

Pierce County 211 and Diversion Grant | Project Evaluation Summary

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Building Changes supported the 211 and Diversion Grant Program (211-Diversion), a three-year pilot project in Pierce County, Washington, that operated from January 1, 2018, to December 31, 2020. The project was funded through the Family Homelessness Initiative, a decade-long partnership between Building Changes and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to create high-performing homeless systems in the three most populous counties in Washington: King (Seattle), Pierce (Tacoma), and Snohomish (Everett).

211-Diversion aimed to increase access to Diversion services in the county by integrating this housing support into existing services offered over the phone by South Sound 211 (211), a service of the United Way of Pierce County. South Sound 211 operates a 2-1-1 phone number for people to call to acquire health and human services information, service referrals, or other housing and behavioral health assistance.

Diversion is a strategy that assists individuals and families experiencing homelessness or housing instability to move into stable housing quickly and safely. Diversion utilizes creative conversations that empower people and helps them to identify housing solutions. It can also provide flexible funding (flex funds) for one-time/short-term financial assistance. Diversion is offered as an intervention to anyone in Pierce County who seeks services from the homeless system and meets basic eligibility requirements.

The project adapted Diversion, traditionally offered in person, to provide services over the phone. This strategy was implemented by South Sound 211 and was offered to callers in Pierce County who identified as homeless or unstably housed, with a focus on serving families with children. Some examples of services included mediating with a landlord, exploring other available resources, and assisting with move-in or rental costs (security deposit, application fees, rent payment or deposit, etc.).

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic began near the end of this project. To examine how the pandemic may have impacted services, we analyzed data for participants who entered and exited during the pandemic (March 1 to June 30, 2020) (N=15) and those who entered and exited during the same time of the year before (March 1 to June 30, 2019) (N=40). Compared to those who enrolled and exited before the pandemic, those during the pandemic included:

- » A significantly greater proportion currently fleeing domestic violence
- » A statistically similar proportion of domestic violence survivors
- » A significantly greater proportion who reported *"I don't often feel safe"* in response to the question of perceived safety

WHO WAS SERVED

211-Diversion served **323 households** experiencing homelessness in Pierce County that contacted 211 during the first 2.5 years of implementation.

Participant Housing Status and Characteristics at Project Entry

- » **94.1%** were living unsheltered in a place not meant for habitation
- » **32.3 years old** was the average age of heads of household, ranging from 19 to 58 years old
- » **84.8%** of heads of household identified as female
- » **63.7%** of heads of household were domestic violence survivors and **44.6%** of those survivors were currently fleeing

Family Characteristics at Project Entry

- » **74.3%** of households were headed by a single adult
- » **87.9%** of households had at least one child
- » **3 people** was the average household size, ranging from 1 to 8 people

Race and Ethnicity of Program Participants¹

- » **43.7%** Black or African American
- » **25.4%** White
- » **13.9%** Multiracial
- » **7.4%** Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI)
- » **3.4%** American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN)
- » **1.9%** Asian
- » **12.1%** Hispanic or Latinx

¹Race and ethnicity are collected separately in the Homeless Management Information System. Additionally, a participant can only select up to two different races. Therefore, "multiracial" was participants who identified as two different races. It consisted of those who identified as white and AIAN, white and Asian, Black or African American and AIAN, Black or African American and Asian, Black or African American and NHOPI, and Black or African American and white. Multiracial data broken into each racial category can be found in the full report.

211-Diversion had an overrepresentation of participants who were Black or African American (6.5x higher), AIAN (2.6x higher), and NHOPI (4.9x higher) compared to the Pierce County population, which reflects the disproportionality seen in the population experiencing homelessness.^{2,3} It also served a slightly higher proportion of Black or African American participants (43.7%) than other Diversion programs in the county (38% to 40%).⁴ The proportion of Hispanic families enrolled (12.1%) was similar to the Pierce County population (11.1%).

KEY FINDINGS

- » **Just less than half (43.7%) of households successfully exited the program** to stable housing and the average time receiving services among those households was **30.1 days**.
 - * A slightly higher proportion (47.5%) of Black or African American participants had successful exits compared to all participants.

- » **Telephone-based services showed success**, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - * When the pandemic broke out, 211 was positioned to safely continue to provide services since they were already telephone based.
 - * As Black or African American participants and domestic violence survivors were served at higher proportions than in other Diversion programs in the county, 211 staff posited that telephone-based services are more anonymous and accessible and potentially allowed some groups to feel safer accessing and utilizing them.

- » **Flex funds usage by successful exits (69.5%) was lower** than other county Diversion programs.
 - * As an information agency with strong connections to community resources, 211 was uniquely positioned in the community to identify and provide solutions that required little to no flexible funding.
 - * \$930 was the average amount of flex funds received among households that exited the project successfully.

To read more about this project and other key findings, see the [Pierce County 211 and Diversion Grant Evaluation Report](#) on the Building Changes website

²Olivet, J., Dones, M., Richard, M., Wilkey, C., Yampolskaya, S., Beit-Arie, M., & Joseph, L. (2018). *Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities: Phase one study findings*. Needham, MA: Center for Social Innovation. <https://c4innovates.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/SPARC-Phase-1-Findings-March-2018.pdf>.

³U.S. Census Bureau. *American Community Survey, 2018. Table DP05: American Community Survey 1-year estimates*. Generated by Building Changes using <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/> (August 28, 2020).

⁴Pierce County Homeless Management Information System data. <https://www.co.pierce.wa.us/5980/System-Performance>

⁵Successful exits were considered those who exited into permanent housing and included rental by client with or without an ongoing housing subsidy, rental by client in a public housing unit, rental by client with a housing choice voucher, staying or living with family or friends permanently, or exiting to a hotel or motel paid for without an emergency shelter voucher.