



# HOMELESS TO HOUSED IN A HURRY

*Extending the use of Diversion to help families exit homelessness*

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## AN OVERVIEW

A variety of circumstances can lead to a family becoming homeless. Sometimes, those situations can be addressed quickly and simply through the light-touch approach of **Diversion**.

In some areas of the country, Diversion has been used successfully to help people identify alternatives to entering shelter and prevent them from becoming homeless.

***Now, many of the same elements of Diversion that help prevent homelessness are being used to help families exit homelessness. This extension of Diversion to families that already are homeless carries great potential for the field—and for the families being served.***

## Our Experience with Diversion

Since 2014, **Building Changes** has worked with several counties, nonprofits and philanthropies in the state of Washington to test Diversion as an approach for helping families that already are homeless.<sup>1</sup> Results from our two biggest Diversion pilots show ***about half of the 1,898 families<sup>2</sup> that pursued Diversion found safe housing quickly***, averting the need for costlier interventions. Among the families successfully housed through Diversion, ***the vast majority did not return to homelessness within a year***.

Diversion is a process, not a program. It differs from homeless interventions that require intensive case management and sizable system resources. As a result, Diversion ***costs less*** to get families successfully housed.



Based on our experiences with Diversion, we believe it is an effective and efficient approach for resolving—not just preventing—the homelessness of some families.

<sup>1</sup>**Past projects:** FHC (Family Housing Connection) Shelter Diversion in King County (2014-2016), partners: King County, City of Seattle, Catholic Community Services, InterIm CDA, Neighborhood House, Solid Ground, Wellspring Family Services; Diversion Collaboration in Pierce County (2014-2016), partners: Pierce County, Associated Ministries, Catholic Community Services, Pierce County Center for Dialog and Resolution.

**Ongoing projects:** Clark, Kittitas, Spokane and Whatcom counties (2016-2019).

<sup>2</sup>1,898 households with children served between both pilots (959 in King County; 939 in Pierce County)

## How Diversion Works to Help Families Exit Homelessness

Diversion **engages families early** in their homeless crisis.

A staff member trained in the techniques of Diversion initiates an **exploratory conversation** to brainstorm practical solutions for families to resolve their homelessness quickly and safely. The Diversion conversation is laser-focused on helping families get past the immediate barriers they face in obtaining safe housing. Staff helps the families see beyond their current crisis by encouraging them to **generate creative ideas** and **identify realistic options** for safe housing.

Families identify housing options that are based on **their own available resources** rather than those of the homeless response system.

The goal is for families to become housed right away—ideally **within 30 days**. To help ease their transition out of homelessness, families may receive a flexible combination of **short-term services** and **one-time financial assistance**.



Every system should integrate Diversion as the first response to families in a homeless crisis.

### 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.

## The Diversion Process

### First-Response Strategy

The Diversion process takes place during a family's **initial contact** with the homeless response system—either at Coordinated Entry or at the front door of an emergency shelter.

Diversion is **pursued with all families** without any pre-screening or pre-determination on whether they are likely to succeed. Exceptions are made for families identifying upfront that they are fleeing domestic violence or facing another imminent threat to their safety. In those instances, families are referred immediately to appropriate services, including shelter.



Not all families will have their homeless crisis resolved through Diversion, but Diversion nevertheless is pursued with all families experiencing a homeless crisis.

### Solutions-Focused Conversation

The Diversion process begins as an **exploratory conversation** between a family and Diversion-trained staff.

Families experiencing homelessness begin their search for safe housing **without delay**. Staff informs the families about the likelihood and possible timeline for receiving services like Rapid Re-Housing or Permanent Supportive Housing. For some families, chances are low, if they exist at all, and anticipated wait times are long. As a result, those families may be open to faster alternatives for finding a place to live.

By listening intently and asking questions, staff prompts the families to **identify realistic options** for becoming housed quickly and safely, and helps them **develop a plan** for moving out of homelessness **within a goal of 30 days**.

If no realistic options for safe housing emerge through the Diversion conversation, families continue with the standard Coordinated Entry or emergency shelter process and are assessed for the deeper interventions.



Diversion emphasizes a family's own strengths, connections and resources as the instruments for becoming housed.

## Time-Limited Support

The Diversion conversation encourages families to pinpoint the immediate barriers they face in obtaining safe housing and generates creative ideas for **moving beyond those barriers**, even those that seem impassable at the time. Examples of barriers include: a running dispute with a previous landlord, conflicts with relatives or friends who could provide safe shared housing, or not being able to afford up-front moving costs like initial rent and security deposit.

As families pursue their plan for obtaining safe housing, Diversion-trained staff may offer a flexible combination of **short-term services** and **one-time financial assistance** to help ease the transition out of homelessness. This time-limited support can take several forms.

### SHORT-TERM SERVICES

#### Direct services from Diversion-trained staff

Housing search • Creative problem solving  
Mediation or conflict resolution (with landlords, relatives, friends)

#### Connections to community resources

Job search and referral • Credit repair • Legal aid

### ONE-TIME FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

#### Housing-related costs

Rent • Landlord fees • Moving expenses  
Security deposits • Utility bills • Background check

#### Non-housing-related costs

Employment certifications and licenses  
Interpreter services • Transportation • Work supplies

One-time financial assistance is provided through flex funds, which are set-aside dollars that staff have the discretion to spend in order to help a family obtain housing.

## Obtaining Safe Housing

Through Diversion, families may resolve their homelessness by:

- \* Moving into a new rental place of their own.
- \* Re-establishing their lease with a prior landlord.
- \* Entering into a permanent shared-living arrangement—usually with a relative or friend.

What Diversion Is	What Diversion Isn't
Light touch 	 Intensive case management
Fast-paced approach 	 Wait list for homeless services
Solutions-focused conversation 	 Standardized assessment
Flexible combination of support 	 Prescriptive set of services

## Qualities of Staff Trained in Diversion

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Families experiencing homelessness often are overwhelmed and anxious about what to do next. **Diversion-trained staff** help families focus on the big picture and believe that a solution is possible.

Diversion-trained staff are **attentive listeners** and **strategic thinkers** who ask a lot of open-ended questions. They are **skilled communicators** who can help families brainstorm creative ideas for obtaining safe housing quickly. They are experts in identifying community resources and connecting families to them.

Diversion-trained staff are **transparent**. They provide a reality check on the availability of local homeless services and housing resources, such as Rapid Re-Housing and Permanent Supportive Housing. They also help determine which of the housing options that the families have identified are most realistic.

The best Diversion-trained staff are adept in the skills of **dispute resolution**. They do not necessarily need work experience in homeless services, although they do need to understand how the homeless response system works.

Diversion-trained staff are especially skilled at **identifying family strengths**—and leveraging those strengths to help get families housed.

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## Results

### From Homeless to Housed

Families pursuing Diversion were able to **obtain safe housing successfully** about half the time and **at a lower cost** when compared to other interventions.

	Successful exits to housing	Annual cost per successfully housed family	Cost breakdown for Diversion
Diversion	49% <sup>a</sup>	\$1,668 <sup>c</sup>	<b>\$1,031</b> in Flex Funds + <b>\$637</b> for Staffing = <b>\$1,668</b> <b>Cost per successfully housed family</b>
Emergency Shelter	35% <sup>b</sup>	\$10,641 <sup>d</sup>	
Rapid Re-Housing	75% <sup>b</sup>	\$14,407 <sup>d</sup>	
Transitional Housing	71% <sup>b</sup>	\$10,743 <sup>d</sup>	

Of the 49 percent of families that successfully exited to housing, **most ended up in their own rental unit without a housing subsidy.**

### Housing destinations for families that exited Diversion successfully

In a rental, no subsidy	76% <sup>a</sup>
In a rental, with subsidy	15% <sup>a</sup>
Living with family/friends permanently	9% <sup>a</sup>

**Notes:** A successful exit to housing from Diversion is defined as one of the following destinations: rental without subsidy; rental with subsidy; or permanent shared-living arrangement with family or friends. Differences in exit rates and costs may reflect factors such as systematic differences in family circumstances.

#### Sources:

- <sup>a</sup> Building Changes analysis of Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data as of September 2017 for King and Pierce County Diversion pilots, January 2014 to September 2016.
- <sup>b</sup> Building Changes analysis of HMIS data as of September 2017 for King and Pierce County families exiting these services in 2014, 2015 and 2016.
- <sup>c</sup> Building Changes calculation of average costs based on: The sum total of grant dollars designated in the King and Pierce County Diversion pilots for flex funds and staffing, divided by the number of families successfully housed. This estimate does not include overhead costs.
- <sup>d</sup> Building Changes calculation of median costs for King and Pierce Counties based on 2016 data from the Washington State Department of Commerce, downloaded July 2018 from: [www.commerce.wa.gov/serving-communities/homelessness](http://www.commerce.wa.gov/serving-communities/homelessness). These calculations have been updated since the April 2018 release of this Diversion Overview.

## Housed in a Hurry

Families spend **less time homeless** when they pursue Diversion to obtain safe housing, compared to other interventions. The goal with Diversion is for families to move from homeless to housed in 30 days, but staff have the flexibility to extend the length of Diversion assistance for families needing additional time to complete their plan for obtaining safe housing.

Median number of days from entry to successful exit	
Diversion	37 <sup>a</sup>
Emergency Shelter	69 <sup>b</sup>
Rapid Re-Housing	211 <sup>b</sup>
Transitional Housing	443 <sup>b</sup>

**Notes:** A successful exit to housing from Diversion is defined as one of the following destinations: rental without subsidy; rental with subsidy; or permanent shared-living arrangement with family or friends. Differences in median days may reflect program design and/or other factors such as systematic differences in family circumstances.

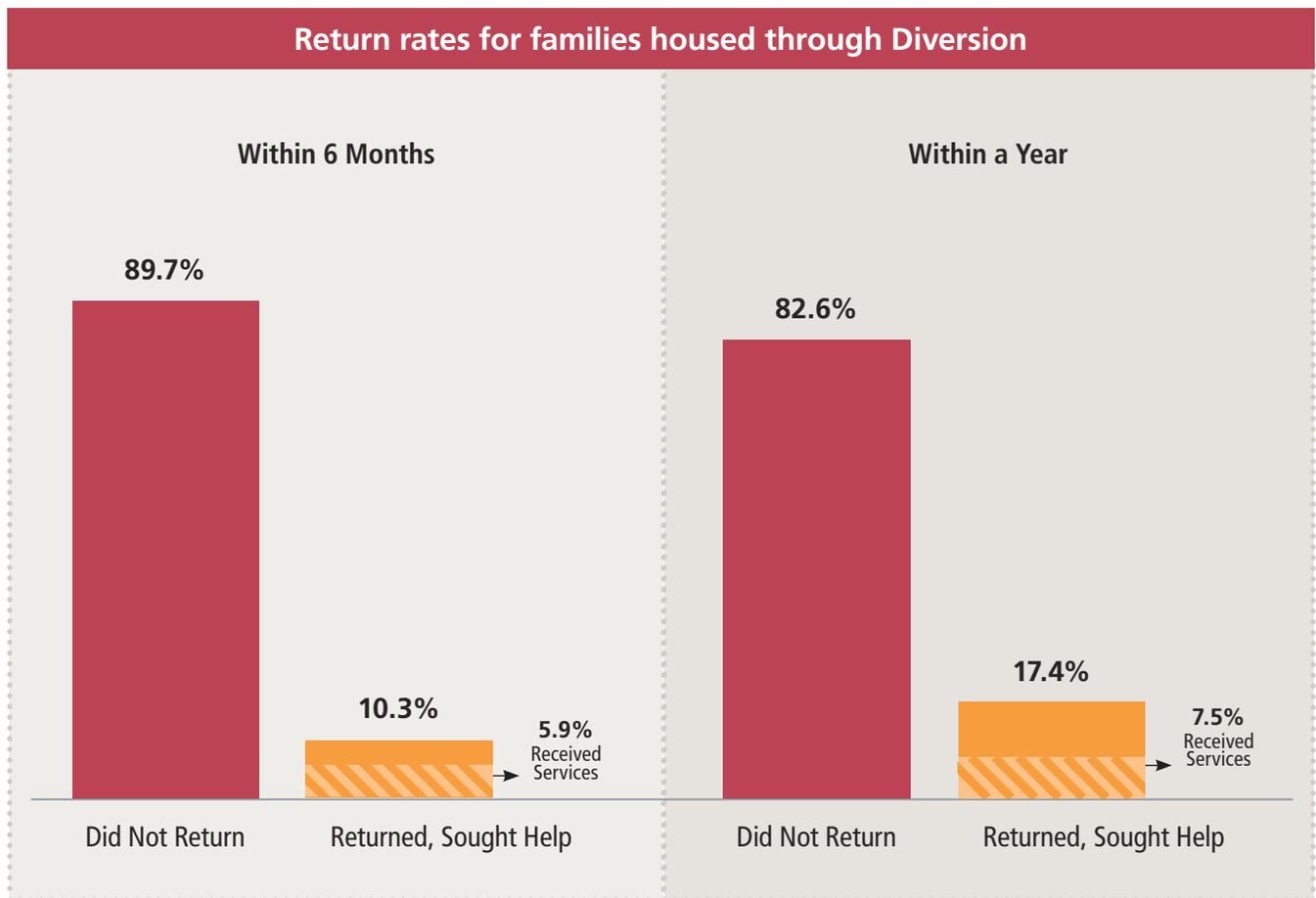
**Sources:**

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<sup>b</sup> Building Changes analysis of HMIS data as of September 2017 for King and Pierce County families exiting these services in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

## Staying Housed

Among the families able to obtain safe housing through the use of Diversion, the **vast majority 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.
- \* **Returned, Sought Help:** Represents families that re-contacted the homeless system for 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.

**Note:** These return rates are limited to the families that sought help in the same county from where they received Diversion.

**Source:** Building Changes analysis of HMIS data as of September 2017 for King and Pierce County Diversion pilots, January 2014 to September 2016.

## Other Benefits of Diversion

### Diversion as a Strategy to Address Prioritization

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires those with the greatest needs be given priority for homeless services, including Rapid Re-Housing and Permanent Supportive Housing.

As a result, families that already are homeless but not deemed to have the greatest needs can be left without support. Communities can integrate Diversion into their homeless response system as a light-touch, low-cost strategy to better serve those families and help them find housing.



Diversion helps find housing for families  
that are experiencing homelessness but not prioritized  
high enough to receive other services.

### Extending the Use of Diversion to Other Sectors

In the state of Washington, Building Changes has begun training other sectors in the skills of Diversion. Our new pilots include:

- ▶ Training maternity-service professionals—registered nurses and counselors—to use Diversion to support low-income pregnant and post-partum women who already are homeless or are precariously housed. (Pierce County)
- ▶ Training South Sound 2-1-1 call center staff to use Diversion to support families that already are homeless or are precariously housed. South Sound 2-1-1 is a regional health and human services information and referral line. (Pierce County)
- ▶ Training school districts and community nonprofits to use Diversion to support families of students who already are homeless or are precariously housed, including those living in untenable shared housing situations. (King County)

## Using Diversion to Help Families Exit Homelessness

<i>Where does it take place?</i>	At the front door of the homeless response system (Coordinated Entry)
<i>How is it applied?</i>	Across the entire homeless response system
<i>Who does it help?</i>	Families (households with children) that already are homeless
<i>What is the goal?</i>	Shorten the amount of time that families spend homeless
<i>What is the measure of success?</i>	Families find safe housing quickly



Diversion is a necessary component of every homeless response system.

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For additional publications in this series, go to: **[BuildingChanges.org/Strategies/Diversion](https://BuildingChanges.org/Strategies/Diversion)**

### 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.

