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SPOTLIGHT: MASON COUNTY HOST

Schoolhouse Washington improves housing stability and advances educational success for students experiencing homelessness. We spotlight innovative programs in local schools and communities so they can serve as models across the state.

Mason County HOST (Housing Options for Students in Transition) helps students who seek to earn a high school diploma, GED or technical certification—but face barriers to reaching their goals because of the homeless crisis they are experiencing. The program serves unaccompanied youth who either have run away from home, been forced to leave home or been abandoned by their families.

The program connects a student, age 16 to 21, with a family that offers up its home as a safe, stable and temporary place to live until the student graduates. Homeless crisis resolved, the student is better able to concentrate on school and more likely to achieve educational success.

The HOST model is a particularly effective strategy for smaller communities that lack other temporary housing options for youth experiencing homelessness, such as shelters. (Mason County has none.)

In addition to temporary housing, the program also provides one-on-one educational support for the students, as well as services that help the HOST families. Students receive incentivized financial assistance—a \$50 monthly stipend contingent on meeting school attendance and educational performance goals. The program pays HOST families \$100 a month to temporarily house the student and, when needed, will help families find ways to increase their income, such as connecting them to employment services or other public benefits.

The program also helps students make a successful transition into independent adulthood. First and foremost, they are given help in finding stable housing for when they graduate. So far, *every Mason County HOST student has exited the program into permanent housing.* Students also are offered life-skills training, help with college applications and assistance in finding a job. Transitional services can last six months to a year after graduation.



Program Results & Data

For students living with Mason County HOST families

Educational Success //

Total served:	160
Graduated high school on time:	154
Returned to graduate:	3
Graduates who went on to college:	83%

Housing Stability //

Total served:	160
Permanently housed after exiting program:	100%

Demographics //

White:	55%
Latino:	19%
Two or more races:	17%
Native American:	4%
African American:	4%

Source: Mason County HOST

Mason County HOST also provides ongoing support for the family, including mentor training, mediation services and counseling, with a focus on crisis management and problem solving.

HOST families undergo a screening process that includes a Washington State Patrol background check and a Child Protective Services registry check. The vetting is similar to what a family hosting a foreign-exchange student would undergo, and not as rigorous as that for a licensed foster family. Students living with HOST families are not under a dependency with the state. If the student is under 18, the HOST family signs a temporary custody agreement.

In Mason County, about 60 percent of HOST families are related to the student they take in, while the other 40 percent are community people just wanting to help. The program strives to place HOST students near their existing school. Otherwise, the district provides transportation services.

Mason County HOST operates out of CHOICE High School (Shelton School District), which enhances the program's visibility and access to students. As a result, Mason County HOST has connected also with hundreds of students and their families that are precariously housed but not actually homeless. The program offers case management services to those families in hopes of preventing a homeless crisis.



Siblings Jesus Acosta and Angelica Reynoza

A HOST OF SUPPORT HELPS STEADY A STUDENT WHO RAN AWAY FROM HOME

Although Angelica Reynoza had relocated to the Pacific Northwest, a piece of her heart remained behind in Arizona with her little brother, Jesus Acosta. A runaway living on the streets, Jesus' distress calls from the desert reverberated across the tall timbers of the South Sound, shaking Reynoza to her core.

She sent for him, but without legal custody, trying to enroll him in a Shelton high school proved challenging. "Then a lady at the school referred me to Mason County HOST," Reynoza says.

Kim Rinehardt, Mason County HOST executive director,

helped Reynoza apply to become a HOST family for her little brother while he completes his schooling at CHOICE High School—and hopefully beyond. With a legal structure similar to hosting a foreign-exchange student, a HOST family provides students like Jesus three key foundations for educational success—a stable home, a caring family and a school-based support system.

"HOST has helped my brother just by being there," says Reynoza, 21. "He and I are brother and sister so he doesn't always want to take direction from me. When we have conflicts—and we do—he will go in and talk to Kim, and she will call me if there is a problem that needs solving."

Sibling rivalry aside, Jesus recognizes the priceless gift his sister has given him.

"She has taken on the mother role in my life," he says. "She makes life comfortable for me. I always have clothes on my back. I don't have to worry about running away again. Back home in Arizona, I was scared I wouldn't have enough to eat. I wouldn't go to school because I wasn't dressed properly."

In 2015-16, the Shelton School District identified 429 students experiencing homelessness across its seven schools.

"That's a lot of kids requiring intense attention," says Sascha Fischel-Freeman, the district's family and student support coordinator. "We don't have the capacity to meet that caseload. Mason County HOST fills a need by becoming deeply involved in those students' lives."

In Rinehardt and Fischel-Freeman, Jesus has two fearless advocates at his school who constantly encourage him to excel. "I think he's going to rule the world one day," Rinehardt says.

At CHOICE High School, Jesus is a disciplined athlete whose favorite subjects are world history and physics. "There's a math element to physics but also a philosophy side," he explains. "Some students are more math-oriented. I like to be philosophical."

Jesus says Fischel-Freeman has inspired him to channel “my crazy opinions and ideas” into songwriting and poetry. Rinehardt gave him a book to further explore his artistic side—“probably the strongest part of me,” Jesus says.

His grades are high, and his dreams are boundless. He is applying for college and wants a business degree. “Everything looks good right now,” Jesus says. “I plan on getting a job and saving up my money to pay for college. It’s a lot, but it’s not unmanageable.”

Reynoza credits Mason County HOST not only for inspiring her brother, but also for helping her raise him. Support comes in many forms, including family counseling, helping her find a job, and paying for Jesus’ school supplies.

“We both had a tough childhood,” Reynoza says. “I was first one in my family to graduate high school and he’s already doing so much more than me. I’m happy he is getting opportunities that I never had.”

STUDENT HOMELESSNESS IN MASON COUNTY

As the number of students experiencing homelessness increases, promising practices are crucial for meeting the needs of those students and their families. Successful programs like Mason County HOST happen in communities where school districts, local organizations and individuals work collectively on innovative and impactful solutions.



669 students were identified as homeless in 2015-16

64% identified by Shelton School District

20% identified by North Mason School District

2 in 5 are Latino/Hispanic

1 in 16 are unaccompanied youth

Student homelessness has increased:

77% since 2006-07

28% since 2010-11

19% since 2014-15

Sources:

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. “2015-16 Homeless Student Data Report.” Accessed January 29, 2017. http://www.k12.wa.us/HomelessEd/pubdocs/2015-16DistrictDemographics_Suppression.xlsx

Dyer, Melinda, and Jordyn Green. “Homeless Student Data: 2015-16.” Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Accessed January 29, 2017. <http://www.k12.wa.us/LegisGov/2017documents/2017-01-HomelessEducation.pdf>

GUIDANCE FOR LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

Want to start a HOST family program in your own community? Here are a few tips to guide you down that path, based on the Mason County experience.

» **Community concern and a desire to make a difference are all you need to start.**

Inspiration for Mason County HOST came from community members who were alarmed by a decline in high school graduation rates and an increase in the number of students experiencing a housing crisis. Representatives of a local Episcopal church, the Shelton School District and the regional Educational Service District led the charge.

» **Pay attention to anecdotal data when hard data is not available.**

In smaller communities, the best evidence of student homelessness often comes through word of mouth—usually, testimony from the students themselves. In a program’s developmental stages, a shortage of hard data should not inhibit community action. Mason County HOST was “born out of students giving lip service to their lives,” says Kim Rinehardt, executive director. “They were telling us, ‘I’m living in a tent with my family’ or ‘I’m sleeping on a couch at my aunt’s house.’”

» **Organize the program as a nonprofit.**

By operating as a tax-exempt 501(c)(3), Mason County HOST is able to apply for grants, accept private donations and advocate on behalf of the students it serves.

» **Start small, but research how many students need services.**

Mason County HOST served eight to 12 students in its first year, although a risk assessment determined at least 120 students could benefit from living with a HOST family. “It was a bigger problem than we were acknowledging,” Rinehardt says. “The question then became how many of those students could we serve and how could we get the money to do that.”

» **Craft a business plan for the program and present it to funders.**

Mason County HOST funding has come from various sources, including Rotary clubs, a tribe, a community foundation, HB 2163 state funds, and private donations. A fundraiser is held annually.

» **A formal relationship with the school district is crucial to program success.**

Mason County HOST entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with both the Shelton and North Mason school districts. Under terms of the Shelton MOU, the district provides administrative support, including office space at CHOICE High School.

» **Be flexible with the terms of the MOU.**

Support from the cash-strapped Shelton School District did not include funding, but allowing Mason County HOST to base itself at CHOICE gives the program something else very valuable – visibility and instant credibility. An on-site location also provides the program access into student lives that would be impossible to achieve otherwise.

MASON COUNTY HOST COMMUNITY PARTNERS

St. David's Episcopal Church
(facilitating organization)

Shelton School District

North Mason School District

Educational Service District 113

Gravity GED

Rotary District 5020

Shelton Rotary Club

Shelton Skookum Rotary Club

Shelton Skookum Rotary Foundation

Squaxin Island Tribe

Mason County Consortium for Student Success

Mason County Housing Coalition

Partnership on Family Homelessness

Community Foundation of South Puget Sound

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.mason-co-host.org

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