

Ending Family Homelessness in Washington State: An Emerging Approach

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
POLICY PAPER 2011**

Preface

In 2010, Building Changes, a nonprofit organization working to ensure that housing and vital public services are available to people experiencing homelessness in Washington State, developed a policy paper titled “Ending Family Homelessness in Washington State: An Emerging Approach.” The paper seeks to capture emerging practices in communities throughout the United States to prevent and end family homelessness, and offers policy recommendations in support of that goal.

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For the complete paper, please visit: <http://buildingchanges.org/our-work/advocacy/58-advocacy-and-policy-sidebar/300-family-homelessness-strategy>

About Building Changes

Building Changes is a nonprofit organization that works with government entities, private philanthropy, and community-based service organizations to ensure that housing and vital public services are available to people experiencing homelessness in Washington State. We foster collaborative partnerships and harness innovative, evidence-based strategies to collectively address barriers to housing stability and reduce homelessness.

Executive Summary

When homelessness first became a widespread phenomenon in the 1980s, the resources that arose to meet this need focused on single adults, who made up the majority of the homeless population and were its most visible members. However, for the last decade, families with children have become the fastest-growing homeless population.

Housing and service providers responded to these families in the same way they treated individual adults: In what this paper calls the “Original Approach,” the homeless assistance system first came into contact with a family when it was already homeless and seeking entry into an emergency or domestic violence shelter. The small percentage of families fortunate enough to be admitted usually moved from shelter to transitional housing, where stays could last up to 24 months, and parents were required to receive a pre-set bundle of supportive services. The overwhelming majority of families, however, were turned away due to lack of shelter space. This one-size-fits-all model could support only a small number of families at a very high cost. It did not include a focus on preventing homelessness in the first place.

In recent years, dozens of communities across the country began to pilot innovations to this approach, creating a more robust and customizable “Emerging Approach” that incorporated homelessness prevention, sought to rapidly re-house families that had lost their homes, and cultivated partnerships with the “mainstream” system. (Note: In this paper, “mainstream” refers to benefits, services, and supports whose eligibility criteria do not explicitly incorporate housing status, and are not designed to address the specific needs of homeless families. Examples include welfare benefits, food stamps, and employment training.) Developing partnerships with these mainstream programs would allow homeless providers to promptly connect families with services that are tailored to their unique needs. Washington State is home to many of these innovations.

Planning teams in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties—the three most densely populated counties in the state—have just completed comprehensive plans to re-design systems and services to best meet the needs of at-risk and homeless families. Their plans are rooted in five key strategies:

Prevention: Keeping families that are on the edge of homelessness housed and linked with the right services

Coordinated Entry: Implementing a common way for families to access homeless services and for providers to quickly link families to the resources they need

Rapid Re-Housing: Moving families rapidly into permanent housing, whenever possible

Tailored Programs: Getting the right services at the right level—and at the right time—for each family

Economic Opportunities: Creating stronger connections to family-wage jobs for the recently homeless

The purpose of this paper is to explicitly identify an Emerging Approach to ending family homelessness and to provide policy and systems-change recommendations that both align with the Federal Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness and support the five key strategies being implemented at the regional level. Accordingly:

The first part of this paper introduces six concepts that provide the practical and philosophical foundation upon which communities seeking to embrace the Emerging Approach should build. The concepts contain several frameworks that are meant to help communities visualize how services can be organized.

The second part offers a set of policy recommendations for federal, state, and local governments that will enhance systems collaboration between the homeless and mainstream systems, increase funding for services where possible, and ensure that the five strategies can be fully realized.

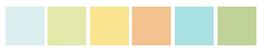
Concepts

In order for a community to incorporate the Emerging Approach into its efforts to end family homelessness, it should refer to the following six concepts. These concepts draw on local best practices and insights from other fields, such as behavioral health. The concepts also examine possibilities for a new partnership with the healthcare system to assist homeless providers in identifying and serving vulnerable and homeless families.

Concept 1: Family Homeless Policy Development and System Design Use a Population-Based Approach that Includes Vulnerable and Homeless Families.

A population-based approach seeks to determine the needs of a specific population, and features a four-step process: 1) defining the target population; 2) understanding the needs of the population; 3) designing and funding a system of care tailored to those needs; and 4) implementing the design and evaluating whether it is working.

When applying the first step, “defining the target population,” the paper proposes that the target population includes both homeless and vulnerable families—the latter should be the focus of prevention efforts should they become at risk of homelessness. These families fall into the following categories:



- Safety-net families. These families have incomes at or below twice the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), which research suggests is the average minimum amount required to meet children's basic needs. Although these families are currently stably housed, an emergency could quickly propel them into vulnerability or homelessness. In Washington State, the safety-net families' population consists of approximately 240,800 families.
- Vulnerable families. These families earn less than 30 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI) but spend more than 50 percent of their pre-tax income on housing. They could lose their housing because of eviction, family violence, or other crises. About 78,500 Washington State families fall in this category.
- Homeless families. These families have experienced one or more episodes of homelessness, primarily due to economic reasons or a temporary housing crisis. An estimated 6,800 families in Washington State are homeless each year.
- Homeless, high-needs families. High-needs families have a complex set of physical and/or behavioral health and/or social needs that underlie an inability to achieve housing stability. There are anywhere from 1,350 to 1,700 homeless, high-needs families in Washington State.^a

It is important to note that the paper's estimates of homeless and homeless, high-needs families are rough. As with the rest of the country, Washington State has historically struggled to establish a system that offers accurate and timely data on homeless families. Washington State is in the process of consolidating a statewide Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), the federally mandated system for states and localities to count and track their homeless populations. While much hard work has gone into this effort, ensuring a system that offers an accurate picture and allows for easy data-sharing among homeless providers will remain a major task in the months and years ahead.

Concept 2: Housing and Services are Organized as Two Related but Distinct Domains of Need.

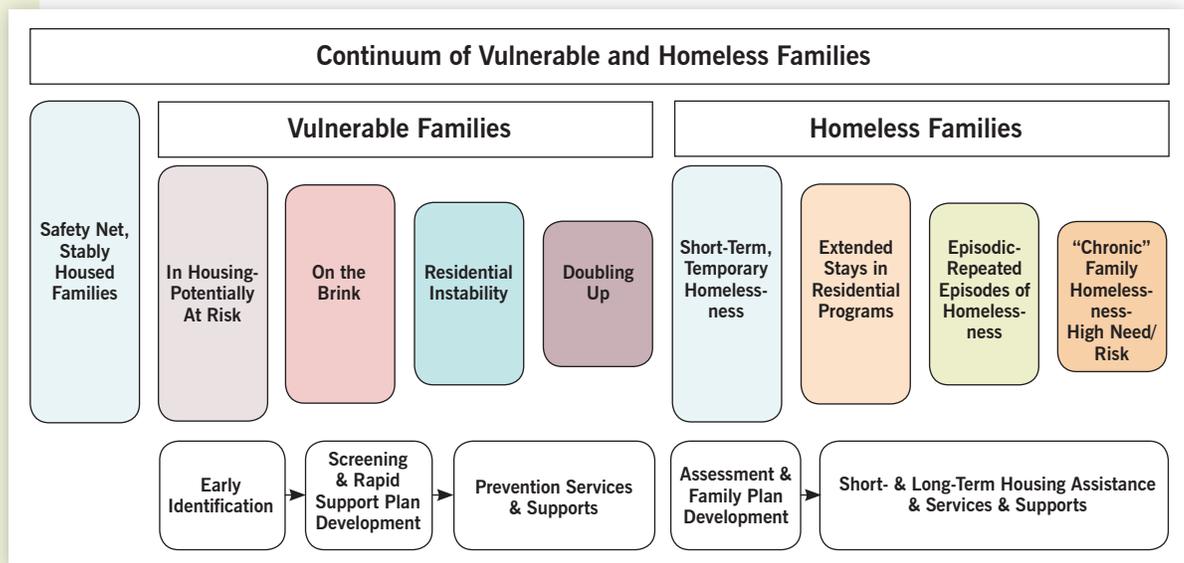
In contrast to the one-size-fits-all Original Approach, this paper proposes families' housing and service needs may not necessarily correspond. For example, a family undergoing first-time homelessness could have vulnerabilities that are as great or greater than another household experiencing an extended episode of homelessness. Instead of offering all families a pre-set package of services, providers should customize each family's services and supports according to the extent and complexity of its needs. This practice would result in savings for the homeless assistance system as resources are allocated more effectively.

^a The estimates for safety-net and vulnerable families in Washington State are courtesy of the customized calculations from forecast analyst Erica Gardner of the Forecast Division of the Washington State Office of Financial Management. The estimate for homeless families in Washington State is derived by comparing the difference between the Point-in-Time Count (taken one night in January 2010) and the 2009 Annual Count in four counties that have a strong Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). The difference between the 2010 national Point-in-Time and 2009 Annual Count was also factored into the paper's state calculation. For the homeless, high-needs families' estimate, experts say that between 20 to 25 percent of homeless families have high needs. The paper's calculation is based on the 6,800 number of homeless families. For more information on these calculations, please see Endnotes 38-40.

Concept 3: A Well-Defined Approach Balances Prevention, Early Intervention, and Housing Stability for Vulnerable and Homeless Families.

Vulnerable and homeless families have a very wide range of service needs, featuring tremendous variability in both the intensity and types of services and supports necessary to achieve and maintain housing stability and to foster resilience and recovery. Those include short- and long-term housing assistance, education and employment supports, income supports, and health and social services.

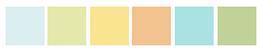
This paper offers the following two-part typology that can serve as the foundation for defining the range of housing risks and needs for vulnerable and homeless families:



Concept 4: Ending Family Homelessness Requires the Development of a Network of Community Services and Supports.

Nationally, the service delivery systems for at-risk and homeless families are as varied as the communities in which they operate. A new service delivery paradigm would better align the services and resources of the housing and service systems with a focus on effectively responding to at-risk and homeless families. It would include:

- A Community Awareness Plan, whose goal is to enhance public awareness of family homelessness and reduce the stigma associated with imminent housing loss, a major barrier that keeps at-risk families from seeking help. The plan should include outreach to traditionally underserved minority populations as well as immigrants and refugees.
- An Early Warning System, where a wide spectrum of people in the community are equipped with information to set a vulnerable family on the right course for help. Schoolteachers, religious leaders, healthcare professionals, child welfare workers, and utility workers would be part of the formal network, with specific training on interacting with and assisting families. Relatives, friends, neighbors, landlords, and employers would be the informal part of the system.



- Coordinated Entry, Assessment, Prevention, and Early Intervention Systems, in which homeless providers are trained to screen families to determine their level of housing and service needs. They would also have developed relationships with mainstream agencies in order to easily connect families to services and supports.
- Network of Services and Supports, which ensures that all aspects of the new paradigm are functioning effectively. This system would include such job positions as a community organizer who disseminates the Community Awareness Plan or a care manager who creates or strengthens relations between the community's homeless and mainstream systems.

Concept 5: Family Homeless Competency is Embedded in Emerging Healthcare Reform Structures.

The 2010 passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) has the potential to be a significant stabilizing force for vulnerable and homeless families. With more than 100 grants, demonstration projects, and other funding opportunities to improve quality of care, there is the potential for these to be used to pilot initiatives targeted at vulnerable and homeless families. More significantly, the law provides opportunities to shift the healthcare system from one that rewards the treatment of illnesses—often when health problems have become chronic conditions—to one that rewards preventive care. This paper explains how this new paradigm will create healthcare structures that could bring healthcare providers into a community's network of services and supports for vulnerable and homeless families.

Concept 6: All Interactions with Homeless and At-Risk Families are Based on a Philosophy of Respect, Resilience, and Recovery.

Known as the “3 R's” in the field of mental health, the philosophy of “respect, resilience, and recovery” takes a strengths-based approach to working with families—both in addressing immediate needs as well as resolving underlying conditions that can hinder residential stability. It should serve as the foundation for system design, community awareness, and all interactions among families and homeless and mainstream system workers and providers. Without it, the focus on building resilience to support recovery may be lost in the process of addressing basic needs.

Recommendations

The paper's policy recommendations are largely organized to align with the themes and strategies of the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. Released in June 2010, it provides a roadmap for improving the nation's response to homelessness among families, veterans, youth and children, and people who are chronically homeless, and sets a path for ending all types of homelessness in the United States. Some of the policy recommendations go beyond the federal plan's scope to address additional issues such as child welfare, but overall, they align with the federal plan's goals and vision. The recommendations also draw on the strategies that King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties are taking to end family homelessness. Their programs and initiatives are cited as examples for other communities looking for promising practices.

The recommendations fall under eight issue areas, each of which contains policy and systems adjustments for federal, state, and local governments. A sample of recommendations is included for each issue area.

Area 1: Increase Leadership and Collaboration to Prevent and End Family Homelessness

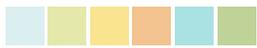
- 1A. The Governor should revive the role of the Interagency Coordinator to promote collaborative leadership among state agencies.
- 1B. The Interagency Coordinator should task the Interagency Council on Homelessness to address the following priorities:
 - Convene leaders and providers in the homeless and mainstream systems for cross-systems education, information-sharing, and relationship-building.
 - Sponsor the development of a common vocabulary to support cross-agency collaboration and data collection.
- 1C. The state legislature should study the braiding and blending of existing federal, state, and local funds to support the Emerging Approach of ending family homelessness.

Area 2: Increase the Supply of Stable and Affordable Housing and Improve Access for Vulnerable and Homeless Families

- 2C. The Washington State Legislature should re-enact the Home Security Fund. Many of the shelters and programs that serve both homeless individuals and families in Washington State are funded through the Home Security Fund (HSF).
- 2D. Federal, state, and local policies and practices should be revised to reduce housing access barriers for the most vulnerable and homeless families as well as domestic violence survivors. These include barriers that prevent families with poor credit, criminal backgrounds, or histories of eviction from qualifying for housing.
- 2E. County governments should establish landlord liaison programs to engage private-sector landlords to rent units to homeless families. They should also seek to establish funding pools for support for homeless families, including through public-philanthropic resources.

Area 3: Increase Economic Security for Vulnerable Families by Increasing Opportunities for Meaningful and Sustainable Employment and Improving Access to and Adequacy of Cash Assistance

- 3A. Federal policy adjustments should be made to the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) reauthorization so that employment and training programs that receive WIA funding address the needs of vulnerable homeless families.



- 3C. Federal and state policy adjustments should be made to encourage, support, and connect parents in homeless and vulnerable families with post-secondary education opportunities.
- 3D. Congress should make policy adjustments through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) re-authorization that improve participation rates and cash-assistance levels. Washington State should enact changes that provide more effective and adequate support for vulnerable families.
- 3G. Washington State should enact and fully fund the Working Families Tax Credit, the state's supplement to the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

Area 4: Improve Health and Stability for Vulnerable and Homeless Families and Align Healthcare Reform Policies with Their Needs

- 4A. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Human Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) should co-lead the design of healthcare home pilots for vulnerable and homeless families. The pilots should test clinical and payment reform designs that serve the needs of families with moderate or high levels of service needs.
- 4F. The state Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and the Medicaid Purchasing Administration should sponsor community health centers that are co-locating primary and specialty care for adults with mental illness. The new healthcare law provides \$50 million to improve care for adults with mental illness and co-occurring primary care conditions or chronic diseases. A number of Washington State community mental health centers have applied for funding.
- 4H. DSHS should partner with local organizations to apply for maternal, infant, and early childhood home-visiting program grant funding that is targeted to vulnerable and homeless families. Many families experiencing homelessness are headed by young parents who are pregnant or caring for very young children. This program can provide flexible, family-centered services.

Area 5: Retool the Homeless Family Crisis Response System and Rebalance Homeless Family System Resource Allocations

- 5A. The WA State Department of Commerce/DSHS Homeless Families Plan and local Ten-Year Plans should be updated to reduce their reliance on transitional housing for families that would be better served by other interventions, such as rapid re-housing assistance or short-term rental assistance.
- 5B. Federal, state, and local policies should be modified to allow for flexibility in the development and use of housing stock, prevention funds, and services for homeless families.

Area 6: Improve Educational Opportunities for Children in Vulnerable and Homeless Families

- 6A. Congress should adequately fund the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act so that State and Local Educational Agencies (SEAs and LEAs) can fully implement the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) obligations.
- 6B. The Washington State Department of Commerce, the Office of the Superintendent (OSPI) and the Department of Early Learning should strengthen their partnership to ensure academic success for children from vulnerable and homeless families.
- 6D. The Washington State Department of Commerce and OSPI should support relationship-building among school districts, providers of early childhood education and child care, and homeless service providers.

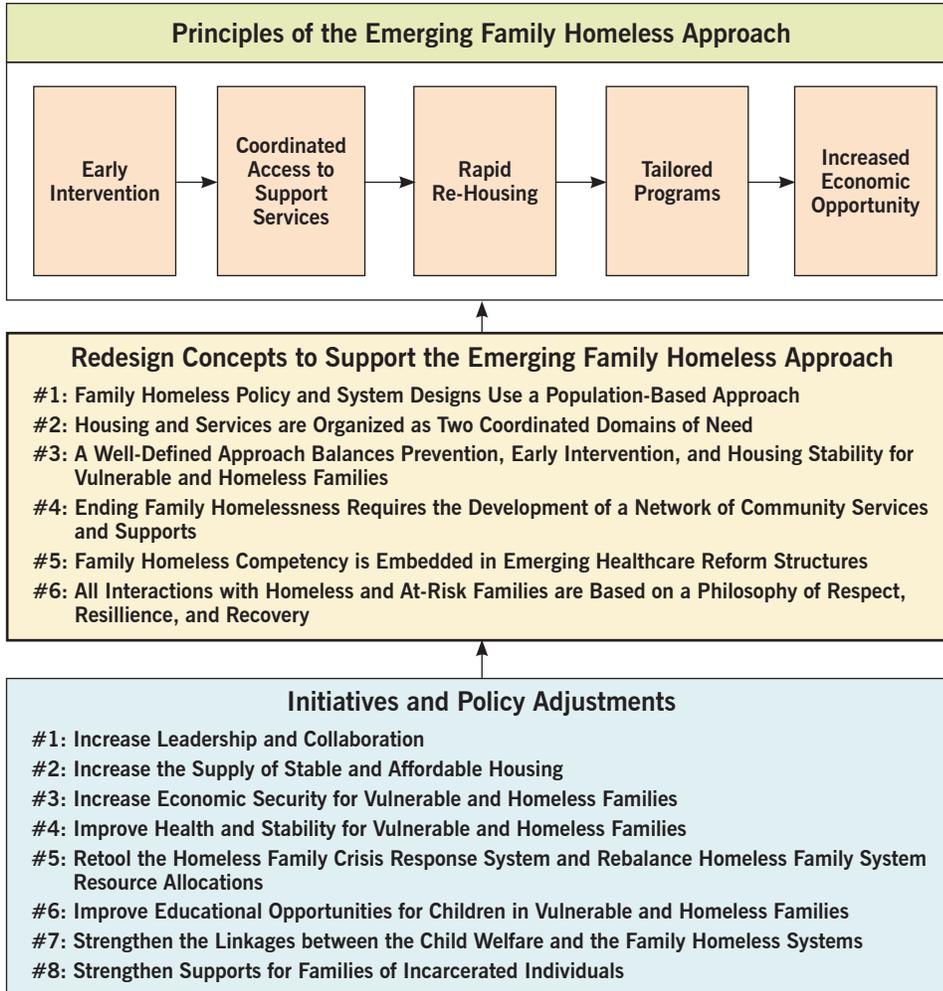
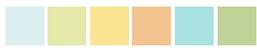
Area 7: Strengthen the Linkages between the Child Welfare and the Family Homeless Systems

- 7A. DSHS should incorporate a focus on vulnerable and homeless families into the Washington State Child Welfare Redesign initiative. As part of planning and implementation of efforts to redesign and strengthen the child welfare system in Washington, pilot programs should be established to target family preservation and reunification services to high-needs families that are at risk of homelessness or already homeless.

Area 8: Strengthen Supports for Families of Incarcerated Individuals, Making Families with Children an Explicit Focus of Re-entry Plans and Program Initiatives

- 8A. The Washington Department of Corrections (DOC) and DSHS should provide targeted support for children who have an incarcerated parent so they can stay enrolled in their schools and remain in their neighborhoods.
- 8B. The Washington State DOC and DSHS should strengthen efforts to address the risks of HIV infection for family members of incarcerated individuals. They should examine the relationship between incarceration, re-entry, and the risks of HIV infection for parents and children in homeless and vulnerable families, and develop strategies to support housing stabilization.

These policy adjustments and initiatives span an ambitious range of issues as well as multiple systems (e.g., housing, education, employment, and child welfare). Together, they aim to direct much-needed funding to programs that serve homeless and vulnerable families, use existing resources to improve the way families access housing and supports, strengthen collaboration and information-sharing among disparate agencies, and bring the mainstream system that serves low-income families in closer partnership with the homeless system. The following figure demonstrates how they help realize the paper's six concepts, which in turn support the five strategies that King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties have identified in their effort to prevent and end family homelessness:



Conclusion

This policy paper was developed during a particularly challenging time in our nation and state. State budget cuts to vital support services, housing loss, and unemployment are stressing already vulnerable families. Despite the uncertain economic outlook, Building Changes hopes that this work will serve as a road-map for policymakers, providers, and other stakeholders seeking to prevent and end family homelessness in their communities. The concepts offer several frameworks for visualizing how services should be organized under the Emerging Approach, and point to new potential partnerships with important sectors such as healthcare. The policy recommendations will move both the homeless and mainstream systems to be more responsive to the diverse needs of vulnerable and homeless families.

The recommendations span an ambitious range of issues across multiple systems (e.g., housing, education, employment, and child welfare), and require an extensive amount of relationship-building and information-sharing among disparate agencies that might have little or no history of collaboration. This begs the question: Where to begin?

Where to Begin

Building Changes will use this paper to define its work agenda in the coming years, setting both short- and long-term policy priorities in concert with the political and economic possibilities in Washington State. It will also strengthen existing partnerships and build new relationships.

For others looking to chart their course, below are some general first steps that can be taken to begin the work of preventing and ending family homelessness in their communities:

- Create a shared vision among community leaders and funders with the goal of ending family homelessness within the next ten years.
 - Update local and state Ten-Year Plans
 - Refine, use, and test screening and assessment tools
- Re-prioritize and re-organize existing resources for greater efficiency, cost-saving, and flexibility.
 - Assess the braiding of existing federal, state, and local funds
 - Reduce reliance on transitional housing and increase flexibility for how housing funds can be used
- Strengthen alignment between the homeless and mainstream systems, and ensure that homeless and vulnerable families are a focus of state planning when improving child welfare, workforce development, and other systems that affect those families.
- Prepare the state for recent changes in federal law and programs that could direct funding for housing and services, such as:
 - HEARTH Act’s revised definition of “homelessness” that funds newly eligible activities
 - Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers
 - Veterans’ homelessness prevention demonstration program
 - U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) transitional jobs demonstration project (appropriated but not yet allocated)
 - Health reform measures
- Actively support advocacy efforts in partnership with national organizations for continued and expanded federal funding for programs such as the National Housing Trust Fund and TANF.

Ultimately, communities know best how to leverage their existing resources and improve the way they provide housing and services for homeless and vulnerable families. Indeed, it is the many promising developments occurring throughout Washington State that inspire this paper, including Building Changes’ own program, the Washington Families Fund, which coordinates housing and services according to each family’s level of need and sustains stability and support over time so that families do not become homeless again. It is Building Changes’ hope that communities across the state and country develop and learn from one another’s best practices as they work together to prevent and end family homelessness.