

## **Gates Foundation helps find homes for needy families**

Cara Solomon

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There are plenty of reasons Alicia Gutierrez, 11, is proud of her mother.

This is a woman who worked nights and studied days, caring for two daughters as best she could. When Veronica Perez lost her job, and then her home, she still got her girls to school on time. She found space for them to sleep, at friends' houses, on couches, and in spare beds.

For nearly three years she tucked them into bed at Vision House in Renton, an apartment complex for homeless families. Then, last winter, she found them a new home.

After all that, one thing stands out:

"Her trying," Alicia said.

Trying is not always enough to get out of homelessness. But in this case, it proved to be, because behind Alicia's family was Vision House, and behind Vision House, among others, were Bill and Melinda Gates.

For the past seven years, in one of its few Northwest initiatives, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has worked with government and nonprofit groups to help more than 600 families find permanent homes. The \$40 million effort, called Sound Families, has also raised the profile of family homelessness in the state.

Last winter, the state's one-night count found nearly 3,700 homeless families — about 10,000 people — not including the many sleeping in cars or on spare couches. Nationally, advocates say, families now represent more than 40 percent of the homeless population.

"It's one of the more invisible and hidden crises in the community," said David Wertheimer, the senior program officer for the Foundation's Pacific Northwest initiative.

The Gates Foundation gave out its final Sound Families grants this fall, and it's studying data from the initiative, with an eye for how to move forward. But for the past several years, it has focused on the concept of "supportive housing" as a way out for families, pairing transitional or affordable housing with social services such as child care and budgeting classes. The goal is to triple the supply of supportive housing in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties.

All this effort encouraged the formation of the Washington Families Fund, a public-private partnership that provides long-term grants to supportive housing projects. In a speech Monday, Gov. Christine Gregoire is expected to address the fund, which is up for reauthorization this legislative session.

### Critical assistance

In practice, supportive housing looks something like Vision House, an apartment complex where 16 homeless women live with their families, a child-care center within walking distance, and counseling on site once a week.

A case manager works with parents on money management and job preparation, organizing field trips and movie nights for the children. Banks of computers, shelves of books, and dozens of video games sit in a communal playroom, painted blue and green in a nautical theme.

Vision House has always relied largely on donations of money, work and expertise from the community. But over the past several years, Sound Families has covered 20 percent of building costs on everything from additional apartments to a new child-care center.

The money was critical, said Susan Camerer, executive director of Vision House, a faith-based project she founded with her husband, John, in 1990. But there was another, significant advantage to being connected with Sound Families.

A study commissioned by the Gates Foundation tracked how well families fared over the years, and how the individual programs helped or fell short. Programs such as Vision House could then adjust their focus accordingly.

The evaluation found that with consistent case management, career guidance and housing subsidies, families can make significant progress. Nearly 70 percent of parents who stuck with the program had a permanent home at the end of it. The percentage of parents working full-time tripled. Children who had switched schools several times had stabilized in the program.

But the study also showed serious gaps in services. One in four families were evicted from their supportive housing, usually because of chemical dependency or poor mental health. Most programs required sobriety, and did not have the capacity to cope with serious behavioral problems.

And while families increased their monthly incomes during the program, sometimes significantly, their wages later leveled out, leaving most to earn well below what one University of Washington study called the livable income for a self-

sufficient family: In Seattle, that's almost \$3,500 a month for an adult with two children.

Parents stressed that they needed more training and education to help them move into jobs that would support their children. In some programs helped by the foundation, the resources were simply not there. In other cases, the problem was time.

The limit for families to stay in most supportive housing was two years — a time frame too short, foundation officials said, for some parents to prime themselves for success.

Perez, 28, was lucky: Vision House allowed her to stay longer; that gave her the time she needed to find a full-time job and map out a plan for her family's future.

"I'm really grateful," she said. "They saw how hard I was working, and that I wanted to be somewhere."

"Such a blessing"

Depending on people did not come easy to Perez. She started early on her own, a teenage mother, finishing high school mornings, working at a chiropractor's office afternoons. She always made the rent, even after a divorce, when she was a working mother of two and an art-school student.

Then in the spring of 2002, her work hours were scaled back, and she fell behind in the rent. Perez lay awake some nights on a friend's floor, her daughters sleeping nearby.

"It was kind of unreal," Perez said. "Being back at zero again."

After six months of couch surfing, the family settled into their own apartment at Vision House. There were purple painted walls for Danisa, and a jungle-themed room for Alicia, and child care for Perez whenever she needed it.

"It was such a blessing," she said.

The rules of the house did rankle sometimes. Weekly inspections of the family's apartment. Going through her budget with a caseworker. Picking through her problems with a counselor. But all of it, said Perez, came to good.

Several months after the family arrived, she found a full-time job, working in the corporate office of a hair salon in Bellevue. She started to pay her way out of debt. She began a romance with a man who saw her strength as something good.

Now engaged, they live together, renting a tidy house in Renton. He works full-time, she works part-time, and making ends meet is a strain. No money left over for child care; Perez has put her dreams of finishing art school on hold.

Still, there are the simple pleasures. Beds to sleep in, grass to play on, new family pictures on the mantel. Perez has never smiled so much.

This winter, when government officials count homeless families, she and her daughters will not be among them.

### The Gates Foundation's Sound Families Initiative

The seven-year, \$40 million initiative has provided homeless families with transitional or affordable housing, paired with services such as counseling, budgeting and child care, with the goal of moving them toward self-sufficiency. Most families who completed the program found permanent housing, though one in four did not complete the program.

Nearly 1,500 families participated in the program, about 1,700 adults and 2,700 children.

Most families were headed by a single caregiver, typically a single mother, with an average age of 31. Most had at least a high-school diploma or GED.

Half the families had one child living with them in transitional housing.

Half of primary caregivers were Caucasian, one-fourth were African American and one-fourth Hispanic/Latino.

Causes of homelessness reported by families: lack of affordable housing or a living wage, loss of income, domestic violence.

More than 50 programs in King, Snohomish and Pierce counties served the families with housing, services, or both.

Source: University of Washington School of Social Work and Northwest Institute for Children and Families