



# Key Learnings from the Equitable Homeless System Design Project

February 2023

Building Changes believes that we cannot meaningfully address family homelessness without addressing systemic and structural racism. Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are more likely to face housing crises and continue to be overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness. As we learned from our 10-year Family Homelessness Initiative, traditional responses to homelessness are often generalized and not tailored, inadvertently favoring those closest to power and privilege to access and receive support services more easily. In contrast, the diverse backgrounds and experiences of families of color are often not considered in existing homeless programs and services design, leaving many families with inadequate support and unmet needs.

Building off these learnings from the Family Homelessness Initiative and with additional investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Building Changes created the Equitable Homeless System Design project. The project focused on narrowing service gaps and addressing inequitable structures, policies, and processes in the homeless response system that prevent families of color from obtaining safe and stable housing.

Building Changes supported four organizations, which serve geographically and population-diverse counties in Washington State, to address these inequities and provide collaboratively designed, culturally appropriate, tailored support for families of color in their communities. In 2021 and through 2022 as needed, we provided funding, training, guidance, and evaluation support to partner organizations as they reimagined a more racially equitable homeless response to better serve families of color experiencing homelessness.

## Our Project Partners:

**Helping Hands Project Organization** (*King, Snohomish, Skagit, and Island Counties*)

**Port of Support** (*Thurston County*)

**Share** (*Clark County*)

**Yakima Neighborhood Health Services** (*Yakima County*)

Through the Equitable Homeless System Design project and our partnerships with these organizations, we gained a better understanding of what it will take to continue building a more equitable homeless response in communities across the state. Among our many learnings, here are the most important takeaways within the four key project areas.

# Overarching Learnings

## 1. Funding

- Whether it is aimed at working with people long term, continuing the journey to build more equitable systems in communities, or continuing to make strides on internal culture within organizations, more time and long-term funding are needed to continue work rooted in racial equity.
- Newer organizations that are BIPOC centered and led may have less consistent funding and fewer available resources due to their shorter history. However, they are often situated to have impact in BIPOC communities; therefore, funding eligibility criteria and access should be more adaptable to meet each organization's needs.

## 2. Housing Strategies

- Flexible funding is a versatile and necessary component of housing support services that can help people become more stabilized. This is especially necessary for BIPOC community members, who may have larger financial and other barriers that need to be

met due to systemic and structural issues. Flexible funding enables organizations to be responsive to specific barriers people face in their communities by:

- » Making creative problem-solving actionable by covering “nontraditional” expenses that lead to a housing solution.
  - » Covering move-in assistance and unpredictable housing application costs.
  - » Addressing arrears and debt that impact rental histories.
  - » Providing incentives to bring landlords to the table and help them overcome hesitancy in renting property to clients who may have a low income or lack a housing history, among other experiences or characteristics.
  - » Addressing gaps and an expensive housing market not covered by federal and state-level housing assistance.
- Landlord engagement is an important strategy, especially for BIPOC clients and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is greater hesitancy to rent to clients now, in addition to higher rents, security deposits, application fees, and other costs. Further, lack of housing availability and affordable housing in communities make working with landlords crucial.

### 3. Internal Racial Equity Work

- Diverse staff are needed to support diverse people. While some pathways of experiencing a housing crisis are universal, such as loss of income, leaving an unsafe situation, and rent increases, BIPOC communities face specific structural barriers as a result of racism. This can hinder their ability to build trust, identify solutions, and navigate systems. Diverse staff can help to better facilitate people through the housing and homeless system with cultural fluency and shared experiences.
- Ensuring that staff of color feel respected and valued requires addressing inequities in power and compensation, and increasing pathways and support for BIPOC staff to occupy lead decision-making positions in organizations.
- Among established organizations, equitable and targeted work is often advocated for and led by a dedicated staff member or two. This requires them to do a lot of work within the organization (in addition to their work with clients), such as advocate and communicate with peers and management on the importance of tailored supports for BIPOC clients, cultural skills, and changes in internal culture to better support BIPOC clients and staff.

### 4. External Racial Equity Work

- Racial equity work is different for each organization and each community. Doing racial equity work effectively means being flexible and responsive to emergent needs and learnings. Organizations implementing programs (as well as the funders supporting

that work) need to be able to practice that flexibility. By being flexible and committed, organizations can be in a better place for both BIPOC clients and staff.

- It is necessary for funders to work with BIPOC community leaders and BIPOC-led community-based organizations when striving to implement more equitable services and tools. It is necessary to build trust within communities, understand the importance of different cultural needs, understand and address negative experiences with the housing system, and provide feedback and information on tools and services.

## PROJECT PARTNER:

# Helping Hands Project Organization

Helping Hands Project Organization (HHPO) is a nonprofit led by women of color serving Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) experiencing housing crises. HHPO got its start serving people in King and Snohomish Counties and expanded their services to Skagit and Island Counties through the Equitable Homeless System Design project. The organization focuses on helping communities of color meet their basic needs, as well as providing resources for families to access support services.

Through the project, HHPO identified families of color in need of housing support and helped facilitate smooth referrals to support service providers. This warm handoff allowed local agencies, community leaders, and housing support providers to provide tailored referrals that helped meet the needs of families more directly.

HHPO prioritized support for those in crisis, especially those who faced eviction or were leaving domestic violence situations, by conducting focused outreach and providing culturally relevant services. They did this by building capacity around tracking client data and building out their existing information-gathering process. This improved their ability to identify and support households that have been waiting a long time to access housing services, and help families more quickly fulfill some of their specific basic needs. HHPO also hired additional outreach and case management staff who provided person-centered, culturally responsive services.

HHPO supported more than 50 Black/African American households to obtain stable housing during the Equitable Homeless System Design project.

***“You have a lot of people who identify as people of color going through a lot. They don’t know where to turn to for help and a lot of them have been unhoused for a really, really long time. Because of the remoteness of Island County, we decided to go to trusted leaders in the community to strike a relationship and get the information that we needed to support our communities.”***

**—VIVIAN OBAH, CEO, HELPING HANDS PROJECT ORGANIZATION**

## Learnings from Helping Hands Project Organization

- Utilizing different strategies tailored to the needs of more remote and rural communities is key to connecting and building trust with people who need services. Strategies include promoting services and events on social media, organizing events like community barbeques, and partnering with trusted community and religious leaders.
- Contracting with and hiring staff from the community itself was crucial, as trust of community members already existed.
- Intensive case management and the use of flexible funding helped lead to creative problem-solving, such as renting out individual rooms. Engaging with landlords with flexible funding and advocating for their clients were critical to helping address application fees and high security deposits in the community, as well as landlords' general hesitancy to rent to HHPO clients.
- With the prevalence of high rents and lack of affordable housing in these communities, one-year rental subsidies were a critical tool to help BIPOC households. This allowed them time to build their income and rental history, and to develop soft-skills necessary to thrive in their communities, gain resiliency even when their housing may be jeopardized, and obtain stable long-term housing.
- Assessing and understanding Homeless Management Information System data with local community leaders can help them gain deeper understanding of barriers faced by BIPOC households, especially those that have been on waitlists for housing services for longer periods of time.
- Dedicating staff capacity to building trust takes time but is necessary to counter fatigue and lack of confidence many BIPOC households may have experienced in previous efforts to access services. Lack of available, affordable rental housing and eviction moratoria exacerbated these conditions.

### PROJECT PARTNER:

## Port of Support

Port of Support, established in 2017, is a Black women-led nonprofit organization in Thurston County. As an organization led by and serving the Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) community, Port of Support is dedicated to centering the voices of BIPOC to address racial inequities.

With support from the Equitable Homeless System Design project, Port of Support focused on supporting the Black community experiencing homelessness. They did this by increasing their understanding of the barriers BIPOC families face and helping create more opportunities to obtain stable housing.

Relying on feedback from BIPOC community members who had experienced homelessness and housing instability, and had accessed Port of Support’s services, the organization implemented a holistic participatory design approach to inform and improve future programs. This approach was key to creating better programs, as the process allowed those with lived experience to provide input on how services could be better designed to effectively support people in similar situations. To identify needs and gaps in services, Port of Support collected data on housing and homelessness from a diverse group of stakeholders and compared them to current county-level information.

Port of Support also collaborated with landlords and a member of the Tenants Union of Washington State to provide referrals for people so they could apply for Rapid Re-Housing. This support provided six months’ worth of rental assistance, beyond the standard 90 days given by Rapid Re-Housing programs. These actions allowed Port of Support to aid 20 BIPOC households not being served by their local housing system.

Port of Support also provided households with wraparound services, such as connecting people with clothing, food, and counseling services, and advocated for families as they navigated the homeless system. Prior to and during the Equitable Homeless System Design project, the organization also helped to equitably distribute emergency federal funds to prevent evictions of people impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in their community.

***“Thinking and operating from a participatory approach mindset, we knew that we would not be able to tackle social inequities that have been festering within Thurston County alone. We used mixed method approaches, which included providing clients with incentives for documenting lived, endured social inequities.”***

—STEPHANIE TAYLOR, FOUNDER AND CEO, PORT OF SUPPORT

## Learnings from Port of Support

- Using a combination of an “Intent to Rent” process (a coordinated agreement between housing support services and landlords), responsive landlord engagement, and flexible assistance for move-in costs can help overcome the stigma of housing assistance and incentivize landlords to participate in Rapid Re-Housing approaches for families of color.
- Culturally responsive and person-centered case management is key to building trust and helping BIPOC households open up about their housing crisis and homeless status in order to de-escalate conflict and support problem-solving.
- Flexible assistance is vital to address urgent basic needs and respond to rental arrears and/or debt—barriers to housing stability, especially within communities that do not have access to wealth and savings due to historical racism.

- Providing a stipend for program participants to journal about their experiences can be an effective way to cooperatively gather honest qualitative feedback on services, as well as build a grounded understanding of the unique drivers and impacts of housing instability and homelessness.
- Partnering and subcontracting with trusted leaders embedded in communities of color can facilitate important referrals for households that disproportionately experience homelessness.
- Implementing a participatory design model centered around BIPOC with lived experience, who have endured inequities, allows stakeholders to improve policies and practices that are reinforcing racial inequities in the system. It requires deep financial investment, planning, and community partnerships with shared interest. It takes time, money, and trust.

## PROJECT PARTNER:

# Share

Share is a nonprofit organization located in Clark County that provides support for people experiencing hunger and homelessness. Their goal is to provide emergency shelter and help people exit the shelter system and obtain stable housing. This project focused on services provided through Share's family shelters.

With support from the Equitable Homeless System Design project, Share reviewed ways to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of its shelter services and housing navigation services. Some examples of how they updated services to be more equitable include hiring and retaining Chuukese staff, who are more culturally responsive to the needs of the Chuukese families that Share serves. Hiring employees who understand Chuukese culture helped Share serve more families as they navigated housing and support services. They also saw an increase of Chuukese clients coming through their door. Share hopes to use similar strategies to reach Hispanic, Latinx, and Black or African American populations in their community.

In addition, the new Chuukese staff were able to collect data on the value of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)-focused services—information used to further Share's equity work. With Equitable Homeless System Design project support, they developed and changed internal policies to create a culture that is more supportive of their own BIPOC staff. They also introduced more inclusive hiring processes, created opportunities for skills development and coaching, and advocated for the value of hiring those with experience and skills in Chuukese language and culture. Share held and will continue to hold focus group discussions to obtain feedback from staff and board members on how the organization can improve internal culture, communication to effectively gather feedback, and decision-making.

*“Initially when we started this project, I thought it would be all about clients, but it ended up being a lot about our internal work. What we’re trying to do was shift as an agency and within family shelter. I didn’t realize it was going to be as much internal work as we were going to go through, which I’m loving and embracing.”*

—NICKY FERGUSON, FAMILY PATHWAYS PROGRAM DIRECTOR, SHARE

## Learnings from Share

- Building and having a trusting relationship with a respected Chuukese community member helped to improve cultural understanding, staff and board recruitment, and understanding of employee needs.
- Shelter staff who know the Chuukese language and culture are essential to meeting the housing needs of the Chuukese community, which was accessing services at a low rate. Meeting these needs required increasing their representation of Chuukese staff through focused job recruitment and providing training on housing systems and related skills.
- Work by Share staff at all levels to learn and overcome implicit bias was necessary to better recruit, train, and retain BIPOC staff overall. While some staff initially considered BIPOC-targeted services as preferential and counter to their work, Share’s staff and leadership committed themselves to racial equity work. They began several efforts, including staff readings of antiracism resources, holding focus group discussions to elicit feedback on internal organizational culture, and encouraging discussions about the importance of cultural knowledge over housing knowledge. It also included updating and changing internal policies and procedures around hiring practices, upward mobility, and communication.
- Flexible spending allowed BIPOC families to overcome debt, housing arrears, and other barriers to stability. The staff believed that removing internal restrictions on these services, such as spending caps, were particularly important to providing better support for BIPOC families.
- Staff of color invited to improve policies and practices within the organization should be compensated for their time, and the work should be facilitated through partnership with embedded, trusted staff and outside support.



## PROJECT PARTNER:

# Yakima Neighborhood Health Services

Yakima Neighborhood Health Services (YNHS) is a well-established and trusted community health and housing service provider in Yakima County. They are recognized as a federally qualified health care center and provide primary care services for underserved patients in their community. They are also recognized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to be a service access point for their local Coordinated Entry system. As such, they can help families identify which housing and support services they may need and make tailored referrals.

Yakima County has an estimated population of 256,000, and more than half identify as Hispanic or Latino, according to the 2021 U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>1</sup> Yakima is also home to the tribal people of the Yakama Nation. With support from the Equitable Homeless System Design project, YNHS addressed biases in and barriers to homeless and housing support services faced by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and LGTBQ2+ identifying people experiencing homelessness across the Yakima Valley.

To address these inequities, YNHS strategized ways to improve navigation of the homeless and housing support system from beginning to end, including:

- Working to replace VI-SPDAT, a widely used Coordinated Entry assessment tool. C4 Innovations, with funding from Building Changes, published a study that found VI-SPDAT to perpetuate racial inequities within the homeless system.<sup>2</sup> YNHS incorporated feedback from BIPOC clients, LGTBQ2+ groups, and members of the Yakama Nation into the development of an updated assessment tool.
- Providing intensive case management for BIPOC families experiencing housing crises, focused on serving those who had been on the Coordinated Entry waitlist for a long time.
- Holding two diversity and equity trainings for more than 12 local organizations to encourage adoption of their updated assessment tool.

---

1 U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Population Estimates, July 1, 2021 (V2021) – Yakima County, WA [data table]. Quick Facts. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/yakimacountywashington>.

2 Wilkey, C., Donegan, R., Yampolskaya, S., Cannon, R. (2019). Coordinated Entry Systems: Racial Equity Analysis of Assessment Data. Needham, MA: C4 Innovations. Retrieved from [https://c4innovates.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CES\\_Racial\\_Equity\\_Analysis\\_2019-.pdf](https://c4innovates.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CES_Racial_Equity_Analysis_2019-.pdf).

## Learnings from Yakima Neighborhood Health Services

- Implementing a new Coordinated Entry assessment tool takes a substantial amount of time and can be met with a lot of resistance in a community, even when presenting it with urgency and need. It took time; conversations with groups negatively impacted by VI-SPDAT, such as Indigenous and LGBTQ2+ people; constant advocacy; and trainings.
- Work to shift internal organizational culture to be more equitable is a necessary part of implementing effective, targeted work externally for BIPOC communities. It can include training around recognizing unconscious bias, listening to staff concerns, advocating for change, and elevating the experiences of BIPOC clients and staff.
- The ability to be flexible and reduce barriers for BIPOC clients, such as being able to serve those who are in doubled-up living situations, is necessary. In addition, clients may face multiple applications and processing fees (which is new in the community), larger security deposits, and other barriers that differ from other clients.
- As an unintended outcome of the eviction moratoria, many landlords were less willing to work with YNHS. To overcome this challenge, YNHS set out to both re-engage landlord relationships and build new ones. They found that educating landlords on housing vouchers, discussing YNHS's role in supporting people, and the benefits of YNHS's overall financial backing were essential to building relationships.
- Housing availability in Yakima County is low, particularly affordable housing, and creative strategies and greater financial support are needed to help households identify available units.
- Flexible assistance and intensive case management are important for people who have qualified for Emergency Housing Vouchers and Foundational Community Supports (which uses Medicaid reimbursement for long-term housing assistance) but have not been able to find housing due to low vacancy rates for affordable housing or high move-in expenses.