PREVENTING AND ENDING YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT HOMELESSNESS

Lessons From Five Years of Systems-Focused Grantmaking in King County, Washington

In 2011, the Raikes Foundation began convening local funders to align efforts around youth and young adult (YYA) homelessness in King County, Washington. In the years since, the Raikes Foundation and its partners have laid the groundwork for meaningful and lasting change. More than 100 stakeholders have contributed to a community plan to end and prevent youth homelessness and nearly five million new dollars have been dedicated to the issue. There is dedicated staff to coordinate youth homelessness efforts in King County and there are active efforts to strengthen data collection and system referrals. And young people with lived experience are actively involved in the regional and statewide efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recognized the Raikes Foundation and the regional effort in King County with the Secretary's Award for Public-Philanthropic Partnerships.

The purpose of this brief is to share our experiences and lessons learned with the hope that other funders and community leaders can learn from our experience in supporting efforts in their community to prevent and end youth homelessness.

Why Now?

We are at a critical moment in the work to end and prevent homelessness. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness has set the goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020 as part of the [Opening Doors Federal Strategic Plan to End Homelessness](#) and A Way Home America, a national initiative, is rallying a growing group of government agencies, funders, providers, advocates, researchers, and young people to prevent and end YYA homelessness in this country.[1] Today, we are seeing:

- Increased attention to the issue of YYA homelessness as communities make progress on ending chronic and veteran homelessness;

- New research, such as the [Voices of Youth Count](#) study led by [Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago](#) and [Hidden in Plain Sigh](#)t, a report by Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates;

- Ground-breaking pilot programs in communities like Cincinnati, Cleveland, Houston, and the Twin Cities;

- Organized advocacy efforts led by [National Network for Youth](#), [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#), [National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth](#), [True Colors Fund](#) and others;

- Greater coordination and alignment among federal agencies through the [U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness](#) (USICH); and

- Commitment from other private and public funders. For example, in 2015 [Funders Together to End Homelessness](#) launched [Foundations for Youth Success](#), a multiyear learning community of funders focused on YYA homelessness.

Together, these efforts can prevent and end YYA homelessness. At the Raikes Foundation, we believe that funders can play a unique role in [catalyzing action](#). We hope that sharing our experiences and lessons learned will help other funders replicate the progress we've seen in King County. Because each community presents its own opportunities and challenges, this resource is not meant to be a one-size-fits-all playbook. And while we speak from a funder's perspective, we do recognize that other entities have led and are leading community-wide efforts. If you are committed to working with diverse stakeholders and creating effective systems for those most in need, many of these techniques may still apply to you. The important thing is to start somewhere with a group of willing partners!

"Every night, thousands of unaccompanied young people go to sleep without the safety, stability, and support of a family or a home ... Many of these youth have experienced significant trauma before and after becoming homeless. Often they face struggles across multiple aspects of daily life that contribute to their vulnerability. ... All youth have strengths, but youth experiencing homelessness often lack positive opportunities and supports to apply them. An effective strategy must account for the specific needs of adolescents and youth transitioning to adulthood and the role families can play in both the reasons for becoming homeless and the potential solutions."[2]

Why Now?

Preventing and ending youth homelessness became one of our foundation's strategic priorities in 2011. But before we could take steps to realize this goal, the Raikes Foundation needed to understand the problem in King County. How does one understand YYA home-lessness, if by its very nature it remains hidden from mainstream society?

We started asking questions like:

- How many youth are experiencing homelessness in the community and why?

- How long have they experienced homelessness? Is this the first time or are individuals and young families experiencing homelessness in cycles? How long are those cycles? We tried to find both qualitative and quantitative answers.

- What does the existing system look like? What are the current programs? Who are the current providers? Are there players in the system who may not identify as "youth homelessness" agencies, but are working with the same population?

- What do we know about the dollars? Who is investing already and what are existing resources supporting? Where are the gaps?

- Where are the opportunities? Who is coordinating efforts around YYA homelessness, and from where? Can you identify a backbone agency in the community who can bring diverse stakeholders to the table?

- Where are things working well? Who is working well together? Think about these questions at both the services and the systems level.

We found it helpful to actually map out existing programs, practices, and resources in our community. When you connect the dots, you start to see the gaps and overlaps in the system. We also conducted a listening tour with national experts to better understand the systems approach to ending and preventing homelessness as well as colleagues in other cities to learn how they are responding to their community's needs.

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Connect with Other Funders Early and Find A Place to Start

It is impossible for you to take on everything at once, so identify a place to start. And it's crucial to act with other funders. We knew, for example, that the Raikes Foundation could not invest in the necessary systems change work alone and that we would need to work alongside other private and public funders. We formed a Youth Funders Group early on and our first task was to determine the priorities among the many program and systems gaps.

In King County, we focused our early efforts on:

- Prevention and early intervention, which was a major gap in our community;

- A community plan with a strong definition of the problem and proposed action steps because we wanted to raise awareness of YYA homelessness among regional funders and state leaders;

- A dedicated County staff lead (at the County's Committee to End Homelessness, now called "All Home") to coordinate regional efforts and demonstrate our collective commitment to the issue;

- Coordinated and improved data collection so that we could better understanding the size and scope of the issue in King County; and

- Youth voice, so that our efforts would be informed and developed with input from young people who experienced homelessness.

The starting point will likely look different in other communities. Are you still thinking about a missing set of data or research from your landscape scan? Start there! Do you struggle to bring certain stakeholders to the table? Start there! Did you hear about an exciting national effort, but you wish you could pilot it in your own community sooner? Start there!

Goals, obstacles, and people will change as you work to solve YYA homelessness, so it is critical that funders keep talking and pivoting. Build these relationships early and check in with other funders often. The Youth Funders Group gave us all an opportunity to learn faster and better together.

Funders can play a unique and strong role in setting priorities and bringing people together, but the first task is to get aligned and prioritize among the many goals. We ask our grantees to coordinate and align all the time and it's important that we also do the hard job ourselves!

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Collaborate with Diverse Stakeholders and Think About What Different Groups Can Do Best

Funders can prioritize where we should start especially after getting input from providers, researchers, advocates and youth but funders are neither front line staff nor experts. We need our partners and the broader community to inform the "how."

For example, after funders prioritized prevention and early intervention efforts, a Task Force on Youth Homelessness supported by the United Way of King County developed specific recommendations on the programs and strategies that should be funded. Providers in King County found that clarity from funders was helpful in scoping their

recommendations. They also saw our priority list as a signal that their newly-scoped recommendations were more likely to be funded instead of sitting on a shelf. Ultimately this open conversation improved relationships among funders and providers and advocates.

Now, you may be thinking that you don't have time to corral all of these stakeholders, build meaningful relationships with other funders, and fulfill your other job responsibilities. You're right! These efforts need a backbone, and as a funder, you can help fund someone to fill this role or support a position within another organization.

Embrace and Fund a Collective Impact Framework

We believe that the collective impact framework is one that will effectively guide the work to end and prevent YYA homelessness. According to FSG, collective impact "occurs when organizations from different sectors agree to solve a specific social problem using a common agenda, aligning their efforts, and using common measures of success."

Countless resources have been published on collective impact and we have included some of these in the Additional Resources list at the end of this brief. For King County, it was important to have

a framework to guide our implementation efforts. Working up front to establish measures of success and what metrics you will use to identify baseline and measures of progress is critical but know that this is work in progress. Data availability and quality will likely be an issue but work with what you have as you continuously improve and strengthen data quality. As you move into the implementation phase of your YYA homelessness work, talk openly about how you will motivate and hold one another accountable to the goals you set forth.

Key Lessons Learned From Our Implementation

We could recount many lessons learned from our early days, but several stand out:

- **Embed your early work in the community.** To find success early on, your efforts must live within the community so think early about who can play this "backbone" role. Make it part of someone's job description to think about how YYA homelessness can be more rare, brief, and one-time.

- **Do not let the lack of perfect data stop you before you get started.** We all want better data. Better information could help shape policy and funding allocation, and funders everywhere would feel more confident in their strategies. The reality is that we will never have perfect data and, at times, it will feel like you are trying to fly the plane as you build it. Start by collecting data and improve your data collection and usage over time! What data can you collect now to better identify the scope and magnitude of the problem? What are the obvious gaps that exist in the community that you can fill while improving your data efforts? What data or multiple data sources be used for advocacy in its raw form? What can be translated into stories?

- **Private funders can bring flexible dollars to the table, but as a sector, we can provide other support.** Strategic grantmaking is just one tool in our toolbox. We can also convene and use our voice to elevate the issue and the progress we're making in communities. At the Raikes Foundation, we also think about relationship building as it pertains to the sustainability of the work. We are not interested in supporting organizations indefinitely with our dollars, so we try to make connections to other sources of funding. Can public dollars support the backbone position in three years? Can we support capacity-building efforts so that organizations find new avenues of support in the future?

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- **Advocate for more effective and efficient use of limited dollars.** Resources to address youth homelessness are limited, and one way philanthropy can help is by identifying cost-effective interventions and helping the broader community better target and match different types of services to different sub-groups of youth, depending on need. Better matching need with the right level of services will lead to better outcomes for youth and young adults, but it will also help ensure that limited resources are deployed in an effective and efficient manner.

- **Pay attention to changing contexts and to "balancing" measures.** The problem statement is always changing. Indeed, this is probably a sign that you are making progress! You can avoid the "whack-a-mole" situation where the community solves one problem only to have another one pop up elsewhere. Try cycling among 1) the big picture vision of the system, 2) a deep focus on implementation and the measures of success, and 3) other "balancing measures," and other "unintended consequences."

- **Pay attention to the "root causes."** Homelessness is a symptom of many problems that have not been addressed. And while we have to address the crisis situation, we also need to pay attention to the root causes and identify the processes, structure, and systems that are causing this problem in the first place! These are hard issues that can't be solved overnight but we can't truly prevent and end youth homelessness if we aren't paying attention to what's causing the problem in the first place.

Summary: What Other Funders Can Learn From the Efforts in King County, Washington

No funder has the time or resources to solve YYA homelessness alone. We must learn from our failures and be willing to course-correct when we see new issues arise. As a community, we have to be clear about the outcomes we want, what resources we have, and where our gaps can be found. We have to both hold each other up and hold each other accountable along the way. That is how we ensure that youth homelessness is rare, brief, and a one-time occurrence, if it even occurs at all.

Over the past five years, we've learned a lot about what works to end and prevent YYA homelessness. We've built meaningful relationships with a diverse group of government, philanthropic, and community partners, and we are seeing progress in King County. As you work to catalyze change in your community, we hope you can benefit from these lessons learned:

- It is not about the size of your checkbook, but rather your willingness to speak up and bring people together. Communities want to solve YYA homelessness. Help start that conversation.

- Proactively seek diverse perspectives and set up a parallel track of funders-only conversations.

Funders need both the opportunity to test their assumptions and a space to talk through funding strategies with other funders. Funders can drive the changes that are provider informed and youth centered.

- Adopt a framework like collective impact that aligns your community efforts and uses common measures of success.

- Start somewhere. Don't wait for perfect data before you act. Don't let big goals stop you from achieving small wins. The problem statement is likely to change over time. That is a sign of progress! Be a model for continuous learning for your community and be willing to cycle between the systems-level lens and the focused implementation lens. Pay attention to "balancing measures" or unintended consequences of your work.

- Work with others. Join A Way Home America and Foundations for Youth Success so that you could work with other stakeholders to learn, collaborate and advance our effort to prevent and end youth homelessness in this country!

Additional Resources

All Home (formerly the Committee to End Homelessness, King County), The Journey to Home: How We're Solving Youth Homelessness in King County

Building Changes, Priority Action Steps to End and Prevent Youth/Young Adult Homelessness: An Implementation Plan

FSG, Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work

Funders Together to End Homelessness, Resources for Funders on System Change

The Homeless Hub, Resources on Youth Homelessness

National Alliance to End Homelessness, An Emerging Framework for Ending Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness

(1) The group includes representatives from: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, the State of Minnesota, King County, Seattle, the City of Houston, the District of Columbia, True Colors Fund, National Network for Youth, National Alliance to End Homelessness, National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Melville Charitable Trust, Raikes Foundation, Casey Family Programs, Butler Family Fund, Polk Bros. Foundation, Heading Home Minnesota, Covenant House International, Chapin Hall Center for Children and others.

(2) Framework to End Youth Homelessness: A Resource Text for Dialogue and Action. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, February 2013