



**LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE**

*A progress report from Building Changes*

**JULY 2016**

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# COORDINATING EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSING SERVICES

*A STRATEGY TO IMPACT FAMILY HOMELESSNESS*

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# COORDINATING EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSING SERVICES

## A STRATEGY TO IMPACT FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

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# INTRODUCTION

*Q: Why is an organization with a mission to impact homelessness so focused on employment?*

*A: When parents of families experiencing homelessness are asked to name one thing that would most help get their family back on its feet, their most common answer is "employment," more than even housing or financial assistance.<sup>1</sup>*

Heads of homeless families face a unique set of barriers in their efforts to find and keep a job—not the least of which is the difficult juggling act of trying to secure steady employment and stable housing at the same time. They often feel stuck in a vicious cycle: Their prospects for becoming employed are diminished by their homelessness, and their prospects for becoming housed are diminished by their being unemployed.

To achieve synchronicity in reaching their goals, families experiencing homelessness need the resources and assistance offered through both the workforce and housing service systems. Yet the two systems tend to operate in separate silos, leaving some families to drift in between.

Homeless housing providers focus on getting families housed but do not have the expertise or time to help heads of those families find a job and generate the earned income necessary to keep that housing. As a result, heads of homeless families venture out on their own to find work. When they show up at the doorstep of the workforce system in search of employment services, they encounter built-in programmatic expectations and requirements that often do not accommodate the crisis-level circumstances they experience as a result of being homeless.

Several organizations across the country, including the National Center on Employment & Homelessness (NCEH), are working to eliminate the unique barriers that homeless people face in obtaining and retaining employment. NCEH is an initiative of Heartland Alliance, an international organization that works in communities in the U.S. to serve those who are homeless, living in poverty or seeking safety.

In Washington state, Building Changes has played a leading role over the past decade by advancing strategies designed to coordinate workforce and housing services for families experiencing homelessness. Our goal is to strengthen the commitments and capacities of both systems:

- **Workforce:** To effectively assist heads of homeless families to obtain employment, increase earned income and pursue career paths.
- **Homeless Housing:** To effectively assist families experiencing homelessness to rapidly obtain and maintain stable housing, and help heads of those families access employment services.

Building Changes is committed to sharing what we have learned through our experiences. This report represents our hope that the knowledge we are gaining will contribute to the ongoing emergence of a promising model for assisting job seekers in homeless families.

*Q: Why is Building Changes focused on employment?*

*A: Because our vision is for everyone in Washington to be stably housed.*

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<sup>1</sup> Westat, *Washington Youth & Families Fund Systems Initiative Evaluation, responses from Family Impact Study Baseline interviews, 467 respondents. Findings presented March 2015.*

# OUR WORK

Over the past decade, Building Changes has brought together the workforce and housing systems to get them to better understand one another and encourage collaboration between the two.

In partnership with the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County and WorkForce Central in Pierce County, we began in 2010 developing a navigator model for coordinating employment and housing services. That groundwork set the stage for the Employment Navigator Pilot Program in King County, which Building Changes funded and helped implement in 2013.

That pilot, spotlighted below, provides an illuminating case study in what we have learned so far through our experience in this work.

The King County pilot ended in 2015 but testing of the navigator model is continuing in Washington state through a research project funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Workforce Innovation Fund. That project, led by WorkForce Central, focuses on workforce and housing services in five counties: Pierce, Yakima, Whatcom, Skagit and Island. Building Changes provides project consultation through training and technical assistance. Marc Bolan Consulting is conducting a full evaluation of the project, due for release in June 2017.

A full listing of Building Changes' employment-related work can be found in the Appendix to this report.



## Spotlight: Employment Navigator Pilot Program

- Years: 2013-15
- Location: King County, Washington
- Partners:
  - » King County Department of Community and Human Services; City of Seattle Human Services Department; All Home King County; United Way of King County; King County Housing Authority; Seattle Housing Authority
  - » Local workforce service providers: Neighborhood House, Career Connections, YWCA Works
  - » Local Rapid Re-Housing providers: Catholic Community Services, Neighborhood House, Wellspring Family Services, Solid Ground, YWCA

### **Rapid Re-Housing //**

Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) has evolved into the core and primary practice in Washington state and across the country for quickly moving families out of homelessness and into stable housing, such as a rental apartment. Under RRH, families experiencing homelessness receive rental subsidies that gradually taper off, which means the families need to generate other sources of income to pay the rent for their new housing in the long term.

The **Employment Navigator Pilot Program** in King County specifically targeted homeless families receiving RRH services. It was designed to assist heads of homeless families to secure steady employment, increase earned income and maintain stable housing.

Rapid Re-Housing is most successful when it provides people the ability to both become housed and take over their own rent in the future.

*“Stable housing is inseparably connected with employment and financial empowerment.”*

–Tanner Phillips, senior housing stability manager. Neighborhood House

## Cross-System Partnership //

The pilot included a formal agreement that connected RRH providers to designated workforce service providers. The partnership began with each system and each set of providers defining specific roles, goals and procedures.

Housing providers referred families experiencing homelessness to workforce providers at the onset of RRH services. Under the cross-system agreement, five different Rapid Re-Housing providers in King County referred participating families to an **employment navigator**, a staff person working for one of three workforce providers.

## Participants //

Participation in the pilot was voluntary. The families that opted to participate faced multiple barriers to reaching their concurrent employment and housing goals. In addition to having very low earned income, other barriers included: outstanding debt; past evictions; criminal history; pending civil matters; domestic violence history; physical disability; behavioral health conditions; and limited work history.

### Demographic Profile *(based on 282 heads of homeless families, at program entry)*

- **Median age:** 34
- **Gender:** 87% were female
- **Family Type:** 54% were single parents
- **Education:** 27% had no high school diploma or GED

*Source: Employment Navigator Pilot Project, King County preliminary findings. (2016). Unpublished raw data. Analysis conducted by Clarus Research and Building Changes.*

## Navigator Role //

The employment navigator staff person played the role of helping the family build a connection to—and comfort with—local workforce programs and resources. The navigator worked directly with the head of the family to assess and address the unique barriers standing in the way of finding and keeping a job. In many cases, the navigator referred heads of families to training opportunities designed to help them either find a job or get a better job. Often, the navigator customized the employment services to account for the family’s homeless crisis. Families experiencing homelessness likely would not receive such individualized service if they entered the workforce system outside of this structured approach.

*“Without the increased income that clients earned through jobs that (the Career Connections navigator) helped them to find, many of our families would not have been able to secure housing in the first place, or maintain it without our subsidy.”* –Theresa Curry, housing advocate, Solid Ground

## Team Approach //

An employment navigator does not work in isolation but instead convenes a cross-sector team to work together with the family. The team approach is designed to facilitate collaboration and communication between the different systems working with the same family, and result in coordinated service and resource delivery.

The team for the King County pilot consisted of the family, the navigator (representing the workforce provider), the family's RRH case manager (representing the housing provider), and other key service providers that also served the family. Since most of the participating families were living in emergency shelters at the time of this pilot, the shelter provider tended to be the third member of the team.

Team members met regularly to consult with one another and coordinate services with the family. They shared service plans and resources, and talked often with the family about its goals and progress.

*“Employment navigators are a part of a team that forms a community of support for those they serve. The team works best when housing case managers and employment navigators meet together with the families from day one, and when roles, goals and expectations are clearly defined.”* –Tanner Phillips

## Providers //

The three workforce service providers in the King County pilot (Neighborhood House, Career Connections and YWCA Works) all have a history of working with families experiencing homelessness. These agencies developed their commitment and expertise over the years from a supportive community of funders, including the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, the King County Department of Community and Human Services, the City of Seattle and United Way of King County. The providers had experience not just in delivering workforce services to people experiencing homelessness, but also other social services funded by federal, state, county or city agencies. These connections to outside resources can prove helpful for heads of homeless families seeking employment services.

## Community Connections //

Heads of homeless families often need access to additional community services to overcome their unique barriers to employment and housing. The navigator team worked together to connect the family to services and resources beyond the workforce and housing systems—anything to help the head of the family find a job, keep a job and maintain stable housing. This support included: legal aid to clear up past civil or criminal matters, childcare for when the employee is at work, and instruction in family budgeting and asset building to help the family get maximum leverage from its earned income.

**By combining the areas of knowledge and expertise of its members, the cross-sector team focused on accomplishing the following for a family:**

- Addressing a range of conditions that impact employment and housing, including criminal history, behavioral health, physical disability, outstanding debt, pending civil matters, wage garnishment, and undocumented worker status
- Accessing safety-net programs and public entitlements that can ease the transition to employment and housing
- Obtaining resources necessary for finding or keeping a job, such as transportation, child care and work clothing

## Flex Funds //

A portion of the grant money for this pilot was set aside for “flex funds,” which paid for services and resources to directly and immediately help a family resolve its most urgent barriers to employment. Flex funds, however, could not be used to subsidize rent.

### In the King County Employment Navigator Pilot:

- **70%** of heads of homeless families received some amount of flex funds
- **\$452.60** was the estimated amount spent on flex funds per head of homeless family that received them
- **89%** of flex funds were used to cover expenses related to keeping a job, such as work-related supplies, assistance and materials

*Source: Employment Navigator Pilot Project, King County preliminary findings. (2016). Unpublished raw data. Analysis conducted by Clarus Research and Building Changes.*

## Lasting Support //

The employment navigator coached family members on how to self-navigate the workforce system so that they could benefit from its services in the future. The navigator also continued to work with heads of homeless families after job placement occurred in order to help them retain employment, pursue wage progression and further their career development.

## Learning Circle //

With direct-service staff and supervisors at the table, a “learning circle” was held every four to six weeks. The learning circle provided a venue and forum for partners to examine what was and was not working in the pilot, make adjustments, share knowledge and resources, and review data.



### **The Employment Navigator model tailors workforce services for families experiencing homelessness to accommodate their crisis-level circumstances. This is done through:**

- Individualized assistance and support
- Additional time to achieve employment and training outcomes
- Referral and service agreements between workforce and housing providers
- Greater access to resources outside the workforce and housing systems
- Lessons on how to self-navigate the workforce system so families can use it again in the future

# LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE: LESSONS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Building Changes has funded, helped launch and provided technical support for a number of innovative pilots in Washington state designed to address employment opportunities for families experiencing homelessness.

This decade's worth of work has attracted the attention of state and federal policymakers, and brought additional investment to the state for improving access to employment services for heads of homeless families.

Through our experience, Building Changes has learned several important lessons about how best to assist heads of homeless families who want to work—and need to work. We also have encountered several challenges as we have tested various strategies.

The following sections of this report summarize those real-world **lessons**, in addition to acknowledging the **challenges** and offering constructive **recommendations** for those in the workforce and homeless housing systems that wish to better coordinate employment and housing services for families experiencing homelessness.

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## LESSONS

### **Make employment an essential component of all Rapid Re-Housing models.**

Under the practice of Rapid Re-Housing (RRH), families experiencing homelessness are placed into stable housing quickly through the help of targeted services and short-term rental subsidies. But what happens when that temporary subsidy expires?

The goal of RRH should be for families not only to find housing quickly, but also to be able to adequately support themselves once they are housed—so they can remain housed. That's why Building Changes believes so strongly that effective and meaningful connections to employment services should be integrated within all RRH models. RRH designs vary, and some do not include the essential component of employment.

To improve upon the success of RRH and reduce the number of families returning to homelessness, RRH providers need to discuss with families their employment and income situations, including how they will be able to pay for their new apartment after their RRH rental subsidy gradually zeroes out. RRH providers should not be expected to provide employment services themselves, but rather should develop referral and service coordination agreements with local workforce providers that possess that expertise.

### **Start conversations with families about earned income and employment, and refer them to the workforce system as early as possible.**

Housing and employment goals for families experiencing homelessness must be addressed concurrently. Housing providers therefore need to begin conversations with families about earned income and employment as soon as they begin working to get them housed. As housing providers are not experts in employment services, they need to refer families to workforce service providers under a coordinated partnership between the two sectors.

In partnership with the King County Department of Community and Human Services, All Home King County and the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, Building Changes currently is funding a new pilot that will start those conversations about income and employment even earlier—at Coordinated Entry, which is considered the “front door” to the homeless-response system. Under this approach, families experiencing homelessness have the option of being connected to workforce service providers during their initial assessment process. (See Appendix, Current Projects, King County, “Front Door to Employment” pilot)

### **Translate the independent interests of each system into a common language of shared goals.**

Though they occupy different spots on the service spectrum, the workforce and homeless housing systems have mutual clients—and share many of the same goals. Both strive toward the same result: Economic self-sufficiency and a high quality of life for every person and every family. Workforce has a goal of full employment, a strong economy and economic self-sufficiency for the people they serve. A goal of the homeless-response system is to stably house people experiencing the crisis of homelessness and lay the foundation for a high quality of life.

While the workforce system traditionally has been challenged to serve heads of homeless families, it is highly motivated to equitably and effectively serve all who seek their services.

The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), reauthorized in 2015 as a replacement for the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, reformed workforce systems across the country. The act seeks to improve job seekers’ access to employment services, helping them to be more successful and competitive in a global economy.<sup>2</sup>

As part of Washington state’s implementation of WIOA, Gov. Jay Inslee directed the state’s Workforce Board to “help more people find and keep jobs that lead to economic self-sufficiency, with a focus on disadvantaged populations.”<sup>3</sup> WIOA specifically designates homeless individuals among the 14 populations facing barriers to employment and in particular need of improved workforce system access and assistance.<sup>4</sup> As a result, **WIOA funding can be tapped to test new pilots in this area.**

When encouraging workforce providers to engage in projects with housing providers, frame the partnership around issues that will resonate with the workforce system. Meeting the obligations of WIOA is one way to make the case. Another is to demonstrate that by placing more homeless people in jobs with skill and wage advancement opportunities, workforce system objectives of improving the employment rate and impacting the economy can be met.

To bring housing providers to the table, frame the partnership around the truism that employment is a key strategy for helping people move from homelessness to stable housing. People who are homeless often point to being unemployed as a primary reason for their homelessness.<sup>5</sup> Numerous studies have found that increased income earned through a job is one of the strongest predictors for people emerging out of homelessness—and staying out.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> United States Dept. of Labor. (n.d.) WIOA Overview, Employment & Training Administration. Retrieved from: <https://www.doleta.gov/WIOA/Overview.cfm> (last visited July 12, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Talent and Prosperity for All: The Strategic Plan for Unlocking Washington’s Workforce Potential, Washington State Workforce Training & Education Coordinating Bd. 2 (2016). Retrieved from: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-113publ128/pdf/PLAW-113publ128.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, Public Law. 113-128, 128 Stat. 1428-29, 1433, 1442. Retrieved from: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-113publ128/pdf/PLAW-113publ128.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Heartland Alliance, National Initiatives. *Transitional Jobs and the Value of Employment*. Page 4.

<sup>6</sup> Heartland Alliance, National Initiatives. *Transitional Jobs and the Value of Employment*. Page 5.

**Actively engage all heads of homeless families regardless of whether they appear ready to become employed.**

The idea that homeless people are not ready to work is a myth worth busting. In truth, heads of homeless families tend to be highly motivated to find a job so they can earn the income they need to get and keep their family housed.

Although heads of homeless families often face multiple barriers to employment, those obstacles never should be treated as excuses for not working to get them employed quickly. Workforce services for families experiencing homelessness should focus on identifying and resolving those barriers, and proceed on the assumption that the client is ready to be successfully employed.

This may mean that the workforce system is providing services to heads of homeless families when gaining employment is not their top area of focus, or is just one among several issues being addressed at the same time, including housing.

A workforce services provider should acknowledge the multiple barriers to employment by creating a flexible timeline and an action plan for the job seeker that reflect the complexities surrounding family homelessness.

**Connect families to resources and services beyond employment and housing.**

Coordinating employment and housing services is difficult enough. But what happens when families need the resources and services of other community providers in order to become successfully employed and housed?

Effective partnerships between workforce and housing keep an eagle-eye focus on removing all barriers of employment and housing for families experiencing homelessness—including those best resolved outside their two systems.

For example, heads of homeless families may need additional education, legal aid, health care or other social services to help get them over the hump. The workforce and housing systems should take full advantage of the connections they currently have with providers of other community resources—as well as build new relationships. It can be extremely helpful to have workforce providers in a project that actually deliver those social services themselves in addition to their employment work.

When providers are able to make the connections, they can complete the circle of support for families experiencing homelessness.

**Maintain a pool of “flex funds” that can be accessed and distributed quickly to help families address their most urgent barriers to employment.**

Numerous circumstances can complicate the head of a homeless family’s ability to find employment and be effective at work—from securing affordable childcare, to being able to commute to the job every day, to having appropriate clothing for work or job interviews. Access to flexible funds to remove or resolve those immediate barriers can be essential to a family’s success.

Flex funds cover expenses related to finding and keeping a job, providing the additional assistance that heads of homeless families need *immediately* in order to make their employment a lasting success. By definition, flex funds are not used to help families pay for rent. For an individual family, flex funds may total a small amount of dollars, yet they can make a huge amount of difference.

The turnaround time for accessing flex funds is important. Heads of homeless families should not have to wait months, or even weeks, to address urgent concerns that could result in losing their job. Flexibility on how to spend the funds also is key.

**The workforce system does not need to develop separately funded specialized employment services for families experiencing homelessness.**

The goal of the employment navigator model is to coordinate workforce and housing services, and to provide better connections to **existing** employment services, not to create a separate line of service.

To achieve this, the workforce system needs to increase its capacity and expertise to serve families experiencing homelessness, which supports the intent of WIOA. The housing system in turn needs to “vocalize” by incorporating conversations about income, employment and related resources into its housing stability assessments and planning. Working together, the systems can provide cross-training and consultation, and develop referral agreements, points of contact and service coordination practices.

The spotlighted King County pilot benefited from private funds to initially support employment navigator positions. In the human services arena, however, navigating across systems is becoming a common approach for serving people who need assistance from multiple systems to resolve complicated situations. At its core, the King County pilot simply adapted an approach for the way the workforce system already does its business and applied it to families experiencing homelessness.

**Heads of homeless families who already are employed may need or want workforce services, too.**

For people transitioning from homelessness to stable housing, getting a better job or being able to keep their existing job should not be undervalued.

Pilot programs designed to coordinate workforce and housing services should be opened not just to people who are unemployed, but also those who are employed but seek to earn more income through additional work hours, a raise or a higher-paying new job. Employed people who need help to retain their job also should be welcomed.



## Spotlight: Cross-system coordination works best when partners “stay in their lanes”

When workforce and housing each focus on the area it knows best, while working together in a coordinated fashion, heads of homeless families can leverage maximum benefit from both systems.

Engaging the systems in a partnership begins by identifying common needs and goals, and understanding the specific resources and expertise that each brings to the table. These kinds of conversations will lead to the realization that “Our people are your people,” meaning that the systems have mutual clients who would benefit from coordinated service delivery.

The idea is to bring both systems together in a strategic and structured partnership to help families experiencing homelessness meet both their employment and housing goals.

The employment navigator and other models designed to coordinate employment and housing services are built on a cross-systems approach that relies on alignment at two key levels:

- 1. System level partnership**
- 2. Direct service level partnership**

Roles of each system and direct-service provider must be defined and communication between them must be ongoing.

**System level partnership** occurs when the workforce and housing systems agree to work together to serve mutual clients—in this case, families experiencing homelessness—while acknowledging and respecting the specific expertise and resources of each system. Each system maintains its “lane” of expertise when serving a mutual client, but each depends on the other to carry out its role in order for the family to reach the desired outcome of stable housing supported by earned employment income.

How the systems draw up their lanes is up to them—but a formal structure needs to be in place so each system knows and recognizes its defined roles and desired goals, and those of the partner. Although each system may draw up its own measures for accountability, together they need a coordinated plan for collecting data and tracking outcomes.

**Direct service level partnership** occurs when providers detail their procedures for connecting and coordinating services. In other words, it is the roadmap for how a system level partnership works in practice. Families also are active partners at this level, as they have a direct say over their individual employment and housing plans.

In King County, each of the five Rapid Re-Housing providers that participated in the pilot were matched with one of three workforce providers. For example, Catholic Community Services, which provides Rapid Re-Housing services, knew to refer its families to Neighborhood House, which employed the navigator. Successful coordination occurs through a formal structure. ***It is not enough for housing providers simply to refer heads of homeless families to the workforce system, send them on their way and hope for the best.***

In most cases, the cross-system partnership needs to expand beyond workforce and housing, creating a more balanced team to support and work with the family. A third partner is selected based on family profile. In the King County pilot, that additional player was emergency shelter providers because most participants in the pilot were staying in their facilities. In other pilots, the third partner has been the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services because many of the participants were receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or enrolled in Washington WorkFirst, which are programs the agency oversees.

Like workforce and housing, the third partner also stays in its own lane, resulting in harmonized services and a wide thoroughfare of support.

# CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Challenge: Cross-system coordination does not come naturally.**

- Workforce and housing systems may have the best of intentions to work together to effectively serve families experiencing homelessness, but coordination between the two systems takes work and time to build.

### ***Recommendation: Constantly grow and nurture the partnership through ongoing and effective communication.***

- Communication between the two systems must be ongoing. To develop a strong partnership, regularly discuss not just the progress of mutual clients, but also how the partnership is working overall.
- The two systems not only have to communicate regularly, they have to communicate effectively. Every service system operates with its own terminology. Certain terms mean something to them but may translate as jargon to others. The workforce and housing systems should develop a shared glossary of terms to ensure that definitions are clear between the two. Having clear definitions will help the systems coordinate their data so they are not only talking about the same things, but also measuring the progress of the same things. That's how we ultimately will find out what approaches are working best.

### ***Recommendation: Develop a learning circle as a mechanism for sharing collective wisdom.***

- A learning circle is a participatory structure where various stakeholders come together in regularly scheduled meetings to share resources, review data and reflect on challenges while focusing on shared goals. It is a particularly effective tool for cross-sector projects, allowing partners to reflect on the development of new practices and the building of new relationships.

### ***Recommendation: Cross-pollinate the boards that govern workforce and housing.***

- Collaboration needs to occur at both the leadership level and on the ground. Having homeless housing experts sit on workforce boards, and vice versa, is a good way to share institutional knowledge and erase institutional barriers. Cross-pollination already has begun to occur in Washington state in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties.

## **Challenge: Flex funds are hard to find, and can take a while to retrieve.**

- Flexibility and quick turnaround time are essential to making flex funds work. Governments, however, restrict how their dollars may be used, and accessing those funds can take a long time.

### ***Recommendation: Be exhaustive in identifying existing sources for flex funds, and coordinate efforts to make the dollars available quickly.***

- Access resources for families experiencing homelessness that already are available through other systems and means, such as free transit passes, subsidized child care and volunteer legal aid.
- Look toward private foundations to support flex funds as they tend to put fewer restrictions on their grant dollars.
- Partner with other private organizations to create a pool of flex funds that can be shared.

## Challenge: For some families experiencing homelessness, additional income from employment may result in a paradox of actually having less money in their pocket.

- Any increase in earned income for a family experiencing homelessness is considered a positive. But additional income also can bring about consequences for a family. For example:
  - » A family may lose eligibility for public benefit programs like TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) or SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).
  - » A family's existing rental housing subsidy may reduce or vanish when income level increases.
  - » Wages may be garnished due to pending debts or legal issues, such as child support.
  - » Having a job may incur additional expenses for a family, such as childcare or transportation for commuting to and from work.

### ***Recommendation: Help families with “benefit planning” so they can budget for the inevitable bumps and dips in future income.***

- When tailoring an employment and housing plan for the family, workforce and housing providers need to be sensitive to a family's particular income situation—not just at the time services are rendered but also into the foreseeable future.
- Workforce and housing providers should actively prepare families for a “benefit cliff”—the point where public benefits end because earned income has increased.
- Workforce and housing providers should consult with their peers in other areas, such as TANF, a housing authority or legal aid, to better understand the consequences that additional income will have on a family's continuing eligibility for public benefits and subsidies.
- Workforce providers should coach families to be able to navigate the workforce system on their own so, over time, they can return for assistance in increasing their earned income and advancing their careers.



## Spotlight: The Challenge Of Data Coordination

Strong data provides the evidence needed to drive informed decision-making in the areas of practice, policy and funding. Through data, we can learn:

- What models and approaches work best for families experiencing homelessness.
- What services families need, and when they need them.
- Who within the population is being underserved.
- Where resources can be invested to help families most effectively and efficiently.

Data is more than just a bunch of numbers. It allows us to make sense of the numbers and use what we have learned to move forward.

If we are to effectively evaluate—and ultimately improve upon—the models that coordinate employment and housing services, we need to be able to accurately collect, track and report employment, earned income and housing outcomes of project participants. And for that, we need data from the workforce and housing systems to relate well to one another.

## No Simple Solution //

We have learned that data coordination between workforce and housing does not occur organically. For it to happen, tremendous commitment and ongoing communication will be required. Both systems will need to devote the same time and attention to data as they do to their partnership itself.

The biggest complication is that workforce and housing use different systems to track their client data. Housing uses the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to collect and track detailed data on those who have received homeless housing services. Workforce is unfamiliar with HMIS, and uses different data systems from state to state. In Washington state, the workforce system used the Services, Knowledge and Information Exchange System (SKIES) until this spring when it switched to WorkSource Integrated Technology (WIT). Workforce collects detailed employment and income data but does not specifically identify families experiencing homelessness or track housing status.

For the King County Employment Navigator Pilot, Building Changes and our partners attempted to customize HMIS for the workforce system to use, but this did not prove successful.

## Plan Ahead //

We do not underestimate the difficulty in achieving data coordination between the two systems. Upfront planning, however, can only help. At the commencement of their partnership, the workforce and housing systems would be wise to convene meetings between their respective data experts to address the challenges, and then work together to develop an action plan.

A possible plan could be for workforce and housing to enter into a formal data-sharing agreement. This means they would spell out how data from each system would be collected and tracked. It also would mean agreeing in advance on definitions to ensure that they are clear between the two systems. For example, "income" or "housing status" may mean different things to workforce and housing providers. When data is entered based on vague definitions, this can lead to unreliable tracking of outcomes.

## Recommendations //

Building Changes makes the following recommendations regarding workforce and WIOA implementation:

- Data should be collected both at the start and end of a homeless family receiving workforce services (intake and exit). This would establish a baseline for tracking the effectiveness of employment services to homeless families. Examples of data to be collected at program intake and exit are:
  - » Housing status to allow for better tracking of people experiencing homelessness.
  - » Earned income to ensure that households can support housing needs and gauge the effectiveness of workforce services.
- Outcome data should be disaggregated by race and ethnicity. This would allow for more precise evaluation of whether services are helping reduce racial disproportionality in family homelessness, and help identify for whom the program models work best.
- A common agreed upon definition of homelessness should be utilized by the workforce system and developed in partnership with the homeless housing system. The workforce system should enter housing status at program entry and exit. This will help both the workforce and homeless housing systems gain a better understanding of the families being served by both systems.

# APPENDIX

As part of our work to impact homelessness in Washington state, Building Changes has been engaged in employment work for nearly a decade. We fund and help implement pilots primarily through our grants and related capacity building. We also provide technical support for projects. The following is a list of our current and past work in this area.

## Current Projects //

### Statewide

- Supported projects that engage education and employment systems so they can better serve the needs of youth and young adults who are homeless or struggling to remain housed, with a special focus on LGBTQ youth and youth of color. The projects are designed to help these young people secure jobs, continue their education and maintain stable housing.
  - » **2016-18**
  - » **Grantees:** Career Path Services, Spokane County; Janus Youth Programs, Clark County; Multi-Service Center, King County; Somali Youth & Family Club, King County; Workforce Snohomish, Snohomish County; Yakima Neighborhood Health Services, Yakima County
- Providing training and technical assistance for a Housing and Employment Navigator research project implemented through three regional workforce councils in Washington and funded through a U.S. Department of Labor, Workforce Innovation Fund grant.
  - » **2012-17**
  - » **Partners:** WorkForce Central, Pierce County; South Central Workforce Council, Yakima County; Northwest Workforce Council, Whatcom, Skagit and Island counties; Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS); local housing providers in each service region

### King County

- Leading a three-year capacity building partnership to connect the region's homeless housing and workforce systems to benefit homeless households. This initiative is part of the Connections Project funded by Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity and made possible through the support of the Oak Foundation and Melville Charitable Trust.
  - » **2015-18**
  - » **Partners:** King County Department of Community and Human Services; All Home King County; Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County; United Way of King County; City of Seattle Human Services Department; Heartland Alliance
- Supporting a "Front Door to Employment" pilot that connects families experiencing homelessness to workforce services at Coordinated Entry.
  - » **2016-17**
  - » **Grantees:** YWCA Works, Neighborhood House, TRAC Associates
  - » **Partners:** King County Department of Community and Human Services; All Home King County; Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County

## **Snohomish County**

- Supporting a Rapid Re-Employment Project pilot that provides employment assistance to families in two homeless shelters as they undergo Rapid Re-Housing services.
  - » **2016-19**
  - » **Grantee:** Housing Hope
  - » **Partners:** YWCA Seattle King Snohomish; Interfaith Association of Northwest Washington; Snohomish County Human Services Department
- Supporting a pilot to provide employment services to families experiencing homelessness that are on TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) and have behavioral health conditions.
  - » **2015-17**
  - » **Grantee:** Sunrise Services/Community Trades and Careers
  - » **Partners:** Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery; Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF); Snohomish County Human Services Department; local behavioral health and homeless housing providers

## Past Projects //

### Statewide

- Led the Economic Opportunities Initiative (EOI) to provide capacity building to 25 nonprofits in 19 counties. EOI included training, technical assistance and grants to deliver, expand and sustain social service programs that helped low-income individuals with employment services, career development and increased access to state and federal benefits.
  - » **2010-12**
  - » **Partners:** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Strengthening Communities Fund; Paul G. Allen Family Foundation; The Boeing Company; Clegg & Associates; 25 nonprofits across the state

### King County

- Supported an Employment Navigator Pilot that paired employment navigation services with Rapid Re-Housing services for families experiencing homelessness.
  - » **Years: 2013-15**
  - » **Partners:** King County Department of Community and Human Services; City of Seattle Human Services Department; All Home King County; United Way of King County; King County Housing Authority; Seattle Housing Authority; Local workforce service providers: Neighborhood House, Career Connections, YWCA Works; Local Rapid Re-Housing providers: Catholic Community Services, Neighborhood House, Wellspring Family Services, Solid Ground, YWCA
- Provided funds to Career Connections to be used as flexible financial assistance to families experiencing homelessness that were participating in employment services.
  - » **2012-13**
  - » **Partners:** Career Connections; King County Department of Community and Human Services; local homeless housing providers
- Supported a Housing and Employment Navigator pilot.
  - » **2010-12**
  - » **Partners:** YWCA (employment navigator provider); Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County (co-funder/project design); local transitional housing providers

### Pierce County

- Supported the Launching into Employment Assistance Program (LEAP) to provide transitional employment and job retention services to heads of homeless families transitioning out of homelessness with a goal to increase their income and reduce returns to homelessness.
  - » **2014-16**
  - » **Partners:** Pierce County; local employment service providers (Career Path Services, Pierce County Community Connections); local homeless housing providers
- Supported a project to increase access to—and participation in—sector training and certification programs for heads of homeless families.
  - » **2012-16**
  - » **Partner:** WorkForce Central

- Supported “Education to Employment,” a community and technical college navigator to link homeless households with training and educational opportunities, and to connect homeless students to housing services.
  - » **2013-15**
  - » **Partners:** Making a Difference in Community; Pierce College; Tacoma Community College; Bates Technical College; Clover Park Technical College
- Supported a “McKinney-Vento Workforce Project” to provide case management and workforce services to parents of students identified as homeless in three Pierce County school districts.
  - » **2013-15**
  - » **Partners:** Tacoma, Puyallup and Sumner school districts; Courage360; WorkForce Central
- Supported a Housing and Employment Navigator pilot.
  - » **2011-13**
  - » **Partners:** WorkForce Central; Department of Social and Health Services; Pierce County Housing Authority; local transitional housing providers

### **Snohomish County**

- Supported “Bridges to Employment,” a housing and employment navigator project.
  - » **2013-16**
  - » **Partners:** Workforce Snohomish; local coordinated entry and homeless housing providers
- Supported two projects to link previously homeless families residing in subsidized housing to employment and training services.
  - » **2013-16**
  - » **Partners:** Everett Housing Authority; Housing Authority of Snohomish County; Workforce Snohomish
- Supported a College Readiness and Retention project to increase access to—and participation in—sector training and career pathway credential programs for heads of homeless families, and create a Life Skills curriculum.
  - » **2011-14**
  - » **Partners:** Housing Hope; Snohomish County; Everett Community College; Edmonds Community College
- Provided funding for the Integrated Economic Opportunities and Housing Services pilot to link families experiencing homelessness to workforce services.
  - » **2011-12**
  - » **Partners:** Workforce Snohomish; YWCA Snohomish County

**For additional resources**, please visit the library page on our website, which links to resources on a variety of topics, including Employment, Economic Stability and Rapid Re-Housing: [www.buildingchanges.org/library](http://www.buildingchanges.org/library)

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Building Changes pulls together government, philanthropy and nonprofits in a collective effort to impact homelessness in Washington state. We act as a driver for innovative strategies that help youth and families emerge out of homelessness and maintain stable housing. We advocate for effective practices and fair policies—and adequate investments to sustain them.

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