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Families gather at homeless outreach event where helping hands are meant for them

June 1, 2019 at 6:17 pm | Updated June 1, 2019 at 8:59 pm

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1 of 2 | Roxanna Torres, 30, came looking for an two-bedroom apartment for her and her three children. She didn't find one, yet, but felt optimistic after meeting... [More](#) ▼



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Seattle Times staff reporter



The Seattle Times' [Project Homeless](#) is funded by BECU, The Bernier McCaw Foundation, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Campion Foundation, the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Schultz Family Foundation, Seattle Foundation, Seattle Mariners, Starbucks and the University of Washington. The Seattle Times maintains editorial control over Project Homeless content.

DES MOINES — The line was already 50 people deep Saturday morning, half an hour before the doors to the Highline College student union were set to open.

Families stood with backpacks and blankets, tote bags and strollers, in search of — or trying to hold onto — permanent housing.

Volunteer greeters met them outside, logging them into King County's online system for homelessness services. Then, through the front doors to find those services: agencies and organizations to help access food, clothing, schools, jobs, libraries, health care, driver's licenses and more. Downstairs, into the college's food court, where another table of volunteers was set up to guide families to an agency that might be able to connect them with housing.

For each family, a barrage of questions: Are you behind on rent? Are you being evicted? Are you currently homeless? Do you live in Seattle? Are you a community-college student? Are there kids in your household?

Each specific combination of answers led to a different housing-service provider.

Roxanna Torres, 30, took the bus to Highline on Saturday with her three children, ages 4, 6 and 8. They were hoping to find a two-bedroom apartment they could move into. They've been in and out of homelessness for two years, she said, since she left a domestic-violence situation.





Torres felt “like a weight lifted off” after filling out housing applications. She celebrated with her kids and with Divine Masoya, a case worker who’s been helping her. (Alexander Woldeab / Pyramid Communications)

They’re currently staying in transitional housing in Tukwila, but have been there for close to a year and need to find something more permanent by June 15. They answered questions. They got cheeseburgers and chicken fingers. They got bags of toys and toiletries.

Saturday was the sixth Family Resource Exchange led by the United Way of King County and sponsored by Starbucks. The events are specifically designed to cater to the needs of families experiencing homelessness, although individuals seeking help aren’t turned away. The first five events served more than 2,800 people. More than 350 of them were connected to housing.

“These have been transformative because families weren’t feeling comfortable going to the larger community exchanges,” said Marty Hartman, executive director of Mary’s Place. “Families have a different set of needs.”

Homelessness in King County ticked down last year, for the first time in years, declining by about 4%. And [homelessness among families with children declined even more](#), falling more than 13%.

Saturday’s event served more than 800 people from more than 300 households, handing out 274 pairs of shoes and 700 meals in the process. About 220 people were connected to housing resources, although it’s too soon to say how many of them will ultimately find housing thanks to that connection.

Torres, who was born in Los Angeles but has lived in the Puget Sound region since high school, was shuttled along with her children to Solid Ground, a provider that operates emergency shelters, transitional and permanent housing programs. While she spoke with a case worker, her kids played on the floor around her. One daughter sculpted a Play-Doh snowman. Another daughter fiddled with a fidget spinner. Her son maneuvered a Star Wars Red Guard action figure. He named it Roger.

“I’m so glad they have toys and the food,” Torres said. “We were already hungry.”

Solid Ground, it turned out, wouldn’t be able to help Torres before her June 15 deadline, but she did get on their list for future possibilities. So they sent her to speak with folks from Mary’s Place, just across the conference room.

While the housing providers were undoubtedly the main event, other services were available throughout the student union. The Seattle Humane Society gave away pet food, collars and leashes. Nonprofits offered job training. Enterprise and PCC offered jobs. Various government agencies offered information on food stamps, cash assistance, Medicaid, bus passes and Social Security. Highline and Federal Way school districts were on hand to hand out books (titles included “Bathman” and “El Loro Tico Tango”) and sign kids up for free preschool.

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“If they come here and get offered a job, but they don’t have child care, how are they going to get where they need to go?” said Porscha Anderson, a housing specialist with Wellspring Family Services. “These events, we try to offer stuff they didn’t even know they need.”

Back at the Mary’s Place table, Torres spoke with a caseworker for about 20 minutes, filling out forms and answering questions.

As the conversation neared its end, and her children buzzed around her feet, she wiped away a tear.

Mary’s Place didn’t have that two-bedroom apartment that she sought. At least not yet. But she filled out an application. Her caseworker said they’d put a special note on the application and have a meeting about her housing situation. The wheels were in motion, she said. Now Torres would wait for a call back.

“I feel like a weight lifted off,” Torres said. “I’ve had so much anxiety about what to do. This is a first step to getting something. Face to face with a person helps so much.”

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