



FareStart and Homeless Prevention

Although FareStart works with populations in need beyond the homeless, homelessness is a pervasive and dire result of the joblessness and poverty that we are working every day to combat. This article takes a look at how we as a community, and we at FareStart, are striving to solve a growing crisis.

The Sustainability Question

The news these days is full of stories about new ways to shelter our community's homeless and how to fund new low-income housing. But what will keep people in housing once they are there? Much of the time the critical question of sustainability – how to give people in poverty the support and the tools they need to stabilize and remain housed long-term, and find a way out of poverty – is left out of this discussion.

There are many factors that contribute to homelessness, but poverty is the most fundamental of them. The barriers that keep individuals from escaping poverty are numerous, and can multiply quickly for anyone in a crisis. Many who are born into poverty lack opportunities to overcome it, and follow paths that perpetuate it and trap them into risky behaviors. Others may lose everything with a job loss, or in the grip of mental illness or addiction, and, then in poverty, they find scant resources available when they seek help. A few sad facts:

- The 2016 estimate of people without shelter in King County showed a 19 percent increase over last year, and the count in 2015 was a significant increase over 2014.
- Those leaving the criminal-justice system are seven times more likely than others to become homeless.
- In King County, about one-third of all foster youth end up homeless.
- Washington State is ranked 47th in the nation for access to mental health services.
- Chemical dependency treatment services for the poor are inadequate to the demand. Five years ago there were 100 detox beds available in King County. As of last month there were 16.

Housing is just one part of a solution to this complex challenge. While our region's leaders study various approaches to housing and services that have worked elsewhere in the nation to reduce the overall number of unsheltered people, FareStart is focused on sustainability, dedicating resources to helping youth and adults find a way to pull themselves out of poverty and stay out. FareStart works one-on-one with each of our students to provide the tools needed to help them untangle their lives, loosen the tight grip of poverty, and overcome obstacles to employment and stability – a comprehensive and individualized approach.

Support to Overcome Barriers in FareStart's Training Program

How does FareStart address the multiple issues our students face, and move them toward self-supporting lives? The following graduate stories illustrate the ways.

Simon's Story: Mental Health Support and The Right Job

Simon came to FareStart homeless and struggling with depression. FareStart's intake staff set him up with a bed at Compass Center, a main provider of temporary housing for students in the Adult Culinary Training Program. From the first week of the program, Simon had unlimited access to mental health services onsite at FareStart through Sound Mental Health, and with this critical support to conquer his depression, he was able to successfully complete the adult training program and graduate. Though he still struggled with interviewing, FareStart's employment specialists and his life skills instructor continued to work with him to build his confidence while he worked as a temporary employee in FareStart's kitchens, continuing to hone his skills. After struggling to find the right "fit", Simon ultimately landed a job with a large maker of pre-packed salads. He has now been there for over a year and is thriving. He also has qualified for and taken advantage of the support of Compass Center's program in which he continues temporary residency there, paying a third of his income in rent while he builds his work experience and his wages. He now plans to move into permanent housing closer to his job in Renton in July. Simon's mental health and prospects for the future are better than they have ever been.

Untreated mental disorders, including depression in its many forms, are a leading cause of and perpetuator of homelessness. In providing comprehensive services such as mental health and addiction treatment for our students and graduates, we remove significant barriers to success and decrease the likelihood of future homelessness.

Dennis' Story: Direct Re-entry and Transitional Employment

Dennis came into the FareStart Adult Training Program directly from eight years of incarceration as part of our partnership with the Washington State Department of Corrections, begun in 2015. Though in his 50s, he was ready to work and embraced the new challenge and the FareStart community. Quiet and hardworking, Dennis sailed through the program with support from the chefs, staff and other students, and then entered FareStart's transitional employment program while looking for a permanent job. Though his age and his record were working against him, with his Employment Specialist's help he was able to secure a part-time position with a Safeway in their deli. He continued temporary work at FareStart while looking for a second job, but was successful enough at Safeway right off to earn a full-time job after just a few months when he requested it. Thus positioned for job and wage stability, Dennis's Employment Specialist worked with him to find an affordable apartment with another graduate. With FareStart providing the first month of rent, Dennis moved in and is well positioned to move up steadily in his job. He is reconnecting with family and steadily showing them, his FareStart supporters, and his parole officer what successful re-entry looks like.

Temporary and transitional employment opportunities are critical to many graduates in bridging a common gap between training and finding a permanent job. FareStart's transitional employment program provides that bridge, in the form of wages and skill enhancement, for many graduates whose multiple barriers mean more time is needed to find the right job fit.

Community Support and the Opportunity to Advance – Genna's Story

Genna had a college degree and a career. But addictive behaviors including chemical dependency and gambling derailed her success. She lost her housing and eventually her job, and then moved back to

Seattle to be closer to her family. She came to FareStart homeless, but then moved into one of the women's shelters that we contract with for housing. Genna dove into her training, and FareStart staff connected her with addiction support groups and mental health professionals. She made new friends with a similar desire to change in the program. Upon graduating in 2014, she found an opportunity to work on food prep at a Tom Douglas restaurant. Since then, Genna has stayed clean, transitioned to permanent housing, and developed a regular habit of coming back to volunteer at FareStart, her supporting community. Best of all, she has been promoted at work to a line position and continues to work on advancing her culinary skills in pursuit of her dream of becoming an executive chef.

FareStart gives its graduates a solid set of skills to build on, and those skills are in demand. In the current market, food service workers are so in demand that students sometimes find jobs even before graduating. While some are taking their skills to the next level right away, more is needed to address wage progression for those at or near the poverty line, and FareStart will focus on this in the final two years of our five-year strategic plan. Continued access to our community and to our graduate support services for as long as necessary means that graduates, whether they aspire to become executive chefs or something entirely different, have support to pursue the life they want and valuable skills to build upon or fall back upon – all the pieces needed to complete the puzzle of self-sustainability.

Martin's Story: Gaining Skills and Staying in School

One year ago, Martin was a shy kid who was struggling with his mental health and failing in traditional high school. His attendance had plummeted; he preferred to stay home playing video games. He transferred to Seattle Public School's Interagency Academy, which specializes in helping students like Martin stay in school, and from there was placed in FareStart's new Youth Culinary and Customer Service Training Program. He had never had a job before and was hesitant with his trainers and his co-workers and struggled with attendance at first. But things soon turned around and he started showing up regularly both to class in the morning and training in the afternoon. He earned school credit in training, a weekly stipend, and made new friends. He also mastered some great kitchen and customer service skills through kinesthetic learning and real-life experience on the job. By the time he graduated from the FareStart program, he was working independently and enthusiastically. Martin received his high school diploma from Interagency Academy in June at Memorial Stadium with his chef trainers and friends cheering from the sidelines. He is eager to return to FareStart to start an internship at Pac Tower, working in the Café there with FareStart trainers, earning a paycheck, sharpening his skills, and preparing for future work.

Many of the youth we serve, ages 16 to 21, are unstably housed and dealing with serious life issues that interfere with their ability to stay in – much less succeed in – school. Intervening positively in a youth's life at a critical time can be the key to breaking a cycle of poverty. Our youth programs aim to give students skills and opportunities they might never otherwise encounter, and show them just the beginning of what they can be capable of in a work environment. Education goes hand-in-hand with their training – students like Martin must attend school to be eligible to participate in the training program, and we are witnessing daily how successful this model is in turning their attitudes – and lives – around.

Growing Opportunities to Meet the Need

Despite housing 7,000 unsheltered people a year, more than 5,000 more people become newly homeless in King County annually, and the number is rising, due in large part to rising rents and the lack

of availability of affordable housing. No matter how many shelters or low-income housing units we add to our region, our homeless problems will not abate until we give people the tools and services they need to rise from a basic scramble for survival to active control of their futures. It is not easy or cheap to “teach a man to fish” when he or she is barely scraping for survival, but any other approach is just a Band-Aid. FareStart – relying on the continuing, vital support of our many donors and partners – has been expanding access to its training locally through growth of our businesses and our programs to attempt to serve more people in crisis. We will be continuing to expand access as much as possible in the next two years, especially to populations such as custodial parents in need and people in poverty who are still housed but at risk, in order to prevent homelessness and its many adverse effects before it happens.