



**Washington Families Fund  
Systems Initiative Evaluation:  
2012 Interim Report**

**V: Interagency Collaboration and Data-  
Driven Decision Making**

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## Overview

The Washington Families Fund (WFF) 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 (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 that was designated in 2004 by the state to oversee a public and private pool of funds for statewide supportive housing programs, was selected by BMGF 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 action.<sup>1</sup>

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 documents 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 are intended to provide a foundation of understanding of the Initiative and to provide formative feedback to BMGF, Building Changes, and stakeholders in the Initiative counties.

The eight brief reports, all under the title, *Washington Families Fund Systems Initiative Evaluation 2012 Interim Report*, are available on [BuildingChanges.org](http://BuildingChanges.org). They include the following:

### Executive Summary

#### Summary of Key Baseline and Early Implementation Findings

- I. The Role of the Funder
- II. The Role of the Intermediary
- III. The Role of the Evaluation
- IV. The Role of the Counties: Promising Practices
- V. Interagency Collaboration and Data-Driven Decision Making
- VI. Advocacy

Three sets of appendices include additional description and analysis of the implementation of the Initiative in each of the Initiative counties (Appendices I A-C); the role of selected organizations in the

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

system and in the Initiative (Appendices II A-G); and the list of key informants for our site visits in summer 2009 and February 2011 (Appendix III).

Although the Initiative's Theory of Change emphasizes the five pillars within Focus Area 1, three additional areas of activity and focus are considered critical to achieving the gains in the system. This section describes the Initiative's implementation thus far on two of these areas:

- Focus Area 2: Interagency collaboration that integrates and matches the most effective resources to the needs of the families; and
- Focus Area 3: Data systems that can provide accurate, reliable, and timely data on homeless families that can guide decisions, improve provider practices, and support advocacy efforts.

This report describes the baseline status for each focus in each of the counties, followed by a summary of their status in February 2011.

## **Focus Area 2: Interagency Collaboration**

### ***Background and Baseline Status***

**King County.** The Committee to End Homelessness (CEH) was considered the main leadership body on homelessness issues in King County. The CEH is a broad coalition established after adoption of the Ten Year Plan in July 2005. The CEH is staffed by 2.5 full-time equivalents (FTE). It is composed of four committees: the Governing Board, the Interagency Council, the Funders' Group, and the Consumer Advisory Council. The Governing Board provided high-level oversight from the mayors of the cities, sheriffs, local business leaders, BMGF, and other community leaders and guides planning and coordinates funding. The Interagency Council (IC) includes agency directors and department heads from many of the organizations working to end homelessness in King County. It guides service delivery and data collection and makes recommendations to the Governing Board. The Consumer Advisory Council included about 15 individuals who were currently homeless or who had experienced homelessness in the past. This group was self-governing and provided understanding about consumers' needs and challenges to the CEH.

The initial concept was that the IC would decide what policies would be implemented. However, it was difficult for providers to make some of the tough decisions that arose, and the Governing Board generally relied on the staff for making decisions. Therefore, the CEH eventually developed the Funders' Group, composed of the King County Department of Community and Human Services, Seattle Office of Housing, King County Housing Authority, the Gates Foundation, and the United Way of King County. There previously had been funder coordination at the deputy level, setting the stage for the formal establishment of a Funders' Group. Funders from the east and south side of the county were invited to sit at the table and be involved. The group established five priorities and then worked to see how much

funding each had. They asked each funder to develop a budget for the five priorities for the next five years.

There was general consensus that, despite the lack of a coordinated entry system, agencies that serve the homeless worked very closely together. For example, one provider said, “Our region has communication and coordination. Funders are coordinated and there are long-standing relationships and partnerships.” Providers agreed that better coordination among the various service systems with which homeless families interface was essential for improving service delivery.

Advocacy at the system level for families was integrated with that for single adults. There was not a separate family-focused advocacy agenda. The key advocacy groups noted were the Seattle-King County Coalition on Homelessness and the Washington Low-Income Housing Coalition.

There was a mix of opinions at the time concerning the extent to which homeless and mainstream service providers were coordinated. Some of the individuals interviewed agreed that there was some evidence of productive coordination between mainstream and homeless service providers. Other providers described the dearth of coordination between homeless providers and mainstream services. For example, one stakeholder said, “Homeless providers are very separate and doing everything themselves—and not accessing all of the mainstream services that exist.”

**Pierce County.** In 2009, Pierce County’s network of homeless service providers consisted of several types of systems (i.e., government agencies, foundations, housing providers, service providers, and faith-based organizations). Thirty-nine agencies within the county used funds from various sources to provide housing and homeless services to families. According to interviews with county staff, the funding sources used to operate these programs often intersected, causing competition among homeless services providers for common resources.

According to the county’s Landscape Assessment, these homeless service providers also used varying business models to perform similar activities and provide similar services. Though organizations sometimes entered formal agreements with other organizations for services (e.g., mental health services), there were few significant partnerships between agencies. In 2009, interviewed participants also described the lack of significant partnerships among agencies. When asked to describe the current homeless family service system, interviewees said there is no “system” and that each agency works independently with individual priorities, eligibility requirements, intake processes, program models, discharge criteria and processes, and information systems. Interviewed providers also reported that there was no centralized leadership for the homeless service system in Pierce County.

This theme of disconnectedness was also apparent during the examination of funders’ priorities. Funders within Pierce County tended to have individual sets of priorities. The county did have one collaboration, the 2163 Funders’ Group. This funding oversight group, including leadership from Pierce County, the City of Tacoma, and the City of Lakewood, was developed to streamline the funding process for 2163 dollars. As of 2009, a common application for organizations to apply for 2163 funds had been

developed. The Pierce County Department of Community Services administered the funding. Unfortunately, during the 2009 interviews, several stakeholders reported that it was difficult to work with the Community Services Department.

**Snohomish County.** At the time of the site visit in 2009, there was general consensus that there was no single agency or organization that led the homeless family system in Snohomish County. Rather there were “pockets of leadership.” In recent years, there had been some attempts to create coordinated leadership through the development of the Housing Consortium. The county provided some leadership but more often participated in efforts that began elsewhere, such as from the Homeless Policy Task Force or from the housing providers themselves.

In part, because Snohomish County is a small community, there was a great deal of collaboration and leadership among housing providers. Providers reported that there has been fairly good coordination and cooperation among the non-profit communities and the government on policy and other things. There had been an effort in the community to work together instead of competing. The Housing Consortium was one structured way that coordination happened. The consortium held monthly meetings to bring together community leaders and to provide a forum for communication in the community. Again, because Snohomish County is relatively small, most of the players knew one another. They were all present on the same committees and at the same meetings. Much of the coordination happened informally at these meetings.

Leaders from the three predominant agencies that serve homeless families—Housing Hope, Volunteers of America, and the YWCA—worked closely in a collegial and collaborative spirit. They served on the same committees (Housing Consortium, Homeless Policy Task Force) and saw their overall mission as being collective. However, there was some tension surrounding funding. Most of the organizations that served homeless families had to compete for the same limited funding. The problem was that the providers did not have a lot of power in this community in terms of funding determinations. The county was somewhat fragmented about how money related to homelessness was spent. Providers indicated that they “sort of randomly go after money and hope to get some kind of package.”

The Homeless Policy Oversight Committee included a broad array of service providers, housing providers, and county and city officials. The Homeless Policy Task Force worked with the mayor’s office to implement Project Homeless Connect. Sponsored by the city of Everett and Snohomish County, the project pulled together about 300 volunteers, ranging from representatives from agencies to citizens from the community, to provide all kinds of services, including Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) connection portals, medical and dental care, haircuts, and public transportation coordination.

The Human Services Council was another avenue for coordination of issues pertinent to homeless families. At quarterly meetings, providers talked about what services were available and gaps in service delivery that existed. In developing the Consolidated Plan and the 2005 Action Plan, Snohomish County staff consulted with members of the Housing Consortium and with a variety of public and private agencies that provide assisted housing, health services, and social services.

At the time of our baseline site visit in August 2009, there was a great deal of frustration among the housing community that the Workforce Development Council of Snohomish County (WDCSC) was chosen as the lead organization for the Initiative because it was believed that the Council did not know enough about housing or issues related to homelessness to effectively lead this project. However, throughout the planning process, WDCSC reportedly worked hard to engage the housing community, to listen to their ideas, and to share developments in the Initiative as it unfolded.

### ***System Initiative Design***

**King County.** The Committee to End Homelessness and the four bodies within its governance structure—the Governing Board, the Funders’ Group, the Interagency Council (IAC), and the consumer advisory board continue to be the main coordinating and leadership vehicle in King County.

During the site visit in February 2011, the IAC was undergoing restructuring. The CEH and its bodies, particularly the Funders’ Group, continued to be cited as the group that was most instrumental for coordination and collaboration for the system and for families. The specific groups that were brought together to develop the Implementation Plan also were cited as key coordination vehicles, but were considered more ad-hoc and temporary. Other vehicles cited as important for coordinating people and efforts included the WFF Leadership Committee (though it was noted that it meets only twice a year and does not function as an “anchor of activity”) and the Coalition for the Homeless.

**During summer 2011, an Implementation Advisory Group for the King County Initiative was created and had its first meeting. It is advising** the Family Homelessness Initiative lead staff in support of the CEH’s Funders’ Group investment priority. The Advisory Group meets monthly and consists of community partners, funders, and field experts from diverse agencies and specialties from across the county.

**Pierce County.** Over the course of 2009 and 2010, Pierce County and the Steering Committee for the WFF Systems Initiative took a significant role in providing leadership for the homeless system. Several committees, with representation from local universities, housing authorities, workforce development agencies, public schools, and private funders were formed to guide the development of the Strategic and Implementation Plans. In addition, as a result of the planning work the Steering Committee was doing for the Initiative, and with the assistance of Building Changes, an Oversight Group of Funders was created to oversee and execute the Initiative. This group is composed of local funders from the county’s Department of Community Connections, the City of Tacoma Human Rights and Human Services, the City of Lakewood, Building Changes, United Way of Tacoma/Pierce County, Greater Tacoma Community Foundation, and Pierce County Workforce Development Council. Members of this Funders’ Group signed a Compact for Change, agreeing to meet every quarter and create policy alignment and funding strategies that oversee the Implementation Plan.

In addition to the Funders' Group, Pierce County has made progress in creating partnerships with workforce development agencies and with the local McKinney Vento liaisons. However, the county has encountered some challenges with developing collaborative relationships with prospective partners, such as DSHS and local colleges and trade schools.

**Snohomish County.** The Strategic and Implementation Plans lay out a strategy for collaboration and coordination that proposes to create a governance structure to advise and oversee the implementation of the Snohomish County plan. This structure will be designed to reflect a community-wide collaborative effort in which all partners are invested and that specifically recognizes the expertise of the Homeless Policy Task Force. The Strategic Advisory Coordinating Committee would convene regularly to establish oversight and processes for engaging with Snohomish County government.

In planning for the *Investing In Families* Initiative, the county leads pulled together representatives from county and city government, WDCSC, the major housing and service providers, mainstream services, the Homeless Policy Task Force, and the Housing Consortium to create a Strategic Advisory Coordinating Committee. The various members served on pillar-specific work groups to discuss the needs of the county and what the focus of the Initiative should be. Throughout this process, providers in Snohomish County expressed frustration with the Initiative, attributed to how the Gates Foundation initially announced the project without providing details on the restrictions, the choice of WDCSC as the fiscal agent rather than a provider solely focused on homelessness, and the focus on families to the exclusion of single adults and youth. This frustration resulted in some providers withdrawing from the planning process and publically criticizing the Initiative. While the input from providers did produce many useful ideas, WDCSC (with support from the county) determined they would have to be more directive if the project was to move forward.

Once the Landscape Assessment and Strategic Plans were completed, in February 2010 and October 2010 respectively, the pillar workgroups were dissolved and the county leads took the lead on developing the Implementation Plan. During the site visit in February 2011, the providers said they felt that they were not as involved in the development of the Implementation Plan as they were in the earlier two phases. Yet conversations with the county leads suggested there were "too many cooks in the kitchen" and too many differing opinions on what the plan should look like. In order to get it done, they took control of developing that plan. The county leads were working hard at keeping the housing providers engaged in the process. To that end, they (and BMGF) asked the director of the Housing Consortium to take a stronger leadership role in representing the Initiative to the members of the housing community but, as of February 2011, that had not yet occurred.

Throughout 2011, the Strategic Advisory Coordinating Committee continued to meet monthly to provide policy-level guidance.

In spring 2011, the county started convening the Snohomish County Funders' Collaborative, composed of representatives from both government and non-government organizations that have a financial interest in serving the low-income population in Snohomish County. This group includes representatives

from the county; WDCSC; Building Changes; United Way; health care organizations, such as Verdant Health; and other local foundations. They meet bimonthly to share information about the community's needs, including identifying service gaps, coordinating funding priorities, and streamlining application processes and reporting requirements. The scope of this work is broader than that of the BMGF's Systems Initiative. Prior to the Initiative, these funders met infrequently and irregularly. In 2011, upon Building Changes' recommendation, this group began meeting more regularly and in a more formal role.

### **Focus Area 3: Data-Driven Decision Making**

#### ***Background and Baseline Status***

In the baseline period, across the counties, the most widely used source of data on homelessness was the One Night Count Shelter Survey, providing an annual point-in-time count of single adults and families. The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), intended to be the main source of data on homelessness, had a number of issues and challenges in each of the counties that inhibited its ability to be a useful system to guide the work of the counties.

At the time, all three counties' HMIS systems were operating as "closed systems," not allowing other agencies to have real-time access to client information. The biggest hurdle to opening the systems was provider reluctance to enter data directly into the HMIS. Although some providers were directly entering data, others – typically larger providers – were exporting data into the system. In Pierce County, some providers were directly entering data into the HMIS but also continuing to enter data into their own system. The core of the problem was providers' reluctance to rely on the HMIS due to concerns about it not meeting their full information and reporting needs, concerns about quality, and concerns about confidentiality (especially in Snohomish County).

According to the providers interviewed in King County, data quality was cited as problematic. It was reported that, in 2008, Safe Harbors was able to un-duplicate only 50 percent of the records in the system because providers were not entering enough information about the clients they served. Entry of Social Security numbers was voluntary, and clients could opt out of any of the fields. Even though providers were required to enter full names and at least the last four digits of the Social Security number, it was difficult to match clients across records and reduce duplications. Another concern raised about the HMIS was the inability to conduct a point-in-time capacity count because of the poor quality of the exit data. Unfortunately, Seattle and King County lost \$1 million in Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds in 2008 because of poor data quality.

All three systems had considerable capacity to capture and report on significant amounts of data, but none were operating at capacity. The HMIS systems of King and Snohomish counties were almost exclusively focused on collecting universal elements, and Pierce County's HMIS was collecting some additional elements but still had unrealized capacity.

With respect to reporting, King County was not able to produce reports due to data problems, and Pierce County had produced HMIS reports, but they could not be used for planning or decision making due to incomplete and inaccurate data. Snohomish County's HMIS had been able to generate reports, although some providers found it difficult to generate their own reports from the data.

Several HMIS challenges shared across the three counties included the following:

- Inability to offer real-time access due to a number of providers exporting data into HMIS;
- Resources needed by individual agencies to enter data and meet the additional demands of the system; and
- Lack of participation by key providers, including agencies that do not receive Federal funding and domestic violence organizations.

Two of the counties needed considerable assistance in helping improve the quality of the data entered into the HMIS system. Pierce County also needed help in providing greater oversight and clearer direction to providers.

The BMGF held a Data Summit in May 2009 and formed a Data Solutions Workgroup comprising county leads, representatives from DSHS, the Department of Commerce, provider organizations, and the HMIS administrators for each county. The goal of the workgroup was to discuss data-related issues, including needs and challenges, and to identify ways to improve data availability, quality, and uses within the Initiative.

Efforts by the Data Solutions Workgroup supported increased enforcement of reporting requirements by the Department of Commerce and further development of the HMIS systems for accessing records. This was based, in part, on feedback provided following our baseline site visits in August 2010 on the status of HMIS in each of the counties, including problems with data quality, the number of organizations complying with HMIS federal reporting requirements, and the limited utility of the existing HMIS systems for individual providers to access data on the families they served. At another meeting of the Data Solutions Workgroup the county leads presented their preliminary plans for a coordinated entry process and the intended role of HMIS in supporting the process. It became apparent, that while each county is developing its own coordinated intake process, there are common data elements that could be captured in the initial and follow-up screening instruments. Common screening tools that include required HMIS data elements were drafted and adapted by each of the three counties to fit their specific needs for coordinated entry.

The Data Solutions Workgroup has also focused on providing support to DSHS's efforts to integrate additional data into RDA's Integrated Client Database. These efforts include entering into data share agreements among the three Moving-to-Work Public Housing Authorities (i.e., King County Housing Authority, Seattle Housing Authority, Tacoma Housing Authority) and DSHS as well as developing a data sharing agreement between DSHS, the PHAs, and the Education Research Data Center (ERDC) to link housing and education data with the existing social service data collected by DSHS.

## ***System Initiative Design***

Since the baseline visit, there has been significant improvement in each of the county HMIS systems. Each of the counties is now participating in a statewide, coordinated HMIS strategy and works in partnership with the Washington State Department of Commerce. These improvements, coupled with the successful efforts of Building Changes, in combination with the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance (WLIHA) and other housing and homelessness advocacy partners, to pass state legislation allowing telephonic consent for HMIS data collection, has allowed the three counties to integrate coordinated intake with the HMIS and provide accurate counts of need in each of the counties.

**King County.** In King County, the new director of Seattle's Housing Department (who was hired in 2010) has taken a strong interest in Safe Harbors II and has moved it to reside with the IT and Quality Assurance division. There has also been an increase of staff from six FTEs to eight FTEs. Participation reportedly increased from 55 percent to 85 percent program coverage in one year. At the time of the site visit, 329 programs were using Safe Harbors; 800 people had been trained, and there were 477 active users (i.e., they have logged in the system in past 30 days). The perspectives regarding Safe Harbors had improved since the baseline visit and the new director was credited with providing leadership and making it accountable. Data integration continues to be the way in which several of the agencies participate, though data were now unduplicated (which was viewed as a huge accomplishment from a year ago). There continued to be concerns about the quality of the data, about the effort to do double and sometimes triple entry of data for various systems, and the need for more interactive training.

The state is now requiring HMIS and there is movement in King County to require reports with Safe Harbors to match up or invoices will not be paid. There is the expectation that for every month the agency sends an invoice, the report in HMIS matches the number of clients served.

In the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing (HPRP) project funded in 2009, it was stipulated in the contracts that each agency had to enter the data in HMIS in a coordinated fashion. In addition, King County has recently negotiated an agreement with Safe Harbors to capture all the data associated with coordinated entry and assessment. The county leads have been working closely with Safe Harbors and Adsystem to make sure the system can do the scheduling automatically when the call comes into 2-1-1. Assessment data will be collected and entered into Safe Harbors first for families already in the system, and then for all families entering the system.

**Pierce County.** In Pierce County, it was reported that participation in the HMIS system is nearly 100 percent, and county staff have seen great improvements in the timeliness and quality of the data received by provider agencies. During interviews with providers, they also noted a new ease with using the system, and reported that technical assistance from the county staff has been helpful. Moreover, the County and Associated Ministries have been able to capture information about the families seeking and receiving services through centralized intake. This ability to capture information supported them in making decisions for future program planning. They were able to track the number of assistance requests received per month and alter Access Point for Housing's (AP4H) staffing patterns to answer

calls in a “live” manner and conduct intake assessments within 48 hours. The data also helped the county understand who needed assistance. For example, the county leads reported that in the first year of AP4H, 85 percent of the calls were from families, and the majority of these families were requesting prevention assistance. In addition, African Americans were significantly overrepresented in the pool of clients requesting services, representing over a third of the calls, yet representing only seven percent of the population in Pierce County. The county is using these data to develop plans to effectively target families and provide prevention assistance in the second year of the Initiative.

**Snohomish County.** Snohomish has moved to an “open” data system, both for pilot project families and for other homeless families in the system, such that any of the participating providers with an opening can access any of the waitlists to find eligible families. Although there were other data systems in use in Snohomish County, such as the SKIES system, there was no additional integration of these data with the HMIS. Moreover, HMIS has not received any additional funding to expand its role or capabilities.

In addition to using the HMIS, the counties are using other data sources to guide their efforts. In King County, for example, the county team has conducted surveys of their providers to understand their capacities and readiness for change. In Snohomish County, data are being collected through a special contract with a consultant who is providing real-time formative feedback on the implementation of the pilot from interviews with staff and families involved in the pilot. Finally, the Initiative as a whole has been examining ways to strengthen the data available at the state level, with efforts focused on individual housing authorities and education. Working in collaboration with Dennis Culhane, there has also been a Foundation-focused effort to try to obtain information on families receiving housing support through HUD. These latter efforts are currently underway.

## Summary

Focus areas 2 and 3 in the Theory of Change describe areas of activity that are believed to be needed to support the reforms undertaken in each of the counties. Thus far all three 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. Additionally, 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.