



On Poverty and Homelessness: What Works?

Though 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 how we at FareStart, are working to solve a growing community crisis.

- **1 in 8 Americans lives below the poverty line.**
- **In 2014, 21% of all children (15.5 million kids) lived in poverty.**
- **In January 2015, 564,708 people were homeless on a given night in the United States.**
Of that number, 206,286 were people in families, and 358,422 were individuals.
- **In King County, over 10,000 people are currently homeless on any given night.**
- **At least 67 people died out in the elements in King County in 2015.**
- **An estimated 3,000 students in the Seattle School district are homeless – roughly one for every classroom.**

We've seen statistics and headlines like this for so long, and they haven't seemed to get better, only worse in recent years, despite long-range plans and dropping unemployment rates. In November, the mayor of Seattle and the King County Executive declared a state of emergency over homelessness in response to the sharp increase. Many of us here in the greater Seattle area, with its backdrop of a booming tech economy, struggle with what to do or think when we encounter a homeless or jobless person. Some feel compassion and frustration simultaneously, and most of us ask ourselves if any of the efforts to help – from giving out dollars to community-wide campaigns – really have any impact. Are we just fighting a losing battle? Are real solutions possible?

Some background on how we got here: The 2008-2009 financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession were catastrophic to the most vulnerable of our society, and affected those already in poverty or on the brink in vast disproportion to the rest of the population. But the origins of our current homeless problem go back much farther, beginning in the 1970s and accelerating sharply with the huge government disinvestment in low-income housing subsidies, social services and urban programs benefitting the poor during the 1980s.

In the years since, wages have stayed relatively stagnant for most working people, but the cost of living – in cities especially – has continued to climb, especially in the last decade, and more families and individuals are falling into poverty and homelessness every year. This is particularly the case in the Seattle area, where we have seen a dramatic increase in rents. One national study, published in *The Journal of Urban Affairs*, showed that for every \$100 in increased rent in urban areas like ours, there is a 15% increase in the homelessness population. We see this effect locally in a 19% increase in the number of people sleeping outside in January 2016 compared to last year at the same time, and a 21% increase the year before. (One Night Count, 2016 & 2015)

A better approach: Faced with this economic reality, those who work on the issue in all sectors have an uphill battle. But we have learned quite a bit during this last decade of struggling with the problem. While King County's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, begun in 2005, concluded in an economic climate where the homeless rate was increasing instead of decreasing, important lessons have been learned along the way. The Committee to End Homelessness succeeded in helping over 40,000 people out of homelessness during that time by focusing on building affordable permanent housing. The takeaway: a laser focus on just one aspect is not enough to gain traction on what is a multifaceted, complex, and growing problem. Current thinking about what is most effective in reducing homelessness is based in the idea that we must listen carefully to the real, complex needs of homeless individuals and families and work on many levels to provide customized services and opportunities for employment, as well as housing help – the opposite of the housing first, one-size-fits-all approach of the past decade.

Our community is now tackling the problem afresh and with new strategies. The former Committee to End Homelessness has reorganized into All Home, with a stated goal of making homelessness "rare, brief, and one-time", and has a new four-year plan. The state of emergency was declared to both bring more awareness to the crisis and to

signal our community's real need for federal partnership. Though that may be slow to come, the City of Seattle has subsequently freed up \$7.3 million in new funding to address the problem and is poised to announce its full proposal for the use of those funds this month. These are expected to go to three main efforts: homelessness prevention, additional shelter capacity, and outreach to encampments. Already the city is stepping up efforts in the latter two efforts, creating new encampments and increasing services for those who are currently unsheltered, and collecting important data.

At FareStart, we are most interested in homelessness prevention – in innovative, long-term solutions that will help make homelessness truly rare and mostly one-time. It is clear that we cannot just build ourselves out of the problem of homelessness. Providing ample housing for those who are unsheltered is indeed important and necessary, but if we do not invest in pathways out of poverty for those we house, we will never be able to effectively address the issue – people will continue to fall back into homelessness and poverty again. Families and individuals need an array of help and access to services to become housed, but to keep them housed we need to invest much more in employment and education – innovative programs that are currently not being supported sufficiently. We need more work training programs that provide pathways out of poverty like those we offer at FareStart.

This is the impetus behind our push for recent growth locally, and in our efforts toward replication of our model nationally. FareStart's model of what has been working all along that can be expanded to have significant impact in a time of increased need. In our current situation, giving a hand up to those who want to work hard to transform their lives is both a pragmatic, workable solution and a moral imperative.

FareStart is at the table in the community discussion on the topic in many ways locally, including our CEO Megan Karch's board membership on the Downtown Seattle Association, membership in the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness, representation on the mayor's housing task force, and our national leadership in food-service social enterprise through our Catalyst Kitchens program and membership in the national Social Enterprise Alliance, to name just a few. **We will continue to push for increased attention and support for employment and education programs as equal in importance to housing**, while also continuing to grow as much as we can locally and share our model with other communities, keeping faith that we can together make real progress and give relief to thousands of families and individuals and make our communities healthier and stronger, and better places to live for all citizens.

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Sources and Further Reading

Articles

“Seattle, King County declare a state of emergency over homelessness,” [Crosscut.com](http://crosscut.com), Nov. 2, 2015

“Can Seattle Make Homelessness Rare?” *Seattle Met*, seattlemet.com, Dec. 29, 2015

Resources

The Social Enterprise Alliance: socialenterprise.us

National Alliance to End Homelessness: endhomelessness.org

All Home: allhomekc.org

Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness: homelessinfo.org