



# One Can Help and the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems: Findings from a Qualitative Study

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August 26, 2020

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the research question, *What is One Can Help's role in the journey of underserved children and families through the juvenile court and child welfare systems?* One Can Help is a nonprofit that provides assistance to underserved children and families navigating the juvenile justice/court and child welfare systems in Massachusetts (“One”, n.d.). One Can Help (OCH) was founded by Anne Bader-Martin, an attorney working in Massachusetts’s juvenile justice system, who saw a need for assistance beyond what the court and child welfare institutions provide. Attorneys and social workers (and other child advocates, but these are the main groups) working with children and families who are involved with these systems can apply for assistance from OCH. OCH refers to these applicants as their clients and to children and families as their beneficiaries (whereas the applicants refer to children and families as their clients). (Additionally, throughout this paper the term “participants” refers to the individuals who participated in the research.) Beneficiaries cannot apply directly for OCH support. OCH aims to provide assistance that is ancillary to legal issues: they provide for basic needs like food and housing and for additional opportunities like education and extracurricular activities.

As an independent, nonprofit organization, One Can Help occupies a liminal space around and within the systems and institutions of juvenile justice and child welfare. This research sought to define the organization’s position and role in these systems and in the diverse and complex journeys that children and families take through the systems. This included an exploration of the gaps in the system – both that OCH attempts to fill and that it cannot fill; of the challenges faced by social workers and attorneys who work within the systems, as well as by children and families dealing with the systems; of the types of support that OCH provides; and of the challenges OCH faces and areas in which it might improve or expand.

## **Methodology**

The research began with informal conversations with OCH founder and executive director Anne Bader-Martin, who served as a key informant. She provided applications for OCH assistance in 2019 and the outcome surveys from participants over the same time period, OCH annual reports and an external cost-effectiveness report, which were analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques. Bader-Martin also provided informal background information and participated in an unstructured interview. The research also involved unstructured and semi-structured interviews and a focus group with social workers and attorneys who regularly work with OCH, a past beneficiary and a retired judge. A purposive sampling method was used in which I asked Bader-Martin to recommend research participants who were well-aware of OCH’s work and who could be expected to be forthright and active participants. This sampling method was particularly effective because the remote nature of the research meant that it would not have been possible to gain access to participants without Bader-Martin’s introductions. To combat any potential sampling bias (and for other ethical reasons), all participants were informed multiple times that their data would be kept confidential. The focus group participants also agreed to confidentiality among themselves. It was made explicit that one of the goals of confidentiality was to allow participants to speak frankly and openly, which they seemed to do. None of the participants are referred to by name in this paper, except for Bader-Martin, who gave permission for her name to be used as the small size of the organization and her role as its leader would have made it impossible to conceal her identity.

Because OCH's beneficiaries are by definition vulnerable individuals, the past beneficiary who was interviewed was the only current or former beneficiary who participated in the research. She is no longer an active beneficiary of OCH and is an adult. To protect her privacy, this interview was not recorded. Quotes from her were noted by the researcher; in cases when it was not possible to note a direct quote, her responses are paraphrased.

The unstructured interviews and focus group were recorded and transcribed. The documents provided by OCH and the transcripts were analyzed using data-driven coding (Gibbs, 2007), with codes arising and being recorded as the data were analyzed. Portions exemplifying codes were pasted into sections based on those codes, resulting in coherent definitions of the codes with examples of each code coming from multiple sources/participants. As the research progressed and codes emerged while data collection was ongoing, *in vivo* coding was occasionally used with participants being asked questions related to codes that had already been generated.

## **Findings**

### *Situating OCH within the systems*

OCH was described by research participants as an outside actor that supplements the official systems, yet simultaneously as a necessary part of those systems, filling significant gaps that exist within the systems. Participants described OCH assistance being used to fulfill expectations that were set by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) or the courts, yet which beneficiaries were not enabled by these institutions to fulfill. One social worker explained: "If you're gonna place a kid far away that a family can't get there...the expectation should be on DCF to be able to get the parent out there. Whether it would be [to be] helpful with the funding, working with programs to provide transportation when needed...it just seems unfair. And I've felt bad that I've had to reach out to One Can Help for those things." Paradoxically, this participant explained that One Can Help's role in providing things that the system should provide positions OCH as an outside actor, not part of the system itself. "They have kind of I think been...forced into fitting into the system when I think really it is a safety net," she explained. (It should be noted that most of the other participants did not agree with the metaphor of the safety net, with some arguing that a more apt metaphor would be a "stepping stone" to better outcomes or a "linchpin" in achieving justice. These metaphors for OCH's role are explored below.) This role as an outsider/supplementer of the system is reinforced, according to this participant, by the fact that OCH spans multiple organizations that contribute to the systems of juvenile justice and child welfare.

### Gaps in the systems

When asked about the problems and gaps that exist in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, participants reacted with derision. Asked what a system would look like in which she would not have needed assistance from OCH, a former beneficiary clarified: *you mean if the system wasn't broken?... I can't even imagine that.* Asked about issues with the systems, a social worker said, "I think we're talking decades and decades of generational systemic issues." Bader-Martin (who is an attorney as well as the Executive Director of OCH) explained, "We remove their children, we give people criminal records, we... incarcerate them...we terminate parental rights.... And we're not doing the stuff that really makes people feel supported." This, she

explained, is an issue of equity: “Underrepresented populations are overrepresented in juvenile court.”

Participants explained that the gaps that OCH fills are often quite small in terms of the amount of money, but large in terms of the impact of the issue on the beneficiary’s life. A social worker explained: “So many times...there’s such a small financial gap of being able to have [a need] met versus not met.” She gave an example of a mother who received a \$14 public transportation pass that enabled her to visit her son while he was placed in care. “This is a kid and his mom, and it’s always been just the two of them, and being separated is really hard. And so being able to bring them together for something as simple as \$14 a week...it was priceless.” She expressed frustration that such financially small yet significant gaps exist: “That’s what makes it kind of really sad at some points, is like, why is there nothing else that can meet this need when it’s such a small number?”

While children and families are the explicit beneficiaries of OCH, a theme that arose in this research was that the assistance helps not just these beneficiaries but the social workers and attorneys themselves, whose jobs and lives are made easier by having access to this resource. The gaps in the systems that impact children and families also impact the attorneys and social workers who are employed to help them. One social worker explained: “Being able to rely and know that there’s this agency that will help when nothing else will...it just makes it so much easier and it makes me feel more confident in being able to support my clients.” She shared that she provides a level of service to her clients that she would not be capable of without OCH: “Without knowing that One Can Help is there, I wouldn’t necessarily be able to talk to a kid about, ‘oh, you really want to learn how to dance? Well maybe we’ll try to find you some dance classes.’ That wouldn’t really be fair for me to try and say something like that to a child...without knowing that...worst case, I have someone that I can ask to fund this.... Those are things that like I wouldn’t even be able to talk to kids about.” Another social worker agreed that OCH has changed her practice: “Before I knew about One Can Help I had sat across the desk from clients with just...this like helplessness around their situation. And now like to just have...\$25 here or \$55 there...there’s just like these small amounts of money that just move something forward for that week for that client.”

### *Two types of assistance*

OCH’s assistance can be divided into two categories: “basic needs” and “opportunities”. (OCH themselves call this latter category “education and opportunities”. They describe a third category, “transportation”, which this analysis places within “opportunities”, although some transportation issues could be categorized in “basic needs”.)

### Basic needs

OCH covers basic needs that support families to survive hardship, including homelessness and lack of food and clothing. Clothing is a frequent area of support. In one extreme case, an attorney applied for assistance to buy clothing for two children whose mother had been recently murdered. The children’s home was the crime scene, and so they had been unable to return and change their clothes for several days following the murder of their mother. In another case, the beneficiary interviewed for this research received assistance for a deposit on an apartment when

she and her children were without a home. This deposit enabled her to move into the apartment and live there for years, until this day.

### Opportunities

In many cases, OCH covers not a basic need but an opportunity that the beneficiary would not otherwise be able to access. Opportunity assistance can be further subdivided into two categories: “stepping stones”, as described by one attorney, which allow the beneficiary to move towards a concrete, better outcome; and boosts, which support the beneficiary’s self-esteem or allow them to move towards a less clearly-defined but nonetheless positive outcome. Many examples of stepping stones involve transportation. Applications for assistance as well as stories shared by attorneys and social workers who participated in this research frequently mentioned the need for bus passes or vehicle maintenance in order to enable the beneficiary to attend court- or DCF-mandated services, such as parental visits to children placed in foster care or group homes or attendance at therapy. An attorney positioned transportation as a stepping stone to a concrete outcome, speaking from the hypothetical point of view of a beneficiary: “I have an opportunity to be able to get a job or to be able to move to a better place and I need to be able to drive, to be able to visit with my kids, to do these services - it’s really about allowing clients to take advantage of the opportunities that are out there for them.”

An example of transportation as a stepping stone was provided as part of an exercise that focus group participants engaged in to visualize OCH’s role. Participants drew a timeline of a beneficiary’s life as a river, with OCH’s assistance as a rock. They discussed whether and how the presence of the rock changed the course of the river. One participant drew the story of a mother who was on track to reunify with her children when her car broke down, preventing her from getting to her new job (see figure 1). The social worker who shared this story explained: “Her car just bit it. And I reached out to One

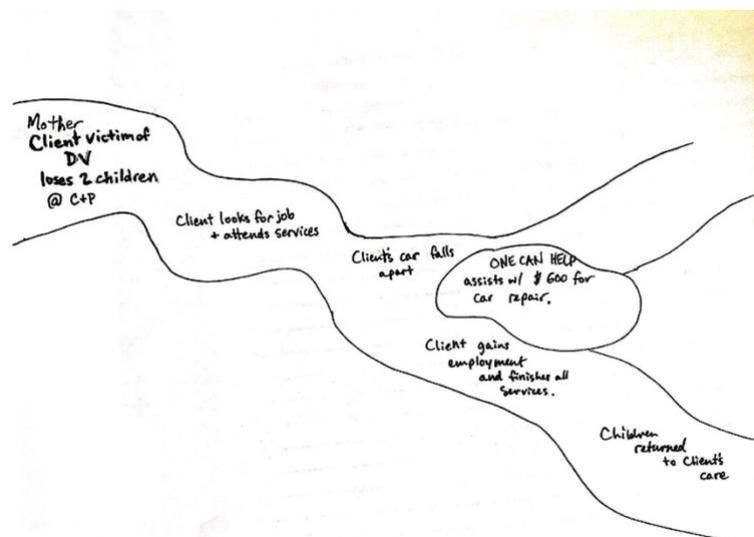


Figure 1

Can Help and the money that was required to fix the car was there for her and she...fixed the car, got the job, finished the services [that she was required to attend] and got her kids back.... and she still has the kids today.” In the drawing, this is visualized by the rock blocking the mother from going down an alternative stream; because her car is fixed, she continues towards reunification with her children.

Another river drawing provided an example of what I call a “boost” to general improved well-being (rather than a “stepping stone” to a specific goal). This participant drew the story of two children who had been placed in the care of their grandmother (see figure 2). “They had a dog which was...a major thing for them psychologically. The dog got seriously ill...the grandmother

of course didn't have the funds for it. It's not the kind of thing DCF or the other funders would pay for. But they came to One Can Help and within...hours basically the vet bills got approved and the dog was saved. And the kids were able to go on a stable course...which really blocked off I think this side track [see drawing] which would have been very unstable for them

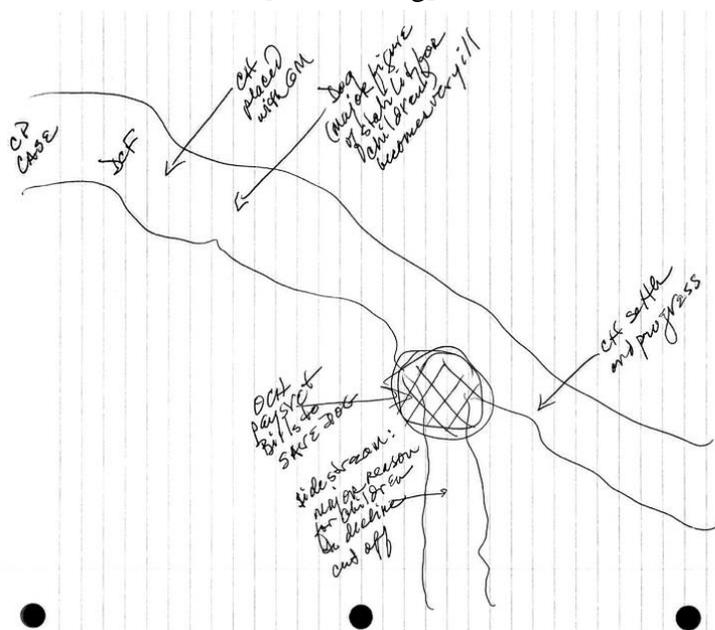


Figure 2

psychologically. It was the beginning of their placement with the grandmother and things could have gone very, very wrong.” The assistance which saved the dog was not aimed at any specific court or child welfare outcome for the children, yet it enabled them, in the eyes of the retired judge who shared this story, to avoid disastrous psychological outcomes. This was a case in which the need was clear, yet ephemeral, and which therefore would not have been supported by the systems or other funding agencies.

Other “boosts” often include edifying activities for children who have few options for extracurricular activities. These include camps, gym memberships, tutoring, and even college classes. One social worker described OCH boosts: “I really look at it in terms of a resource that we can utilize to really enrich the lives of these kids who have every right to live the same life that they are entitled to live if they weren't in DCF custody. It's a program that can break down that wall, where they can just say ‘I'm a kid’, instead of having to say, ‘I'm a foster kid’.”

### *Outcomes and impact*

This qualitative research does not seek to make causal claims around the outcomes of OCH's assistance. Yet participants traced many avenues of impact that they have witnessed in their experiences with OCH. While it is not possible based on the qualitative methods used here to definitively claim OCH's impact, it is important to examine the perceptions of impact that the stakeholders described.

In some cases, the impact perceived by stakeholders was extreme. One social worker described a case in which OCH supported a child to attend a camp for transgender youth: “This parent had given up on their child because to them it appeared like unexplainable and purposeful defiance. And everything that they had tried on their own to get the support that this girl needed failed in their eyes. So I imagine that it would have led to that family either just giving up on that child; even if the family didn't give up...this girl was severely suicidal and depressed and in my opinion was...very, very close to reaching a point where she wouldn't have been able to come out of. So I think it was absolutely vital on...allowing us the foundation to do the work that we really needed to provide some stability and direction.” The social worker himself acknowledges that he could

not say for sure whether the family would have “given up” on their child entirely if not for OCH’s assistance; this is an unknowable counterfactual. Yet he feels confident implying that the assistance potentially averted the child’s suicide. Even without being able to examine the counterfactual, the interpretation that OCH achieved such a drastic level of impact in this situation speaks to the significance of OCH’s support.

The attribution of impact is perhaps even more powerful coming directly from a beneficiary. The beneficiary who received assistance to put a deposit on an apartment explained, “I was at a point in my life that I definitely said to myself, ‘I’m just gonna give up.’” She recalled feeling tired and overwhelmed, and losing the motivation to continue to seek work and housing. The provision of the assistance necessary to gain housing came at a crucial moment; as in the example with the parent of the trans youth, it prevented “giving up” at a time when the situation seemed hopeless.

### Justice

One of One Can Help’s stated goals is to promote underserved children and families’ access to justice. When asked about this, participants defined two different types of justice that OCH impacts on: legal justice and equity. The retired judge explained how OCH support can impact on a legal outcome for a parent of child who has been placed in care: “What I have to do is make a decision at certainly-defined points in time as to whether a child can go back to a parent or a guardian or not, depending on whether that parent or guardian is unable to provide for their needs.... That’s a horrible situation to be in. I want to know, if I’m making a decision not to return a child, or to have child go on an adoption track, I want to know that that parent had a reasonably fair opportunity to do their job. And if they’re not able to do their job, they’re not able to do their job, and fine - we’ll go down the...adoption road. But One Can Help obviously helps me in making that decision by showing me, you know, the parent did have that opportunity.... You know, that’s important information for me in making that pretty critical decision.”

Within the theme of justice, the theme of transportation came up again. One lawyer explained: “...a parent who’s been consistent with everything that they’re doing but they’re struggling to get to visits [with their child while the child is in care] because their car broke down. And that’s just like death.... If you stop visiting your kid, you’re just never getting custody back, and it doesn’t matter if it’s because your car doesn’t work.”

Participants provided even more examples of One Can Help supporting access to justice when justice is defined as equity, rather than as a fairer chance at achieving a positive legal outcome. One social worker explained, “One Can Help assists the youth that I work with in achieving what they deserve to have as a child. And what they deserve to have are experiences that their friends are having.... So although not legal justice it really is justice for kiddos because it helps to achieve what they as a child deserve to have that they often may not simply due to the fact that they’re a foster child.” Multiple participants specifically mentioned that they apply for assistance for those who need it most. One social worker said, “I’m not putting in applications for families that have the extra income that can do this.” She further explained, “We also cover pretty high immigrant populations and [sigh] these are the folks, this is what I struggle with the most, I think, these are the folks that don’t have access to the stimulus checks, don’t have access to

unemployment insurance.” Thus OCH’s assistance provides basic needs and opportunities to those who cannot otherwise access them, creating greater equity for children and families dealing with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

### Ripple effects

A theme that came up with several participants who discussed the outcomes of OCH’s assistance was the idea that assistance does not help only the person it was meant for, or only at that specific moment in time. I call this the “ripple effect” of OCH’s assistance. One social worker shared the story of a youth who had received assistance to take community college classes (an “opportunity” type of assistance). The beneficiary’s family had emigrated from another country specifically to seek better educational opportunities for their children. The social worker described the impact on the family: “His younger sisters...just started high school, and even seeing their brother...still try to keep his life going forward I think was huge for them to see.... Then they could all do their homework together, and they had this little like trio.... For his parents, they were just, they were so proud, you know? They were so happy that he...despite some tough circumstances...was in college.” Throughout the research, various participants explained that much of OCH’s assistance involves things that parents would want to provide but cannot due to their circumstances. When their children do receive this assistance, parents are thrilled. A social worker explained: “Even if it’s really like something for the kids, you know parents are parents.... They love their kids and love being able to see them do wonderful things...things that parents would want to be able to provide to their kids.... You know it’s gotta be really hard knowing that you can’t, but feeling relieved that there’s another agency that is willing to do that and there’s people that believe in their children.”

Ripple effects included not just perceived impact on people beyond the primary beneficiary, but perceived impact on the primary beneficiary far beyond the original purpose of the support. In one application for assistance, a social worker requested clothing that a youth could wear to job interviews. After receipt of this assistance, the social worker attributed the youth’s success in getting a good job as well as increased self-esteem to OCH’s assistance. While, again, we cannot claim causality here, the social worker who described this ripple effect is the expert in this case; where it is not possible to examine a counterfactual, her perception is valuable evidence of the extensive impact of a \$100 OCH grant. Similarly, in yet another transportation case, a social worker requested a bus pass so that her client could visit his child. After receiving the assistance, she credited the bus pass with not only enabling visits, but also enabling her client to get a job.

The beneficiary who participated in this research described ripple effects of the assistance she received to put a deposit on her apartment: “Because of that little help with that apartment, it gave my family so much more than that little deposit. It opened the door for my daughter to go to a great school. She got accepted to five different colleges.... We can breathe a little bit easier. We can actually sleep through the night. Now we can work on our mental health.” In her view, the provision of the funds needed to secure safe, affordable housing lifted the burdens of homeless and insecurity that had prevented positive forward movement in her life. She attributed this one-time assistance to the long-term success and mental health of herself and her children.

### *Challenges and areas for growth*

Participants in this research were eager to share positive experiences with One Can Help. When asked about areas where One Can Help could improve, some could not think of anything. This group included the beneficiary who was interviewed: “I don’t think they need to change anything. Everything they’re doing is beyond perfect and good and great and amazing.” However, some participants did mention challenges and suggested ways in which One Can Help could improve.

One challenge mentioned was that One Can Help requires applicants to exhaust other funding sources before applications can be made. A social worker explained that this is an issue because the same requirement exists among all funding sources. “You’re caught in this web of, no one wants to be the first person to provide the funding and then that creates this system where everyone wants you to exhaust every other source first. But when that’s a requirement for everybody, where do you start?” A lawyer in the focus group discussion agreed: “They all have to be last.” The social worker further explained that this burden can be especially onerous because he usually has several applications in to One Can Help at a time.

The social worker who raised this issue suggested a solution: “So say I request \$1,000, maybe [One Can Help are] the first ones, they’re brave enough to say, ‘we’ll fund you first, but what we’re gonna fund is we’re gonna fund \$200...and then you can go to all your other agencies and see if they can fund any other part of that as well. Once you exhaust that, come back and then we can have a conversation about the rest.’... Because...just one of the organizations to say ‘we’ll be the first to start the ball rolling,’ is enough momentum for the others, in my experience. When I’ve been able to get even a fraction of a total request from somewhere it almost justifies to the other funding sources that I talk to, ‘this must be a valuable request because another organization made the decision to fund it, well then maybe we should too, there must be value in this.’... I think One Can Help is an agency that’s best set up to be that brave organization that can say ‘you know what, we’re gonna start the ball rolling on the conversation to fund this request.’ And I do think that the other funding agencies will follow suit because I do think that One Can Help is the example.” An attorney participating in the focus group clarified that this has happened for her already - One Can Help has provided partial funding, which allowed her the time to look for more funding to make the assistance sustainable. It is also important to note that some participants did not agree that this was a barrier for them.

One social worker mentioned that when she pays for assistance herself rather than calling on One Can Help (a situation that participants said used to occur more often before they had OCH’s support), it is usually because the need is too urgent to wait even for OCH’s usually speedy reply: “I’m with a kid, and they’re like, ‘I’m hungry.’ I’m not gonna hear that and not get them like, a bite to eat or something.” She shared that a system of immediate assistance in emergency cases would be helpful, but acknowledged that this would present new challenges. It is worth noting that many participants mentioned that OCH’s quick reimbursement system makes OCH easy to work with and is a major advantage of the organization’s model; nonetheless, this participant suggested that an even more immediate reimbursement system would ease her burdens further.

A challenge the existence of which was broadly agreed upon by focus group participants was that One Can Help generally provides reimbursement rather than up-front payment. (Participants acknowledged that this is a norm rather than a rule.) The participants were all themselves fine with this system, but they mentioned having colleagues who were not. Two attorneys who participated mentioned knowing other attorneys who do not use One Can Help because they refuse to pay up-front costs, despite both of these attorneys explaining One Can Help's quick turnaround time to these colleagues. As with the above suggestion for immediate assistance, switching to an up-front payment model would present new challenges to One Can Help. However, the agreement among participants that this is a barrier to attorneys' use of One Can Help indicates that it is a challenge worth exploring further.

Another challenge that participants generally agreed exists was social workers' and attorneys' awareness of One Can Help's existence and process. While all of the participants use OCH themselves, they mentioned that many of their colleagues are either unaware of OCH altogether or do not know enough about how it works to persist when they face the barriers mentioned above. There was a sense that OCH is less present and provides fewer trainings within the court and child welfare systems than it used to, and that turnover within these institutions means that there are now fewer social workers and attorneys who are aware of OCH. Participants recommended that this issue could be resolved by the resumption of trainings for social workers and attorneys to raise awareness and knowledge of how OCH works. Finally, participants suggested that research like the current project or others should be continued and utilized to ensure that OCH hears from its users and beneficiaries.

## **Conclusion**

This research asked, *What is One Can Help's role in the journey of underserved children and families through the juvenile court and child welfare systems?* I found that OCH is an outsider and supplement to the systems, with a different mission and structure. Yet it fills gaps that exist within the systems, and plays a role that some stakeholders think should be played by system actors, but is not. This role is to provide two types of assistance that support the children and families dealing with these systems: basic necessities and opportunities. Opportunities are seen as being as important as basic necessities, and as a special area of support that OCH is unique in providing. This assistance is perceived as creating opportunities for justice, as well as a broad range of other outcomes. Challenges mentioned by the participants were mainly centered around the access of more attorneys, social workers, children and families to OCH's support, rather than problems with the organization. Nonetheless, OCH should examine these challenges further and look for areas to improve and expand upon its work.

OCH works within complex systems and creates outcomes that would be virtually impossible to quantify; this qualitative research therefore contributes valuable understanding of the organization's role. OCH and other researchers should consider using additional qualitative techniques, such as contribution analysis or outcome harvesting (Bamberger, Rugh & Mabry, 2012), to further build understanding of OCH's role in achieving specific outcomes.

One limitation of this research was the lack of beneficiary voices. Because ethical approval from an institutional review board was not sought for this research, it was not possible to include these vulnerable individuals, but their perspectives should be explored in further research. In addition,

further research should utilize sampling methods that allow for a broader range of perspectives and perhaps a less biased sample. Finally, research should be conducted into the issues and gaps of the systems themselves as described here in order to potentially propose even larger or more sustainable solutions.

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