



Washington Families Fund Systems Initiative Evaluation: 2012 Interim Report

Executive Summary

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Report Authors:
Debra J. Rog, Ph.D.
Kathryn A. Henderson, Ph.D.
Ranita Jain, M.P.P.
Martena C. Reed, M.S.W.
John R. Haight, B.S.

Westat

Overview

The Washington Families Fund Systems Initiative is a \$60 million comprehensive systems change intervention aimed at ending family homelessness. Implemented in three counties in the Puget Sound region of Washington State (i.e., King, Pierce, and Snohomish), the Initiative is guided by a Theory of Change that builds on proven and best practices as well as emerging new concepts from a number of communities across the United States. The Initiative, created over the course of several years by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), was approved in October 2007 and officially launched in 2009. Building Changes, a local nonprofit organization with a long history of working on homelessness issues at local, state, and federal levels, was designated in 2009 as the intermediary to operate the Initiative. The three communities were funded to conduct a three stage planning process, culminating at the end of 2010 in five year implementation plans that are currently being put into action¹.

Westat, a national research firm with extensive background in the evaluation of program and system-level interventions for homeless families, has been commissioned to conduct a longitudinal evaluation of both the implementation and outcomes of the Initiative. This first set of coordinated reports document both the baseline status of the systems for homeless families in each of the counties prior to the Initiative and the implementation of the Initiative in its first two years after the launch (2009- 2011). The reports, available on BuildingChanges.org are intended to provide a foundation of understanding of the Initiative and to provide formative feedback to BMGF, Building Changes, and stakeholders in the individual counties.

The WFF Systems Initiative: Impetus and Theory of Change

The Foundation created the WFF System Initiative to assist the three counties in the Puget Sound area in creating reforms that can lead to reductions in family homelessness. The Initiative has four focus areas, described below.

The first “focus area” of the theory is the heart of the Initiative, outlining five programmatic pillars or areas of promising practices to reform systems serving homeless families. These pillars include:

- **Coordinated Entry:** A common point of entry into the system that includes a universal assessment protocol to match families to needed resources;
- **Prevention:** Resources that either divert families from entering shelter or that stabilize housing situations for families who are at risk of homelessness;

¹ Due to changes in the economic climate since the strategy was initially approved in 2007 and the length of time it took for the Initiative to unfold, BMGF has decided to extend the timeframe of the Initiative for an additional three years to allow for economic recovery and the complexities of the system change processes. The projects now will be implemented over the course of eight, rather than five, years.

- **Rapid Housing:** A system for quickly placing families who enter shelter into permanent housing, often with short-term rental assistance;
- **Tailored Services:** Services that provide for flexible, coordinated, and customized support to ensure that families are matched with the services needed to become residentially stable and self-sufficient; and
- **Economic Opportunity:** Services such as education, job training, and other employment preparation and support that help families become and stay residentially stable and self-sufficient.

The expectation is that change will occur by having organizations with the capacity to implement the pillars. Focus Areas 2 through 4 are believed to be critical components to drive and support the effective implementation of the programmatic pillars at the organization and systems level. These include effective collaboration and coordination among the providers and other stakeholders that provide for resources to support the pillars (Focus Area 2); data systems that provide reliable, accurate, and timely data to inform decision-making at service and system levels (Focus Area 3); and advocacy for building awareness and support among policymakers and key third parties for reallocating existing resources and promoting new sources of funds (Focus Area 4).

The goals of the WFF Systems Initiative Theory of Change are to decrease the number of families who experience first time homelessness, to decrease the number of families who experience repeat homelessness, and for those who become homeless, to decrease the length of time they are homeless. The ultimate goal is to produce a 50 percent reduction in family homelessness in each of the three counties by 2020.

Key Accomplishments

The WFF Systems Initiative has made great progress in implementation since its official launch in March of 2009. Despite being clouded by the worst recession since the Great Depression and the subsequent elongated impact on the State and local economies, the Initiative has been able to take hold in all three counties. Among the key accomplishments of the Initiative up through February 2012 include:

- After engaging in planning for nearly 18 months, ***each of the counties has begun or is about to launch activities in one or more of the pillars.*** In January 2011, Pierce County launched their centralized intake system, Access Point for Housing (AP4H), were redeveloping their prevention strategy, had rapid rehousing ready to launch, and were engaged in activities to address the other two pillars. Snohomish County launched its *Investing In Families* pilot project in July 2011, implementing all pillars with a pilot sample of 75 families. In King County, the coordinated entry and assessment plan and their plans for shelter diversion were scheduled to be launched by April 2012, and activities were in place in developing the housing stabilization process that would include attention to rapid re-housing , tailored services, and economic opportunities.

- All counties now have ***operating funders' groups*** to guide the work of this Initiative and the broader homeless portfolios in the counties. King County's group predated the Initiative, but both Pierce and Snohomish counties groups were developed in part with impetus from Building Changes. Building Changes also participates in each of the groups.
- ***Progress has been made on the HMIS*** in all three counties. As of February 2012, all three counties have had systems that are up and running, providing data to guide decisions, and getting more involved in the workings of the Initiative. Each of the counties' HMIS systems will play a pivotal role in capturing the data on the process and the assessments of the coordinated entry process.
- The Initiative has ***an operational and active intermediary*** that is increasingly taking over the management of the Initiative, awarding grants, offering technical assistance and ongoing support to the counties, fostering collaboration and coordination among agencies, convening groups on key issues, and promoting policy change. Two noteworthy accomplishments of Building Changes included *The Silos to Systems* convening in October 2011, a key event that was well-received and appears to be having longer effects on the thinking and work of the counties, and leading an effort to get legislation passed at the state level that permits telephonic consent for HMIS data collection and thus ensures a more open coordinated entry process in the three counties.
- ***A variety of advocacy activities have occurred***, including the awarding of over 30 advocacy grants to a variety of organizations across a range of sectors, to broaden awareness of family homelessness and the role of the Initiative, and to garner support for its efforts.
- ***A longitudinal evaluation has been funded and in underway, providing feedback*** from its systems data collection efforts and more recently from the family data collection efforts, and has helped to spark improvement in the counties, especially with respect to the HMIS.

Recommendations

We offer six recommendations based on our analysis of the early implementation findings. Each is described below. The first five are directed to all stakeholders involved in the Initiative; the last recommendation is specifically directed to both the Foundation and Building Changes to work to clarify the role of the intermediary.

Re-examine the Theory of Change

Although the Theory of Change has provided great flexibility and general direction for the Initiative, it may be useful to take stock of what has been learned to date, and whether there are specific changes or additions that would be useful to make at this time. Even if a conscious process of review only serves to reaffirm the usefulness of the Theory of Change as is, it would be a process that would be useful for galvanizing support and refreshing the importance of the model.

Develop an Agreed Upon Approach to Rapid Housing

The system's entrenchment in the status quo continuum of housing in each of the three counties and stakeholder concerns about the "sixth pillar" suggest the need for greater attention to how to move the needle away from "building more housing" to new innovations. This focus on transitional housing was perpetuated by both the investments made by the Foundation's earlier initiative, Sound Families, and over a decade of federal funding dedicated to this resource, albeit without evidence of its effectiveness in improving the stability of families. The consequence of having so much transitional housing appears to have cemented it as a permanent and needed fixture in the system. Moving from a continuum of care mentality to one that focuses on the urgency of permanent housing will require organizations and individuals within the systems to change their philosophical orientations, to be open to innovative and nontraditional approaches to serving families, and to repurposing existing housing resources to new and better uses.

Given that the Foundation promoted and funded much of the transitional housing, there will likely be skepticism as to whether this new approach is also expected to be a "flash in the pan". However, there is a need to try out new approaches that are both more cost-effective and capable of serving greater numbers of families with a wider variety of needs than can be served by transitional housing. It is important that all involved in the Initiative work together to assess what is working and why, and what changes need to be considered in best to meet the needs of homeless families and increase their stability. The approach needs to be flexible so that providers can be offered support as they adapt their business models to accommodate these new directions in the system.

Continue Tri-County Work

As the Initiative continues to unfold, it will be important to continue to understand and study the differences among the counties and how it impacts the implementation process and the outcomes. Work on some pillars, however, may benefit from a more explicit cross-county effort. One area in which a tri-county approach may augment individual county efforts is the work with the workforce development system. There may be considerable benefit to working across the three counties to engage the local WDCs. Understanding the strategies and partnerships that are possible, regulations that are barriers and how they can be hurdled and other activities may be best addressed as a three-county effort.

Broaden Mainstream System Involvement

Creating systems change for homeless families necessitates not only the involvement of the homeless and housing system, but other mainstream systems that have an influence on the stability of families and their progress toward self-sufficiency. The ongoing work with the child welfare system is one major step in this area. Other mainstream systems that may need to be connected to the Initiative, in addition to the workforce development system mentioned above, include health and behavioral health,

education, and possibly criminal justice and legal systems. Involving representatives from these agencies on the WFF Leadership Committee may be one cross-site strategy for engaging them into the Initiative.

Work To Clarify the Role of the Intermediary

The Initiative needs greater clarity as to the role of the intermediary, Building Changes, vis-à-vis the Foundation, especially with respect to making decisions regarding the work of the counties, but also at the state level and in other interactions. As Building Changes assumes more of a funding role through re-granting to the counties, its stature and leadership role will likely grow. It will be important for the Foundation to let Building Changes assume this leadership role and abdicate its direct decision making role with the counties if the desire is for Building Changes to assume a strong intermediary role.

Building Changes, in turn, will need to strengthen and broaden its reach in the counties to ensure that it continues to help guide and manage the Initiative. Having a stronger organizational presence in the counties, state, and nationally will help to build its recognition not only as the lead in this Initiative, but as a leading force in family homelessness. In addition, one role that Building Changes may need to strengthen as implementation unfolds is as a capacity builder of organizations involved in the Initiative. As the Initiative starts demanding shifts in the business models of the housing organizations, for example, Building Changes may be in a prime position for working with these organizations to enhance their capacity to make these changes.

Hold Ongoing Opportunities for Examining Data and Learnings

Perhaps combined with the reflection on the Theory of Change, a meeting in the next year that focuses on lessons learned to date based, in part, on the data provided through the HMIS, this evaluation, and other evaluation and data collection efforts could be potentially powerful and could help to model a process of data driven decision making.