

Ups and downs for Gates effort

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Seven years ago, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation took on a new challenge: family homelessness.

Spurred by a question put to them by Melinda Gates, and backed by \$40 million, foundation officials wanted to see what could be done to increase the number of homeless families who make their way back into safe, permanent housing.

The resulting Sound Families Initiative has just completed its grant-making round, and officials are declaring it a qualified success. Some 1,445 new housing units have been funded in Pierce, King and Snohomish counties, including 333 in Pierce County. More than 800 of them are operational. Nearly 1,500 families were served, including Regina Jordan of Tacoma and her three sons.

Jordan, a single mom, lost her job and then her house. For about a year, she and her boys lived in an apartment funded through the Sound Families Initiative until she graduated from the program and they moved into a three-bedroom house complete with a yard and a picket fence.

“This was like a dream,” Jordan said Friday from Tyler Square, the transitional housing development where she lived until this summer. “If it wasn’t for this place, I don’t know where me and children would’ve ended up.”

But for all the success stories, there were plenty of failures, too. One-quarter of families who entered the program were evicted or asked to leave their transitional housing units, often because of substance abuse or mental health issues, according to a study by the University of Washington.

Allan Golston, president of U.S. operations for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said he’s encouraged by the success but sobered by the setbacks. “Sound Families did what it was supposed to do,” Golston said Friday, noting the stability and support it provided to families in crisis. He and other housing officials met in Tacoma to talk about the effort. They met at Tyler Square, a Tacoma Rescue Mission project that’s part of the Sound Families partnership.

More work lies ahead in figuring out what went wrong for families who failed the program, Golston said. In some cases, families faced multiple challenges including substance abuse and mental health issues, which made it difficult for them to earn a sufficient income.

“The gap between what they can earn and what it really takes to be self-sustaining – we’re just not there yet,” he said.

Household income was a problem even for families who succeeded in the program. Although monthly household income increased substantially in the first year after they left the program, it leveled off after that, according to the University of Washington evaluation.

For 70 percent of families, monthly income was less than \$2,000 three years after exit.

“With self-sufficiency income levels in the region typically over \$3,000 per month, the gains these families have made, for the most part, still lag behind what is necessary to adequately support their families,” the report says.

Tacoma housing officials say the Sound Families model of combining housing with services is a good one, and they say the program will continue long after the funding of new housing units. Case managers are assigned to each family, and they help families with services including job training, child care, counseling, and drug and alcohol treatment.

Michael Mirra, executive director of the Tacoma Housing Authority, said the foundation provided an immense push to the value of linking housing with services.

Golston didn’t offer specifics about what the Gates Foundation might do next. But he said the foundation remains committed to the issue of family homelessness, a problem that he called the “invisible side of homelessness” that is growing nationwide and accounts for half of the homeless population in Washington.