



SPOTLIGHT: SPOKANE COUNTY

Rallying your community to support students experiencing homelessness



In **Spokane County**, a coalition of local leaders representing a wide variety of sectors mobilized to declare student homelessness a top community priority. The county's efforts are exceptional, yet they draw from strengths and resources already existing within the community. In that way, lessons learned from Spokane County can apply to any and every community in the state willing to step up for students experiencing homelessness.

Question:

How can you get your community to unite around student homelessness and address the issue with the urgency it deserves?

Answer:

Use the example of Spokane County to inspire and guide you—and make it happen!

“Everyone stepped up to raise awareness of the problem. Community members tend to be blown away when they learn that there are more than 3,500 students experiencing homelessness in Spokane County.” —Ryan Oelrich, Executive Director, Priority Spokane

K-12 STUDENT HOMELESSNESS 2015-16

Spokane County

homeless: 3,558
% of total enrollment: 4.7%

Statewide

homeless: 39,671
% of total enrollment: 3.7%

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

MAKING STUDENT HOMELESSNESS A TOP COMMUNITY PRIORITY

Identify a catalyst. Build a coalition.

Spokane County launched its effort through [Priority Spokane](#), an organization already rooted in the community. Priority Spokane exists to catalyze collaboration among the various public and private sectors within the county and then organize that coalition behind a single community issue.

Priority Spokane's members come from government, philanthropy, health, education, social services and business. When diverse sectors within a community rally behind a common goal, they can create profound impact.

Your community doesn't need the equivalent of a Priority Spokane to get started. It does, however, need an entity with enough influence to mobilize various sectors of the community and bring them together to make student homelessness a priority. The entity can be a school district, a regional educational service district, a county or municipal agency, a nonprofit, a foundation, a faith-based group, a prominent local business—or a combination of two or more. The identity of the catalyst doesn't matter. What matters is identifying one.

“Student homelessness affects all aspects of Spokane County—the business community, our hospitals, juvenile justice ... everything. Having all entities at the table has been extremely helpful in making student homelessness a community-wide priority.”

—Ryan Oelrich, Executive Director, Priority Spokane



Identify an influential entity that can pull together a core group of champions that will serve as a steering committee and be held accountable for the community-wide effort.

BRINGING TOGETHER AN ENTIRE COMMUNITY

These local leaders came together to make student homelessness a top community priority in Spokane County.



BUSINESS

Avista Utilities
Greater Spokane Incorporated
Numerica Credit Union
Umpqua Bank



EDUCATION

Eastern Washington University
Northeast Washington Educational
Service District 101
Gonzaga University
Spokane Falls Community College
Washington State University Spokane



GOVERNMENT

City of Spokane
Spokane County



HEALTH

Providence Health Care
Spokane Regional Health District



PHILANTHROPY

Community Building Foundation
Empire Health Foundation
Inland Northwest Community
Foundation



SOCIAL SERVICES

Catholic Charities
Spokane Housing Authority
United Way of Spokane County

Acknowledge the problem. Examine data.

Under the Priority Spokane operational model, which has been emulated across the country, a specific community need is identified and then elevated into a multi-year initiative. Casting a wide net, Priority Spokane identified the combination of homelessness and mental health as the biggest problem facing the county.

Steering committee members examined local and national data to gain a better understanding of the issue. It turned out to be quite the education.

Committee members concluded from their research that family homelessness was not being addressed adequately in Spokane County. They learned that many parents experiencing homelessness are employed but simply cannot afford housing for their families. They also learned about traumatic impacts on students who are living “doubled-up”—those sharing housing with others due to a loss of housing or economic hardship. These students are couch-surfing between the homes of relatives or friends, often separated from their parents and siblings, not knowing from one night to the next where they will sleep.



Learn everything possible about the issue of student homelessness so you can position yourself as both advocate and expert.

Share findings. Attract funders.

Guided by the data, the steering committee narrowed the focus of the Priority Spokane initiative to K-8 student homelessness, targeting students and their families who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless.

Priority Spokane awarded a research grant to Eastern Washington University (EWU) to identify approaches across the country that have demonstrated success at addressing student homelessness. As the research study progressed, Priority Spokane targeted funders within its member network, including a foundation, bank and health care provider. It also reached out to expand the sphere of community support. In September 2015, Priority Spokane presented its findings at a community forum attended by 250 local leaders, including the mayor of Spokane and other elected officials.



Take a deep dive into local student homelessness data and then share your findings with the larger community to draw additional supporters behind the cause.

DATA MATTERS

The sharing of data has been essential to building broad-based support for addressing student homelessness in Spokane County. At the September 2015 community forum, Priority Spokane shared a [document with key data points](#) detailing the impacts of student homelessness on mental health outcomes and academic success. An excerpt of the document is shown below:



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Select a model. Launch a pilot.

Based on the EWU study findings and community feedback, [Priority Spokane](#) selected a specific plan for addressing student homelessness in Spokane County—a three-year, school-based services pilot that launched September 2016 in three elementary schools (one in the Spokane School District and two in the more rural Deer Park School District). The schools were selected through a Request for Proposal process in which more than a dozen applied.

The pilot embeds a specially trained community health worker at each school to identify, support and stabilize students and their families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The worker advocates for the students and serves as a navigator of resources for their families, connecting them to health, housing and other community services. At each school, the worker has \$10,000 a year in unrestricted (flex) funds to spend on helping families get housed or stay housed. For one family, \$72 made a huge difference. That modest amount of financial assistance paid for a car repair, which allowed the parent to commute to and from work—and continue to earn employment income.

Catholic Charities, a local nonprofit, is administering the pilot. Each school provides office space and logistical support, but neither district is funding the pilot. Some of the funding has come from the Spokane Regional Health District, which also will evaluate the project's effectiveness at improving students' academic success and their families' housing stability.



Informed by data, research and public input, launch a project that is practical in scope and tailored to meet the unique needs of students and families in your community.

K-12 STUDENT HOMELESSNESS IN PILOT AREAS, 2015-16

Spokane School District

homeless: 1,853
% of total enrollment: 6.1%

Deer Park School District

homeless: 141
% of total enrollment: 5.6%

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

HEALTH DISTRICT LEADS THE CHARGE ON STUDENT HOMELESSNESS

A community should strive to attract all stakeholders to join the efforts around student homelessness. But one stakeholder can take the lead—and that entity doesn't have to be a school district, as counter-intuitive as that may seem.

The Spokane Regional Health District has been a key player in the effort to organize the community around student homelessness and a major supporter of the pilot. The health district has a mission to protect, improve and promote healthy lives, safe environments and thriving communities, says Lyndia Wilson, division director. Yet she gets the question all the time: *Why is a health district so involved in a community initiative on student homelessness?*

A 2013-14 survey of youth in Spokane County revealed that young people experiencing homelessness were more likely than their housed peers to:

- » Feel nervous, anxious and worried on a routine basis.
- » Experience debilitating levels of sadness and hopelessness.
- » Look bleakly toward the future.
- » Feel alone in life.
- » Experience long-term emotional problems or learning disabilities.

Children experiencing homelessness often are afraid to report their feelings of depression to school counselors and teachers for fear of getting their parents in trouble. As a result, they don't get the assistance they need—and their emotional state worsens over time.

At Logan Elementary School in downtown Spokane, one of the three schools hosting the pilot, nine in every 10 students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Brent Perdue, Logan's principal, says the school has a high number of students transferring in and out each year because they live in temporary housing—either in shelters, or with friends or relatives. The disruption is hard on the students—and their teachers.

“As soon as we show the data, people get it—although some take longer than others. It's important to keep repeating the message.”

—Lyndia Wilson, Division Director, Spokane Regional Health District

“The issue of homelessness comes to school with the kids. They wear it on their faces. Their emotions show us they are hurting. If we don't help their families, we don't get to do our work, which is to educate them.”

—Brent Perdue, Principal, Logan Elementary School

GUIDANCE FOR LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

- » **Assemble a team of champions.** To make student homelessness a community priority, all aspects of the community need to be involved. Priority Spokane enjoyed the benefit of having an established group of champions already in place—its members. Model that approach by creating a coalition of those in your community already known for their advocacy and compassion for young people. Include elected officials who can use their influence to help spread the message.
- » **Take a cross-sector approach.** In Spokane, the regional health district—not school districts—became the lead champion and a key funder of the pilot. While this may seem counter-intuitive, it actually is not. Family and student homelessness affects not just schools, but the community as a whole. Other systems like child welfare, juvenile justice and homeless response also may consider taking on leadership roles.
- » **Educate the larger community to broaden your base of support.** Student homelessness is often misunderstood and underestimated. Identify local organizations, businesses and individuals that have a history of giving back to community but may not have student homelessness front and center on their radar.
- » **Use data to illustrate the urgency of the issue and strengthen your case.** Report the number of students experiencing homelessness in your community and the impacts that being homeless has on students' academic success, as well as health and other social outcomes. Engage a community partner that has the expertise to compile the data, such as a college or university, a local research company or nonprofit, a foundation, or a government agency.
- » **Be relentless in sharing what you have learned.** Organize community meetings where you can share the findings of your research with the public and key stakeholders, including teachers and parents. Distribute printed documents that simply and succinctly illustrate key pieces of data. See if the local print shop will become a partner in your efforts by asking them to design and copy your documents as an in-kind donation.
- » **Don't just articulate the problem; offer ideas for solutions.** Balance the sobering data on student homelessness with a more hopeful message. Engage a partner to research successful innovative program models from across the country that can be tailored to fit your community. This, too, can be a college or university, a local research company or nonprofit, a foundation, or a government agency. Share what has been learned with the broader community and discuss together what model or models you should pursue as a pilot.
- » **Include key funders within the team of champions.** Some of your champions, such as school districts and nonprofits, may lack the financial capacity to fund your projects. Bring philanthropy, government entities and other recognized community funders to the table to get them invested—and ultimately investing—in your solutions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.priorityspokane.org

Contacts:

Liza Burell

Program Director, Building Changes

e: liza.burell@buildingchanges.org

p: 206.805.6143

www.schoolhousewa.org

Ryan Oelrich

Executive Director, Priority Spokane

e: PrioritySpokane@outlook.com

p: 509.499.0536

www.priorityspokane.org

Schoolhouse Washington improves housing stability and advances educational success for students experiencing homelessness. We spotlight innovative programs in local schools and communities so they can serve as models across the state. Schoolhouse Washington is a partnership of Building Changes and Columbia Legal Services.