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LESSONS IN FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

Making homeless systems more equitable and effective



**BUILDING
CHANGES**



Topic:

Racial Equity

Lessons in Family Homelessness

Five guiding principles to advance racial equity in homeless systems:

1. **Eliminate racially biased tools, processes, and decision-making in Coordinated Entry and at all points along the homeless response continuum.**
2. **Invest in organizations that are trusted within racial/ethnic communities, no matter their size or level of formal experience in delivering homeless services.**
3. **Ensure that programs are informed and led by BIPOC and the racial/ethnic communities that homelessness impacts the most.**
4. **Target resources to the racial/ethnic communities that homelessness impacts the most.**
5. **Create accountability by tying project funding to racial equity goals.**

Racial equity is not an initiative or approach. It's a value and practice that should permeate every aspect of homeless services, from funding to delivery. It involves identifying the practices and processes that create racial inequities, and correcting them. It means putting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in leadership and other high-level staff positions where they can influence decisions and approaches on homeless response. It also requires government and private funders to hold themselves accountable to the racial equity goals they communicate internally and externally.

Family homelessness¹ has disproportionate impacts on BIPOC and their communities. In response, every homeless system should have specific goals to advance racial equity and address the institutionalized racism that persists within its programs.

Through our 10 years of working in family homelessness, Building Changes has learned that to effectively address racial equity, government and private funders must be proactive and demonstrate flexibility in having BIPOC-led organizations develop, design, and deliver homeless services for and to their communities. Homeless services should be culturally responsive, and investments should target resources to the racial and ethnic communities that homelessness impacts the most.

The lessons Building Changes has learned in racial equity, while gained through working in family homelessness, are applicable to all area of homeless response.

Disproportionality in Family Homelessness in Washington State

	% of all families experiencing homelessness	% of total family population
American Indian/Alaska Native	5%	2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	6%	10%
Black/African American	30%	4%
Hispanic	19%	19%
Other/Multiracial	11%	11%
White	48%	72%

Note: Data for race and ethnicity are reported separately and therefore totals do not add to 100%.

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development CoC Analysis Tool v. 2.1. www.hudexchange.info/resource/5787/coc-analysis-tool-race-and-ethnicity. Data for families experiencing homelessness are from 2019 Point-in-Time counts. Data for total family population are from American Community Survey 2013-2017 five-year estimates.

Building Changes is a nonprofit with extensive experience in testing, evaluating, and advocating for a wide range of strategies to reduce and prevent family homelessness in the state of Washington and across the nation.

With financial support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Building Changes led the **Family Homelessness Initiative**, a decade-long intensive effort to create high-performing homeless systems in Washington’s three most populous counties: King (Seattle), Pierce (Tacoma), and Snohomish (Everett). From 2011 through 2020, Building Changes assisted in the design and implementation of 79 projects totaling \$29.8 million.

On behalf of the State of Washington, Building Changes administers the **Washington Youth & Families Fund**, a public investment that supports innovative strategies to reduce family and youth homelessness across the entire state.



1 For purposes of this brief, **family** is defined as a household with at least one member under the age of 18 and at least one member aged 18 or older.

Lesson 1: Eliminate racially biased tools, processes, and decision-making in Coordinated Entry and at all points along the homeless response continuum.

Coordinated Entry was created with an intent toward equity: develop a streamlined, standardized process for all families and individuals to access the homeless system whereby those with the greatest and most immediate needs would be prioritized for services. In practice, however, Coordinated Entry assessment tools and processes have been shown to unfairly favor white people over BIPOC, perpetuating racial inequities within homeless systems.

In 2019, Building Changes funded and supported the research for a [racial equity analysis](#) by C4 Innovations. The analysis found that families and single adults experience system-level inequities from the widely used VI-SPDAT assessment tool and its variable processes. The Coordinated Entry tool is intended to objectively capture who among those experiencing homelessness have the highest levels of vulnerability and therefore should be prioritized for housing interventions, such as Rapid Re-Housing or Permanent Supportive Housing.

The study concluded that the VI-SPDAT's indicators that capture level of need are tilted toward vulnerabilities that whites are more likely to have. Both before and after release of the study, several communities in Washington state and across the country—including some that had not used the VI-SPDAT—began examining whether their Coordinated Entry assessment practices were playing out as intended by ***treating all people fairly and creating equitable access to homeless housing services.***

A lack of responsiveness to cultural traditions and mindsets can also impact how BIPOC are assessed during Coordinated Entry. American Indian people, for example, are culturally inclined to express reverence of family and therefore disinclined to divulge family deficits—especially to Coordinated Entry specialists who are not American Indian. In King County, this cultural disconnect has resulted in a downplaying of vulnerabilities among American Indian families, manifesting as disproportionately low referrals to homeless housing programs.

Systems are geared toward the white race. As people of color, it's like we're on the outside looking in because they're not our systems—they don't belong to us. When you look at the assessment vulnerability tool, someone who understands us and is from our community has to be trained to ask the questions. And the questions have to be asked differently if the process is going to work for us. Otherwise, our people are going to fall through the cracks.

—Norine Hill, Founder and Executive Director of Mother Nation, an American Indian-led organization that serves American Indian families

Lesson 2: Invest in organizations that are trusted within racial/ethnic communities, no matter their size or level of formal experience in delivering homeless services.

Too often, small organizations that specialize in offering social services and other support to communities of color get passed over when government and private funders make investments in homeless services. This tends to occur because those organizations lack formal experience in providing homeless services through the traditional homeless system. That paucity of experience, however, is due to BIPOC-led organizations historically being denied investments in which they would have gained the experience. By continuing to deny them resources, government and private funders effectively are propagating an institutionalized inequity.

Through our decade of work in family homelessness, Building Changes has learned that the **organizations known, respected, and trusted within communities of color are well situated—and often, best suited—to serve families of color experiencing a housing crisis**. Families of color trust these organizations enough to approach them for help and share their stories. Funders need to reward and return that trust by investing in those organizations to deliver homeless services.

Funders should view a lack of formal experience with the homeless system as an opportunity to build capacity and infrastructure within the organization and in communities of color as a whole. Further, when assessing overall qualifications of an organization to provide homeless services, funders should give weight to whether the organization is led by and staffed by people who look like those they are serving—those impacted by homelessness the most.

We witnessed situations—and unfortunately participated in them ourselves—in which investments in BIPOC-led organizations were denied or questioned due to a baseless perception of risk. Building Changes has learned that as funders, we need to stop making “return on investment” demands of BIPOC-led organizations that we don’t usually make of white-dominant organizations. Instead, we need to **trust the trusted organization** to do what they have done for years without the benefit of large capital investment—serve communities of color well.

Featured Project

- Preventing Homelessness for Black/African American Families, Pierce County

Black/African American families represent 36% of the families experiencing homelessness in Pierce County but only 6.5% of the county’s overall population. Through the Family Homelessness Initiative (FHI), Building Changes invested in a project designed to increase access to homelessness prevention assistance for Black families by offering services through three organizations embedded in and trusted within their community: **Multicultural Child** and Family Hope Center (MCFHC), the **Tacoma Ministerial Alliance** (TMA), and the **St. Leo Food Connection**.

Prior to our investment, MCFHC—respected in the Black community for its quality childcare and early learning services—had begun to dabble in homeless services based on demand from the families it served. Partnering with Bates Technical College, MCFHC built seven “tiny houses” on a lot adjacent to its daycare center to house families receiving MCFHC services. The agency’s work in homelessness, however, was being done outside of the formal homeless system.

We were running into single mothers who would come in with their babies to sign up for childcare or one of our pre-school programs, and we would find out they were living in their car as a family. We decided to build these seven tiny houses so that when someone like that came in, we at least could offer her family a safe place to stay.

—Gail Neal, Executive Director, Multicultural Child and Family Hope Center

The FHI project, done in partnership with Pierce County Human Services, positioned MCFHC to play a greater role in addressing the Black community’s homeless crisis by helping families avoid homelessness altogether. The investment also supported the TMA to address the community’s homeless crisis directly for the first time. TMA had drafted a five-year plan to address homelessness but had been turned down for grant projects because of its lack of formal experience and infrastructure in delivering homeless services.

We had talked about what we wanted to do and we knew what we wanted to do, but it wasn’t until this prevention project came about that, oh my God, so many doors opened for us in terms of being able to get our feet wet—but also in filling a place in the community to help prevent people from becoming homeless.

—Sfg. Bishop Kim V. Forest, Second Vice President, Tacoma Ministerial Alliance

Despite their lack of formal experience in providing homeless services, both MCFHC and TMA were well positioned to reach and help members of the Black community who were experiencing a housing crisis.

Right away, the project took off. We didn’t have to beg people to come in and ask for help. They were comfortable with not just sharing their story with us, but also talking about what it would take for them to get out of the housing crisis that they were in. And they trusted what we were saying back to them.

—Gail Neal, Executive Director, Multicultural Child and Family Hope Center

Featured Projects

- Culturally Tailored Rapid Re-Housing Aftercare, King County
- Continuum of Services for American Indian/Alaska Native Families, King County

In an effort to improve disproportionately low Rapid Re-Housing outcomes for American Indian families in King County, Building Changes awarded an FHI grant to a large social services agency with experience running a Rapid Re-Housing program but not in serving American Indian families.

In retrospect, we should have directed that work to—and invested in—organizations that directly serve American Indian families. We eventually did that—awarding two follow-up grant projects, to **Mother Nation** and **Chief Seattle Club**—when the first project failed to achieve our equity goals. Mother Nation had no formal experience in providing services through the traditional homeless system—although it routinely served American Indian families experiencing homelessness. Mother Nation and Chief Seattle Club drove the design of the two projects, which value ethnic identity and utilize cultural traditions to address unmet housing needs of American Indian families experiencing homelessness.

Through our relationship with Mother Nation and Chief Seattle Club, Building Changes learned that the American Indian families we sought to serve would benefit most from homeless services rooted in the traditions of their own culture, not a white-dominant one. The relationship between a funder and the organization receiving the funding is reciprocal. Building Changes has benefited greatly from our relationships with BIPOC-led organizations as much as they have benefited from our investments. As a result of these relationships, we have become more inclusive, knowledgeable, and effective in advancing racial equity and addressing systemic racism.

[For more information on these projects, download “Lessons in Family Homelessness: Rapid Re-Housing” from the Building Changes website.](#)

Be flexible on data capture methods

BIPOC-led organizations without formal experience providing services through the homeless system will not be familiar with or have the infrastructure in place to collect client data through the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Government and private funders should not use this as a reason to deny investment in BIPOC-led organizations. Instead, funders should work with the organizations to develop other methods of data capture that are less onerous to the organization but still provide a baseline of information to track family progress and project effectiveness.

We always have to prove ourselves on who we are, how we manage ourselves, how we govern ourselves, how we work for our own community, and how we know what’s best for our people. On this project, I didn’t think twice about having to do that yet again because—and I hate to say this—we’re used to being treated that way, whether that’s right or wrong. Looking back at it now, yeah, it should have been something that was just given to us from the start. But it wasn’t.

—Norine Hill, Founder and Executive Director, Mother Nation

Lesson 3: Ensure that programs are informed and led by BIPOC and the racial/ethnic communities that homelessness impacts the most.

Building Changes has learned that proactive, formal engagement of BIPOC is critical in developing family homelessness strategies and programs. In several cases during the 10-year span of FHI, we worked with our partner counties in a vacuum to develop and design programs to address racial and ethnic disparities and disproportionality, thinking that as the funder, we knew best. This paternalistic approach slowed down our efforts to effectively address inequities in the homeless system.

In the homelessness prevention project for Black families in Pierce County (described earlier), Building Changes performed formal outreach to the community to inform our proposed housing navigator grant project model. In retrospect, our outreach should have occurred prior to us settling on a project model. Nevertheless, the **engagement of the community was crucial to the success of our project**. In partnership with Pierce County Human Services, we reached out to 40 Pierce County service providers, including those that specifically serve the Black community. We asked the providers to identify: organizations that serve large numbers of Black households; the services and types of referrals those organizations provide; and community resources and organizations perceived to be most trusted among Black households.

Once we identified those trusted organizations, we asked their help in introducing us to Black individuals who were either unstably housed or experiencing financial insecurities that put them at imminent risk of losing housing so that we could interview them directly. The 53 individuals with whom we spoke informed us on what kinds of services to offer and where to locate them to reach the most families. They identified that cash assistance to pay for basic needs would help fill in financial gaps and lead to more housing stability. In response, our project offered “flex funds” to support a range of financial needs, from a \$60 job application fee to a \$200 parking ticket for a vehicle relied upon for income.

The individuals cited food banks and Black churches as trusted, convenient, and relatively comfortable places to access services. Families with children also cited early learning and Head Start locations. Although they identified the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) as a critical resource, many said they preferred to not access project services at a local DSHS office due to their perceived treatment there. The proactive engagement not only helped guide the direction of our project, it also introduced us to the organizations in which we ultimately invested to implement the project, which included the St. Leo Food Bank, MCFHC, and TMA.

Focused outreach to BIPOC should occur prior to investing in any homeless program or strategy, whether directed to families, single adults, students, or unaccompanied youth. Building Changes, for example, has conducted formal interviews with students and families of color experiencing homelessness to learn what issues in and outside of school impact them the most. These interviews have helped lay a foundation for all of our student homelessness programs that have followed. BIPOC with lived experience of homelessness in particular should be at the table when investments in homeless services are being discussed and decided.

Sometimes, there is a cultural disconnect that occurs when Black people go seek help at other agencies. The missing link is the cultural competence. The Tacoma Ministerial Alliance may not have all the professional skillsets that some of those big service agencies do, but we understand the heart, the nature, and the culture in our community. That should count for a lot.

—Sfg. Bishop Kim V. Forest,
Second Vice President,
Tacoma Ministerial Alliance

Lesson 4: Target resources to the racial/ethnic communities that homelessness impacts the most.

Government and private funders must strive to target resources to those communities that are disproportionately impacted by homelessness. As a private funder, Building Changes has supported projects that targeted families from specific racial and ethnic communities, while also ensuring the services were open to any family experiencing homelessness.

In the aforementioned projects designed for American Indian families and Black families, race/ethnicity was not an eligibility criterion for services. Instead, we targeted services to those families by having organizations within their communities lead the projects. By locating them in the communities—and by clearly communicating the targeted population for the projects—we were able to direct resources to two racial/ethnic communities that homelessness impacts the most.

Public funders sometimes cite the federal Fair Housing Act as the reason they don't target homelessness funding and resources to specific racial/ethnic communities. That's flawed rationale because **local governments can comply with the Fair Housing Act while still being proactive in pursuing racial equity goals**. They just need to make the services eligible to all races and ethnicities, as well as be strategic and selective on who is designing and leading the programs, and where to locate them.

Our funding approaches have been influenced by [targeted universalism](#), a theoretical framework for addressing complex societal issues while operationalizing equity and inclusion. Targeted universalism acknowledges that **starting points for people are different based on the history, policies, and practices of structural and systemic racism**. The framework calls for creating a universal goal—reducing family homelessness, for example—and then targeting specific strategies based on where and how groups of people are situated. It recognizes that **getting everyone to the same finish line requires multiple and tailored strategies, not a one-size-fits-all solution**. When funders target resources to specific communities that homelessness impacts the most, they in effect are addressing homelessness to the benefit of everyone.

Building Changes first tested a targeted universalism approach in a family homelessness prevention project in King County aimed toward [newly arrived immigrants and refugees](#), who face unique barriers to maintaining housing after resettlement. We awarded the project to the **International Rescue Committee**, **Muslim Housing Services**, and **Somali Youth and Family Club**. The latter two agencies primarily serve immigrants and refugees of African and/or Middle Eastern descent. By placing the project with those two organizations, most of the families served were from Somalia, Iraq, Syria, or Eritrea—although services were open to immigrant and refugee families from any country.

In a separate FHI project, we selected **Africatown International**—via competitive process—to lead the [Centralized Diversion Fund](#) (CDF) in King County. Africatown International is a local nonprofit with deep ties to the Black community. As a result of those connections, about three-quarters of those served by the CDF have been BIPOC-led households. The CDF not only is successfully housing people experiencing homelessness, it is helping to address racial disproportionality and advance racial equity.

Lesson 5: Create accountability by tying project funding to racial equity goals.

In 2018, Building Changes began requiring King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties to create specific plans to address racial equity in order to continue to receive project funding under FHI. We required that at least 25% of each county's total FHI grant allocation be spent on specific strategies to address racial disparities and/or disproportionality within its homeless system. Each county surpassed our 25% mandate.

In 2019, Building Changes developed a grantmaking strategy for the three-year Washington Youth & Families Fund (WYFF) funding cycle around the goal of advancing racial equity in local homeless systems. Our request for grant proposals explicitly called for “culturally specific organizations or smaller organizations led and staffed by persons of color that primarily serve communities of color” to apply.

For the WYFF grants addressing family homelessness, we specifically sought proposals for projects offering culturally enhanced Rapid Re-Housing services, with the goal to better serve highly vulnerable families of color. Instead of Building Changes designing the projects in advance, we asked applicant communities to identify the culturally enhanced services that help families of color maintain stable housing.

We ultimately awarded the grants to the **Cowlitz Indian Tribe** (southwestern Washington) and the **Samish Indian Nation** (northwestern Washington). The projects value ethnic identity and utilize cultural traditions to address unmet housing needs of American Indian families experiencing homelessness.

Terminology

In this brief, different terms are used to describe race and ethnicity. **BIPOC** stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and is inclusive of all non-white races and ethnicities. **American Indian/Alaska Native** and **Black/African American**—both terms from the U.S. Census—are used at first reference, or when referencing data or formal project names. Otherwise, the term **American Indian** is used to describe Native American people, their tribes, and communities, and **Black** is used to describe people of African descent and their communities.

Additional Resource

Efforts of Building Changes to advance racial equity have been informed by the 2018 [Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities \(SPARC\) report](#), which examined racial inequities in homeless systems in six communities across the United States, including Pierce County.

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