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## PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS FOR REFUGEE FAMILIES

a unique population calls for unique solutions

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**W**ashington currently ranks **fourth** among the 50 states in the number of refugee arrivals, behind only California, Texas and New York.<sup>1</sup> In all of 2016, our state welcomed more than **3,800** refugees.<sup>2</sup> Most of Washington’s refugee families resettle in South King County,<sup>3</sup> where support systems are established but affordable quality housing is increasingly scarce.

Homelessness and housing instability disproportionately affect people of color, including recently relocated immigrant and refugee families. More than 60 percent of participants in homeless services in King County in 2016 were people of color, compared to 35 percent of county residents overall.<sup>4</sup>

Refugee and recent immigrant families also are more likely to be living “doubled up” with friends or relatives. While these living arrangements are not categorized as homeless, they can be particularly traumatic for children when the situation is grossly unstable or unsafe.

Refugees and immigrants new to our nation and to King County face unique barriers to maintaining safe and stable housing. They include a lack of English proficiency, unfamiliarity with how leases work and delays in obtaining work visas. Federal financial assistance for resettlement tends to run out three months after refugee families arrive in the U.S. At that point, many families experience an increased risk of losing their housing, particularly if they are unemployed or awaiting approval for public benefits.

**Building Changes** and **All Home** recently supported a two-year **Prevention Navigator for Immigrant and Refugee Families** pilot to address the unique housing needs of newly arrived immigrant and refugee families at risk of homelessness, including those living doubled up. Most of the families served originated from Somalia, Iraq, Syria or Eritrea.

One approach for addressing the housing needs is to improve cross-system collaboration among the various agencies that serve refugee families. The pilot sought to identify resource gaps and systemic barriers, and develop strategies for solving those challenges.

This report shares what was learned through the project. Perspectives of the pilot’s three grantees are reflected throughout. While the project represents only a modest slice of the work being done in King County to address housing for refugees, it amplifies the important role of agencies in King County that specifically serve this unique population, and it can inform policymakers and funders on how to effectively invest resources in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> Refugee arrivals by state from Oct. 1, 2016 to April 30, 2017. U.S. Department of State; Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration; Office of Admissions – Refugee Process Center.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/580e4274e58c624696efadc6/t/590cf9d115d5dbcc2c3254f7/1494022610693/Arrivals+by+State+-+Map5.5.17.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State; Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration; Office of Admissions – Refugee Process center.

[http://ireports.wrapsnet.org/Interactive-Reporting/EnumType/Report?ItemPath=/rpt\\_WebArrivalsReports/MX%20-%20Arrivals%20by%20Destination%20and%20Nationality](http://ireports.wrapsnet.org/Interactive-Reporting/EnumType/Report?ItemPath=/rpt_WebArrivalsReports/MX%20-%20Arrivals%20by%20Destination%20and%20Nationality)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Summary of year-end 2016 dashboard. All Home. <http://allhomekc.org/the-problem>

# Pilot: Prevention Navigator for Immigrant and Refugee Families

## Timeline:

May 1, 2015 to April 30, 2017

## Purpose/Goals:

- ❖ Address the unique housing needs of refugee and recently arrived immigrant families that are at risk of homelessness
- ❖ Identify and develop strategies to address resource gaps and systemic barriers

## Grantees:

International Rescue Committee, a refugee resettlement agency

Muslim Housing Services, a provider of housing and homeless services

Somali Youth and Family Club, a community provider of social services

## Families Served:

### 134 FAMILIES SERVED

Majority of families were refugees from Somalia, Iraq, Syria, or Eritrea, residing in South King County.

**All families were of color** and relatively large in size (at least five members).

**Women headed** most of the families, and most families had been in the U.S. **less than two years**. Each family was characterized by at least one factor putting them at an **increased risk of homelessness**:

- ❖ Disabling conditions that limited their ability to work and earn an income
- ❖ Unemployed but with an ability to work
- ❖ Employed but with low wages and/or inadequate hours
- ❖ Experienced delays or interruptions in receiving public benefits through the state

## PRELIMINARY OUTCOME DATA

All families began the project housed but at risk of homelessness.

**Upon exit, 99% had maintained their housing.**

Source: Building Changes combined analysis of individual reports submitted by the three grantees, April 2017.

## Services Provided:

Grantees offered participating families a combination of tailored services:

- ❖ Targeted case management
- ❖ Connections to services and resources offered through other community providers
- ❖ Flexible client assistance funds

## Funds Spent:

A total of **\$400,000** in Systems Innovation Grant funding was awarded through the Washington Youth & Families Fund.

Grant dollars paid for additional staffing, staff training and flexible client assistance funds. (\$30,000 of flexible client assistance funds were made available to each grantee agency per year.)

## Unique Housing Challenges for Refugee Families

Refugee families usually arrive in our country in the throes of a housing crisis. Resettlement agencies pick up families at the airport and drive them immediately to the rental housing the agencies have arranged for them as a condition of arrival. The initial costs of that housing – rent, security deposits and utilities – are offset in part by federal resettlement funds that last approximately three months. When the resettlement subsidy expires, refugee families unable to afford their rent may find themselves threatened with eviction. Advocates call this the *three-month cliff*.

Relatives, friends and community members often assist those refugee families unable to pay their rent. The resourcefulness of the immigrant and refugee

community can support some families, but not all – particularly as housing costs in King County increase.



The unique situation of refugee families necessitates a safety net of homeless prevention that is seamless and extends beyond the resettlement period. This will help families avoid the three-month cliff and maintain stable housing.

Homeless-response services in King County are prioritized for people sleeping in places not meant for human habitation (outdoors, in cars, encampments, etc.) or fleeing domestic violence, and therefore are not an option for refugee families that are housed but may have a high risk of homelessness. These families are eligible to receive homeless prevention services, but those services also don't always extend to these families. As new arrivals in our country, they lack documented prior episodes of homelessness or evictions, which are common tools to prioritize prevention resources.

In other cases, refugee families arrive in King County after having originally resettled elsewhere in the U.S. Typically, these families are no longer eligible for refugee resettlement assistance and are unattached to a resettlement agency, further increasing their risk for homelessness.

## Housing Challenges Compounded in King County

In King County, refugee families face additional barriers to stable housing that are economic in nature. Due to the tight rental housing market, resettlement agencies must compete in a limited and shrinking housing inventory to place refugee families. Rapidly rising housing costs in King County exacerbate the situation.

***“Resettlement agencies react to the inflow of refugees and assist with many of their needs. In recent years, the housing piece has become a huge challenge.”***

**– International Rescue Committee**

With the market driving the rental housing options, refugee families may get placed in apartments that are less than compatible. For example, the only available housing may be uncomfortably small for a large family. Or, the unsubsidized rent may exceed more than what a family can be expected to reasonably afford after resettlement assistance ends.

***“Housing is the crux for families and children being able to thrive. The lack of safe and affordable housing in King County sets up refugee families to fail.”***

**– Muslim Housing Services**

## Working with Landlords

Refugee families lack the kinds of documentation that make tenants attractive to landlords, such as rental, credit and employment histories. As vacancy rates in many neighborhoods drop to miniscule levels, resettlement agencies are finding fewer openings within apartment complexes – even those where they have preexisting relationships.

The procurement of quality housing in an increasingly restrictive housing market is major hurdle for resettlement agencies. They realize they must forge new landlord relationships, but that requires resources and time.

### RECOMMENDATION

The pilot demonstrated that resettlement agencies can benefit from dedicating more resources to housing. A staff person focused exclusively on housing can:

- ❖ Build relationships with new landlords to expand the housing inventory for newly arriving refugee families.
- ❖ Help refugee families become better prepared to meet the responsibilities of tenancy. This includes creating a plan to address how they will continue to pay rent after their resettlement subsidy expires.

Resettlement agencies help refugees access multiple services, with housing just one component. International Rescue Committee in King County does

not have a staff member specifically assigned to focus only on housing issues. During the course of the pilot, however, the agency created a working group among staff to triage housing issues for new arrivals.

**“Even two years ago, we had a lot more landlords willing to house refugees. But as housing costs increased, we’ve had the number of landlords drop off. It’s not about our clients. It’s about landlords being able to pick and choose who they want to live in their apartments.”**

**–International Rescue Committee**

Resettlement agencies and community organizations that work with refugees should bring something extra to the table when working with private landlords who perceive these families as risky tenants.

## RECOMMENDATION

To help immigrant and refugee families access long-term housing, and to reassure landlords of their viability as tenants, agencies may:

- ❖ Serve as a resource and contact for the landlord in case an issue arises with the family.
- ❖ Offer to mediate between the landlord and the families should problems arise.
- ❖ Provide home-based case management to the family so the landlord knows the family is getting support.
- ❖ Have specific funds they can use to help families pay for security deposits and actual damages to the unit.

## Improving Cross-System Collaboration

Various agencies in King County work directly with immigrant and refugee families that are in the process of transitioning their lives. Resettlement agencies traditionally focus on services in the first three months after refugee arrival, although many now also offer longer-term case management to assist the most vulnerable clients. Community organizations (like

Somali Youth & Family Club and Muslim Housing Services) also offer a variety of social services, providing another support system for new arrivals – especially after federal resettlement assistance ends.

A gap can exist in the handoff between resettlement agencies and community organizations, however. The agencies share similar goals but tend to work in their own silos, which can lead to misunderstandings and mistrust. The lack of collaboration can impede efforts to help families navigate the three-month cliff and their ability to maintain stable housing long term.

**“It’s important that we work together, stick together and make our points together.”**

**–Somali Youth & Family Club**

Mainstream service providers also serve refugee families. The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) provides public benefits like TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), SSI (Supplemental Security Income) and food assistance; and workforce development providers help with employment services.

The pilot created a Partners Workgroup made up of members from the three grantee agencies, Building Changes and All Home. The group met regularly to improve cross-agency and cross-system collaboration, and to share and refine service approaches.

The grantees identified systemic barriers they believe contribute to housing instability for refugee families:

- ❖ Workforce services sometimes place refugees in **jobs that fall short** of meeting their family’s financial needs.
- ❖ Public benefits can be difficult for refugee families to manage as they become employed or experience changes in income. The **changes and shifts in public benefits**, combined with families’ lack of understanding about the complex requirements around reporting, can leave refugee families with less money than anticipated at crucial times.

To address the latter, Building Changes convened a training with the grantee agencies and DSHS Community Services Office (CSO) staff. During the session, the grantees were informed about:

- ❖ Available DSHS resources and how best to access them
- ❖ How to work effectively with a CSO and develop contacts within a local office
- ❖ How families can report adjustments in their income to DSHS without experiencing delays or interruptions in receiving benefits

As part of the pilot, the grantees also received training in how to more efficiently access SSI benefits for refugee families and how to leverage the most out of the homeless prevention services they offer.

The grantees agree that partnerships – with one another and with mainstream service providers – are essential to their ability to serve refugee families effectively. While multiple agencies serve the same families, no formal process is in place for sharing information about them, at least among those participating in this pilot. This results in a lack of coordinated services and an inability to ensure agencies distribute resources efficiently.

*“It makes sense for us to naturally partner together. It’s even more important now as we continue to face such a huge affordable housing crisis in King County.”*

**--International Rescue Committee**

## RECOMMENDATION

The grantees had several ideas for improving cross-agency and cross-system collaboration:

- ❖ Establish a regular contact person at each agency to foster ongoing communications.

*Having an advocate for immigrants and refugees located at system offices (such as a local DSHS CSO) can make a huge difference in service access.*

- ❖ Establish data-sharing agreements between providers.
- ❖ Create a process at intake where families identify other agencies providing them services and give permission for providers to share information.

## Additional Funds Help a Family’s Transition

Grantees report that the additional funds made possible through the pilot allowed them to provide a heightened level of individualized case management for families, sometimes extending as long as a year. Each agency used the funds to dedicate more hours to its case management and homeless prevention programs, which included helping families create plans to address their future ability to afford and maintain housing.

*“We had the capacity and time to sit with our families and figure out together what their future plans could look like.”*

**--Somali Youth & Family Club**

All agencies report that the funds also helped families cope with delays in accessing TANF, food assistance and other benefits. Overall, grantees said the pilot inspired ideas on what additional resources they need to help more refugee families prevent homelessness.

## Flexible Funds: A Little Financial Assistance Can Go a Long Way

### FLEXIBLE FUNDS (24 MONTHS)

All **134** families participating in the pilot received financial assistance through flexible funds. While the most common flexible fund paid for rental assistance, the amount varied widely, **from \$300 to \$1,616**.

Flex funds also covered other housing expenses.

Landlord Fees	<b>\$47</b> average cost
Security Deposits	<b>\$1,000</b> average cost
Utility Bills	<b>\$285</b> average cost

Flexible funds – an adaptable form of financial assistance – are used to help families resolve their most urgent barriers to stable housing. Grantees identified flexible funds as a vital resource for families to maintain their housing. These client assistance funds can be spent for a variety of purposes: rental assistance, landlord fees, security deposits, utility bills,

moving costs, background check fees, license or identification fees, interpretation assistance fees, and transportation.

***“It didn’t take much to stabilize families. It’s cheaper to save an existing housing situation than have that family become homeless and start all over.”***

**--Muslim Housing Services**

## Maintaining momentum for progress

This pilot signals the need for flexible approaches and adaptable strategies to meet and address the unique strengths and needs of refugee and recent immigrant families in King County.



Investing in agencies that work specifically with new immigrants and refugees is a crucial part of addressing the increased risk of homelessness among this population.

These agencies have deep connections to the communities they serve, and those voices need to be heard and respected. Agency staff often are new immigrants or refugees themselves and therefore can provide culturally competent support. These natural ties mean the agencies are in ideal positions to work collaboratively with one another, and to connect refugee families to existing resources within the local immigrant communities that can help them stay housed.

***“We aren’t serving some other community. We are the community.”***

**--Somali Youth & Family Club**

## Contact Information



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Building Changes pulls together government, philanthropy and nonprofits in a collective effort to impact family and youth homelessness in Washington state.



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Making Homelessness in King County  
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## International Rescue Committee

[www.rescue.org](http://www.rescue.org)

## Muslim Housing Services

[www.muslim-housing.org](http://www.muslim-housing.org)

## Somali Youth & Family Club

[www.youthclub.org](http://www.youthclub.org)

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