This month, the National Alliance to End Homelessness is holding its annual conference here in Seattle. To honor their efforts, I am dedicating this issue of My View to our efforts to end homelessness by presenting a layered portrait of what we have accomplished thus far towards our 10-Year Goal to end homelessness in Washington State.

Homelessness is an enormous challenge. As such, it’s not surprising that this is the biggest issue of My View we’ve produced to date. To help you navigate, the narrative is organized into sections:

- A focus on the state level, with a lot of emphasis on the Homeless Housing and Assistance Act and its implementation through state-level agencies and consultants.
- A focus on the county level, featuring close-up views of two mid-sized counties in eastern Washington contrasted with our most densely populated urban area, King County.
- A closer look at family homelessness, including new research findings, how the Washington Families Fund is progressing—and the impact that the Gates Foundation and other private funders have had on our efforts to end family homelessness.
- A look at the growing focus on creating employment opportunities for homeless people in our state.
- A conversation with Washington State Coalition for the Homeless (WSCH) executive director Mia Wells.
The state legislature sets an ambitious goal

It all starts with the legislature, which in 2004 created the Washington Families Fund (WFF), followed by the passage of the Homeless Housing and Assistance Act (HB 2163) in 2005. These acts have been a tremendous boost to everyone in the state who is fighting to end homelessness.

WFF has raised $12 million for service-enriched housing, and HB 2163 set the ambitious goal of reducing homelessness in Washington State by at least 50%. It’s not just a statewide goal, but applies to each individual county. Because both initiatives are administered by the Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED), it makes sense to start with CTED Director, Juli Wilkerson, and Will Graham, who serves as Assistant Director for Housing.

Housing at the forefront

While CTED has numerous responsibilities in addition to housing, Juli notes that WFF and HB 2163 show that “the issue of housing is coming to the forefront at the state level both with the legislature and the governor.” While there has been a lot of excitement about new ideas and innovative approaches, Juli emphasizes that some of our longstanding programs will probably have the most impact as we work to house the homeless.

First and foremost is the Housing Trust Fund (HTF), whose administration is a core part of CTED’s mission. The legislature added $130 million to the HTF during the 2007 session. Governor Gregoire’s latest budget proposes increasing the HTF by another $50 million this year—all dedicated to creating and maintaining safe, decent, and affordable housing in Washington State.

Unfortunately, temporary shelters remain an important need—even as we work toward long-term solutions. The Emergency Shelter Assistance Program provides a place to sleep for more than 45,000 homeless individuals each year. CTED also administers the Homeless Management Information System that provides real-time client-level data on homeless people across the state. Next come CTED’s responsibilities as head of the governor’s Interagency Council on Homelessness. In signing HB 2163, Governor Gregoire noted the need for state agencies to work together including the Departments of Corrections (DOC), Health (DOH), Social and Health Services (DSHS), Veterans Affairs (DVA), the Employment Security Department (ESD), and the Office of Financial Management (OFM). CTED heads the council on the governor’s behalf, with the mandate “to create an appropriate forum for cross-agency coordination, collaboration, and planning.”

HB 2163 is actually a two-pronged initiative. After taking 2% for administration costs, 60% of the revenue collected goes directly to the counties for their programs. That leaves 40%—much of which is distributed by CTED as local grants to counties and agencies for three-year homeless pilot programs through the Homelessness Grant Assistance Program (HGAP). CTED also applies this funding for technical assistance to counties.

Let’s take the 60% for counties first, then turn to the HGAP pilot programs.

Counties are key players

CTED has contracted with nonprofit affordable housing consultant Common Ground to serve as the lead technical assistance provider to counties implementing HB 2163. As such, Common Ground Executive Director Lynn Davison has a keen view of where we are right now with our 10-Year Plans, and the many miles that remain. She believes HB 2163 provides a well-crafted strategy, both because it identifies Washington’s counties as key to planning, funding, and accountability for plans to end homelessness—and because it gives local governments flexibility in how the funding can be put to best use.

Along with so many others who have contributed to this newsletter, Lynn credits Rep. Mark Mилос на for his advocacy for the homeless and for this bill, along with an astute understanding of how identifying the counties as pivotal will be critical to success. “That was a change from the past in approaches to identifying, she points out. “Clearly it was very important for Rep. Miloscia. And I think it will serve his long-term history well.”

With the addition of the monies from HB 1359 to the HB 2163 funding source, Lynn says, “counties are getting enough resources now, and have something to work with. And most of them have stepped up and said ‘we’ll take that money.’ In doing so, they acknowledge that they have a homeless problem—and they have a plan to fix it.”

The Washington Families Fund and the Homeless Housing and Assistance Act: A brief background

WFF has leveraged the contributions of our state’s philanthropic community in support of homeless families, as foundations have continued to step up to match state dollars. To date, $12 million ($8M from the state, $6M from private giving) in funding for service-enriched housing to homeless families has been raised through this partnership. Governor Gregoire, working in concert with House Speaker Frank Chopp and Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown, has announced that she will push for a $6 million increase to WFF during the 2008 legislative session.

Funded by document recording fees, the Homeless Housing and Assistance Act (HB 2163) provides approximately $12 million a year for housing and services for homeless people. The Act places the onus on counties and cities to develop 10-year plans—and to aim, at a minimum, for a 50% reduction in homelessness. Of the funds collected, 60% goes to these local governments, and 40% goes to CTED for local grants as well as technical assistance to organizations and governments.

The momentum continues to build. During the last (2007) legislative session, HB 1359 made more funds available to counties’ programs for the homeless through an additional state document recording fee. It’s estimated that HB 1359 will generate an additional $12.8 million annually, 90% of which will go directly to counties’ efforts.

To read a deeper history of these programs: The June 2006 pages of My View were dedicated to reporting on the initial status of efforts to end homelessness in Washington State one year after the passage of HB 2163. We followed that up in August 2008 with an overview of the work-in-progress of WFF [http://www.wshfc.org/Newsletter/archive.html].
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“Integration into the local government world is going to take time. And I think we will begin to see greater and greater fruits of that strategy to enlist the counties.”

HGAP: a big victory for systems change

Despite the importance of these 2163 and 1359 monies being utilized directly by the counties, Lynn also credits CTED with using a portion of the grant funds at its disposal from HB 2163 to create big-picture solutions that can serve as catalysts for changing the face of how we approach homelessness. CTED is utilizing the Homelessness Grant Assistance Program (HGAP) to foster systems change.

HGAP was created by CTED to fund capital operating services in areas where communities bring together partners from all the systems that work with homeless people—or many of them—like jails and prisons, employee services, health services, social service programs for people with disabilities, and schools. In this way, CTED is funding a much smaller number of projects, more deeply. “They are funding programs that could be a different way of doing business,” Lynn says. “Because at the end of the day, we need a whole lot more housing, and we need some different ways of doing business at the system level.”

“I think we should acknowledge CTED for this,” Lynn adds. “It’s an important step in trying to move a whole system in an entirely different direction. I think it’s been a big victory. It’s too soon to tell with these projects, the second round is just being funded now. But I think that kind of strategy is the highest and best use of the resources they manage.”

HGAP as incubator

Julie says that these three-year HGAP grants are important both for generating new ideas and for providing state agencies with real-time experience in working collaboratively. “HGAP is really about testing promising approaches: Seeing if they can get implemented, and seeing if they can get results—on the legal end, the policy end, and specifically into rural entities. We’re also looking at trying to demonstrate cross-system integration between traditional homeless efforts, affordable housing efforts, and other systems.”

Going forward, CTED will use objective, third-party evaluators to see which of the HGAP approaches are most effective in reducing homelessness—and taxpayer costs.

In fact, Tedd Kelleher, who serves as implementation manager for 2163—including the HGAP program—reports that CTED is investing heavily in “not just measuring these programs, but making sure people can reconstrue what happened.” All of this information, Tedd says, will be available on CTED’s website. This includes “the documentation of HGAP projects in terms of timeline, process, and players. The contracting, sub-contracts, related policies and procedures, assessment tools ... Whose idea was it? Did it start with the county commissioners? Does that relate to what we’re doing? What sort of matching resources did they use?”

Bringing state agencies together to build capacity in smaller counties

One major opportunity that HGAP has helped to create in smaller counties is teaching local governments and agencies to become stand-alone developers of permanent supportive housing. In concert with CTED, Common Ground and nonprofit housing and housing development consultant Building Changes are performing targeted technical assistance.

These organizations are about to initiate a six-month training institute for teams from eight counties in the state. Most of these counties, like tiny Pacific County (pop. 22,000), haven’t previously been able to support permanent supportive housing for the homeless because of their size. The goal is to help these teams bring a project forward to the point of financing. “It’s a big capacity-building project designed to help communities form teams to create multiple supportive housing projects,” Lynn says.

Funding is coming from CTED, the DSHS’s Mental Health Division, and WFF. The Program of Assertive Community Treatment (PACT) approach applied by DSHS’s Mental Health Division with HGAP funding will be tied into supportive housing created through capital financing from CTED’s operating and maintenance program. Juli notes that, if successful, this program should reduce the need for state-funded psychiatric hospital beds, which, in turn, should lower the cost of caring for the homeless mentally ill.

“This is modeling collaboration at the funder level, focusing on building the skills to do a pipeline of permanent supportive housing—the housing that we have the least of within our homeless networks across the state, and what the literature shows is the most successful in those communities for ending homelessness,” Lynn points out.

Tedd Kelleher adds that this new effort is also exciting to him in that it’s bringing state agencies together in a way they haven’t experienced before. “The way that both HGAP funding and the Interagency Council on Homelessness are structured give us a tangible reason to regularly coordinate with our other state partners—whereas historically, these discussions tended to be more academic. There wasn’t that tangible driver.”

Leadership and collaboration make a difference

What are some of the preliminary conclusions we can draw from our battle against homelessness to date? First, revenue opportunities—like those that HB 2163 and 1359 have provided—are certainly a big boost to counties in addressing their homelessness challenges. But clearly, leadership, collaboration, and the creative application of resources are also critical in counties’ meeting their 10-Year Goals. At the local and project level, many of the communities that have had a track record of good collaboration are further ahead in addressing homeless issues.

Lynn points to Whatcom, Clark, and Clallam Counties, where efforts have been “built on strong local systems.” There are other counties that seemingly hadn’t had homelessness issues on their radar previously, but are now really coming to the table.” She also singles out Benton and Franklin Counties for stepping up to the homelessness challenge—I’ll highlight their approaches below.

Looking ahead, Lynn sees other signs of encouragement. On a mental health systems level statewide, service funders and policy makers are recognizing the importance of housing as well as services in order to meet the outcomes of the people they serve. But many hurdles remain across the state, and creating housing, and culturing existing housing, is fundamental to this work. Lynn points to the continued need to recruit, and support communications with, private landlords. “We can’t build our way out of this. We have to find a way to access rental housing that already exists. A big challenge in every county in the state is how to figure out how to do that more effectively.” She points to agencies that are developing private landlord incentives, including getting response services for the clients living in their housing up to 24/7. A case in point is Sound Mental Health in King County, which has a long history of developing effective working relationships with private landlords, including “serving some fairly high-risk homeless people,” she says.

“Washington State is out in front of the majority of states in its statewide response...
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"... At the end of the day, we need a whole lot more housing, and we need some different ways of doing business at the system level."

—Common Ground Executive Director Lynn Davison
to homelessness and I think we’re quite a long way from getting to that goal that we’ve established for ourselves ... both of those are true,” Lynn concludes. “We have strong momentum, and we have distributed our efforts across the state better than ever before. All that’s good. But we’re talking about homelessness, and in order to address and eliminate homelessness, people have to have places to live. We don’t have enough of that. It would be wrong to let anybody think that just managing the resources better will get us to our goal. That will not be sufficient.”

A tale of two eastern Washington counties

Every county is unique in terms of their homelessness challenges and the way they’re making the resources available to meet those challenges. It helps enormously to have community leaders who truly take homelessness to heart, and are going to great lengths to do what it takes to change the status quo.

Benton and Franklin Counties: An inspired partnership

One such inspired partnership actually involves two counties: Benton and Franklin, in southeastern Washington. These counties, which face off across the Columbia River, are home to the Tri-Cities: Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland. They have elected officials who have moved homelessness issues to the front of their agendas. And county residents are also fortunate in their local nonprofit leadership: Judith Gidley, executive director of Benton Franklin Community Action Committee (BFACAC), has been focused on homelessness since she took the job nine years ago.

“When I came here, there were so many agencies doing so many things in the community,” Judith recalls. “I made a promise to the board that I would look for gaps in services. One of those was the homeless issue. No one was taking it on,” Judith wrote her agency’s first grant that provided services out of McKinney-Vento funding. BFACAC has since also taken on administering tenant-based rental assistance programs and the THOR (Transitional Housing, Operating, and Rent) program. When HB 2163 came along, she was chair of the Benton Franklin Housing Network, which had just completed a five-year homeless plan for the bi-county area.

Benton County Commissioner Claude Oliver remembers first meeting Judith back in 2005 at a kick-off session for local officials on implementing the county 10-Year Plans for HB 2163. “Tedd Kelleher from CTED introduced us. Judith has been inspiring. Working with people dedicated to making something happen really makes the work a lot more fun. And you get a lot more done.”

At the outset of the 10-year planning process, Claude and Judith worked alongside Commissioner Frank Brock of Franklin County, who retired one year ago. Since his departure, Commissioner Rick Miller has stepped up to lead Franklin County’s efforts. “Our two counties span cities and rural areas,” explains Judith. “There are different kinds of homelessness here, and the Tri-Cities are connected by bridges across the Columbia River. The migration of our homeless populations goes back and forth.”

Each county created their own contract for providing services under HB 2163, and contracted with BFACAC to provide those services. Home Base, created by BFACAC, is a major component of the counties’ approach to homelessness. It’s a one-stop triage system. “Under Home Base we have all our satellite agencies that provide services connected via the Internet, which means there’s no wrong door. Someone can go to any one of these agencies, start the application process, and get the right referral,” says Judith.

Another major intervention that Judith and her community partners have pursued through recent years is more housing and services for homeless persons who are mentally ill, including securing state and federal funding for permanent rental subsidies. Last year, Benton and Franklin Counties succeeded in reducing homelessness by about 22%. Judith says one of the things last year’s homeless count told her is that her agency needs to focus more on homeless youth. Of the 780 people who were counted as homeless in her counties in January 2007, 105 were between the ages of 18 and 23; 82 were 12 to 17 years old. “Helping homeless youth is our next goal,” she says.

Housing for ex-offenders: An awakened awareness

But they’re already well launched in efforts in a complementary direction. In 2006, the two counties applied—and won—significant funding from HGAP for a pilot program that aims to take on the revolving door that sits between jails and homelessness. Claude, whose office overlooks the Benton County Jail, puts it this way: “My office overlooks the exit of our ‘Benton County Hotel’, many times I’ve seen young men and women come out. And I would think, ‘How did they get in, and how did they get out of there?’”

Each of those young people were moved from jail, and too often, they ended up back where they started. What he saw, he says, led him to conclude, “Couldn’t we do things better?”

“We saw the need to start planning processes for people exiting our jails to connect them with community resources that existed—but many times were just disconnected from the folks and the process.” Claude says. That might mean a bus pass for people who had no transportation, or following up with continued medications for a person with a mental illness. It could be a substance abuse program—or a place to call home. On any given day in Benton County, roughly 50 people are coming into the jail, and 50 others are coming out. “We saw the need to get in the jail and interview people before they got released.”

The HGAP grant is for providing housing and services to 68 jail inmates along with families of those in jail who would otherwise be homeless. Of the $540,000 total, $210,000 has been kicked in by the counties, and $30,000 by BFACAC. “We have already enrolled our 68 inmates in the program,” says Judith. “A good majority of them are in housing already.”

The objective has been to also serve the families of those jailed inmates who were in danger of losing their homes. “While the inmate is in jail, this helps the family stay stable, and gives the person a stable home to go back to.” The project includes rent subsidies, case management, transportation, rental deposits, filing fees, lost document recovery, and life skills training.

“Make my three-year sprint is that it establishes a role model that I think should be replicated throughout the nation. It’s effective in getting people placed in housing early on, effective in getting case managers around people if they’re open to that, and effective in equipping law enforcement with skills training,” Claude says.

Building good examples

This HGAP pilot program is just one piece of the systems overhaul that Judith, Claude and Commissioner Rick Miller of Franklin County are working to implement. It includes educating police officers and sheriffs about the appropriate referrals for homeless people in crisis, linking services; pulling in agencies to work together; proactively working with homeless people who are mentally ill or dealing with substance abuse issues. They’re in the process of creating a crisis response consolidation center for both counties.

And there’s been some push back. Claude and Rick admit. For example, during the January 2007 homeless point-in-time count, jail officials in the Franklin County Jail wouldn’t permit volunteers to enter and interview the inmates about their homeless status. This year, Rick says, they’re going to get in. When he left farming a little over a year ago to take on his commissioner role, Rick had been somewhat skeptical about what local governments can do about homelessness. But his participation in last year’s count, he says, “was a real eye-opener.”

Eighty percent of his county’s budget, Rick says, goes to criminal justice. “Overcrowding in our jail is a big problem. It was built for 110 inmates. Since then they’ve doubled the beds. Sometimes we have to put three people in a cell. The mentally ill shouldn’t be there to begin with, and preventing homelessness for released inmates will help curb recidivism.”

Claude agrees. “The law and justice portions of the budget just absolutely eat us alive at the county level, and to a lesser extent, the city level today. When you add that portion of the budget up, and you add the costs for courts, and prosecution, and incarceration, it’s absolutely dizzying. In terms of how much money needs to be escalated. But with our homeless and housing 10-Year Plan, and with the inmate transition plan through HGAP, we’ve been able to bring folks together to make the community work more effectively.”

“I think every county in the nation in the next 10 years is going to be strongly looking at how they align their services this way. The bureaucracies may not accept that with open arms, but let’s build good examples.”
King County: A confluence of efforts

King County is another county that has a strong track record of collaboration. But Washington State’s largest county has much more at stake. King County’s population of 1.8-plus million outstrips the combined population of about 290,000 for Benton and Franklin Counties. During the 2007 point-in-time count, which includes Seattle, there were 7,839 people counted as homeless in King County.

Homelessness ranks as a top concern
One huge positive is that, collectively, the people who live here rank homelessness in the top three of important issues facing King County. The same can be said of many of the county’s most influential public officials.

Bill Block, project director of the Committee to End Homelessness in King County (CEHKC), has done a masterful job of involving people and constituencies into the conversation about what they can do about solving homelessness in their communities. He’s also pulled together a governing board of highly effective leaders, what he calls a “confluence of efforts,” including King County Executive Ron Sims, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels and former Mayor Norm Rice, former Governor Mike Lowry, Nordstrom President Blake Nordstrom, Car Toys Chairman and CEO Dan Brettler, King County Sheriff Sue Rahr, United Way of King County, County President Jon Fine—and many other key players.

“King County is making progress,” Bill says. “We created 526 housing units for the homeless in 2007, and have about a thousand in the pipeline. These are permanent units. The total number of housing units that have been brought on line since King County’s 10-Year Plan was adopted is approximately 1,489. “It’s still not the level we need,” Bill says. “We need 950 homes a year to make the goals of the plan.” He explains that he’s now discussing with CEHKC’s governing board what other sources are available to them.

Moving forward on many fronts

“The commitment is still there,” Bill says. He points to plenty of actions and accomplishments to be celebrated, including:

- Unprecedented new and ongoing resources for homeless programs and affordable housing. Bill reaps off several of the many positives:
  - The City of Seattle’s $88 million low-income housing levy, passed in 2002.
  - The United Way of King County’s $25 million campaign to end chronic homelessness, announced in mid-2007.
  - $130 million was added to the state’s Housing Trust Fund during the 2007 legislative session.
  - King County recently passed the 1/10th of 1% sales tax for mental health and chemical dependency treatment.

Great results coming from innovative Housing First programs.
Recent studies of the City of Seattle’s Housing First programs at 1811 Eastlake and Plymouth on Stewart (see sidebar) demonstrate that permanent housing for people who are chronically homeless and very high users of crisis treatment services turns lives around—and results in significant savings in emergency and health services. Last month, Mayor Nickels released one-year cost savings figures for the two programs: $3.2 million. The City has already funded 215 such housing units and a total of 1,000 are planned countywide under the 10-Year Plan.

Nationally recognized homeless programs make their home in Seattle

Washington State is home to hundreds of organizations that are on the leading edge of efforts to prevent and end homelessness. These three Seattle-based programs are among the many that are yielding great outcomes—and that are serving as lookbooks for other homelessness programs across the country:

**FareStart** is a 16-week culinary training and placement program for homeless and formerly homeless workers. In addition to training in the food service industry, every student is able to access a range of other services, including temporary housing, counseling, and job search training. More than 1,500 have graduated from the program since its founding in 1982. House at Seventh and Virginia in downtown Seattle, FareStart is home to a thriving restaurant for paying patrons, as well as a catering and meal delivery business.

Since 2006, FareStart has partnered with the DOC for direct referrals for offenders; soon-to-be released inmates who are interested in the training program can register for culinary training—and reserved housing. A successful field of FareStart, Kitchens with Mission helps other communities around the country to develop and implement the FareStart model.

**The Mockingbird Society** is committed to advocacy and system reform on behalf of children and adolescents involved in the child welfare system. One of its initiatives is the Mockingbird Family Model, a program that is piloting supportive communities of “extended families” for foster families. Among its many virtues, the stability this model provides to families helps prevent homelessness: Youth who are or have been placed in foster care are more than four times as likely to become homeless. In a cohort of four to six families, a continuity-of-care network provides support for both foster parents, and foster children and youth. The families pitch in on ongoing efforts like transportation and childcare; relationships with siblings and other family members are supported; and foster parents in a hub home provide emotional support, giving foster children an alternative place to turn to in a crisis.

**The Begin at Home Project**, a Housing First program run by Plymouth Housing Group, is transforming the lives of some of the community’s hardest-to-reach chronically homeless people. Under the initial wave of funding, 20 private studio apartments received a direct allocation from City of Seattle general funds. The participating individuals had incurred more than $10,000 in expenses in either inpatient care, or 60-plus visits to the sobering center in the 12 months prior to enrollment. One-year outcomes for these residents have demonstrated a 75% reduction in medical costs ($1.2 million), along with reduced drug use, and improved physical health.

On the heels of this success, 45 new Begin at Home housing units were opened last month at Plymouth Housing’s Langdon and Anne Simons Senior Apartments; about half of those homes have been reserved for homeless veterans.
they move to housing that doesn’t have 24/7 staffing.” HDAP is providing $1.5 million over three years to this project. It will house an additional 25 chronically homeless individuals, while helping 50 people who have become stable in service-intensive housing to graduate to homes with lower services at a lower cost. This will open the door to an additional 50 people who can move into those service-intensive units.

CHEKC is moving forward on many other fronts. The group’s Prevention Task Force is working to create a cohesive, integrated regional homelessness prevention system; they’re planning to apply for funding for implementation in the next round of state funding. The Landlord Liaison Project is working to create new sources of housing by bringing landlords and service providers together. The goal is to negotiate terms and provide incentives and protections that will assuage landlords’ concerns.

This interview with Bill took place late afternoon on Christmas Eve. He’s working tremendously hard on this, as are countless others. King County’s 10-Year Plan calls for securing 9,500 new units of housing for homeless people—if it can be done, they’ll be the team I’d choose.

Research outcomes are helping to shape new approaches to ending family homelessness

The origins of the Sound Families Initiative can be traced back to a question asked by Melinda Gates: “What can we do for families in crisis?” Melinda’s question led to the commitment of more than $40 million by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to create transitional supportive housing for families coming out of crisis who are homeless and trying to regain stability in their lives. Sound Families’ mandate gave our state compelling, documented results. This initiative paved the way for other philanthropic organizations to pledge to pool their resources to truly make a difference for homeless families. State legislators had the insight to sign on with the Washington Families Fund (WFF) and to highly effective programs that met a critical need and would be matched by private dollars. Now, the research generated on the participating families in Sound Families from 2000 to mid-2007 is influencing how the state’s supportive housing programs are being designed and funded.

Two tiers of funding: A new round of grants for WFF

Just last month, the latest funding round for WFF was announced. The current balance of the fund, $5.5 million, was allocated to 14 projects across the state that represent 225 housing units for homeless families. These will 10-year funding commitments. For the first time, the funding has been tiered in two service levels: moderate and high.

This change is the result of a great deal of research, thought, and planning. Those involved anticipate better outcomes for families—and an ongoing longitudinal evaluation with the high service-level participants will add to what we know about serving homeless families.

As the sub-contractor with CTED for the Fund, you might call Building Changes the chief cook and bottle-washer intermediary for WFF. This organization administers and evaluates WFF programs, provides technical assistance, and liaises with funders in the private sector. Known as AIDS Housing of Washington from its founding in 1988 until late last year, the re-christening to Building Changes reflects its team’s expertise and involvement, which have broadened to meet the needs of all of the constituents in Washington State that are impacted by homelessness.

Building Changes Executive Director Betsy Lieberman is excited about the potential of the higher service level. “This was a response by us to both Sound Families’ evaluation data, plus what we were seeing with WFF,” Betsy explains. “Very few of the programs around the state were designed to serve families who truly have chronic homelessness issues, whether it be long-term issues of mental illness, substance abuse, involvement with CPS, corrections—the national data show that about 80% of homeless families need some assistance with services, plus employment—but only about 15 or 20% are what you might call chronically homeless.

“All families are not the same. We want to use resources more judiciously. This 15 or 20% have so many issues in their lives. They need permanent housing, and services that can serve them or we will never see them stabilized. But we really needed to commit ourselves to working with organizations across the state to provide this high level of service.”

Making a positive impact on national homelessness policy

As a state, we’ve been very fortunate in our philanthropists and foundations; private giving has been fundamental to WFF’s success. WFF now has 18 private funding partners. To date, these partners have contributed $6 million of the $12 million that WFF has passed on to organizations that serve homeless families.

Building Changes invited about 15 organizations across the state to work on planning and design. “It was a really profound process,” Betsy says. These organizations were paid a consulting fee to commit to attend all six meetings—and do their homework. Ten organizations signed on.

“WFF is funding up to $7,500 per unit per year for the higher level of services,” Betsy explains. “It requires a dollar-for-dollar match, and so we asked that organizations have the ability to access Medicaid or another ongoing funding source.” In most cases, the partnerships were bringing together mental health providers and other service and housing providers. In the funding round announced last month, five high-service projects in five counties were funded: Sound Mental Health in King County, Community Services Northwest in Clark, Serenity House in Clallam, Volunteers of America in Skagit, and the Women’s Resource Center in Chelan/Douglas Counties.

The evaluation data generated by these programs will provide a level of information and detail that hasn’t been done—even nationally. Betsy explains. Families make up a much smaller portion of the chronic population than individuals, and as a consequence, they’re received less focus. “We want to do something that will both help us understand how to do this well in Washington State, but also have a positive impact on national policy around serving homeless families. So it’s uncommon to see families remain intact when they have a wide range of problems.”

Generosity begins at home

As a state, we’ve been very fortunate in our philanthropists and foundations; private giving has been fundamental to WFF’s success. WFF now has 18 private funding partners. To date, these partners have contributed $6 million of the $12 million that WFF has passed on to organizations that serve homeless families.

“This level of partnership is really quite amazing.” Betsy concludes. “And as someone who has had the opportunity to work around the country, I can say that in Washington State, there is truly a profound commitment to ending homelessness.”

"This level of commitment is really quite amazing." Betsy Lieberman, Executive Director, Building Changes

But even though the Sound Families Initiative is winding down, this by no means signals that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is shifting its focus away from family homelessness. Sound Families, which focused on King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties, is just one part of Gates Foundation’s response. This is “a strategy area of great interest” to the Pacific Northwest program, David says. The program spans all of Washington State as well as the greater Portland area, including Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington Counties in Oregon.

When the initial work to create Sound Families was launched, David explains, “the goal at the time was not focused on ending homelessness—in fact, the language of the field then centered around managing it. We are very excited today to be much more involved in a new set of activities: Trying to end—not just manage—homelessness.”
Februay 2008 FROM KIM HERMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR My View

The Commitment Continues: Washington State’s Efforts to End Homelessness

The photographs of the homeless individuals featured in this issue are part of “Faces of Homelessness,” a series of 62 black-and-white photographs available for display free of charge. The photos were taken by 12 professional photographers in 10 Washington State communities. For more information about bringing this exhibition into your community, contact Washington State Coalition for the Homeless: wsch_info@comcast.net.

“Couldn’t we do things better?”
—Benton County Commissioner Claude Oliver

The photographs of the homeless individuals featured in this issue are part of “Faces of Homelessness,” a series of 62 black-and-white photographs available for display free of charge. The photos were taken by 12 professional photographers in 10 Washington State communities. For more information about bringing this exhibition into your community, contact Washington State Coalition for the Homeless: wsch_info@comcast.net.
One very important part of the Sound Families work has been its evaluation component. Since its creation in 2000, in collaboration with the University of Washington School of Social Work's Northwest Institute for Children and Families, the families participating in these supportive, transitional housing programs have been the focus of a wealth of evaluative data. The first installment of the final report was published late last year.

Two levels of data were pursued. One level has yielded broad features and results for the families, the families participating in these programs. The first installment of the final report focused on some of the families that were in the Sound Families program. While they’re transitioning and their economic earning potential is increasing, families often need the support of subsidized housing in the interim period “to help them get to a living wage,” says David Wertheimer.

The Five S’s of meeting the needs of homeless families

“The findings from that evaluation are instruc- tive,” David says. “Both about what worked well with Sound Families, as well as where we fell short in terms of meeting the needs of some of the families that were in the program.” This has led to the creation of what he calls The Five S’s—five critical components to ending family homelessness:

- **Subsidy:** Section 8 vouchers have been a critical part of the Sound Families model. While they’re transitioning and their economic earning potential is increasing, families often need the support of subsidized housing in the interim period “to help them get to a living wage,” says David Wertheimer.
- **Synergy:** “Families need an entire system that’s pulling with them, working to bring multiple sectors of the system into synergy. Whether it’s housing providers or service providers—including workforce development, childcare, domestic violence and/or mental health workers—all of those different sectors need to pull together with the family, to help them succeed.”

The greater the complexity of issues and problems, the more integrated and holistic are the responses needed.

“We are very excited today to be much more involved in a new set of activities: trying to end—not just manage—homelessness.”

“What we have looked at Sound Families over the last seven years, we think that we got stability and support right,” David says. “Housing plus services works. Many of us made that assumption going into this initia- tive, but there was very little data to confirm it. Now we have that documentation.”

“We also found the synergy piece was very important. We were very excited and pleased to be part of this large partnership of players and systems that made Sound Families successful, particularly the participation of the housing authorities in the Puget Sound region. In fact, no one system or partner can do this work by themselves.”

**What needs to happen next**

“But where we’ve fallen short is, in some ways, one of the most important parts of the story,” David adds. “On the salary area, we need to do better.” One of the conclusions coming out of the longitudinal study is that wage earners in families who are recovering from homelessness seem to hit a wage ceiling of about $11/hour. “And that will keep them in poverty,” he says. “That will keep them dependent on continuing housing subsidies, and does not promote their self-sufficiency as families.”

Developing Community Employment Pathways, a Gates-funded report that I’ll talk about in the next section, is one example of how new synergies in addressing homeless families’ challenges are moving the “Salary” piece of those Five S’s towards viable solutions. What Gates is now asking, David says, is “How do we promote still more synergy in building towards a system where families are truly moving out of poverty to self-sufficiency?”

According to David, another key finding from the University of Washington studies is that about 25% of the families in the Sound Families program did not graduate. “While a 75% success rate is promising and exciting, that 25% is a great concern to us. We need to do better than that. That’s a lot of families.”

Examining the data, it’s become clear that in many instances, these families had more complex issues and needs than those who completed the program.

“They didn’t fail the program, the program failed them,” he emphasizes. “We were not necessarily providing the level of support and services they needed—which is not to blame providers or partners, because they weren’t necessarily adequately funded to provide that level of support, expertise, and training.”

“In fact, this realization is what led directly to the new high-service level for families within WFF that Betsy talked about earlier: the effort to accurately match services with needs, along with the new evaluation component with these families, to track their outcomes.

The 1445 units of housing created by Sound Families are now owned and operated by more than 40 grantees. One of the last stages of Sound Families’ activities will occur over the next year: a series of smaller grants to grantees, partners, and providers, “to help them think about sustainability issues,” David says. “How do we keep this going over time? We want to support them as they’re thinking about maintaining organizational capacity, sustaining the important work that they’re doing.”

“WFF continues to move forward. And at the Gates Foundation, we’re very excited about moving forward with these partnerships that have been created, with all of the synergy and energy that exists around this issue right now in determining collectively what needs to happen next and how to do it.” He says they will make some kind of “gentle announce- ment” at the conference this month, but are not officially launching new strategies until mid-2008. “There’s a lot of conversation, and a lot of collective work needs to occur. Stay tuned for details.”

**An employment epiphany**

David and the Gates Foundation are not alone in realizing that even our best efforts to combine housing with social services are not enough. Employment opportuni- ties are needed as well if we want to create stable long-term solutions for homeless people.

Developing community employment pathways

It sounds elementary—almost embarrassing so. But in truth, the scope of the problem, compared to the resources available, had limited us to taking one step at a time. David recalls attending a meeting in King County in 2005 “when we first brought together all of the leads folks working in supportive housing and services. We sat down in the same room—all of these people who had been working for years and years on workforce development issues—and realized that many of the people around the table didn’t know each other.” The group resolved then and there to “bring these two sandboxes together and work collaboratively. It was a complex task, trying to bring together huge silos of supportive systems. We asked ourselves: How do we break down the walls? How do we make change happen?”

The first step in answering this question was to study the employment problem and form a plan of attack. Initial funding came from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as part of the Taking Healthcare Home Initiative. Washington State was one of eight sites nationally, and the Gates Foundation provided funding to produce the final report. Entitled Developing Community Employment Pathways for Homeless Job Seekers in King County and Washington State, the report’s principal authors were David Wertheimer; Mark Putnam at Building Changes; Bill Rumpf and Tina Shamseldin at City of Seattle Office of Housing; and John Rio, a nationally respected consultant with Advocates for Human Potential, based in White Plains, New York.

I spoke at length with Mark and Tina about the employment issue. They believe that, since its distribution in April 2007, Developing Community Employment Pathways has...
begun to bring about “systems change” and “boundary spanning” in Seattle and throughout Washington State. As Mark explains, “We really have brought together, in our community, employment and homeless housing and service providers. People are talking—at the director level and at the case manager level. Employment is on everybody’s radar now, including the funders.”

Key findings
The report [http://www.seattle.gov/housing/homeless/EmploymentReport.pdf] is full of excellent research and thought-provoking suggestions. I’d like to highlight three points that I think are particularly important.

1. 20% of homeless people work and most want to work. Homelessness is not a “lifestyle choice,” and most of those who are capable of working would do so in order to put a roof over their head.

2. Employment is key to breaking the cycle of chronic homelessness. Conventional wisdom in the field holds that “employment can be stressful and cause for relapse” into homelessness. However, as Tina points out, “Our research shows the importance of employment. It helps engage people in their housing; it’s part of their recovery. It builds in more supports for them.”

3. A flexible combination of housing, supportive services, and employment is needed. Right now, the emphasis is on Housing First. Substance abuse and mental health treatment can help ready homeless people for employment. Then it becomes possible for higher functioning individuals to move into independent living, making room for newly homeless people, or those who need a higher level of support.

Next steps on employment
Mark and Tina are pleased that their colleagues and partners are getting on board. “There’s a building momentum of interest in doing employment,” says Tina. “Now we’re looking at the possibility of expanding our sources to include funders of employment. United Way is already at the table and King County is too.” She adds that future RFPs may well include not only housing and services but also employment.

Currently, Tina and Mark are working on designing a pilot program for the Seattle metropolitan area. Although planning is still in the early stages, it will definitely incorporate the concept of vocationalization into the homelessness solution paradigm. As Mark explains, “Vocationalization is the process of creating a culture where work is expected. It’s normal and encouraged by your neighbors as well as staff within the building. It encourages thinking about how to become more productive and having clients mentor and support others.”

Of course, homeless people vary in their levels of skill and capacity, so a broad range of working situations needs to be available. Whether it’s a full-time job, part-time work, or day labor a couple of times per week—all of these would be accepted as successful outcomes within the vocationalized culture.

Right now, a supportive housing pilot program is underway in Portland, Oregon that includes onsite employment services. Tina says she’s observing the project closely. “We’re hoping to learn from them and do something similar in King County. Our goal is to get this pilot, get some local data, show some success. I think that’s going to really move things forward.”

The Washington State Coalition for the Homeless: More work needs to be done
My last interview for this issue was with Washington State Coalition for the Homeless (WSCH) Executive Director Mia Wells. Our wide-ranging conversation touched on the many faces of homelessness in our state, and the multiplicity of efforts that are coming together to end it.

For the four years prior to taking on her current role last year, Mia was responsible for running WSCH’s annual May state conference on ending homelessness, which has evolved into a truly dynamic exchange of support, great ideas, and best practices. In 2007, the conference hosted 450 participants. WSCH was founded in 1984 to provide state leadership in addressing homelessness; it is governed by dues-paying county representatives, and has always had strong representation across Washington State.

Maintaining gains
Like so many others who contributed their perspectives to this issue, Mia is encouraged that the re-entry of ex-offenders is an issue that the state is finally beginning to give the attention it requires. “Re-entry is a hot topic right now, and legislators are paying attention to that,” she says. She points to a 2006 Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) report that provided a snapshot of the relationship between re-entry, homelessness, and recidivism. In this study, 34% of those who re-offended did not have stable housing. And of those on parole who re-offended, 49% were unstably housed.

During the last legislative session, Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 6157 was passed. It is targeted at re-entry initiatives for offenders released from corrections facilities. Housing is a key piece of the bill’s mandate. Under ESSB 6157, CTED has authorized the Re-entry Housing Pilot Program (RHP), which provides grants to eligible organizations that offer supportive housing and services for jail and prison offenders under supervision and referred by DOC.

“We need to continue to educate people about the benefits of actually ending homelessness rather than continuing to manage it.”

MIA WELLS, Executive Director, Washington State Coalition for the Homeless (WSCH)
“We’re really excited about this,” Mia says. The $3.5 million for several pilot programs is a step in the right direction. Clearly more work needs to be done.

Re-entry for the homeless, as Mia points out, has many aspects. Whether it’s gaining secure employment and financial security or regaining a sense of stability and well being, whether it’s getting out of prison or transitioning from foster care to independence, an individual or family’s successful re-entry from homelessness can truly be a rocky road without the right kind of support. A case in point is the Independent Youth Housing Program established during the last session, which provides re-entry support, in the form of housing vouchers, to youth exiting foster care. What was also passed was the complement to that bill, SB 5305/HB 1201, which extends Medicaid healthcare coverage to these vulnerable youth until age 21.

It’s important to remember, Mia says, that these ex-offender and foster care programs are limited, pilot programs. “It’s going to be really important to stay on top of these, to make sure we ask for more funding and make it permanent in a timely manner, so we don’t lose any ground.”

We still need more housing

Many efforts are coming together, and as Mia sees it, “it’s only a matter of time, as everyone steps up more and more, increasingly, our communities will realize that homelessness is a community-wide problem. We need to continue to educate people about the benefits of actually ending homelessness rather than continuing to manage it.”

When I spoke with Mia, she had just left a meeting with the regional healthcare workers’ union, SEIU Healthcare 1199NW. This union was instrumental in getting the 1/10th of one percent Mental Health Tax Ordinance passed in King County last November, which will help fund vital community services to people coping with mental illness and chemical dependency. These union members are one great example of people who understand the complexity of the issues that impact homelessness, and are working to change the dynamic. SEIU 1199NW members have also been big supporters of affordable housing issues in Washington State across the board. “They spent a lot of time with us, helping us to figure out how to do a better job of grass roots mobilizing, and enlisting support,” Mia says.

Summing up

Currently, there’s a lot of excitement about our progress. Here’s what we have going for us: a dedicated and hard-working team that includes state officials, county governments, homeless advocates, technical assistance providers, private foundations, employment initiative consultants, and housing and social services providers. Our state government is committing significant financial resources. County and city governments are stepping up to the task. And our philanthropists, nonprofit funding agencies and business leaders are demonstrating incredible vision and generosity.

In every community across Washington State, large or small, so many of the same strategies, opportunities, and qualities for ending homelessness apply: Vision, prevention, education, employment, coordinated efforts, using resources creatively, tracking results. But ultimately, we need more of these resources.

As those I’ve interviewed for this newsletter stress, we must continue to coordinate communications and synergies among partners, so that resources are used effectively and homeless individuals and families can secure the homes they need. We need to create more employment solutions for homeless people. We need to strengthen our focus on homeless prevention. We also need to step up our efforts to help underserved segments, such as ex-offenders released from prisons and jails, who fall back into homelessness.

To meet our state’s 10-Year Goal, we need more housing, pure and simple. And, to get that, homelessness needs to matter to voters and taxpayers—in other words—everyday people. We’re on our way but we still have a long way to go.