



## RESEARCH BRIEF

# Yakima County Maternal-Child Health Diversion Project

## Background

Building Changes partnered with Yakima Neighborhood Health Services (YNHS) to integrate Diversion into their Maternity Support Services (MSS)/Infant Care Management (ICM) program through the Yakima County Maternal-Child Health Diversion Project. The project aimed to improve housing and health outcomes for pregnant and postpartum individuals who needed additional support. This is the second Building Changes project to integrate Diversion with maternal health services since the organization first piloted the approach in Pierce County.<sup>1</sup> Building Changes built on learnings from the pilot project to implement this model in a new community.

The Yakima County Maternal-Child Health Diversion Project operated from March 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023, and was funded through a social impact grant from Premera Blue Cross.

<sup>1</sup> The Perinatal Housing Grant pilot project in Pierce County, Washington, ran from November 1, 2016, to October 31, 2019, with the aim to improve housing and health outcomes for pregnant and postpartum people.

## Project Description

The Yakima County Maternal-Child Health Diversion Project expanded the use of Diversion to the health sector through the YNHS MSS/ICM program, a Medicaid program that provides pregnant and postpartum people with health services. Diversion is an approach that empowers people to resolve their housing crises quickly, safely, and permanently.

MSS/ICM case workers at YNHS were trained in Diversion and designated as MSS/ICM Diversion specialists. Diversion services were then offered to MSS/ICM clients who were identified as experiencing homelessness or housing instability by MSS/ICM case workers. Case workers referred their clients to an MSS/ICM Diversion specialist who would then enroll the clients in the project and provide Diversion services. If a client needed more support beyond what Diversion services could provide, the MSS/ICM Diversion specialist would perform a warm handoff to the YNHS Emergency Services team, which provides an array of housing services at YNHS.

To address other client needs identified by MSS/ICM case workers, the project also supported the creation of a “Baby Closet,” a stockpile of commonly needed items for the safety and health of infants—infant beds, diapers, cleaning kits, strollers, and blankets—available to give to clients immediately.

## Impact Story

In her 3rd trimester of pregnancy, Julia\* had recently moved to Yakima with her husband and daughter. Julia’s husband had found employment doing agricultural labor work, and they were temporarily staying with a relative while they looked for housing. They had no household items, furniture, or baby care items. Just 7 weeks before her due date, Julia connected with Yakima Neighborhood Health Services for nutrition and maternity support services. During her enrollment into the MSS/ICM program, she was also screened for housing needs and referred for Diversion services. With support from an MSS Diversion specialist, Julia identified a housing solution and created a plan to speak with her relative’s landlord about renting an apartment in the same building. She was then connected to a housing case manager and received assistance with the rental deposit and first and last month’s rent, a cleaning kit, several care items from the “Baby Closet,” and clothing and school supplies for her daughter. By the time Julia gave birth, she and her family were stably housed and had the supplies they needed for their new baby and for their daughter starting school.

*(\*Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.)*

## Evaluation Overview

Building Changes’ evaluation of the Yakima County Maternal-Child Health Diversion Project examined outcomes related to stable housing, the MSS/ICM unit and visit information, and demographic analysis of the families served. Data sources included the Homeless Management

Information System (HMIS), data captured in the YNHS Practice Management system, information gathered during monthly “learning circle” meetings, and a final interview with key YNHS staff involved with the project.<sup>2</sup>

## People Served

The project served 171 households enrolled in MSS or ICM over the two years it operated.

## Housing Status at Entry

- **Close to half, 49.1%**, were renting with no ongoing housing subsidy but facing a housing crisis.
- **31.0%** were living with a family or friend and facing a housing crisis.

## Household Characteristics at Entry

- **66.4%** had income from any source; the average income was \$1,329 per month.
- **70.7%** received benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and/or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program.
- **90.1%** were white households.
- **83.0%** were Hispanic/Latin(o)(a)(x) households.

## Family Characteristics

- **76.0%** were single-adult households.
- **2.2 people** was the average household size.

## Key Outcomes

- **69.3%** of the 101 households with exit data exited from the project to stable housing. This is approximately the same rate of successful exits as the Pierce County Perinatal Housing Grant pilot.<sup>3</sup>
- **64.3%** of successful exits used flexible funds and the average amount used among those who exited successfully was \$873 (standard deviation: \$799; minimum: \$88; maximum: \$4,000).
- **The average length of time enrolled was 72 days.** YNHS posits that the longer than average length of time seen in this Diversion project could be due to limitations in affordable housing that were created during the COVID-19 pandemic and staffing shortages.

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<sup>2</sup> Building Changes. (2023). *Yakima County Maternal-Child Health Diversion Project final evaluation report*. Seattle, WA: Building Changes. [https://buildingchanges.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023\\_YakimaMCHDEvaluation\\_Report.pdf](https://buildingchanges.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023_YakimaMCHDEvaluation_Report.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Building Changes. (2021). *Perinatal Housing Grant evaluation research brief*. Seattle, WA: Building Changes. [https://buildingchanges.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021\\_PHGEvaluation\\_ResearchBrief.pdf](https://buildingchanges.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021_PHGEvaluation_ResearchBrief.pdf).

- **24.4%** of the MSS or ICM units allocated to a client through those programs were used while enrolled in this project.
- During the project, the average number of MSS or ICM units used was 5 and the average number of visits by the MSS/ICM Diversion specialist was 1.5.

## Key Learnings

- Utilization of flexible funds, the Baby Closet, and warm handoffs helped staff build trust with clients, which in turn helped to ensure that clients stayed engaged with services. This is a key aspect of all client services, whether in health or housing.
- Health and housing programs can integrate to create better informed pathways of referrals and conduct warm handoffs for clients. This enabled staff to maintain good relationships with clients and helped clients get connected to the services they needed.
- MSS/ICM case managers equipped with Diversion skills are able to problem solve with clients facing a housing crisis, even after projects such as this end, and can provide better services overall.
- Through this project, the MSS/ICM team gained a better understanding of the impact of housing on clients' health, and as a result, discussing housing status is now a key part of MSS/ICM client case management.

***“With secure housing, participants were safer physically, mentally, emotionally, and financially. Without unpredictability related to housing, they could focus on accessing care for themselves and their children and connecting to other needed services.”***

—LISA ROOT, MSS/ICM Supervisor, Yakima Neighborhood Health Services