



Supporting K-12 Students and Young People Experiencing Homelessness through the Pandemic: Needs and Opportunities for Systems Change

In partnership with the Raikes Foundation, Building Changes created the Washington State Student and Youth Homelessness COVID-19 Response Fund to augment existing public dollars supporting students, youth, and young adults experiencing homelessness.¹ Between April 24, 2020, and March 30, 2021, the Fund awarded \$4.1 million in grants to 199 community-based organizations, service providers, schools, school districts, and tribes serving 25 counties across the state.

Students, youth, and young adults experiencing homelessness and housing instability in Washington State have faced unprecedented challenges due to COVID, and we know that these challenges are evolving as circumstances change. **After awarding all available funds, we surveyed grantees to get their perspectives on the changing needs of students, youth, and young adults experiencing homelessness and ways the public and philanthropic sectors can change to better meet those needs.**

In April and May of 2021, we sent the survey to more than 200 staff from our grantee partners and received a total of 81 responses: 40 responses from grantees serving youth and young adults, and 41 responses from grantees serving K-12 students and their families.

Key findings from the insights they shared and Building Changes' recommendations on how to address those insights are summarized below. Additional details and analysis can be found in our [survey results summary presentation](#).

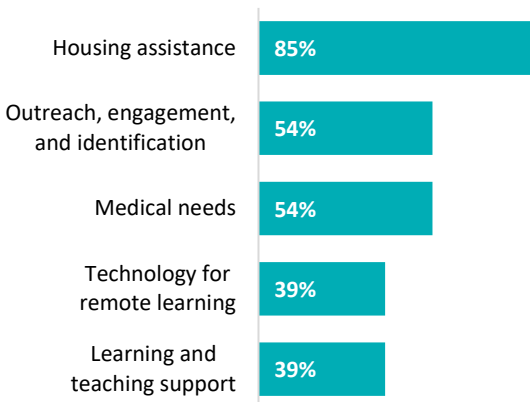
Needs of Students, Youth, and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness

Students, youth, and young adults experiencing homelessness have a unique set of needs, many of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. To learn more about the particular needs of students, youth, and young adults, we solicited feedback from grantees about how needs have changed since the start of pandemic and the types of needs they will face going forward.

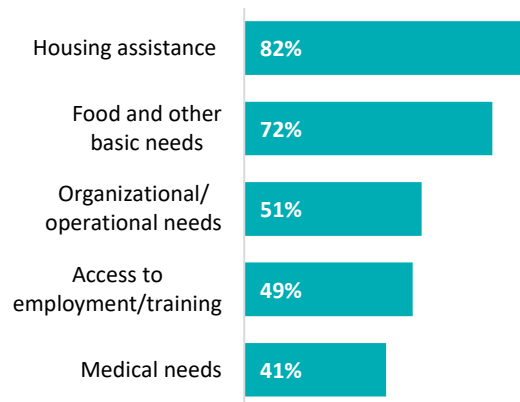
- **The needs of students, youth, and young adults experiencing homelessness have increased since the start of the pandemic.** A majority of respondents felt needs have increased across almost every domain, from housing and food to educational supports and transportation.
- **Housing is the biggest need over the next six months for both students and youth and young adults.** Additional short-term priorities respondents identified include food and other basic needs; more outreach, engagement, and identification; organizational/operational needs; and support to address medical needs.

¹ Throughout this brief, "students" refer to young people and their families experiencing homelessness who are enrolled in or connected to K-12 schools, while "youth and young adults" refers to young adults and unaccompanied youth 13-24 served by a community-based organization or tribe.

Top 5 Short-term Needs: Students



Top 5 Short-term Needs: Youth and Young Adults



- **Longer-term needs include housing, academic supports to address learning loss, and supports for mental and behavioral health and social-emotional learning.** Additional long-term needs respondents identified include targeted and equitable supports, organizational capacity, and increased access to jobs.
- **Many students, youth, and young adults experiencing homelessness—especially those who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), immigrants/refugees, English language learners, or undocumented—are having difficulty getting their needs met.** Respondents identified a variety of challenges they have faced, including a general lack of resources, insufficient academic supports for remote learning, and the inability for some households to access public programs like unemployment and other economic assistance due to eligibility criteria.

Opportunities for Funder and System Change

Some public/philanthropic funders have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in new ways that differ from business as usual, which provides a unique opportunity to identify system-level barriers and challenges that may have hindered prior efforts to address student, youth, and young adult homelessness. To learn more about this, we solicited feedback from our grantee partners providing direct services on lessons learned from the pandemic; how to make funding opportunities more accessible and equitable; and how public and philanthropic systems should change to better meet the needs of students, youth, young adults, and the organizations that serve them.

- **Increased flexibility in how funding can be used could allow for more innovation, enabling service providers to better meet the individualized, immediate needs of students, youth, and young adults.** Respondents described several barriers to innovation and individualized services, including funding that is restricted only to specific services and/or populations, lack of funding for pilot programs, and unrealistic reporting and documentation requirements.
- **Student, youth, young adult, community, and service provider voices are not always reflected in planning and decision making.** Respondents felt that listening to and including the voices of those with lived expertise and experience providing services would increase understanding of the unique needs of students, youth, and young adults and how those needs differ from adult populations. Respondents also felt this would strengthen efforts to address the root causes of housing instability.

- **Current housing options, housing assistance programs, and support for basic needs are insufficient to meet the level of need.** Respondents identified the need for more housing options, including youth and young adult-specific housing, low barrier shelters in more locations, rental assistance and forgiveness, eviction prevention, and additional affordable housing. Respondents would also like to see more support for basic needs, as well as a broader definition of basic needs that includes food access, health, childcare, access to technology, and other services.
- **Systemic barriers and lack of support for organizational capacity and operational costs can limit partnerships with many service providers working in, trusted by, and closest to the communities they serve, particularly for smaller and/or newer organizations.** Respondents identified several barriers and opportunities, including application processes that favor more established organizations with substantial infrastructure, the inability to use a sufficient portion of funds for capacity building and staffing, bottlenecks that hinder by/for organizations from accessing funding, and the need for funders to trust that community-based organizations can get funds to where they are needed most.
- **Standard outreach and engagement efforts to students, youth, young adults, and service providers are ineffective, leading to inequitable access and lack of awareness about available services and funding opportunities.** Respondents noted barriers around awareness of available services and suggested several improvements to improve outreach to students, youth, and young adults, including the need to communicate in multiple formats and languages. Respondents also identified the need for more frequent and visible publication of funding opportunities for service providers, and the need for agencies to develop better guidance.

Recommendations

As noted above, grantee partners provided feedback on how the public and philanthropic sectors can better support young people experiencing homelessness. Building Changes recommends the following actions to address some of the major themes that emerged from the survey responses:

Recommendations for Public Agencies and Philanthropy:

Allow public and private dollars to be used flexibly to best meet the needs of young people experiencing homelessness.

- Fund service providers offering a holistic range of supports for young people experiencing homelessness and not just those that are typically awarded homeless housing grants or funding. Consider funding community-based clinics, tribes, Native-led coalitions and organizations, organizations serving immigrants and refugees, small health-based nonprofits, afterschool organizations serving young people, libraries, and school-based nonprofits.
- Ensure that funding awarded to service providers is substantial enough to meet their organizational/operational needs and flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of the young people experiencing homelessness that they serve.
- Eliminate funding restrictions and reporting requirements that may discourage or prevent smaller, rural, or by/for service providers from applying.
- Ensure wide dissemination of, access to, and eligibility for funding opportunities.
- Prioritize and direct flexible uses of funding specifically to young people experiencing homelessness.

- Include people with lived experience and those who work directly with young people experiencing homelessness in decision-making around funding strategy, grant proposals, and determining community needs.

Recommendations for Public Agencies and Systems:

Eliminate systemic barriers that prevent young people experiencing homelessness from getting the care and services they need.

- Revise policies and practices which may unintentionally prevent young people from accessing vital COVID-19 resources, such as vaccines and testing, and resources to meet their basic needs, such as food and nutrition.
- Ensure that services, such as behavioral health and medical care, are both accessible and affordable to all young people.
- Provide guidance to service providers on how to reduce barriers for young people, such as documentation, costs, consent, and where and how to access services.

Improve interagency coordination and cross-system collaboration to better meet the needs of young people experiencing homelessness.

- Expand your agency's reach and capacity by partnering with community-based organizations that serve young people experiencing homelessness.
- Commit to working and aligning with other public agencies to advance a more coordinated and holistic response. Recognize how a young person experiencing homelessness may be impacted by each agency and actively collaborate to improve services.
- Educate and raise awareness among service providers and other public agencies about the importance of serving this population and connecting them to resources.