

A bridge to hearth and hope

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After seven years of success and innovation in helping homeless families, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is pausing to assess how it might improve.

They are their own toughest critics.

The foundation is eager to rethink what could have been done differently for the one in four families asked to leave transitional housing early.

By any measure, the Sound Families Initiative achieved expansive goals that began in 2000 as conversations between Melinda Gates and her father-in-law, Bill Gates Sr. The foundation would invest \$40 million to generate 1,500 units of transitional housing, roughly double what existed.

Some of the cash would pay a share of the capital costs of new construction or acquisition of existing units. The balance would pay for services vital to a family's transition through chaos to stability and onto new lives of independent living.

One triumph of the Sound Families Initiative unity of purpose was evident this week as key individuals and organizations gathered at the Grand Hyatt Seattle for a celebratory breakfast.

Here was an achievement shared by federal, state and local officials, and county executives and mayors from King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. The audience included former tenants, public-housing specialists, private philanthropies and on-the-ground program managers who operate the housing or provide social services.

The initiative successfully convened public and private funders of housing, who attracted the people to manage and oversee the properties, where community support would be marshaled to rebuild shattered lives.

The power of the foundation's good idea and substantial investment attracted \$200 million in public and private money. The Ben B. Cheney Foundation of Tacoma is a prime example.

In an effervescent atmosphere of thanks for generosity, tenacity and expertise, no one received the rock-star welcome and standing ovation given Alice Shobe, director of Sound Families. She works as loaned talent from the Seattle Office of Housing.

In a room full of determined people more inclined to lead than follow, Shobe was obviously valued and respected for having moved everyone forward, together.

A typical Sound Families client is a 30-year-old female who fled domestic violence with two children under age 6. As they ran, they abandoned hope along with their possessions. In transitional housing, they found a key ingredient for rebuilding their lives: stability.

Through a residency of up to 18 months, successful families found counseling and emotional support, and they were able to keep their kids in the same schools while tuning up job skills.

More than two-thirds of the families transitioned into permanent housing. Full-time employment tripled. Hourly wages climbed, but were still not competitive in Puget Sound's housing market. Federal rental vouchers were essential.

Family involvement with Child Protective Services dropped to zero in three years. Families on temporary state income supplements declined a third. Household income steadily increased.

The tally of those helped to date is 2,738 children in 1,487 families.

Others had a tougher road. About 25 percent of families were asked to leave the program. Tracking and chronicling those early exits was Jami Bodonyi, research manager for Northwest Institute for Children and Families, of the University of Washington School of Social Work.

Bodonyi and her team interviewed everyone: from those who left early to families three years into new lives.

Their evaluation and inventory of barriers to family stability and permanent housing will shape the next phase of investment. Lessons learned cover greater access to mental-health and substance-abuse counseling and the role of on-site services, to the adequacy of case-manager training, applicant screening and the basics of available transportation and play space for kids.

Bolstering educational and job skills with roles for school districts and community colleges rate high as service improvements in the next round of foundation involvement.

The focus is on finding what will work, not recycling what is available. For all its success, the Gates Foundation is attuned to tailoring services to the families it failed to reach.