Family Homelessness in Seattle: A Review of Cost-Effective Housing Plans

*ABSTRACT: In Seattle, there are 9,240 homeless people. Around 3,000 of these homeless people are homeless families. These families consist of young women with their children who are most often ages 0-5. The Union Gospel Mission of Seattle has a multitude of resources for these women and children. Housing and food are the main needs for homeless families. This paper will evaluate the issue of homeless families in Seattle and how Seattle's Union Gospel Mission can better aid the homeless families that come through their shelter. I will research studies on homeless families, the costs of food and housing, and look into other homeless shelters similar to the Union Gospel Mission to find their strategies of helping homeless families. This research will serve to improve all homeless shelters that aid families and give ideas of how to cater to the specific needs of young homeless children.*

9,240 people sleep on the streets of King County nightly. 1,500 of these people are children. Some of these children are alone, but many are young children living on the streets with their young mothers (Union). Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission (UGM) is committed to getting these families off the streets. What is the best way to keep these homeless families safe in shelters without burdening the UGM with increasing housing and food costs with the influx of homeless families? There are a variety of strategies that can be introduced in to a homeless shelter that are able to give sufficient aid to homeless families without the need to raise the budget of the shelter. Homeless families are in dire need of a safe, warm place to sleep. The streets of Seattle can be dangerous, especially for young children. The Union Gospel Mission in Seattle is responsible for housing these young families and handling the costs of stable and safe, affordable housing.

In the rainy city of Seattle, thousands of people are forced to sleep on the streets each night. Hundreds of these people are families running from abusive fathers and husbands. Seattle's Union Gospel Mission is dedicated to getting these families off the streets. These families consist of young mothers, around their 20's, and their small children ages ranging from 0-5 years (Haber 134). Seattle's Union Gospel Mission must allocate a majority of its funds to the homeless women and children programs they have. Homeless men and women also need secure living areas and healthy meals, but the young children of homeless families have a much higher need for nutrient-rich food (Mayo) and a safe place to sleep. In this paper, I will use research on homeless shelters, costs of emergency housing plans, and the dynamics of homeless families to improve understanding of the needs of these families and the best ways to give them the specific resources they need to get off and stay off the streets.

The Union Gospel Mission is not only in Seattle, there are multiple locations in the United States and Canada. Portland and Vancouver BC both have a Union Gospel Mission, but they have different strategies to help women with children. The Union Gospel Mission in Vancouver BC has a shelter for homeless families, but only affordable housing, not emergency housing (Vancouver). These “housing units” provide families with a “safe, warm, supportive place to call home” for a low cost of rent (Vancouver). The UGM in Portland has a newly established women and children’s facility. The shelter reported that “$100 will provide a day of room, board, family counseling, and case management for one woman and one child”, their main flow of funds is through fundraising and sponsors (Portland). Since this facility is brand new, there is little reportage from the Portland UGM, except that is has been very successful is giving food and housing to homeless families for a low cost to the shelter. Due to the high numbers of homeless families in Seattle, the Union Gospel Mission of Seattle must have a major shelter for women and children. These shelters can be mimicked in Seattle, the housing for women and children is relatively inexpensive and can be supported with the funds raised and donated to the Union Gospel Mission. These two shelters are examples of different housing strategies and how to handle women and children. Both shelters are not greatly experienced with specifically aiding women and children, but the ideals of the housing programs can be integrated into Seattle’s UGM such as inexpensive housing for women and their children and housing units that can be used as short- or long-term housing.

There are a few different types of housing plans that are available to be used at all homeless shelters; such as emergency housing, transitional housing, and permanent housing. The Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH) is associated with the American Institutes for Research and has many projects focusing on the problem of family homelessness. The NCFH has a project called SHIFT (Service and Housing Interventions for Families in Transition), that has seen success in the short period of time that it has been functioning. My research was focused around the Emergency Housing that was offered by SHIFT because that is the most common and cheapest form of housing for homeless families. It is the cheapest form because it is short term and has limited space. SHIFT found that although most families stayed in the Emergency Housing for the full three months was still “living unstably”, but at the 30-month follow up “more than half of the families were living stably” (Bassuk et al 13). “Stable” can be defined as the family has not moved in the past 15 months while living in one of the three housing options. “Unstable” can be defined as the family has moved two or more times in the past 15 months either to a different housing option offer by SHIFT or out of the housing altogether. Seattle’s UGM has some emergency housing available, but it is somewhat new and needs to be further developed to increase stability for the young families roaming the streets. A major problem with housing efforts is that there is a separation between funding and policies “and the real needs of homeless families seeking services” (Brush et al 3). And although most families agree that rapid moving from emergency housing to more stable housing is important for stability in the family, “the logistics of doing so creates additional burdens on limited agency staff and resources” (Brush et al 6). The program SHIFT is an effective program to move families from emergency housing to more permanent housing, but the UGM of Seattle must be able to allocate their funds in order to keep families in the program and for it to be successful. SHIFT is an almost flawless example of transitional housing for homeless families with a low income and the Union Gospel Mission of Seattle should integrate the methods of this project in to their own housing plans.

Three researchers of the School of Nursing at the University of Michigan did a study on the effectiveness of housing policies for homeless families. They found that policies must be put in place that are clear and are available to the public in order for homeless mothers to know what options they have for housing and food options for their children (Brush et al 2). The researchers stated: “our analysis revealed that policies for homeless families are made with limited input from service providers and recipients. Providers struggle to deliver services within narrow funding boundaries and worry about future needs of homeless families” and that policies that were made in the future must be considered by people who are in charge of aiding homeless families (Brush et al 11). Shelters must have adequate funding to enforce these policies and that funding can be difficult to get. Although Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission raises around $21,786,000 in support and revenues (2014 Annual), not all of these resources can go directly toward the women and children’s facility. There is no exact amount listed for the women and children, but a majority of the funding goes towards the programs they have available to all. Because many mothers are concerned with their child’s health, policies that are in place must be made well known to these mothers so they can utilize them to the best of their ability. An effective way to advertise the policies that the UGM has is through posters at the location and passing out flyers to families who are living on the streets. Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission must advertise all of its housing plans well enough so that homeless mothers will be willing to stay with UGM.

Adult men and women are also in need of a safe place to stay each night, they are a majority of the 9,240 people living on the streets (Seattle’s). In fact, they may have a higher need for a place off the streets because belligerent people are more willing to attack a grown man or woman than they are to attack a mother with her child. But, young children have a higher need for warm and secure living conditions in order for them to develop correctly mentally and emotionally. Homeless families are normally in an unstable state both physically and emotionally, as they have so stable living situation and are most likely running from an abusive father and husband (Haber et al 135). Therefore, homeless families have more need for a secure and safe living space that can be their home. Emergency housing is not a stable living situation, but it is imperative for homeless shelters to have as is it free and safe housing for a short period of time for families to have the ability to begin to stabilize their lives. In addition, emergency housing can lead to transitional and permanent housing through homeless shelters (Bassuk et al 17), which are much more stable and realistic housing scenarios as they require a low-rate rent. Although homeless adults are in more danger on the streets, homeless children are still in developmental stages of life and need stable living situations so they develop correctly.

Improving Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission’s homeless family housing options is something that must be considered by the UGM. SHIFT is an example that has had success with emergency, transitional, and permanent housing options specifically for homeless families. The rising homelessness in Seattle needs to be fought back with low rent housing options and extensive advertising for homeless mothers to be educated about their options for housing. Policies at the Union Gospel Mission must be made clear to the mothers who come through the shelter with their children, the policies should include all types of affordable housing plans for homeless families. Affordable housing can be the beginning of the end of family homelessness in Seattle.

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