



HOMELESS TO HOUSED IN A HURRY

Extending the use of Diversion to help families exit homelessness

PIERCE COUNTY CASE STUDY

A worthy goal fueled Pierce County's efforts to restructure its homeless response system: **Make homeless services easier to access for all who need them.** But as soon as the county began to successfully reach more people in need of help, a painful reality was exposed: **Demand for homeless services far exceeded the system's capacity to respond.**

At the time, Pierce County was placing all families and individuals eligible for homeless services in a first-come, first-served queue. As the list swelled with names, many people never received the services they sought.



Pierce County examined the data and realized it was losing touch with about one-third of those on the list. No one could say for sure whether those people found housing or continued to be homeless. About another 20 percent had reported they no longer needed services. The assumption was they had grown tired of waiting and found housing on their own. But again, the county didn't really know.

"Something needed to be fixed," recalled Anne Marie Edmunds, homeless programs specialist for Pierce County Human Services. "There had to be a better way."

Pierce County stood at a crossroads:

- * Was it possible to offer homeless services to all who were eligible without overburdening the system?
- * Was it possible to put people on a simpler and speedier path to resolving their homelessness?

The possibilities arose within an innovative approach used in other parts of the country to prevent people from becoming homeless: a strategy known as **Diversion**.

Pierce County wanted to know: **Could many of the same elements that help people avoid homelessness also be used to help families exit homelessness?**

Source: Unless otherwise noted, all data reported in this case study is from a Building Changes analysis of Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data for the Pierce County Diversion pilot, as of September 2017. The pilot operated from October 2014 to September 2016.

Using Diversion to Help Families that Already are Homeless

Just up the road in Seattle, Building Changes, a nonprofit that advances solutions to family and youth homelessness, had launched a pilot in King County to test the use of Diversion as an effective and efficient approach for **resolving the homelessness of some families**.

Using the implementation of the King County pilot as a model, Building Changes and Pierce County launched a new Diversion pilot in October 2014. During the two-year Pierce County pilot, more than 900 families pursued Diversion as an approach to move from **homeless to housed in a hurry**.

How Diversion Works in Pierce County

Diversion **engages families early** in their homeless crisis so they can move quickly into safe housing—ideally **within 30 days**. It is laser-focused on helping families move past the immediate barriers they face in obtaining safe housing. Barriers can range from a dispute with a past landlord to not being able to afford move-in costs of first and last month's rent.

Diversion differs from other homeless interventions by asking families to identify possible housing solutions based on **their own available resources** rather than those of the homeless response system.

Staff trained in the skills of Diversion—known in Pierce County as “Diversion specialists”—support families through **focused problem-solving**. Diversion specialists deliver expertise, encouragement, and a flexible combination of **short-term services** and **one-time financial assistance**, if needed, to ease a family's transition from homelessness to safe housing.

Results

Homeless to Housed in a Hurry

Of the 939 families (households with children) participating in the Pierce County pilot, **more than half were able to obtain safe housing through Diversion**. Among those families, **most secured a place of their own**.



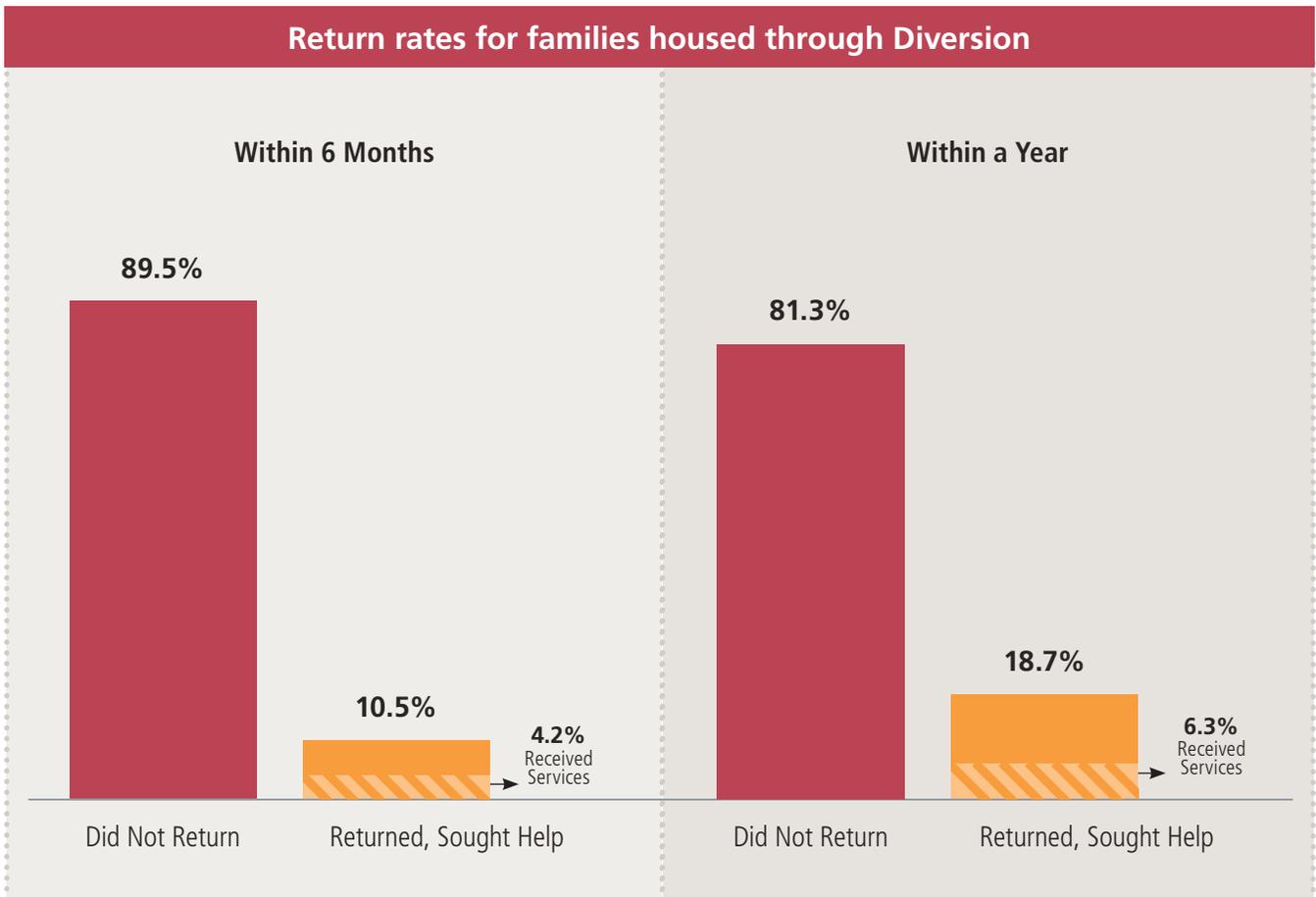
* A successful exit is defined as one of the following safe housing destinations: rental without subsidy; rental with subsidy; or a permanent or temporary shared-living arrangement with family or friends.

** An unsuccessful exit is defined as the following destinations: unsheltered; in transitional housing or shelter; in jail or hospital.



Staying Housed

The **vast majority** of the families that obtained housing through the Diversion pilot **did not return to homelessness within a year**.



Measure Definitions:

- * **Did Not Return:** Represents families that did not seek further services from the homeless system in Pierce County.
- * **Returned, Sought Help:** Represents families that contacted the crisis response system for further homeless services and were identified as experiencing homelessness.
- * **Received Services:** A subset of the second measure, this represents the "Returned, Sought Help" families that received at least one of the following homeless services: Emergency Shelter, Transitional Housing, Rapid Re-Housing or Permanent Supportive Housing.

Acting on Results

Pierce County policymakers were so encouraged by the results of the pilot, they funded the use of Diversion across the entire homeless response system. Now, all populations experiencing homelessness—families and individuals—can pursue Diversion as a strategy for resolving their housing crisis, with no pre-screening or pre-determination as to their likelihood for success.

Diversion is integrated within Coordinated Entry, Pierce County’s “front door” process where all who seek homeless services enter the system.¹ Pierce County’s system-wide implementation of Diversion represents a paradigm shift in services for people experiencing homelessness.



Diversion has created an environment in which families and individuals—not the systems assisting them—identify the solutions for resolving their homelessness.



The fundamental philosophy behind Diversion—committing to support the strengths and resilience of those we serve—has spread across the system and is improving all aspects of homeless response.

– Anne Marie Edmunds, homeless programs specialist, Pierce County Human Services

¹ The Diversion process is bypassed for those who identify upfront that they are fleeing domestic violence or facing another imminent threat to their safety. Those families are referred immediately to appropriate services, including shelter.

At a Glance

Pierce County Diversion Pilot

Timeline: October 2014 to September 2016

Partner: Pierce County Human Services

Grantees:

Associated Ministries of Tacoma Pierce County
Catholic Community Services of Western Washington
Pierce County Center for Dialog and Resolution

Families served (households with children): **939**

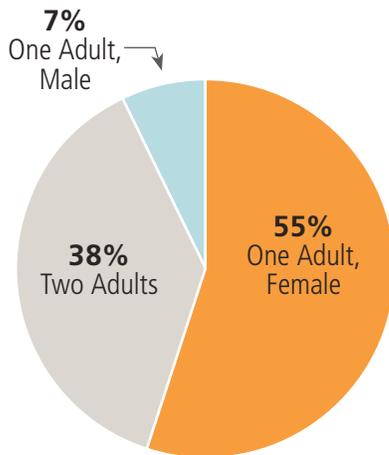
Family size (median): **3**

Age* (median): **32**

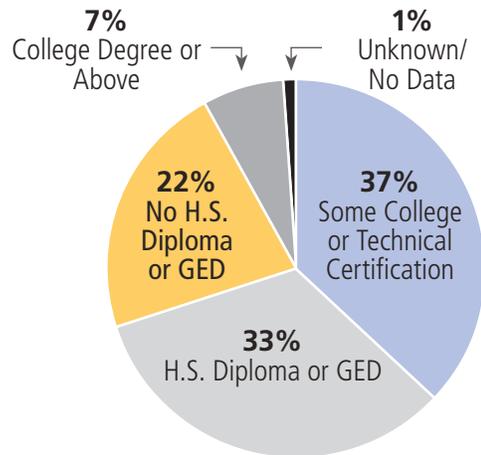
Monthly income* (median, at entry): **\$941**

Employed* (at entry): **41%**

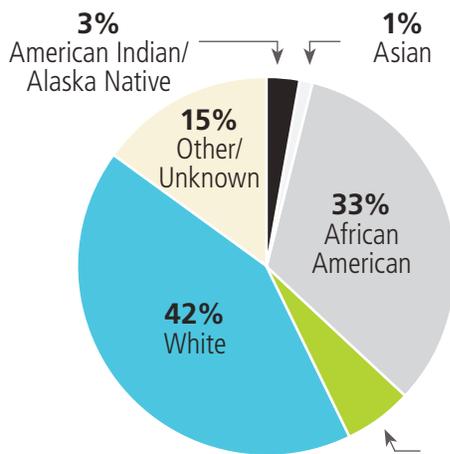
*Head of Household



Heads of Households
(households with children)

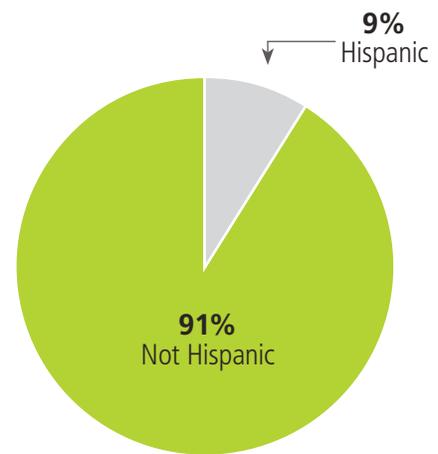


Highest Level of Education²
(head of household)



Race
(head of household)

6%
Native Hawaiian/
Pacific Islander



Ethnicity
(head of household)

² Highest level of education is calculated based on Diversion pilot data pulled by Pierce County in March 2017 on behalf of Clarus Research.

The Diversion Process in Pierce County

Starting as a Solutions-Focused Conversation

In Pierce County, the Diversion process begins as a conversation during the family's 90-minute Coordinated Entry appointment. Diversion specialists from Associated Ministries and Catholic Community Services—the two Coordinated Entry providers in Pierce County—say they spend the first part of the appointment doing a lot of listening, letting the families talk and tell their story.

As part of the Diversion conversation, specialists explain the harsh reality that local resources are scarce and that those with the greatest needs are prioritized for homeless services in Pierce County. "I'm blunt about the reality of it," said Teona Kelley, a Diversion specialist with Associated Ministries.

For some families, that translates into a wake-up call that their desire to receive services like Rapid Re-Housing and Permanent Supportive Housing amounts to little more than a false hope. "My role is to educate," added Delmar Algee, a Diversion specialist with Catholic Community Services. "People need to know what's going on and understand what their realistic options are for housing."

Diversion specialists make it clear they are not case managers. Instead, they treat families as the architects of their own housing solutions. Pierce County trains staff in the skills of Diversion, offering them specific guidance on how to explain their function to families: *"My role is to help you identify a way to get back into housing. I'm here to problem-solve, advocate and provide assistance if I can. I'm going to ask you some questions about your current situation and what is preventing you from being in housing right now. Then we'll explore some options for solving your crisis."*

Pierce County does not characterize Diversion as a program option along the same lines as Rapid Re-Housing or Permanent Supportive Housing. Instead, Diversion is pursued as a potential solution for families to become housed safely and quickly, without requiring more intensive services. If no realistic options for housing emerge through the Diversion conversation, families continue with their Coordinated Entry appointment and are assessed and prioritized for deeper housing interventions.



We aren't expert in people's lives. They are the experts and they need to tell us what they need from us.

— Tammy Boros, Diversion supervisor, Associated Ministries

Generating Housing Solutions

The Diversion conversation helps families identify their immediate barriers to housing, come up with creative ideas for dealing with those barriers and explore realistic housing options. Examples of barriers include: a dispute with a previous landlord, conflicts with relatives or friends who could provide safe shared housing, or an inability to afford up-front moving costs like initial rent and security deposit.

Specialists say a Diversion conversation is organic and motivational, and differs greatly from standardized assessment. “Rather than typing or collecting data in a computer system and sending them off like before, we are now having a creative problem-solving conversation with our clients,” Kelley said. Algee added: “I don’t use a laptop. I bring in only a folder and a legal-size pad of paper.”

Diversion conversations encourage families to see beyond their current crisis, unearth the big picture and consider what’s possible. “I often will ask them to go back to a time when they were stably housed and have them tell me what that looked like,” said Dana Peterson, a Diversion specialist with Catholic Community Services.



Crisis creates a cloud over everything. My job is to help people pull ideas out of that cloud. Sometimes, a solution will just pop into their head.

– Teona Kelley, Diversion specialist, Associated Ministries

Devising a Game Plan

After helping families generate creative ideas for getting housed safely and quickly, the Diversion specialist helps them select the best options to pursue.

In Pierce County, families exit the Diversion conversation with a plan—a form that lists specific steps they have decided to take over the next 30 days in their effort to obtain safe housing, complete with deadlines for achieving each goal. The plan may include reconnecting with a relative or friend who may be able to offer housing, making amends with a former landlord who evicted them, or applying for jobs in hopes of increasing income.

“Diversion is a whole new ball game for families,” Kelley said. “It used to be they’d come in for assessment and when they got ready to leave, they’d say, ‘Now what?’ Now, they literally are walking away with a plan in their hands.”

Diversion also is a whole new ball game for practitioners in Pierce County. “Before, you’d enter people into a database, do some data mining and put them on a list,” said Tammy Boros, who supervises Diversion for Associated Ministries. “We wouldn’t know what became of them. Now, we know the outcome. From my perspective, it’s more exciting because it makes the work we’re doing more tangible.”

Diversion Can Flip a Discouraging Start Into a Happy Ending.

A young single mother began her Diversion conversation expressing little hope. She thought she had moved beyond a past littered with drug-related felony convictions. But her criminal record was restricting her options for housing—and her ability to support her family.

The Diversion specialist from Associated Ministries encouraged the young mother to be persistent and stay optimistic. Together, they drew up a course of action to identify and find realistic options for safe housing. Buoyed by the emotional support and a plan for moving forward instead of looking back, the mother emerged out of her despondency and did all of the footwork on her own. She secured a pay raise at work—but even with that increase in income, her housing search still was met with several denials.

Finally, after a spirited three-week search, urged on by the Diversion specialist, the woman found a landlord who would look beyond her criminal record and rent to her family. Once the young mother found hope, she never gave it up.

Pursuing Complementary Tracks

As families pursue their plan to find housing, the Diversion specialist is working sources and applying skills to help them along in their efforts. Specialists may offer a variety of short-term services, which include:

- * Generating housing leads for families, often by leveraging existing relationships they have with landlords.
- * Mediating conflicts between families and landlords, relatives or friends who may be able to offer housing.
- * Connecting families to other community resources, such as employment services.

If a family appears to be on a successful path toward obtaining housing but needs more time, specialists may continue to work with the family beyond 30 days. Families that are unable to identify realistic options for housing through Diversion are assessed and prioritized for deeper housing interventions.

Some Families Need Just a Little Bit of Help from the System.

A family with two prior evictions marring its rental history pursued Diversion as a way to move from homeless to housed in a hurry. The parents were motivated to secure safe housing so that the state would return their two children to them, including their newborn.

Associated Ministries pointed the parents to a one-bedroom apartment owned by a landlord with whom the agency had built a strong relationship in the past. The father got a job and, once the parents had established themselves as good tenants with the landlord, they upgraded to a two-bedroom—and they got their kids back. The parents keep in touch with their Diversion specialist by sending smartphone videos of their children—at home.

Offering Financial Assistance

Families that need an extra boost to obtain safe housing may receive a one-time offer of financial assistance. Diversion specialists can access the dollars quickly and apply them in a variety of ways to help ease a family's transition out of homelessness.

In Pierce County, Diversion specialists use these "flex funds" to pay for short-term expenses that families can't cover on their own and stand as barriers to the family's efforts to obtain housing. Flex funds may be spent on housing-related expenses, but also can be used to pay for non-housing-related items, such as transportation, food or household goods. In the Pierce County pilot, almost all financial assistance was applied to direct housing expenses.

Diversion specialists in Pierce County are trained to mention the possibility of financial assistance to families only after they have explored all housing options with them. Financial assistance is a vital tool for Diversion specialists to have at their disposal—even though not all families need it.



One-third of the families able to obtain safe housing through the Diversion pilot in Pierce County did so without receiving any financial assistance.

Among the families that did receive some level of financial assistance, the median amount spent per family was \$1,200. The three most common types of financial assistance for those families were: security deposit (used by 76% of the families); one-time rent payment (70%); rental application fee (15%).

Having a Plan and Sticking to It.

A mother with a past eviction on her record and an income of less than \$750 a month was living in her car with her kids. She wanted to re-establish her lease with a previous landlord. During the 30 days she pursued her Diversion plan to obtain housing, she focused intently on finding employment, believing that was her best shot at impressing the landlord. Within a span of 48 hours, she got hired for two part-time jobs, increasing her income to \$2,400 a month.

Meanwhile, her specialist at Catholic Community Services provided her with leads on other possible rentals, just in case she was unable to move back into her previous home. At the 30-day mark, she still had not re-established her lease—but the foundation for success had been laid. A couple weeks later, she called her Diversion specialist with the good news: She and her kids were back in their old place.

Training Diversion Specialists

Although a background in homeless services is not necessary to become a top-notch Diversion specialist, the two agencies that provided Diversion in the Pierce County pilot—Associated Ministries and Catholic Community Services—both are deeply experienced in the field.

The Pierce County pilot engaged the Center for Dialog and Resolution, a Tacoma-based nonprofit, to train practitioners in Diversion. The Center developed a training curriculum that focuses not on the intricacies of the homeless response system, but rather on techniques of effective communications, such as active listening. The curriculum teaches conflict mediation, often a crucial skill in helping families obtain safe housing quickly. Specialists are trained to guide the Diversion process along while always letting the families take charge in finding a housing solution.

“Sometimes a person will ask me, ‘What would you do if you were in my shoes?’” said Algee, of Catholic Community Services. “I respond, ‘Unfortunately, I’m not in your shoes. This is about you and your family, and you certainly have the power to make great decisions.’”

Diversion Puts Confidence in the Strengths of Families.

A military veteran and his son had been homeless, off and on, running on 18 months. Although the father could afford housing through his disability benefits, he had a hard time holding onto housing due to a history of disputes with his landlords. When he began working with a Diversion specialist at Catholic Community Services, he was hesitant to look for housing on his own, requesting that the specialist do all the work for him.

The specialist soon realized the man was anxious about talking to landlords because of his past experiences. The specialist enlisted the help of the Center for Dialog and Resolution to coach the man on conflict resolution so he would be able to build positive relationships with landlords. Working through this barrier took some time, so the assistance continued beyond 30 days. This extension of time was worth it because, in the end, the newly empowered father found housing for his family.

Widening the Use of Diversion

Building Changes and Pierce County are working together to spread the skills of Diversion to other sectors that serve families experiencing homelessness, as well as those facing imminent threat of losing their housing.

One new pilot is training maternity support professionals (registered nurses and counselors) in the skills of Diversion so they can help low-income pregnant and post-partum women who are homeless or precariously housed resolve their housing crises. Another is training South Sound 2-1-1 staff to have Diversion conversations with callers. South Sound 2-1-1 is the regional health and human services information and referral line.

Making the Case

Extending Diversion to Families that Already are Homeless

- * **Diversion is fast-paced.** The goal is to move families from homeless to housed within 30 days.
- * **Diversion is strengths-based.** Staff trained in Diversion help families create a plan of their own for resolving their homelessness.
- * **Diversion reduces trauma for families.** By pursuing realistic options for becoming housed quickly, families can avoid prolonged periods of homelessness and shelter stays.
- * **Diversion matches families with the right level of assistance.** Families get appropriate services right away instead of waiting for programs they may ultimately never get to access.
- * **Diversion is cost-effective.** Costlier interventions—Emergency Shelter, Rapid Re-Housing, Permanent Supportive Housing—are conserved for families unable to resolve their homelessness simply and quickly.
- * **Diversion builds system capacity.** The homeless response system can serve more families in need because those able to resolve their homeless crisis through Diversion move through the system quickly and at less expense.

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Our Vision

Everyone has a home and the opportunity for a healthy, fulfilling life.

Our Mission

Building Changes believes everyone in Washington can be stably housed.
We strengthen the leaders, organizations and systems that make it possible.

