



## **Efforts to Prevent and End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in the United States**

The experience of homeless youth and young adults (ages 13-24) is a shameful reality in our country. While there is no concrete figure for the number of youth who are homeless, the most accurate estimates put the count at around 1.7 million youth (under 18) who experience homelessness during a year. That number grows to 2.1 million when including young adults ages 18-24.

Across the United States, organizations have been trying to understand this population, develop effective service models, and make linkages with other systems that work with youth and young adults. We are beginning to understand how homelessness and lack of stable housing has broad ramifications for other systems. In order to truly end youth homelessness, we will need a systems approach.

### **King County: One Community's Model for Preventing and Ending Youth Homelessness**

Preventing and ending youth and young adult (YYA) homelessness has emerged as a regional priority in King County, Washington. Consistent with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) Framework to End Youth Homelessness, King County focuses on multiple strategies to 1) get better data on the numbers and characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness and 2) improve the system's capacity to ensure that every young person has a safe place to live and thrive.

Specifically, King County is working to:

- Prevent YYA from becoming homeless by promoting family reunification and better systems coordination;
- Quickly intervene for those youth where family reunification is not an option with appropriate housing and/or services; and
- Strengthen young people's access to stable housing, permanent connections, education and employment, emotional well-being and access to healthcare.

### **Background**

It is unacceptable for any young person to be sleeping outside because he or she lacks a safe home. Yet over 5,000 unaccompanied youth and young adults in King County experience homelessness every year. On any given night in our community, over 700 young people are homeless or unstably housed – including over 100 youth sleeping in parks, in abandoned buildings or under bridges.

In 2011, a group of primarily private funders including Ballmer Family Giving, Thomas V. Giddens Jr. Foundation, Medina Foundation, Casey Family Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Raikes Foundation, United Way of King County and the Champion Foundation came together to form the Youth Funders Group. They committed over \$3 million in primarily new private funding to:

- Support new and expanded prevention and early intervention programs;
- Improve data collection, including the launch of Community Sign In; and
- Launch Youth Housing Connection, a coordinated engagement system for young adults seeking housing.

This past August, the King County community came together to finalize the Comprehensive Plan to Prevent and End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in King County by 2020. The Plan's recommendations total \$1,470,000 over 18 months and are fully funded by King County, the City of Seattle, and private philanthropy.

## **Approach and Vision for Success**

King County's approach is in direct alignment with the 2012 USICH Opening Doors Amendment. Specifically, they are working to:

- Engage families in the work of ending YYA homelessness;
- Ensure that interventions meet the needs of youth of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) YYA;
- Align across systems (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, schools, healthcare, etc.);
- Better understand how many YYA are homeless, their needs, and which interventions are effective for whom;
- Use data to drive decision-making and continuous improvement; and
- Align and secure sufficient funding from public and private sources.

King County will measure its success against four key benchmarks:

1. Fewer young people experiencing homelessness;
2. Shorter stays in shelters or on the streets for youth who become homeless;
3. Fewer returns to homelessness by young people; and
4. Fewer homeless LGBTQ youth and youth of color.

## **Roles of Private Philanthropy**

Private philanthropic organizations can catalyze regional efforts in multiple ways. Specifically, they can:

- Strategically invest private funds to pay for "systems" capacity such as coordinated engagement and a lead staff person to manage regional efforts;
- Use private funds to more flexibly and quickly invest in good ideas like prevention, which can be sustained by public funding;
- Help bring youth voice to the table by funding organizations to help engage youth in advocacy; and
- Use our collective voice to advocate for the importance of this issue.

## Lessons Learned

King County is still in the early stages of implementing its work, but key lessons learned include:

- The importance of addressing this issue with a diverse coalition: It is critical to establish shared ownership and bring all key stakeholders to the table.
- The importance of focus, data and continuous improvement: King County's planning process has been done in phases and has been intentionally designed to be short, time limited and data-driven.
- Importance of incorporating youth voice: Direct experience give youth key insights into solutions and their voice on program design and advocacy efforts have been meaningful and powerful.
- Focus on outcomes for young people: Ultimately, King County's work is about improving specific, tangible outcomes for YYA's.

## Collaboration with USICH and Other Federal Partners

- We need to ensure that critical services like street outreach and emergency shelter are supported, as these are foundational to effective systems change efforts. These services have traditionally been funded by federal Runaway Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) dollars.
- Better data is essential to quantify and address the problem, so we applaud the USICH efforts to improve data.
- Convening researchers, practitioners and experts around what is known would be helpful. Funders Together is launching a Youth Learning Network. We encourage co-convening these sessions with our federal funders.
- Identifying and reducing policy barriers that prevent youth programs from better utilizing federal funding streams would be helpful, such as HUD funding which under the HEARTH performance measures rewards shorter length of stay in programs, while longer stays may be more developmentally appropriate for youth.
- Guidance and support are needed on how to better coordinate with education, employment and health sectors.

## Closing Thoughts

Investing in preventing and ending youth homelessness is not just the right thing to do – it also makes economic sense. We know that many homeless adults first experience homelessness before they turn 18. The longer a young person is homeless, the more barriers he/she will face getting back on a successful path. It is sound fiscal policy to invest early and prevent the cycle of homelessness from starting.



*We would like to thank Katie Hong and Megan Gibbard for this update on the important work happening in King County, Washington.*

Katie Hong joined the Raikes Foundation in January 2012 as a program officer. She leads the Foundation's efforts to address youth and young adult homelessness and supports the Foundation's education work on strengthening academic mindsets and learning strategies for early adolescents.

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