

# Hennepin County sees drop in 'repeat users' of shelters after boosting services for homeless families

*Pilot program to break cycle of homelessness showing promise in Hennepin County.*

By Kelly Smith, Star Tribune

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Cynthia Jackson arrived at the homeless shelter armed with a mission to get Donzell Varnado back on his feet as he looked for work.

Unlike the last time he was homeless 11 years ago, Varnado, 43, of Minneapolis, got one-on-one help from Jackson, connecting him to career fairs and job training. Those are the things that keep people from having to return to shelters, said Jackson, a career specialist for Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota.

“It’s just filling in those little gaps that were gaping holes before. And it’s making a difference,” she said.

Hennepin County is boosting its resources for so-called “repeat users” of homeless shelters, connecting families to more housing, employment or parenting services to keep them out of shelters. The effort began when the number of repeat users doubled from 2008 to 2013, prompting the county to test a new pilot program that targeted services for repeat shelter families.

The two-year pilot, called the Stable Families Initiative, ended in 2015. Now elements of it, such as one-on-one job counseling and child care funding, are part of the county’s homelessness prevention program.

“If we do better for families the second time around ... we’d like to break that cycle,” said Lisa Thornquist, a researcher in the county’s Office to End Homelessness.

Hennepin County is the only county in Minnesota and one of only five jurisdictions in the nation with a “shelter all” policy, meaning that county workers must find a bed for any homeless family.

So far the extra services, which are voluntary for families, appear to be working.

In new data released last week, the county said that fewer homeless families than expected that went through the pilot program — 13 percent — have ended up back in shelters. During the pilot, the number of families using shelters or returning to shelters declined, while average family income rose.

After the program ended, the number of families using shelters, and the number of repeat users, dipped in 2016.

While some of the progress may be attributed to the improved economy, Thornquist said it could also be due to changes in how the county helps homeless families in new, targeted ways.

## **New pilot program**

The county contracts for its services with St. Stephen’s Human Services, Simpson Housing Services and Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota.

St. Stephen's staffers are more proactive, reaching out to families deemed at risk of re-entering shelters by connecting them to services. At Simpson, parents under the age of 25 can get more specialized help. And at Goodwill-Easter Seals, career specialists like Jackson give intensive, one-on-one help to residents that goes beyond job searches.

"We thought we had the solution: We'll just house them," said Heidi Schmidt Boyd, the project manager. "But really these families needed more than just finding an apartment."

Now when a family arrives at a shelter, they get a more in-depth assessment. If they're considered at risk of returning to a shelter, they can get extra one-on-one employment counseling, parenting classes or a rental subsidy of up to two years funded by the state and federal governments.

"In the past, everyone in a shelter was treated the same," Boyd said. "There's some people that are going to need more. It's no longer a 'one-size-fits-all.'"

Thornquist initiated the pilot program after hearing from shelter workers that some families kept coming back. She took a closer look at the county's data and found that the shelters were right: More families were requesting shelter beds, staying longer and returning.

In 2013, 25 percent of homeless families were repeat users of shelters, double the number from 2008, while the number of families using shelters overall was 1,572, the highest it had been in recent years.

The county found that many parents were younger, under 25, and had less education and work experience. A disproportionate number were African-American and American Indian.

Hennepin County launched the Stable Families Initiative in 2014. While the program cost a total of \$2 million for 2014 and 2015, the county estimated that it saved \$3 million by housing fewer people in shelters. The program was funded by several nonprofits, federal and state funds and \$300,000 from the county.

In 2016, Hennepin County won an award for the program from the National Association of Counties and started embedding things from the pilot program into its regular homeless program. The county now spends \$65,000 more a year on the program, according to officials.

### **'It fills in so many gaps'**

After being homeless for 18 months in 2015, Varnado ended up at People Serving People in downtown Minneapolis, where he was referred to Goodwill-Easter Seals. Jackson showed up there in July ready to help him — on one condition.

"I can't help you if you don't help yourself," she said she told him.

Varnado found a two-bedroom apartment for himself and his 10-year-daughter, costing him less than half the \$950 monthly rent thanks to a subsidy. Then Jackson got Varnado a bus pass, free training to get licensed to drive a forklift and Bobcat, and a donated suit and tie for job interviews.

She even drove him to job fairs, where he landed a full-time position at a recycling company.

“Now there’s more help than there was before,” Varnado said. “Ms. Jackson has basically put me on the right track.”

He said he got a recent job promotion and pay raise, has a second job removing snow and is now saving up for a car.

“It fills in so many gaps,” Jackson said of the program. “Everybody deserves a good life.”

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