



United Way of King County

United Way of King County 2009-2011 State Legislative Agenda

During the last biennium, a number of significant investments were made in key health and human service programs, including housing and homelessness, asset development and early learning. As our state faces an economic downturn and the Legislature and governor grapple with a significant budget deficit, these investments may be in jeopardy. Should cuts in these areas occur, not only will it negatively impact our state's most vulnerable citizens, but it will be difficult to discern the long-term cost-effectiveness of these strategies. Therefore, the overriding legislative priority is to preserve previous investments in these program areas.

Ending Homelessness

United Way of King County is focusing on preventing and ending homelessness with particular emphasis on the needs of the chronically homeless. The major means to achieve this is through supportive housing which combines affordable housing units with supportive services such as mental health or substance abuse treatment to build a bridge out of homelessness or prevent it from occurring. In addition to the chronically homeless, United Way is also targeting family and youth homelessness.

United Way of King County addresses homelessness by: increasing the availability of permanent supportive housing for those transitioning from homelessness; helping meet the immediate and basic needs of people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless; helping increase the availability of affordable housing for low income individuals and families; facilitating linkages to housing for individuals who are at risk of homelessness upon leaving state systems; and assisting low income individuals and families to move toward greater stability and self-sufficiency.

Affordable Housing for Low Income

Affordable housing is the essential, stable base from which families and individuals grow and thrive. Education, jobs and health care all depend on stable housing. Due to rapidly increasing land prices, construction costs and population growth, at least 250,000 Washington households currently lack affordable housing. The Housing Trust Fund supports all kinds of affordable housing through low interest loans and grants and leverages four times its funding from other public, private and philanthropic sources. About 70 percent of the Housing Trust Fund has gone toward housing the homeless. Despite recent generous increases in funding, the Housing Trust Fund still has a substantial backlog of projects ready for development (16 housing projects in Fall 2007).

Renew the Housing Trust Fund at its current level

Rental Assistance

The state's Transitional Housing, Operating and Rent (THOR) program and similar local programs work with private sector landlords to demonstrate that short-term rental assistance in the form of vouchers and support services can, for many, provide a quick exit from homelessness and prevent homelessness altogether. There are approximately 22,000 people who are homeless on a given night in Washington state of which approximately 8,500 are in King County. In King County, THOR served 161 homeless families with children in 2006. Increasing the number of families and individuals served by this successful program would go far to ending homelessness in the state.

Support rental assistance for housing and service supports to help families, single adults, youth, and people at risk of homelessness



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Discharge From State Systems Into Stable Housing

There are many underlying causes associated with homelessness including alcohol/substance abuse, mental health issues, and incarceration. A key element of both the Washington and King County 10-year plans to end homelessness is preventing people from being discharged from state care into homelessness or risk for homelessness. Individuals discharged from foster care, juvenile detention, jail, prison and mental health facilities without appropriate housing and support services are a recipe for recidivism. Several pilot projects have shown stable supportive housing with appropriate services can stop that cycle.

In addition, once individuals enter state systems, eligibility for needed support such as medical assistance may be terminated rather than suspended requiring new application and temporary loss of services upon release. This loss of services, compounded by the lack of stable housing, increases the risk of recidivism. A feasibility study was funded in the 2008 session that would examine options for addressing this issue including a cost/benefit analysis. The study is due to the Legislature and governor by November 15, 2008.

- ***Require the Department of Corrections, juvenile justice system, state mental health institutions and the foster care system to identify the number of persons being discharged into homelessness or temporary housing, to prepare a plan for eliminating that practice and implement that plan by 2011***
- ***Facilitate continuity of medical assistance coverage for institutionalized persons when they are discharged from correctional and mental health facilities***

Greater Asset Stability and Self-Sufficiency

In order to become self-sufficient, people with low incomes must have the opportunity to save money. Washington state's Individual Development Accounts (IDA's) are matched savings accounts for people with lower incomes. Participants receive financial training to help them plan a family budget and save. People can use this savings to purchase an asset such as a home, business or an education. State dollars support about one-third of United Way of King County's program match. United Way's IDA program has enrolled 963 participants since 2002. These participants have saved more than \$700,000 and accumulated about \$1.3 million in matching funds. Of these, 288 individuals have made asset purchases through the program, with nearly half of the purchases being homes.

Maintain the same level of funding (\$2 million) to IDA's in the 2009-2011 biennium as in the last biennium

Working Families Tax Rebate

Families with lower incomes in Washington state pay a larger share of their income toward state and local taxes than low-income households in any other state. The Working Families Credit passed in 2008 (now called Working Families Tax Rebate) would provide sales tax rebates to lower income working families by building on the federal earned income tax credit (EITC). The Working Families Rebate is scheduled to be set at 5 percent of the EITC in 2009 and 2010 and 10 percent thereafter. Once fully funded, the WFC will provide a tax break to 350,000 working families across the state. The rebate will boost a minimum wage worker's earnings by up to 31 percent when combined with the federal credit, supporting families who are working to move out of poverty. In 2008, the legislature allowed for \$1.25 million in administrative start up costs for the program (now placed on hold by the governor).

If taxes are increased during the biennium, consideration should be given to implementing the Working Families Rebate. A rebate set at 10 percent of the federal EITC would provide a tax



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break of up to \$500 for lower-income working families, an amount that would offset the average cost of a modest sales tax increase

Ensuring Every Child is Ready for Kindergarten

Over 50 percent of children entering kindergarten arrive unprepared to learn. Science tells us that the period from birth to 3 is key to the development of the individual. Helping children and families in the earliest years is United Way of King County's highest early learning priority.

Overall, United Way of King County supports children from birth to kindergarten entry by: helping everyone understand how experiences and relationships in the first days and years of life affect the development of the brain; supporting parents in their role as their children's first and most influential teachers; helping families be able to access high quality formal and informal child care and early education that meets their needs; seeing that young children with special challenges get the additional help they need to achieve their potential; and supporting children in making smooth transitions into kindergarten.

Parent Support

Parents are a child's first and most important teachers. Research demonstrates that growth in development (cognitive, social/emotional and physical) is linked to the quality of relationships children have with their parents and caregivers. Supporting parents and families "where they are" in giving a child the best possible start in life is critical to a child's success in school and later life.

Home visiting is a key strategy in helping parents provide a stable environment with developmental support. There are a number of home visiting models that have been researched and tested with positive results including higher graduation rates and lower child abuse and neglect, unemployment and crime rates.

Fund home visiting for those families in highest need

Early Identification and Intervention of At-Risk Children

Research reveals that 2 to 3 percent of the population experiences developmental issues. While the percent is small, the impact on the community (in terms of the cost of special education and supportive services) is substantial. Developmental screening for all children birth to 3, and availability of culturally competent services, can improve a child's social and cognitive skills, and benefit the child's success in education and social outcomes over the long-term. Services for children birth to three diagnosed with developmental delays via the Individual's with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are an entitlement and can reduce the number of kids that require special education classes and support services in K-12.

Review how well the consistent funding approach for infant toddler intervention services (mandated by the legislature in 2008) is working

Child Care Quality

Fifty percent of all children under 6 live in households where all available parents work. Formal and informal child care (the latter often referred to as family, friend and neighbor care or FFN) is used by families to support their need to be out of the home. There is a strong relationship between quality early learning and school success. Children in high quality early learning programs are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college and own their own home, and be less involved with the criminal justice system. Strategies successfully used to improve the quality of child care include the Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS), voluntary accreditation, and proven support services to family, friend and neighbor caregivers, such as Play and Learn groups.

- *Fund QRIS to test the viability of a rating system in improving and rewarding quality (without unduly affecting the affordability of child care)*



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- *Provide education and support for FFN*

Child Care Co-Pay/Subsidy

The subsidized child care and co-pay system needs to be updated and improved. Currently, the subsidized child care program is limited to those families at less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. The subsidy rate, once in the 75th percentile, has now fallen to the 35th percentile for Family Child Care and the 28th percentile for Day Care Centers. Changes proposed include: extending the re-authorization period from 6 months to 12 months, limiting co-pays to no more than 10 percent of gross family income and continuing eligibility for child care subsidies while children are in Head Start, Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), and/or Early Head Start through the end of the program year, regardless of any change in the family's economic situation affecting subsidy eligibility.

Support changes to the system that increase participation by child care providers, decrease interruption of care for children, and decrease the amount spent by low income parents in co-pays

Positive Transitions/School Readiness Assessment

Being ready for school is critical for success in life. Children starting school behind, usually stay behind. Washington state and various other public and private entities are investing increasing resources in school readiness e.g. ability to learn, talk with other people, make friends and behave. Being able to measure the readiness of a child for kindergarten will provide valuable information on how well birth to five programs are working as well as being able to identify areas where a child needs special attention.

During the 2008 legislative session, \$150,000 was designated for the Department of Early Learning, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and Thrive by Five Washington to develop kindergarten entry assessment options. Once a tool is developed and tested, staff will need to be trained in its use and how to interpret and communicate the results to parents and others.

Continue support for development and implementation of a school readiness assessment that includes both learning and social and emotional components

System Support

Information and Referral to Social and Health Services

In 2003, the Washington State Legislature passed enabling legislation that recognized 2-1-1 as a seamless telephone information, assistance and referral system. In 2005, Washington State appropriated \$1 million for capital purchases. Call centers began operation in February 2006, and a subsequent appropriation of \$2.5 million in 2006 allowed the system to go statewide.

Callers to 2-1-1 are referred to a wide range of governmental and community based social services including housing/shelter, legal assistance, child care, rent/mortgage assistance, utilities, medical coupons, drug and alcohol treatment, counseling, transportation, food, volunteering and recreation.

Every day, over 1000 Washington residents call 2-1-1 looking for information and referral sources that will help them meet the challenges they are facing. This 2007 call volume is an 84 percent increase over the 2006 call volume and continues to grow in 2008. The appropriation level for the 2007-2009 biennium is \$2 million (or \$1 million/year).

Support a statewide system that realistically aligns services with structure and funding