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# ENDING FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

IN WASHINGTON STATE





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On a cold May evening, Cherie Moore, a single mother, and son Cody Barnes, 17, call local stores to ask whether they can park their truck in the parking lot overnight. Moore said they had been living in their vehicle for several weeks. © Erika Schultz / The Seattle Times

## A COMPLEX WEB

Cherie Moore is a Seattle-area mom who, with her teenage son, was recently struggling to find a permanent home. In the fall of 2010, Cherie's story was told by *The Seattle Times*' Invisible Families series, supported by a Seattle University journalism fellowship program. Cherie's was one story that illustrated the growing, yet virtually invisible, population of homeless families with children.

While searching for shelter, Cherie would often make more than a dozen calls a day to agencies—only to find that she could only get part of the help she needed. Sadly, Cherie's experience is not unique in Washington. Many homeless families with children, and those on the brink of homelessness, struggle to navigate a complex web of support and service providers to get help and access to stable housing.

Right now, if a family becomes homeless in Washington state, they must look for help by contacting multiple different service agencies for different kinds of assistance. Their name might stay on a waiting list for months. Since few services are coordinated, it is hard for families to know what kind of help is available. Even for families who

immediately get into temporary housing, it can often take more than a year to get into a permanent home.

Despite tireless and innovative work by advocates and state leaders, too many people still struggle to find a safe place to sleep—for a night, for a week, and beyond. At the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we believe it is a tragedy that, on any given night, thousands of people in Washington state are homeless, and many are families with children.

**“Parents with children are the fastest-growing yet least-visible segment of the homeless population, far more likely to be doubled up in the homes of friends or living in their cars than to be at a busy intersection asking for help.”**

— *The Seattle Times*, August 28, 2010

## What is Family Homelessness?

The notion of family homelessness is becoming more familiar to many Americans, as families continue to lose their jobs, medical coverage, and homes as a result of the recession. News stories have told harrowing tales of families struggling to keep food on the table, find shelter, get the medical attention they need, and ensure their children receive a stable education.

These stories certainly helped raise the voice of homelessness. And yet, even today, when people hear the word “homeless,” most still think of the more visible faces of homelessness—people standing at highway on-ramps, or those who sleep under bridges or on park benches.

Many still have a hard time picturing what homeless families look like. For some, it’s hard to believe that families with children represent nearly half of the homeless people in Washington state. These are the invisible faces of homelessness: parents and children “doubling up” with family or friends, living out of their cars or in motel rooms, or moving in and out of shelters.

And the number continues to rise. A National Alliance to End Homelessness report reveals that family homelessness increased 9 percent in Washington state between 2008 and 2009, during the early stages of the economic recession and at a time when the state saw continued reductions in government funding. Washington’s rate is more than three-and-a-half times the national average.

One homeless child is too many. But the reality is that, during the 2009–2010 school year, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction identified nearly 22,000 homeless children attending public schools in Washington state.

Our partners agree: organizations and counties in the Puget Sound region have joined together to address this growing problem by changing the ways in which vulnerable and homeless families get help. As a lead investor, the Gates Foundation has pledged almost \$70 million to these emerging efforts.

### ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

Families can become homeless for many reasons. Today’s weak economy means that more families experience unemployment, lower incomes, and housing foreclosures. Other factors—such as domestic violence, medical crises, and mental health or addiction issues—make families vulnerable.

Even in better economic times, affordable housing is hard to find. The National Low-Income Housing Coalition reports that an individual in Washington state must earn \$19.10 per hour (or nearly \$39,719 per year) to afford the \$993 monthly rent for a basic two-bedroom apartment. The numbers are even higher for those living in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties.

### THE EFFECTS OF HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness has a profound impact on a child’s health and education, as well as a parent’s ability to find or keep a job. The constant movement and disruption associated with homelessness means that too many children are forced to move from school to school, while others bring emotional and health issues into the classroom. National Alliance to End Homelessness research reveals that proficiency rates for homeless children in reading and math are, on average,

16 percent lower than the scores for all students. Fewer than one homeless child in four graduates from high school.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, the emotional and mental devastation experienced by children and families facing a housing crisis is significant.

- Homeless children have twice the rate of learning disabilities and three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems of non-homeless children.
- Half of school-age homeless children experience anxiety, depression, or withdrawal.
- Approximately one-third of children in foster care have a homeless or unstably housed parent.

### OUR BEGINNINGS

As a first step, we launched the Sound Families Initiative in 2000, a \$40 million investment aimed at tripling the amount of transitional housing available—and pairing it with support services in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties. Sound Families helped fund the acquisition of and services for more than 1,400 new units of housing.

Encouraged by the overall gains made by Sound Families, the Washington State Legislature created the Washington Families Fund in 2004, a public-private partnership devoted to long-term funding for service-enriched housing for families across the state. The fund is led by Building Changes ([www.buildingchanges.org](http://www.buildingchanges.org)), a nonprofit that has been working with nonprofit, government, and philanthropic partners to address homelessness for more than 20 years.

We spent a great deal of time evaluating Sound Families, and found that most families in the program became stable and more self-sufficient. However, overall, family homelessness rates did not decrease. So we joined



*Teesha and her daughter, Jorydn, age 5, and son Gus, age 22 months, at their home at Croft Place in Seattle, WA, on September 22, 2009. Croft Place is a transitional housing complex located in the Delridge neighborhood of West Seattle.*

with nonprofit and public sector partners to think more strategically about the root causes of homelessness.

As we examined the landscape, it became clear that few communities had an effective, systematic response to family homelessness—one that ensures at-risk families get the support and help they need, when they need it, in a coordinated way.

## OUR APPROACH

We aim to cut family homelessness in the region in half by 2020. To meet this goal, we need to change the way that homelessness is addressed by increasing efficiency and coordination in the system.

We are providing support to and working closely with Building Changes and partners in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties—areas that have the highest number of homeless families in Washington state. These counties and their many partners are fundamentally changing the way they do business—ensuring that public dollars are spent in more efficient and effective ways that help homeless or at-risk families.

Each county has created and is implementing a comprehensive strategic plan that meets the community's specific needs and draws on components that have helped successfully reduce family homelessness in other U.S. communities. They are focusing on

preventing families from becoming homeless and quickly moving families who do become homeless into permanent housing with the right kind of support to stabilize and thrive.

Each plan aims to put a broad range of current federal, state, and local funding resources to use more efficiently. This includes leveraging dollars already available through the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), Public Housing Authorities and private non-profit affordable housing providers, workforce development councils, child welfare and domestic violence systems, community colleges, school districts, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Affordable Care Act for health care—all funding streams that have budgets and programs that can help homeless families. Where possible, the counties and their partners are also tapping into new resources to address the growing problem.

Each county is receiving support for these efforts through Systems Innovation Grants, awarded by the

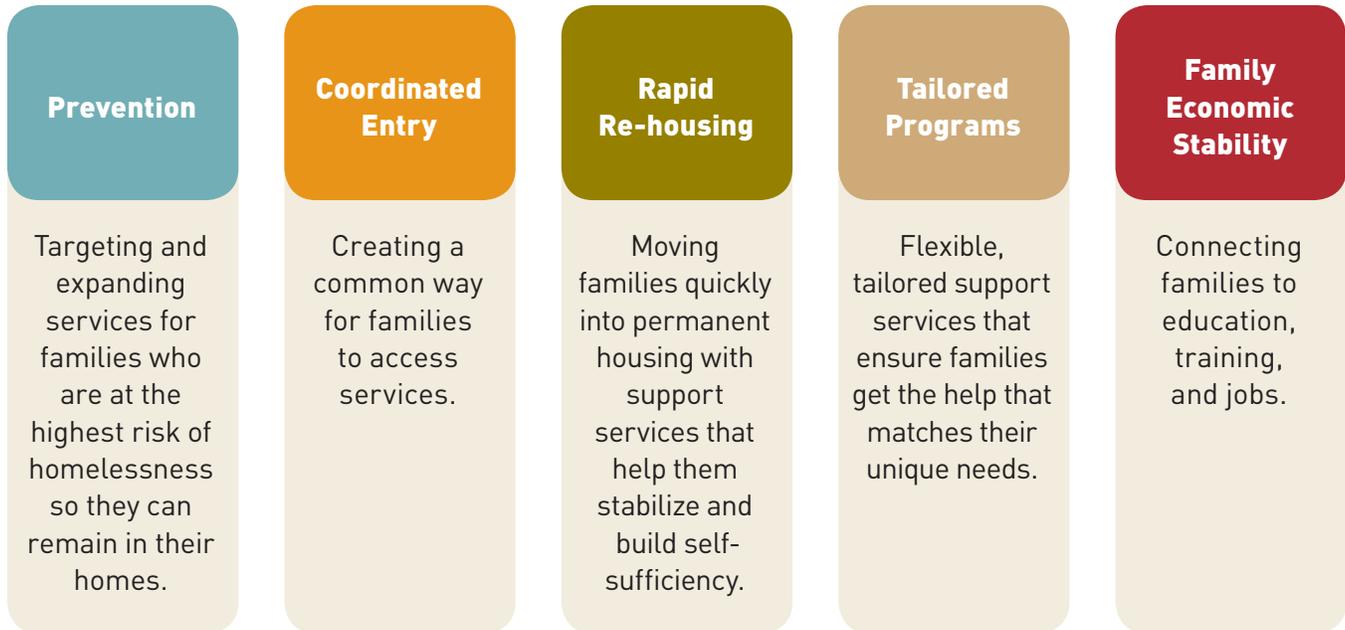
## Our Partners

The State of Washington and several public and private partners committed to redouble their efforts to dramatically reduce family homelessness within the next decade by signing a Memorandum of Understanding in 2009. These partners include:

- Governor Christine Gregoire and King County Executive Ron Sims, Pierce County Executive Pat McCarthy, and Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon
- Everett Mayor Ray Stephanson, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels, and Tacoma Mayor Bill Baarsma
- Ben B. Cheney Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Boeing Company, Building Changes, Champion Foundation, Greater Tacoma Community Foundation, Microsoft, and Paul G. Allen Foundation
- Everett Housing Authority, King County Housing Authority, Pierce County Housing Authority, Seattle Housing Authority, Snohomish County Housing Authority, and Tacoma Housing Authority
- United Way of King County, United Way of Pierce County, and United Way of Snohomish County

# Five Proven Principles

As part of their plans, each county is undertaking programs that support five critical principles that have worked in other communities:



Washington Families Fund. These grants provide the funding that counties need to address how their support system serves homeless families, rather than how one organization or county department serves a targeted population.

Highlights of each county's work include:

## King County

As Washington state's most populous county, King County has the greatest number of homeless families. In 2010, the county's One Night Count identified 3,388 homeless people living in families, and other data show that thousands of others are homeless or at risk. Because of this, King County and many partners in the field have been working for years to find better, more efficient ways to help families and children.

During a recent assessment, King County identified the need to strengthen its system for quickly assessing families and helping them

move quickly into permanent housing. The county's funding directed at preventing homelessness was limited.

King County is now working to create a coordinated entry process so that homeless families with children, and those on the brink, are able to get consistent referrals to the housing and services they need. It is also changing the way families receive services, by promoting prevention and finding homeless families permanent housing, with the services they need to stabilize, as quickly as possible.

To help families stabilize, the county is emphasizing workforce development programs, education opportunities, and connections to the child welfare and protection systems. Because of the high cost of living in King County, the county is increasing the supply of affordable housing and exploring ways of making market rate housing more accessible for homeless families.

King County is working with an active and highly organized group of

funders and the Committee to End Homelessness in King County.

## Pierce County

Pierce County is Washington's second largest county. Because of its size, the county also sees a large number of homeless families. In 2010, Pierce County counted 1,160 homeless people living in families. The county and a range of partners are working together to find new ways to serve families and children.

Pierce County assessed its services for homeless families, and as a result is focusing on creating a common, coordinated way for families to get services and support. The county also found that housing and services could be better connected and that families could be moved more quickly into housing.

The county has created a single point of entry for homeless families and individuals—and those at risk of becoming homeless. The county is also bolstering prevention efforts by closely monitoring known precursors

to homelessness such as food stamps applications or utilities stoppages.

Along with these efforts, Pierce County is creating workforce development and educational partnerships to help families finish school and increase their incomes. Like its neighbors to the north, Pierce County has organized a group of funders to oversee the work.

### Snohomish County

Snohomish County is one of the fastest-growing counties in the state. With that growth, the county has also seen an emergence of families struggling to find affordable, safe housing. The county's annual homeless count identified 1,263 homeless children and families.

In a recent assessment, the county found this is a result of many factors. Currently, there is a shortage in affordable housing options for low-income families. The county

identified a need to make funding across different systems more flexible and find new ways to get organizations and programs to work together more efficiently.

Snohomish County is launching a pilot program that addresses the five principles—prevention, coordinated entry, rapid re-housing, tailored services, and economic stability. The pilot will initially serve at least 75 homeless families, and after testing will serve a larger group.

Countywide, partners are creating a pool of flexible funding and working with private landlords, with a goal of creating a flexible rent subsidy program for clients. To help families stabilize, the county is collaborating with WorkSource, the county's public school system, and community colleges.

The Workforce Development Council of Snohomish County is leading the county's efforts.

### School Partnerships

McCarver Elementary School—located in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood, one of the region's poorest—annually experiences a 115 percent student turnover rate due largely to families that are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) is partnering with McCarver on an innovative project that provides special housing vouchers to families of enrolled students. THA plans to distribute vouchers depending upon each family's commitment to their child's educational progress and their family's economic self-sufficiency.

If successful, this work has the potential to help instruct thousands of public housing authorities and school districts nationwide on how to keep families housed and homeless students enrolled in school—reducing the student turnover rate and, ultimately, giving more students the opportunity to succeed in school and reach their full potential.



*Juanita Moore helps a client and her child find clothing and toys at the YWCA of Kitsap County on December 14, 2009. The YWCA of Kitsap County in Bremerton, WA, received a grant from the Gates Foundation to help families find permanent housing. "Once a family gets into permanent housing they become rooted in the community," said Linda Joyce, executive director. "Then, they begin to flourish."*

## Responding to Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children, because many women who flee their abusers have no place to go, face discrimination, and lose hours at work.

With the aim of eliminating housing as a reason to stay in an abusive relationship, we are partnering with the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence and a group of service providers across the state to create the Domestic Violence Housing First program.

The program focuses on helping survivors retain or access permanent housing quickly—often bypassing emergency shelters. Women and children also receive tailored services based on their unique needs, including transportation support, career training, and temporary financial assistance so they can safely remain in their homes.

To date, more than 90 percent of families that received Domestic Violence Housing First support retained or accessed permanent housing. Service providers praised this flexible approach—where survivors can maintain a home and decide what level of support they need to remain stable—for these incredible results.

We are excited by these initial promising results and are supporting more work to test and refine this approach. We believe Domestic Violence Housing First is a promising alternative to lengthy shelter stays for families recovering from domestic violence and may offer a new way to prevent family homelessness.



*From left; Kelly West, Barbara Langon, Stacy Caves, and her three boys have a reunion in December 2009 at the Eastside Domestic Violence Program (EDVP), where the Caves' received help over three years ago. The EDVP in Bellevue, WA, was the recipient of a grant from the Gates Foundation to help victims of domestic violence find permanent housing.*

## EVALUATING WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

Each county is dedicated to learning what's working and will measure their success in three ways:

- **Families:** Counties will determine whether fewer families are becoming homeless. They will also look at families who became homeless and measure whether they stayed in housing longer, received services more quickly, had fewer children enter foster care, and increased their incomes.
- **Organizational Changes:** Working with service providers, counties will examine services to determine whether families were provided with services more effectively and efficiently.
- **Systems Changes:** Counties will look into how different systems worked together to improve collaborative efforts to serve homeless families.

The lessons we learn will be used to inform work across the state, so that in the future, communities can provide every family the opportunity to live up to its potential and no child lacks a safe place to call home.

### To Learn More

About Family Homelessness: [www.gatesfoundation.org/familyhomelessness](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/familyhomelessness)

About our work in Washington state: [www.gatesfoundation.org/washington](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/washington)

