

FAMILY HOMELESSNESS SYSTEMS INITIATIVE: SIX-MONTH EVALUATION FINDINGS



OVERVIEW

A new evaluation of nearly 800 families finds that King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties have made changes to their crisis response systems over the past five years that allow them to more efficiently and effectively serve families experiencing homelessness. Families are now moving into permanent housing more quickly and are spending more days in that housing than before these changes were instituted.

The research findings are from the first outcome report of a longitudinal evaluation conducted by Westat, a national research and evaluation firm, and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Family Homelessness Systems Initiative

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Family Homelessness Systems Initiative in 2009—a \$60 million effort to move more families out of homelessness and into stable housing.

The goal is to make significant, coordinated improvements to the crisis response systems in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties—three highly-populated regions in the western part of Washington state—to help ensure that family homelessness in these counties is *brief* and *one-time*.

Key targeted outcomes include reductions in the length of time families experience homelessness and decreased rates of returns to homelessness.

Government agencies in each county are responsible for planning, implementing, and guiding the work at the local level. Building Changes, a Seattle-based nonprofit that advances strategies to move families out of homelessness and into stable housing, leads the initiative by awarding innovation grants and providing direct technical assistance, including project development, data coaching, and program evaluation, to county and nonprofit grantees.

The Need for Systems Improvements

When work began, all three counties operated not as systems but as uncoordinated continuums, relying heavily on an expensive, one-size-fits-all approach that moved families from emergency shelter to transitional housing to permanent housing, regardless of the specific needs of the family.

Neither King nor Pierce County had any coordinated intake process, requiring families to contact shelters directly—often multiple at a time—and to linger on long wait lists. Snohomish County maintained a list of families needing housing assistance, but staff often referred to it as the “waitlist to nowhere,” as there were few mechanisms to move families off. Snohomish families also had to call in every two weeks to keep their name on the list.

Services to prevent homelessness were not considered part of the crisis response system in any

of the three counties and those prevention services that were available were not coordinated with shelters or other housing assistance.

Additionally, the transitional housing programs that counties administered frequently required families to receive costly services in the belief that families needed to become “housing ready” before moving to market-rate housing.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF WASHINGTON STATE

Since the launch of this work, the Puget Sound region has experienced massive economic growth. By some measures, the region is thriving, but with this growth came rising rent and housing costs, and far too many residents are struggling to make ends meet. While unemployment is low, homelessness is increasing and is more visible than ever.

Fair market rents set by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)—an indicator of the cost of the housing market and overall economic wealth of an area—stayed relatively steady in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties between 2010 and 2014 at about \$920 for a two-bedroom apartment in Pierce county (rising 2.3% over the four years) and between 1,000-\$1,200 for King and Snohomish counties (rising 6.3%). But rents spiked between 2014 and 2016 (the time of this study) to nearly \$1,200 in Pierce county (rising 12.7% over the two years) and \$1,600 in 2016 in King and Snohomish counties (rising 35.6%). These figures only continued to rise into 2019.

THE PLAN

Three research-based principles inform the counties’ efforts to improve their homelessness crisis response systems:

- **Efforts to prevent families from entering the costly homeless system are emphasized.** This often comes in the form of the flexible combination of short-term services and one-time financial assistance to cover expenses such as initial month’s rent or security deposit.

- **Coordinated entry** allows families to access housing and support services more easily. Providing one point of access for families in need limits the burden of searching for services and housing support and allows for greater coordination of resources.
- **Rapid re-housing** places families in permanent housing as soon as possible—reducing the length of time in, and higher costs of, emergency shelter and transitional housing. This approach focuses on getting people into housing first and then building on that stability to address other challenges such as unemployment.

MEASURING PROGRESS: FAMILY IMPACT AT SIX MONTHS

The goal of the Westat evaluation is to examine the impact of county system changes on families over the lifetime of the initiative. To do so, Westat is following a cohort of 392 families over the course of 18 months before these changes were implemented, and another cohort of 370 families over 18 months after the counties improved their systems. The data from this report compares the experiences of these two cohorts during the first six months of receiving housing and homelessness services.

Specifically, the research team set out to answer these questions:

1. What impact did these changes have on families?
2. Which systems changes had the most significant impact on families?

Key Findings: Family Impact

At six months, Westat’s findings show that system changes affected the nature of housing assistance received and access to housing for families. Families are experiencing greater and quicker access to permanent housing and more days in that housing, despite a tightening housing market.

- As the chart on Page 3 shows, families in the second cohort (after systems changes were implemented) are twice as likely to be in their own home six months after receiving initial housing assistance than families in the first cohort (before systems changes were implemented).
- These families also spent fewer nights homeless in the six months following their initial intake and assessment than the earlier cohort of families.

- A shift from a one-size-fits-all approach to housing to one offering a range of housing assistance options that are tailored to families’ needs meant fewer families lingered in shelters.

However, at the time of the six-month evaluation families continued to experience some of the same challenges as they did prior to the systems reform—including similar amounts of wait time before receiving initial assistance.

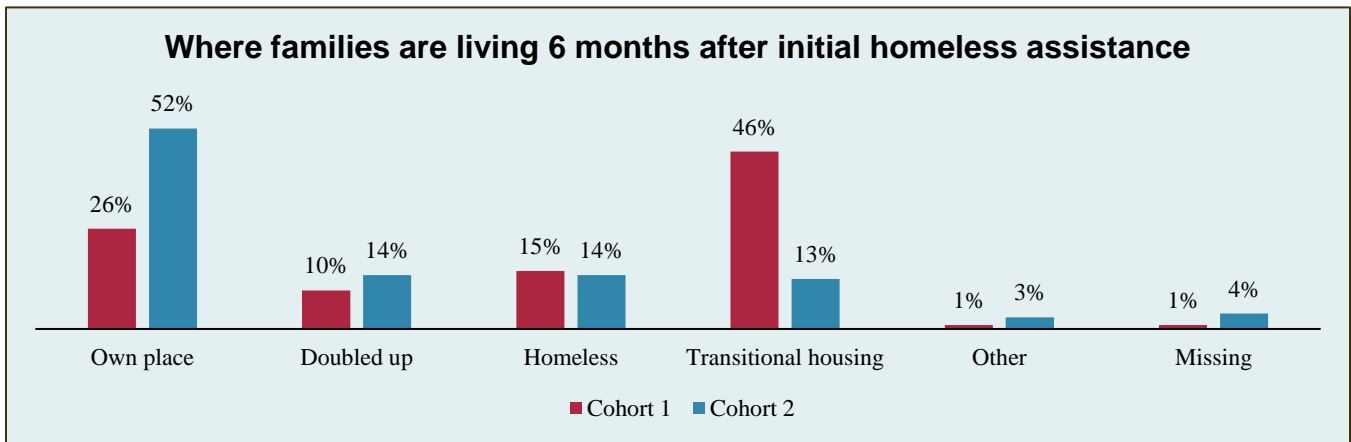
Additionally, parent-child intactness, school absenteeism, employment, income, and the rate of school moves during the six months following initial homeless assistance do not appear to have been affected by systems change.

Upcoming Westat reports will go deeper on issues like housing, employment, and other supports being offered to and utilized by families. Forthcoming analyses of outcomes for these same families 18 months after receiving initial assistance will provide an understanding of the extent to which families continue to access permanent housing at a greater rate after systems reform than before it—and the extent to which they stay housed.

- Implemented efforts to provide flexible, one-time assistance designed to help families experiencing homelessness resolve their housing crises quickly, simply, and safely.
- Implemented coordinated entry systems for families that include an assessment of families’ needs, determination of eligibility, and assignment to different types of available assistance.
- Moved to a “Housing First” orientation, with more funding for rapid re-housing and increased efforts to convert transitional housing to permanent housing.
- Conducted efforts to tailor services and improve case management.
- Improved the quality and usability of their data systems so they can better measure their progress and understand the barriers families are facing.

LEARN MORE

Please read the full Westat evaluation to learn more about the research design and methodology, the systems improvement process, and the results.



Key Findings: Systems-Level

While these are only preliminary findings, the six-month family housing outcomes are promising and suggest that the crisis response systems in each county are moving in the right direction for achieving longer-term outcomes. Building Changes is continuing its work supporting system-level changes, and the counties are working to sustain these outcomes even in the absence of private funding. By the time of this study, all three counties had: