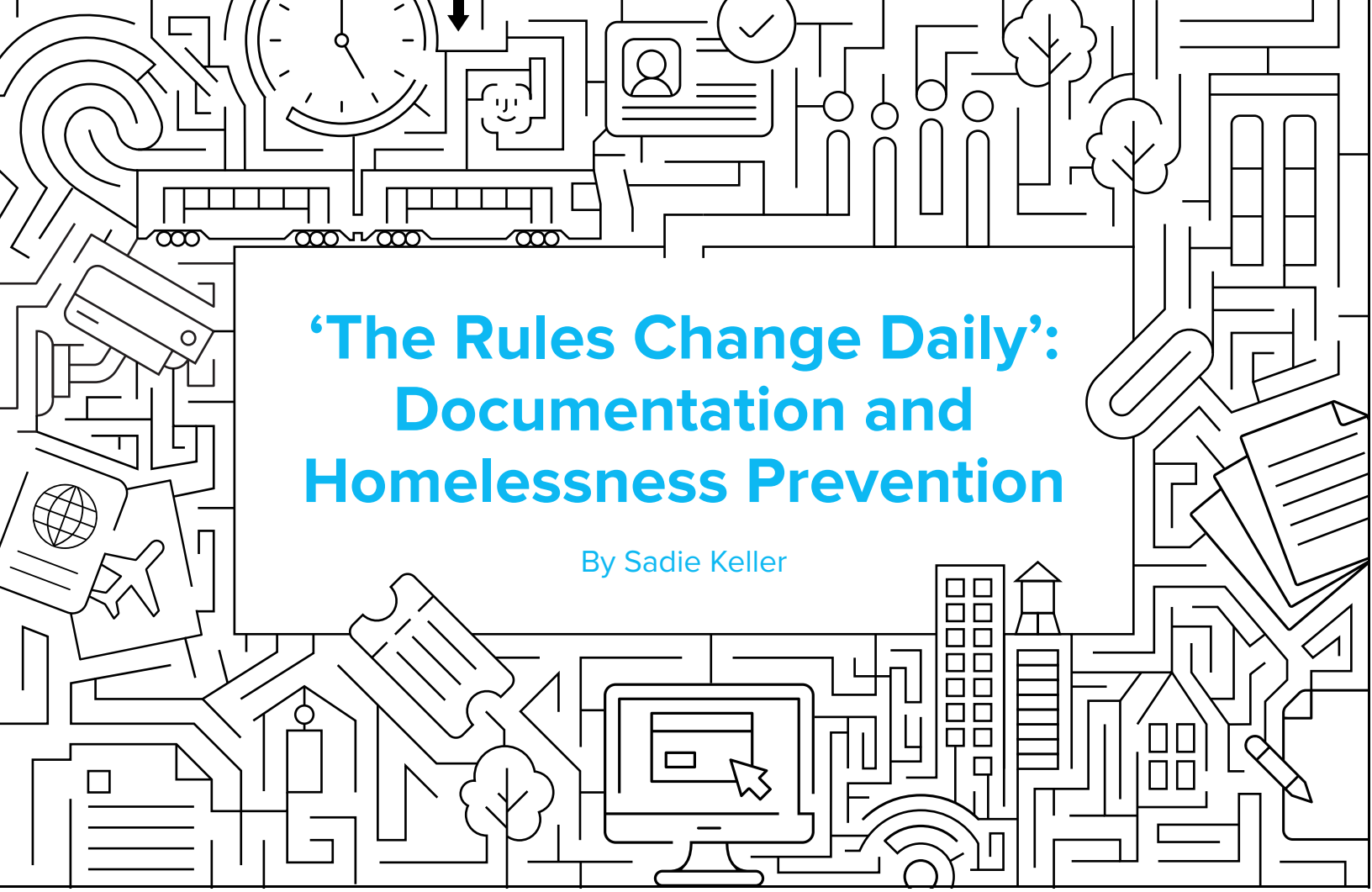

‘The Rules Change Daily’: Documentation and Homelessness Prevention

By Sadie Keller

Lisa Markushewski, case manager at Greater Portland Family Promise (GPFP) in Portland, Maine, has recently found herself somewhat of a specialist in identification and documentation. This is not a skill she expected to develop while working to keep families housed and stabilized.

Amid applying for housing, acquiring necessary social services, and building community ties, most families in GPFP programs are simultaneously embarking on a long and arduous legal journey. According to GPFP Executive Director Michelle Lamm, most of the families served by the organization are new residents of the United States. Ninety-three percent of families served are seeking asylum, the majority from central African countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola.

To respond, the GPFP team has ventured into the complex lattice of state and federal laws that dictate social services, immigration status, and housing. “You have to go back and read the guidelines,” says Markushewski, “and the rules change daily.”

This navigation requires collaboration from an entire community, and thankfully, the GPFP has strong partnerships with legal advocates, including Maine Equal Justice. They refer multiple families to the group each year. Attorney Deb Ibonwa, the organization’s policy and legal advocate, connects families to services, provides legal assistance, and manages high-impact litigation. Ibonwa says GPFP’s team identifies when a family faces a legal challenge, like a loophole eviction, tax fraud, or denied benefits. “I rely on [GPFP’s] advice and insight into the issues families face in our community,” says Ibonwa.

Initiating and winning an asylum claim is contingent on having multiple forms of ID and valid certificates, a significant barrier for some families. Administrative snags and international incongruence add to the stress. For example, a person may struggle to track down a birth certificate and request it from their home country. In the case of married couples, the United States may not recognize a union carried out in another country through a traditional ceremony.

When possible, GPFP gets creative. They have acted as notaries for at least six couples, performed legal marriages onsite, and have helped families obtain state-issued photo IDs. While they leave the legal work to experts, GPFP works with families to prepare their asylum claims, including copying documents needed for the application. Claims can involve more than 250 printed pages, so donors have provided credit at local printing stores to help cover the costs.

Gathering required documentation can take months, which means families may live without access to benefits pending their verification. “Too many families are forced to go without basic needs for their children,” says Lamm.

T.J. Putman is executive director of a Family Promise affiliate on the other side of the country, Family Promise of the Mid-Willamette Valley, in Salem, Oregon. Like GPFP, the organization does not require a family to present documentation to enroll in

programming, including emergency shelter. "You shouldn't need an ID to live somewhere safe," says Putman.

Before working in homeless services, Putman could understand why someone would live without identification, but he did not know the extent to which a lack of documentation would keep a family on the brink of experiencing homelessness. He has been continuously surprised by the centrality of documentation to his work supporting families, noting, "You need documentation to open a bank account, to drive, to apply for an apartment, and to secure a job."

When they first approach a Family Promise affiliate, most parents are focused on getting out of an unsafe situation and caring for their children. Understandably, renewing a driver's license is not top of mind. In Portland, many families contact GPFP after an exhausting and traumatic international journey that may have taken months or years. "At intake, all of the families we serve need serious medical attention. They are deeply concerned about their kids," reflects Markushewski.

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Obtaining documentation can feel tedious and bureaucratic, but it has proven to be a necessary checkmark in case management. It is essential to bringing a family out of homelessness—and can bring a family's long-term goals a little more within reach. "We can work with some landlords to get a family into an apartment and pay for one or two months of rent," says Lamm. "But eventually, the family will pay. Parents need to have a job or be in training, kids need to be enrolled in school, and everyone needs good healthcare. Each piece of that puzzle requires different forms of ID."

Under normal circumstances, documentation poses barriers for those living in poverty, and overwhelmingly burdens families of color. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated this situation, increasing the wait time for processing credentials and limiting in-person visits at the responsible state offices. In one timely example, ID or Social Security Number requirements for the coronavirus vaccine have kept some families from receiving a dose in some states.

The past two years brought an unprecedented level of funding to renters and landlords, including $46.5 billion in rental assistance. Yet the dollars have been slow to reach those who desperately need them. Some localities, fearing misuse of funds or fraud, have put in place strict requirements that mean it can take offices weeks to verify an applicant. One of the biggest hurdles in the process is the level of required documentation needed. Hoping that states and local governments can streamline the distribution of the funds, the Treasury Department has modified its guidance. It remains to be seen how effectively these funds will be distributed. Family Promise and other organizations fear the long-term repercussions of the end of the national eviction moratorium for families who were unable to access or use allocated funds to catch up on rent.

As they navigate ever-changing webs of federal, state, and local rules, both Family Promise affiliates see opportunities for policymakers and administrators to better support families. In Portland, LD 718, HP 529, an act introduced in the past legislative session, could help close gaps in healthcare eligibility for asylum seekers. The act is currently being re-considered in the current legislative session, and GPFP is hopeful it will be adopted. According to Lamm, the change would help ameliorate health inequities of low-income Mainers who are immigrants and allow case managers like Markushewski to better advocate for their clients, but it is just one of many more substantial changes needed in Portland's social safety net.

In Oregon, one existing service needs to be strengthened. The state provides no-cost birth certificates for people experiencing homelessness, a helpful tool for Putman's team as they update and establish documentation for families. But the process is slow, often taking more than 30 days, and COVID-19 contributed to a domino effect. The backlog stalls a family's ability to access a hotel for one evening, and in the long-term could keep them from receiving essential services.

Ironically, the wait for the special documentation can close a window of opportunity for a family to find housing. In today's especially tight real estate market, there are few units that families can afford, and when family-suitable and safe spaces do appear, they go quickly. In rare instances, a landlord or organization will accept an interim card as identification. Often, however, no documentation means no apartment.

They live on opposite coasts and serve disparate communities, but Markushewski, Lamm, and Putman all agree that securing documentation is a necessary step to preventing homelessness and maintaining a family's independence in the long term. Therefore, they believe it is a natural part of the work of homeless services providers. As they work to educate their communities about family homelessness and housing instability, the Family Promise teams are expanding the definition of homelessness prevention to meet the need in their community.

As Lamm says, "It is all about setting the family up for stability."

Sadie Keller is a policy and program associate at Family Promise, where she focuses on housing policy research, grant management, and partner engagement. What began as a local initiative in Summit, NJ, has become a national movement that involves 200,000 volunteers and has served more than one million family members since its founding. Currently, Family Promise is working in more than 200 communities in 43 states to prevent family homelessness and ensure that families have a safe place to call home and the resources they need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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