



Washington Families Fund High-Needs Family Model: Six-Month Evaluation Findings

High-Needs Families Model—Who We're Serving

A growing number of families in Washington State suffer from chronic homelessness. For these families, housing and economic stability is often elusive as they struggle with the complex issues that hinder their ability to remain in permanent housing. Without help they lose hope.

The Washington Families Fund, led by Building Changes, is addressing this issue by providing grants to community organizations reaching out to and serving families with the highest needs. Building Changes supports our community partners to make continuous improvements to a permanent, supportive housing model specifically designed to help families struggling with the cycle of homelessness.

The model emphasizes family stability, and in addition to providing housing, it provides supportive services that address the serious barriers that undermine that stability. These barriers can include mental illness, chronic health problems, chemical dependency, domestic violence, involvement with Child Protective Services, and/or criminal histories.

Begun in 2008, the High-Needs Family model was designed in conjunction with an intensive research/evaluation effort. The evaluator, Westat, in coordination with Building Changes, is assessing data from families participating in these programs with the goal of better understanding how permanent, supportive housing impacts the lives of families who have experienced chronic homelessness. This evaluation is unprecedented in both its design and rigor, and also in its size. Moving forward this study will evaluate the largest number of families being served by these groundbreaking strategies and solutions.

Six-Month Evaluation—What We're Learning

Our most recent data about the High-Needs Family models (collected through September 2010) is the product of a six-month follow-up to a baseline assessment (collected through 2009) of families enrolled in the programs and participating in the evaluation. This is our earliest look at how the programs and services are impacting struggling families. Here's what we're learning:

- **Service Needs:** On average, families are indicating fewer service needs at six-month assessment than at baseline (3.3 service needs at baseline, 2.5 at six months).
- **Improved Mental Health:**¹ At baseline 63 percent of heads of household indicated moderate or severe levels of anxiety. At six months that number dropped to 38 percent.
 - Nearly 75 percent of families received mental health services in the first six months
- **Improved Health Care:** Families report a routine source of health care: 78 percent of heads of households had a routine source at intake. At six months that number increased to 93 percent. 93 percent of children at intake and 100 percent at six months.
 - Families report high rates of insurance: approximately 95 percent
- **School Stability:**² Absences among school children has decreased.

¹ Data from this and other studies reveal that the move into permanent housing improves mental health.

² School absences are due to illness, not the child's inability to participate in or get to school due to homelessness.

This early data does not show significant change among these families at this time, and we attribute to the short duration of time (six months) that the reporting families have been in the programs. We will continue to use it to inform our future grantmaking and to identify areas for additional technical assistance and intervention that will help improve programs and support case managers to better meet the needs of their clients. More importantly, the data we continue to collect will assist us in raising awareness about solutions that support increased stability among families experiencing chronic homelessness.

Next Steps

Going forward we will have a richer story to tell. As programs continue to enroll and serve new families, the number of participants will increase. We will develop a better context within which to understand our evaluations by linking the data from our baseline and follow-up assessments to a more extensive set of data from an integrated system maintained by the Department of Social and Health Services. This additional data link will enhance our evaluation in two ways. It will enable us to compare a group of families not enrolled in supportive housing programs with those who are. Additionally, it will paint a more detailed picture of the constellation of services received by families, the cost of those services and their related outcomes.

We will follow up this report³ with another interim report scheduled to be released in early 2012. The final report for the High-Needs Family model will be released in early 2013.

About Building Changes

Building Changes has supported individuals and families throughout Washington State for more than 20 years and has led the Washington Families Fund since its creation in 2004. Building Changes unites public and private partners to create innovative solutions, delivering expert advice, grantmaking and advocacy for lasting change. Building Changes works with housing and service providers and related government entities to serve more than 8,000 homeless individuals annually, including homeless families with children, homeless single adults. For more information, visit: www.buildingchanges.org.

About the Washington Families Fund

The Washington Families Fund is a public-private partnership created by the Washington State Legislature in 2004 to ensure that homeless families with children have the supportive services and housing they need to move from crisis to stability. Contributions by public entities and 24 philanthropic partners now total \$28 million. To date, the Fund has awarded nearly \$18 million to 48 programs across Washington State. Nearly 1,300 families—including 2,248 children and 1,695 adults—have benefited from these programs.

³ "Washington Families Fund High-Needs Family Program: Year 2 Evaluation." Prepared by Westat for Building Changes. March 2011. Available online: <http://www.buildingchanges.org>