



# Integrating Diversion into Maternal Health Programs in Yakima & Pierce Counties



Building Changes successfully worked with two communities in Washington State on projects that integrated Diversion into Maternity Support Services (MSS) & Infant Case Management (ICM). The projects expanded the use of Diversion—a light touch and person-centered housing approach—to the maternal and child health sector with the goal of meeting the housing needs of pregnant and postpartum persons experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. The projects met people where they were, providing Diversion services where they were already receiving health services.

## What is Diversion?

Diversion is an approach that empowers people to resolve their housing crisis quickly, safely, and permanently. It includes creative problem solving to generate custom, person-centered solutions; light case management to reduce barriers; and one-time financial assistance when needed to cover expenses such as move-in costs, security deposits, eviction debts, and car repairs.

## What is MSS and ICM?

MSS provides pregnant and postpartum people with preventative health and education services to support a healthy pregnancy and baby. Starting after MSS ends, ICM continues up to a baby's first birthday and supports families to learn and access community resources. Both MSS and ICM are part of the state's Medicaid First Steps program, helping families in low-income households.

MSS and ICM program data show that women of color are using these services comparatively more than their white peers, and in the past has shown significantly fewer low-birth weights for Hispanic and African American mothers.

While assisting clients with housing needs is allowed under MSS and ICM, additional time units are not allotted for this usage. Additionally, MSS and ICM caseworkers often have little experience assisting clients with housing needs. Training these caseworkers in Diversion proved to be an effective way to bridge the health and housing systems, while building on the expertise of providers that were trusted by their clients, had provided them with services previously, and were familiar with their circumstances.

## Our Projects

### *Perinatal Housing Grant (PHG) in Pierce County*

This pilot project launched by Building Changes operated from November 1, 2016 to October 31, 2019 and served 680 households. MSS workers at Step-by-Step in Pierce County were trained in the techniques of Diversion. Once trained, MSS staff initiated brainstorming conversations with their clients to help them identify realistic prospects for stable housing that exist within their universe of support.

MSS staff then followed through with the potential housing solutions identified by their clients and provided one-time financial assistance—flex funds—as needed, to cover expenses standing in the way of the pregnant or postpartum person securing stable housing with their family. If greater housing support was needed, MSS staff connected clients to housing programs within the county through a warm handoff.

## ***Yakima County Maternal–Child Health Diversion Project***

After the success of the Pierce County project, Building Changes launched a second project in Yakima County in partnership with Yakima Neighborhood Health Services (YNHS). The project operated from March 1, 2021 to March 31, 2023, on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, and served 171 households. MSS/ICM staff at YNHS were trained in Diversion. These MSS/ICM Diversion specialists then offered Diversion services to MSS/ICM clients experiencing homelessness or housing instability. If a client needed more support beyond Diversion, the MSS/ICM Diversion specialist would perform a warm handoff to the YNHS Emergency Services team, which provides an array of housing services. The Yakima County project also created a “Baby Closet,” a stockpile of items such as, infant beds, diapers, cleaning kits, strollers, and blankets, which were immediately available to give to clients.

## **Who Was Served**



More than half of households were unstably housed when entering both projects (81.9% in Pierce County and over 50% in Yakima County).



The majority of households were headed by a single adult.



Less than half of households reported earned income in each project.



The average household size was approximately 2 people for both projects.

## **Key Outcomes**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Pierce County</b>	<b>Yakima County</b>
Exited to stable housing:	69.7%	69.3%
Those stable exits that used flex funds:	92.4%	64.3%
Average amount of flex funds:	\$895	\$873
Average length of time enrolled:	20 days	72 days*

\*Longer than average length of time in this project could be due to scarcity of affordable housing exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and staffing shortages.

## Key Learnings

- We see success when **integrating housing services into health programs**. Both programs saw approximately 69% of clients exit to stable housing, utilizing less than \$900 of flex funding per household.
- Both teams shared that this model created **stronger relationships between provider and client**. Better rapport and trusting relationships with clients were established through key features of each program, such as speaking with a single provider about both services, warm handoffs, smoother pathways of referral, and access to flex funds and a baby closet. This ultimately led to better engagement and services for clients.
- Both teams came to a better understanding of the **impact of housing on clients' health**, how they could better address it, and the usefulness of being equipped with Diversion skills. Even after the projects end, these service providers can continue using what they learned to serve their clients through the problem-solving and client empowerment approach Diversion provides.

**"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

### Additional sources:

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