

Sound Families Initiative

In 2000, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched a \$40 million, eight-year commitment to address family homelessness in the Puget Sound area in Washington State with the goal of creating 1,500 new housing units, provided with services that increase family stability. The Initiative was launched as a public-private partnership, with involvement from different levels of government, nonprofit groups, and regional housing authorities.

The Foundation made evaluation a priority from the beginning and contracted with a team of researchers from the University of Washington's School of Social Work. The team chose a participatory approach, rather than an experimental design with a control group. The evaluation intentionally focused efforts on identifying and measuring impact and change at three distinct outcome levels: individual families, organizations/agencies, and the larger systems that provide funding and oversight. A variety of different data collection techniques was adopted with feedback loops to share this data broadly among all participants - the Foundation, government agencies, policy-makers, grantees, and even the beneficiary families - and communication tools were designed specifically for each of the different audiences.

Early on, prior to the team of evaluators coming on board, a decision was made not to use a control group. Even if the initiative planners had been comfortable with the expense and complexity of a control group design, the evaluators note that this approach would have been inappropriate for two reasons. First, experimental design is best suited to testing a single model and in this relatively young field, no single approach was yet seen as the likely solution. Second, ethical questions emerge about denying families assistance or assigning them randomly to models that are not expected to work in order to create a control group.

On the other hand, the benefits of the more participatory, multi-level approach have been significant, largely due to the engagement of a broad set of stakeholders in the evaluation. The dialogue fostered by this engagement has built constructive relationships over time between the evaluator and the funders, agencies, policy-makers, and especially with the families being tracked.

The evaluation illustrates many of the different uses of evaluation described in this report, and enabled the Foundation to achieve many of its goals.

- Understanding the needs of the target population
 - *"When the evaluation was set up, a lot of the people involved had just one definition in their minds of homeless families. The evaluation has teased out different groups that we can understand: those affected by domestic violence, disability, or sometimes just real economic challenges. And the differences between rural, suburban, and urban homelessness are real and important to take into account. One major benefit is that now we all understand you can't just generically say, 'here's what you do for homeless families' because it's not that simple."* – Alice Shobe, Director of the Sound Families Initiative



- Influencing public decisions and policies
 - *"The importance of the role of Section 8 in giving families the chance they need to succeed long-term by providing affordable housing has emerged as being critical to this model. The data is saying there are rewards for collaborative behavior and is providing incentives for these partnerships to continue. Our findings underscore the benefits of interagency collaboration for families."* – Jami Bodonyi, evaluator with the University of Washington School of Social Work

- Shaping initiative implementation
 - *"The evaluation has allowed us to make mid-course corrections. One small example was that some of our earlier projects we funded didn't have adequate child play space. We started hearing from our evaluators that kids would run around and get in trouble, stressing out their parents. And this was affecting their ability to focus on goals and was a contributing factor for some who were getting evicted. It would all escalate. Once we heard that, we decided to not fund any more projects that don't have adequate child play areas."* – Katie Hong, Gates Foundation

- Attracting public funding
 - *"The evaluation results were instrumental in helping to create the publicly funded Washington Families Fund. I'm convinced that we wouldn't have succeeded in creating this new public-private fund without the evaluation data. Legislators responded to the fact that the rates of public dependency were reduced for families after they had lived in supportive housing for 6-18 months. Additionally, the results for kids have been meaningful – the rates of attendance in schools improve when kids aren't moving around a lot. This helps make the case for additional public investment. The evaluation results were a cornerstone of our advocacy strategy."* – Alice Shobe

- Refining the Foundation's future strategy
 - *"One of the things we started seeing from our evaluation was that child care is a huge barrier to women going back to work – and high quality child care was identified as one of the top needs for women who had graduated from transitional housing and were moving on. This was one of the reasons we looked at and launched the Early Learning Initiative at the Foundation. Quality child care is an important adult workforce strategy – but it's also important for successful child development."* – Katie Hong

- Increasing dialogue among grantees
 - *"In some cases, I think our [the evaluators'] presence and bringing people together around a table to discuss findings is making a difference: in one example, a program's data on families, and particularly the families' comments on the program, have helped the property manager and service provider to understand how working better together would improve the program for families."* – Jami Bodonyi

- Help grantees understand their own successes and challenges
 - *"The evaluation results have helped our grantees to improve their programs. One example is a grantee who provides housing and services in a rural area. From the evaluation results, they looked at the income level of participating families and saw that they clearly wouldn't make it. So they worked to get transportation money, and changed workforce strategies. They changed from working with the TANF case manager to find any job, and they now counsel families to turn down the easy jobs and look for things in nursing, trucking, and other high growth industries. Many families are now leaving their program and are able to afford apartments on their own. This was not something we expected in terms of how the evaluation would get used. We didn't realize that grantees would be able to use the evaluation to make immediate improvements to their program."* – Katie Hong

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- The Gates Foundation started the Sound Families initiative in 2000 with an eight-year \$40 million grant
- Sound Families is an innovative partnership between the Foundation, local governments, and the University of Washington that aims to create additional units of transitional housing for homeless families in the Puget Sound area
- The goal of Sound Families is to create 1,500 units of housing with services for families in transition in three counties in Washington
- Sound Families has 2 FTEs, support from the Gates Foundation program officers, and a dedicated external evaluator

