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Op-ed: Innovate to end youth homelessness

It's time to innovate to prevent and end youth homelessness, according to guest columnists Tricia and Jeff Raikes.

By [Tricia](#) and [Jeff Raikes](#)
Special to The Times

ON any given night in King County, nearly 800 youth and young adults are either homeless, living in shelters or lacking stable housing. One-tenth are under 18, more than half are women and 60 percent are people of color.

For a community as progressive and prosperous as ours, this is a disturbing situation. The good news is that the size and scope of our youth-homelessness challenge has come into sharper focus, and we can develop and act on a plan to address it.

With support from private philanthropic partners, our region is one of nine cities testing an innovative point-in-time count of homeless youth. Known locally as [“Count Us In,”](#) this important information-gathering effort — which occurred in January — will help our community tackle the problem of youth homelessness in a more systematic way, as we are doing with chronic adult and family homelessness.

Much work remains to end homelessness of all kinds in our community. But it is not a coincidence that the National Conference on Ending Family and Youth Homelessness kicks off Thursday in Seattle. For a decade, our region has been a leader in working together on innovative approaches to end homelessness. Not all of those efforts have worked. That's the nature of innovation. But we have learned from them.

For instance, when the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation first became involved in family homelessness in 2000, the prevailing thinking was that building more transitional housing — short-term accommodations and services that help homeless individuals and families make the transition to long-term housing — was the answer. Working together with a broad coalition, we made important progress on that front and created more than 1,400 new units of transitional housing in the region.

But we also learned that transitional housing — in and of itself — is not enough to end family homelessness. Through experience, we also came to understand the need for a systematic and coordinated approach to reduce family homelessness, based on a few key principles. Among them: acting early to prevent at-risk families from falling into homelessness, intervening quickly

if they do and providing a simple and flexible way for families to access the services they need. We also learned the importance of gathering more data so we can really understand the families we are trying to serve.

Many of these principles are now at the heart of our community's expanding efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness. Last year, more than 100 stakeholders from philanthropic organizations, government agencies and service providers, including 30 homeless youth, came together to create a plan to address youth homelessness, known as the [Priority Action Steps](#). Much like the region's work on family homelessness, it emphasizes prevention and early intervention, better coordination of services and housing, and improved data collection.

The problem of youth homelessness is formidable, which is why we have made it a top local priority of our family philanthropy, the Raikes Foundation. We are optimistic that our community can solve youth homelessness if we stay focused on the resilience of the many young people we have met on the streets and in shelters.

Time and again, we have been inspired by their determination to push beyond difficult personal and family challenges to pursue an education, find a stable place to live and build a better life. Enabling others to realize their hopes and dreams is what motivates us each day, but it will take the whole community continuing to work together to identify and implement durable solutions to end homelessness.

Tricia and Jeff Raikes are co-founders of the Raikes Foundation based in Seattle. Jeff Raikes is CEO of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.