



Washington Families Fund Systems Initiative Evaluation: 2012 Interim Report

I: The Role of the Funder

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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 (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 action.¹

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 individual counties.

The eight brief reports, all under the title, *Washington Families Fund Systems Initiative Evaluation 2012 Interim Report*, are available on 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 system and in the Initiative (Appendices II A-G); and the list of key informants for the Westat site visits in summer 2009 and February 2011 (Appendix III).

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.

This report describes the role of the Initiative's developer and primary funder, BMGF, including a description of its history in funding initiatives for homeless families and related interests, the impetus behind the Homeless Families Systems Initiative, the development and evolution of the Initiative's Theory of Change and overall operational design, the roles the Foundation has assumed during the Initiative's implementation, and a summary appraisal of its efforts during this time.

Overview of BMGF Involvement in Homelessness

In 2000, BMGF launched Sound Families, its first major initiative addressing family homelessness. A \$40 million, seven-year initiative, Sound Families was designed to triple the amount of transitional housing available for families in the same three counties in which the WFF Systems Initiative is implemented—King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties. The Initiative involved the public-private collaborations of regional housing authorities; for-profit housing developers; other local, state, and federal government agencies; and local nonprofit organizations. Housing authorities accepted into their programs families enrolled in the Sound Families program and made agreements to support families with Section 8 vouchers once they successfully completed the program. Also, government agencies sponsored the support services attached to the transitional housing units. Grants were awarded to more than 40 local nonprofit organizations to create new affordable housing units and provide five years of onsite case management that included life skills and parenting services. Families who needed additional specialized services, such as job training, education, domestic violence counseling, mental health services, and drug and alcohol abuse counseling were referred to offsite providers.

The Sound Families Initiative encouraged a transition-in-place strategy allowing families to remain in the same housing complex once they finished receiving transitional housing services. The model also developed a pilot strategy for grantees to house families in permanent supportive units in which families would be provided services as long as needed. The Sound Families Initiative evaluation, conducted by the Northwest Institute for Children and Families from the University Of Washington School Of Social Work, found that 75 percent of the families remained in the program until graduation, 68 percent secured permanent housing, and 48 percent increased their incomes (Northwest Institute for Children and Families, 2008). Among the system changes Sound Families sparked were new partnerships among housing and service providers and property managers, many of whom had not worked with homeless families in the past.

The evaluation also revealed that one-quarter of the families were evicted or asked to leave their housing early. The study indicated that more services were needed for many of these families, including intensive support services for families with domestic violence histories, poor mental health, and substance abuse problems.

The Sound Families Initiative prompted the creation of the Washington Families Fund in 2004 as an effort to expand the lessons learned and impacts to a statewide context. The Fund was established by

the Washington State Legislature as the first-of-its-kind public-private partnership devoted to long-term funding for supportive housing for homeless families. The intermediary organization, Building Changes, was selected as the lead organization to administer the Fund. In assuming this role, Building Changes secured \$3 million of private contributions to match a State appropriation of \$2 million, and began awarding service grants to supportive housing programs across Washington State. Today, Building Changes has assembled 24 public and private partners, and secured \$28 million of funds.

Impetus and Planning for the Homeless Families Systems Initiative

The findings of the Sound Families evaluation, coupled with data that continued to show the same number of families experiencing homelessness each year in the Puget Sound, led the Foundation to explore ways to build upon its investment. The Foundation concluded that housing production alone cannot solve the problem and changed its orientation to systems change in an effort to move from “*managing* family homelessness to *ending* the problem.”

The Foundation conducted a three-stage strategy planning process, including a scoping phase, a discussion of strategic choices, and an execution plan for the selected strategy. In the initial stages of the strategy development, the Foundation concluded that the current configuration of services and housing in the counties is ineffective and inefficient and does not lead to a reduction in homelessness. In addition, the counties were encouraged to attempt to address the problem through the Initiative by using the growing body of information from communities across the country that focused on innovative ways of integrating public resources to prevent homelessness, shorten the homelessness episode, and prevent its reoccurrence. Specifically, staff from the Foundation began looking at other communities across the country, such as Columbus, Ohio; Hennepin County, Minnesota; and New York City that were using innovative models to prevent and end homelessness for families. These emergent best practices were suggesting that systems may be more effective in reducing homelessness if they include a focus on prevention and on tailoring housing and services to each family.

The Foundation wanted a program that could continue its focus on homeless families and leverage the experience gained through Sound Families. The ultimate goal was to reduce family homelessness by 50 percent by 2020 in the three counties in the Puget Sound and over time in Washington State as a whole. The Foundation believed that the Sound Families Initiative positioned it well for undertaking a more systems-focused initiative. The Sound Families Initiative had developed momentum in the target communities as well as helped the Foundation generate knowledge, experience, and partnerships that could help to develop new innovative strategies and models for addressing the problem.

Alignment Within BMGF Goals and Consistent With Other Initiatives

The WFF Systems Initiative also aligned well with the Foundation’s goal that each person has the opportunity to live a healthy and productive life, and with the Pacific Northwest (PNW) program focus

on meeting basic needs for families and children in Washington State. Other PNW work also complemented the Initiative, particularly work in the area of domestic violence and early learning as described in the following paragraphs.

Initial PNW funding was provided in 2009 to support the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV) and four organizations to create and implement Domestic Violence Housing First, a program aimed at helping survivors of domestic violence keep or quickly access safe permanent housing and thus preventing shelter stays. Promising early results prompted the Foundation to expand the program in 2011, providing three-year grant support to WSCADV and nine community-based organizations to continue to implement the program. As the WFF Systems Initiative has taken shape, there have been some cross-systems meetings with WSCADV in which the coalition has shared information from its work.

Other work in the PNW program that complements the Initiative falls within the area of early learning and education pathways through community and public school systems. Since 2005, the Foundation has collaborated with a range of public and private partners to improve the quality of early learning programs. As this Initiative has evolved into a broader set of education system interventions, the Foundation is working more with public schools and children and youth service providers; PNW's efforts with these systems and organizations have the potential to overlap and reinforce efforts targeting homeless families.

Development and Evolution of the Initiative's Theory of Change and Operational Design

Building on lessons learned from the Sound Families initiative and from other innovative communities, the Foundation developed the WFF Systems Initiative to support the implementation of promising practices at the family, provider, and systems levels that can move the current housing and services systems from managing homelessness to ending homelessness for all families. The following section describes the Initiative's Theory of Change and operational structure.

Theory of Change

Through its three-stage strategy development process, the Foundation developed a Theory of Change and an operational plan for unfolding the WFF Systems Initiative. The Theory of Change, outlined in Figure 1, incorporates a differentiated approach to meeting the needs of homeless families and families at risk of homelessness. The first "focus area" of the theory outlines five programmatic pillars that are intended to provide tailored solutions to each family's needs. These pillars include the following:

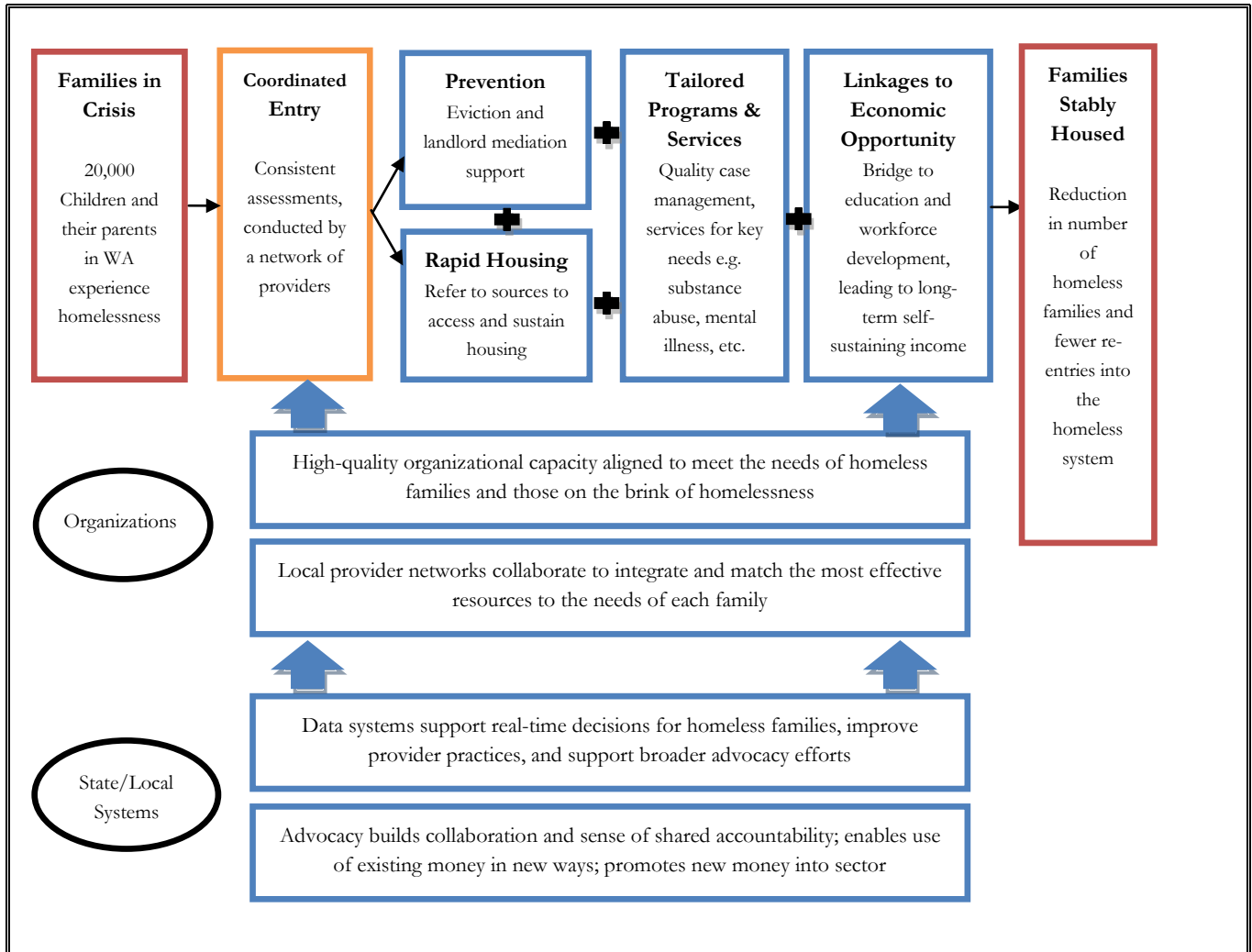
- **Coordinated Entry:** A common point of entry into the system that includes a universal assessment protocol to match families to needed resources;

- **Prevention:** Resources that either divert families from entering shelter or that stabilize housing situations for families who are at risk of homelessness;
- **Rapid Housing:** Quickly placing families who enter shelter into permanent housing, often with short-term rental assistance;
- **Tailored Programs:** Services that provide for flexible, coordinated, and customized support to ensure that families are matched with the services they need 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.

Focus Areas 2 through 4 are believed to be critical components in the overall system that drive and support the effective implementation of the pillars of promising practice. These include having organizations with the capacity to implement the pillars, along with 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 ultimate goals of the WFF Systems Initiative 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, and to ultimately produce a 50 percent reduction in family homelessness in each of the three counties by 2020.

Figure I-1. Washington Families Fund Systems Initiative Theory of Change



Operational Plan

The Foundation determined that a fairly long staged planning period (12–18 months) was needed to have the time necessary to enhance existing relationships, build new ones, enhance the capacities of key players, and share and refine the approach with all key stakeholders before embarking on grant-making. The plan was to “go slow to go fast,” hoping that the time in planning would be off-set by more rapid grant-making and other work once all was in place. Investments were made to increase the capacities of Building Changes to function as the lead intermediary for implementation of the strategy. A three-stage planning process was supported in each of the three counties that included a Landscape Assessment, Strategic Plan, and an Implementation Plan. Each of the counties received \$200,000 from the Foundation, and King County received an additional \$100,000 from United Way of King County, to support this planning process. The role of Building Changes and the counties as agents of change are described further below.

The leadership for the Initiative's implementation comes from four different agents of change: the Foundation, a regional intermediary, county government, and advocacy organizations. The work of the four types of change agents is intended to support and enhance each other's efforts over the course of the Initiative. In addition to the Foundation (role described below), these agents include an intermediary, the lead organizations for each county, and advocacy partners.

The Foundation's plan for the Initiative included a regional intermediary that the Foundation envisioned it would work with and through to "drive a common agenda." As noted, Building Changes, a non-profit organization based in Seattle, Washington, with a focus on vulnerable and homeless populations, operates as the intermediary organization. In this role, Building Changes co-manages the Initiative with the Foundation and acts as the link between the county leads and others in the three counties and the state who are involved in the Initiative. As described in Chapter II, *The Role of the Intermediary*, Building Changes acts as an agent of change through its re-granting of Foundation funds for SIGs; by building the capacity of organizations through the provision of on-going support and technical assistance; by providing an opportunity for individuals to network by convening meetings and groups; and by advocating for policy changes at state and local levels to support the Initiative.

The third agent of change in each county is a county lead organization that plans, crafts, and guides the work that is occurring "on the ground" in the five pillars. In the King County Initiative, entitled *Moving Forward*, the county lead organization is the Housing and Community Development Program within the Seattle-King County Department of Community and Human Services. In Pierce County, the County's Community Connections Homeless Program Office leads its Homeless Families Systems Initiative, *Outside In*. In Snohomish County, the Initiative, *Investing in Families*, is housed in and led by the Workforce Development Council of Snohomish County (WDCSC). The work of these organizations in planning, designing, and implementing the WFF Systems Initiative is described in Chapter IV, *The Role of the Counties*.

The fourth type of system change agent is the advocacy partners, key third parties funded by BMGF to implement specific activities (e.g., media, advocacy, organizing). A description of the groups funded and how their work fits into the Initiative is provided in Chapter VI, *Advocacy*.

Four types of grants, with varying degrees of involvement from the agents of change, are supporting the Initiative's implementation.

- **Infrastructure Grants:** These grants are awarded by the Foundation to the counties for staffing, capital, and technology expenditures in support of systems change work. Each of the three demonstration counties can apply for an infrastructure grant each year for a total of five years. In 2010, the Foundation awarded each of the counties an infrastructure grant: King County received \$1 million, and Pierce and Snohomish counties received \$750,000. In 2011, the Foundation awarded King County \$687,000, Pierce County \$588,000, and Snohomish County \$400,000 in infrastructure grants.

- **System Innovation Grants (SIG):** SIG funds are awarded through Building Changes to local nonprofit providers in the Initiative counties. A total of roughly \$30 million is being provided over time by BMGF to Building Changes to re-grant as SIGs. The purpose of these grants is to foster the re-alignment of mainstream resources towards programming for homeless families. In order for organizations to receive these funds, there needs to be a match of \$2.50 of public funds for each requested SIG dollar. The county leads are responsible for ensuring the proper match of public funds is secured for the SIGs. Once the SIGs are awarded the allocation of public funds is tracked by Building Changes. The SIG grants are intended to be made in multiple waves contingent upon achievement of clear milestones at specified intervals.
- **Advocacy grants:** These grants are awarded by the Foundation to a range of organizations in the counties and the State to support building larger awareness of and support for ending family homelessness, and the implementation of promising practices in the counties. The county leads and Building Changes are not involved in the advocacy grant process.
- **Operating Grants to Building Changes:** Operating grants are provided to Building Changes to function as the lead intermediary for strategy implementation.

The Role of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

The Foundation plays several roles in the Initiative, including among its major roles serving as the initial and primary strategic investor in the infrastructure, the interventions, and other supports that strengthen the Initiative implementation. As a “hand-on” Foundation, staff also have worked with Building Changes, especially in the first stage of the Initiative, in co-managing the activity and co-convening groups locally, statewide, and nationally; working as an advocate to push for needed reforms at local, state, and federal levels; and generating needed knowledge to continue to support on-going learning.

Although Building Changes is charged as the Initiative intermediary, to date the Foundation staff plays a direct role in the work on the Initiative. Initially, especially during the planning phase, both the Foundation staff and Building Changes staff worked with the county leads and others in the counties to help shape the Initiative in each county. As noted below, the pairing of staff from the Foundation and Building Changes led to confusion in a number of instances as to who called the shots and was the authority on decisions. This was compounded by the Foundation directly providing the financial support to the counties to perform the planning process because the final contract with Building Changes was not yet completed at the time the planning process was ready to begin. Building Changes did not yet have the capacities to support the planning processes, and neither the Foundation nor Building Changes wanted to hold up the process. Given the Foundation’s active role with the counties, it is not surprising that it was viewed as the ultimate authority in these early decisions, and the role of the intermediary was diminished and their authority somewhat compromised. Since that time, there has been more

concerted and conscious effort on the part of the Foundation and Building Changes to position Building Changes as the key intermediary and source of support for the work underway in each county. For example, the Foundation was once a participant in the King County Funders' Group, but has since stopped attending and has given that role over to Building Changes, which now also attends all three counties' funders' groups. Because the largest single foundation funding stream supporting the county work (SIG) flows through Building Changes, the intermediary organization should increasingly be viewed as the decision maker about the primary private sector resources available to each community.

During the implementation stage, the Foundation has assumed less of a co-manager role than it did during the planning stage, although it continues to play a key role in the counties, as well as statewide and nationally. Some of the role may be characterized as advocacy work, including gap filling and bridge building. Some of the role is ensuring that critical pieces are in place to make the strategy work as well as seizing opportunities as they arise to strengthen the Initiative, solve problems, and generate knowledge from it. The Foundation also remains engaged in the work at the county level to monitor fidelity to the Theory of Change. As an example, during the planning stage, the Foundation, together with Building Changes, convened a Data Solutions Work Group involving stakeholders from the counties and the state (as well as Westat) to try to tackle struggles with the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in each of the counties.

As detailed in Chapter VI, *Advocacy*, Foundation staff work to keep abreast of changes that are happening nationally and of best practices in other communities so that the Initiative can be as current and cutting edge as possible and remain visible at state and national levels. For example, the Foundation set up meetings in Washington, D.C. between federal government officials and local county and state stakeholders so that the local and state individuals could learn firsthand of federal developments, and the federal officials involved in homelessness activities could learn about the Initiative. Other examples include bringing local stakeholders to different communities around the country, such as to Chicago, Illinois, Grand Rapids, Michigan, or Hennepin County, Minnesota, to learn how the various models of interest work on the ground and acting as an advocate to push for needed reforms at local, state, and federal levels. Foundation staff maintain and nurture contacts with all levels of leadership in government (municipal, county, state, and federal) to keep in contact with their efforts and to try to leverage change. There also is coordination with the philanthropic sector, largely through Funders Together to End Homelessness, and collaborative work, such as with the Champion Foundation.

Finally, the Foundation has a keen interest in generating knowledge from the Initiative. Considerable focus is placed on a set of learning questions, outlined during the strategy development phase and continuing to be refined through this past year (2011). The learning questions guide the work of this evaluation, supported by BMGF, as well as other actions they may take to increase the learning from the Initiative. Recently, for example, the Foundation has provided additional support to a project headed by Dennis Culhane that will build on his work in tying education and public housing authority data together and, in turn, increase the potential that these data could be included in the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Integrated Client Database, a resource being used by this evaluation and other efforts.

Key Characteristics of the BMGF Approach

Taking a Developmental, Somewhat Organic, and Adaptive Approach

The approach to designing and implementing the Initiative has been explicitly developmental. The Initiative itself was created through an 18-month multi-stage strategy development process, and the counties, guided by the Initiative's Theory of Change, spent the first year and a half of the Initiative immersed in a three-stage planning process. Each county was tasked first with conducting a Landscape Assessment of the county, followed by the development of a Strategic Plan based on what was learned in the Landscape Assessment, and then an Implementation Plan outlining the steps and timeline to be taken to put the strategies into place.

As the counties begin to implement their strategies, they, as well as the Foundation and Building Changes, have adapted to changes that have occurred in the broader context. In particular, it is important to note that the Initiative was conceived and designed prior to the onset of the recession. Although the plans for the individual counties were developed after the recession had hit, their development occurred just prior to the extreme budget cuts that hit the state. Assumptions about funding availability as well as the depth and nature of the need for prevention services and the availability of jobs had to be reconsidered and in some cases, plans had to be revised. For example, Pierce County was the first to begin implementing its Initiative in 2011 and started with a focus on both coordinated entry and prevention. Estimates of families needing prevention services were substantially smaller than what the county experienced. Given the extent to which the demand outstripped the funds available, the county had to change its strategy and cut back on what it could provide.

The changes in context have also changed the Foundation's expectations with respect to the timeframe in which it expected to see results occur. The state's fiscal condition in 2011 and the outlook for 2012 was one of the factors that prompted the Foundation to extend the timeframe of the Initiative, giving it more time to unfold and stretching the dollars over a longer period of time.

Learning From Best and Promising Practices

From design through implementation, learning from best and promising practices across the country has been an unmistakable attribute of the Initiative. Early on, the Foundation had an eye on what practices are in place in other areas of the country to determine whether and how they might influence the Initiative model. Since that time, there has been a continued focus on learning from others, whether that has occurred through visits to specific communities where a practice is in place, having site representatives or other experts come to the Puget Sound to present to the counties, or attending conferences, such as the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) Family Homelessness Conferences and other trainings. A key aspect of these trips is that they typically include several representatives from each county as well as the state. Table III-1 lists the trips that have been sponsored by BMGF from 2010 through February 2012. More recently, some of this role of identifying best practices and spreading the knowledge has been assumed by Building Changes.

Table III-1. BMGF Sponsored Visits

Location	Date	Focus
Columbus	2008: April 24-25	To provide an overview of Columbus’s collaborative model to end homelessness.
New York City	2008: November 17-18	To gain an understanding of New York City’s responses to family homelessness from the perspective of key government and non-profit sector partners who have been addressing issues of prevention, housing, and supportive services for families at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.
Chicago/ Minneapolis	2009: June 9-12	To understand how these two localities reformed their homeless systems and implemented a range of innovative practices. The practices of interest included coordinated entry, prevention, rapid housing, tailored services and economic opportunity.
Washington, D.C.	2010: May 4-6	To meet with officials at the White House, U.S. Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, and Labor, the Interagency Council on Homelessness, as well as members of the Washington State Congressional Delegation, as a next step in developing strong relationships with the new federal administration.
Washington, D.C.	2010: November 15-16	To participate in two days of workshops and cross-training opportunities for social services providers and housing professionals aimed at sharing resources and information to keep America’s most vulnerable families and youth safe, including understanding the pivotal role housing can play in family preservation efforts, reunification, and successful transition to adulthood among aging-out youth.
Grand Rapids	2010: December 1-2	To conduct a site visit to learn about Grand Rapids’ coordinated entry, prevention, and rapid rehousing system.
Boston	2011: April 4-5	To conduct a site visit within the Boston regional area.
Portland	2011	To conduct a site visit with Bridges to Housing/ Neighborhood Partnership
Columbus	2012: February 16	To provide an overview of Columbus’s collaborative model to end homelessness

Fostering Peer Learning

Another attribute of the approach has been a focus on the use of peer learning and information exchange, particularly among the three counties and the lead organizations of the three counties. Peer learning initially was fostered by BMGF through the trips and sessions mentioned above, and through other individual exchanges. As the Initiative has moved to implementation, the level of exchange appears to have increased through Building Changes' efforts. Monthly Tri-County Meetings, begun in early 2011, are a key forum for cross-county exchange as well as special convenings and sessions that bring in outside speakers. Some of the areas in which there has been evidence of cross-site learning include the following:

- Pierce County's early experience in coordinated entry and prevention served to confirm King County's concerns about phasing in the process and taking a more cautious approach to shelter diversion and prevention.
- The role of funders' groups at the county level: King County's Funders' Group preceded the funders' groups in Pierce and Snohomish Counties and, although all three groups are structured differently, offered some early insights into the role that these types of groups can have.
- Pierce County's approach to rapid housing and housing location are modeled, in part, after the approaches in King County (and Spokane).

Further details about these projects at the county-level are provided in Chapters IV and V.

Influencing Others, Gaining Visibility

Although the Initiative is concentrated in the three counties in the Puget Sound, it has gained visibility at the state and federal level. The visibility is largely promoted by both the Foundation and Building Changes, and is aimed at getting public and private support for the Initiative and the county efforts, as well as helping to influence policy and funding that could support the three counties. Examples of efforts to both gain visibility for the Initiative and to influence and guide policy efforts include the following:

- As noted above, a 2010 trip to Washington, D.C. that included representatives from each of the counties and the state;
- Learning trips to the strategy sites and programs by key leaders from federal departments, including the Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Health and Human Services and the Interagency Council on Homelessness;
- Several of the Foundation's advocacy grants, particularly those that focus at the state level;
- Building Changes' convening *Silos to Systems* in November 2011;

- Building Changes’ policy paper, “Ending Family Homelessness in Washington State: An Emerging Approach” in February 2011, which developed a framework for understanding homeless and vulnerable families, strategies for serving them, and policy recommendations for ending homelessness.

Guided by the Theory of Change, but Opportunistic

The Theory of Change has provided a template upon which to build the individual county initiatives and to guide the efforts of the Foundation and Building Changes. However, the model also provides flexibility to create and seize opportunities. A key example of an opportunity seized by the Foundation is building on the work of Dennis Culhane in order to increase the potential that the Washington State DSHS Integrated Client Database can access additional agency data. Other key examples of creating and seizing opportunities can be found in the Foundation’s advocacy portfolio. For example, there was a desire to include the business sector in the advocacy portfolio in an effort to increase its awareness of family homelessness and gain its support and influence for policies and system changes that could advance the interests of the Initiative. Local chambers of Commerce were not interested in participating in the effort, so the Foundation approached Rotary International districts, in part due to their past work with the Foundation in supporting efforts to eradicate polio across the globe.

Creating Bridges to Address Problems and Gaps

The Foundation has conducted some convenings in an effort to address some problems that involve different actors across the systems, often operating in separate “silos” but serving the same populations. As noted, at the initiation of the Initiative, the HMIS in all three counties was not operating at the level that could support the Initiative. The Data Solutions Work Group, initiated by the Foundation and Building Changes, was developed to bring together voices across the state and the three counties to determine how best to improve the data systems. Another example is inviting national and state experts in certain fields, such as domestic violence and prevention, to present at the monthly county leads meetings.

Stakeholder Appraisal

Through our visits in 2009 and 2011, we gathered information from stakeholders in the three counties and the state that helped to appraise the work of the Foundation to date. Additional information will continue to be collected from annual site visits and other contacts.

Among the positive aspects noted by stakeholders include the following:

- *The advocacy and bridge-building work.* Noted by several interviewees was the value-added by traveling to Washington, D.C. to meet with federal government officials as well as the trips to and contacts with other communities

- *The systems focus of the Initiative.* The work has brought individuals together, outside of their “silos,” to focus on the inefficiencies of the system. One interviewee noted that, during the planning stage, some of the individuals designing the county plans were stymied at first on how to develop a system that could impact homelessness without adding housing. They were told by BMGF that foundation funding for additional housing capital was off the table, and as they looked at the system, they realized that they needed to focus on the inefficiencies in the system. It made them look to areas that they had not focused on in the past.
- *Bringing in new players into ending homelessness.* The Foundation’s leadership, along with that of others, was attributed to bringing school systems into the mainstream work of homelessness.
- *Making an investment in changing the system.* The funding for infrastructure development as well as the SIG funding was viewed positively. The infrastructure funds were viewed as a jumpstart to the system, and the SIGs were considered important leveraging funds. Other funding by the Foundation, such as providing some support for the Benefits Portal, a one-stop shop application website for DSHS benefits, also was noted and favorably recognized.
- *Having complementary “sister” Initiatives that can be brought to bear.* As described earlier, the work of the Foundation in early learning and domestic violence was noted as an area that the WFF Systems Initiative might learn from and also incorporate into its own work.

There also were aspects about the design and implementation of the Initiative, although they were either not received as positive or were constructively criticized by the stakeholders. These aspects include the following:

- *The downsides of having an active funder.* Some concerns were raised about the Foundation’s active role. Staff from the Foundation is more involved in the day-to-day work of the Initiative than funders are more typically. At times, it is perceived to be driving the agenda more than warranted and “having an opinion about everything,” leading to lengthier planning processes.
- *Having extended planning processes.* The length of the planning process was noted by interviewees in all counties. The Foundation itself had an elongated process of development that was then followed by a three-stage planning process in the counties as well as a development and planning process for Building Changes. Interviewees noted that they kept hearing that change was going to happen, but it seemed to take a long time to occur.

In addition, not all planning processes were optimally aligned. Specifically, Building Changes was selected as an intermediary in March 2009, but did not have the capacity to take the responsibility on completely at that time. The original plan had been for the Foundation to select and fund Building Changes first, help it build capacity, and then provide it with the funding to re-grant to the counties for planning. In this way, Building Changes could provide

deeper support to the counties in the planning process. However, the Foundation and Building Changes agreed that it would be important for the Foundation to fund the counties directly so that they could begin their planning processes while Building Changes was building its own capacity. The consequence of the Foundation's direct funding role with the counties, together with their active co-management role, is that the counties continued to see the Foundation as the main driver and to be confused as to the role that Building Changes was to play.

- *Funding and match expectations.* In the initial stages of implementation, there was considerable confusion as to the level of the match and what could be used as the match for SIG activities. It was noted that the Foundation initially announced the funding without providing details on the restrictions, and this lack of information led to high expectations among providers. Once the information unfolded over the course of a year and a half, there was frustration. In particular, at least one county expressed that it felt caught in the middle of trying to explain why the funding was taking so long and why it was not getting large sums of funds, struggling to explain what could be funded and the match requirements without sufficient explanation from the Foundation.
- *A focus on families exclusively.* In Snohomish County in particular, the Initiative's focus on homeless families, excluding youth and single adults, has been a bone of contention among providers, the government, and other funders in the county. Initially, a range of community agencies were interested in the Initiative. Agencies that did not serve families terminated their presentation and expressed concern that the amount of match required as well as the efforts needed at different levels of government would result in depleting resources for the other homeless subgroups (with particular concern for youth, as there had been some prior focus on chronic homelessness). Consequently, at least one of the funders interviewed noted that it will redirect its resources to the gaps that are left by the Foundation.
- *The missing "sixth pillar."* Concerns continue about the lack of affordable housing and housing subsidies in the counties, and the foundation's unwillingness to fund housing capital. These concerns were in place even before the considerable cuts in funding that the state had to make in 2011. Despite the presence of the third pillar (rapid housing), several of the individuals we interviewed in the three counties questioned the plausibility of the Initiative being able to achieve its long-term goals without a "sixth pillar" (funds to increase the supply of affordable housing) to the Theory of Change.
- *Shifts in priorities.* The WFF Systems Initiative is viewed by some as a new plan placed on top of the existing Ten Year Plans. In addition, the Initiatives' focus on shifting from an emphasis on shelter and transitional housing to rapid housing has required some community-based organizations, many of which have been in operation for over 20 years, to reshape their business models. Many of these models have shelter and transitional housing at their core and, ironically, a number of the organizations built their stable of transitional housing through the

leadership and funding of the Foundation's Sound Families Initiative. A sentiment voiced by several interviewed was the desire for the Foundation to continue to support the transitional housing that it helped expand through the Sound Families Initiative.

- *Not yet maximizing internal resources.* Although the Foundation has other resources to draw upon within the PNW program, there was some concern that it was not as yet well integrated with the WFF Systems Initiative. Initiatives within the Foundation are viewed by some as operating more like "silos" and not as aligned as might be desirable.

Summary

The BMGF created the Homeless Families Systems Initiative in recognition that housing alone cannot solve the problem of family homelessness and that systems need to change their orientation from "*managing* family homelessness to *ending* the problem." Based on extensive reconnaissance of innovative models across the country and a tiered strategy development process, the Initiative's Theory of Change and overall operational design was created. As the Initiative has entered the planning and implementation stages, the Foundation has played an unusually active role for the philanthropic sector. Although Building Changes is now assuming more of the leadership and management role with the counties, the Foundation continues to play critical roles in gap filling, bridge building, and solving problems through its support of advocacy, convenings, and knowledge generation activities. The Foundation's leadership in these areas has been recognized and appreciated by stakeholders, but has been tempered by concerns about the length of time it took to plan the Initiative and confusion between the role of Building Changes and the Foundation. The Initiative's focus on systems change and improving the efficiency of operations is viewed positively by many, but there continue to be concerns about the shift from transitional housing, the exclusive focus on families, and the absence of a sixth pillar to support increasing the supply of affordable housing in the guiding Theory of Change.