

## Michael Mirra, Tacoma Housing Authority, Tacoma, Washington

Michael Mirra is the executive director of the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) in Tacoma, Wash. He has served in that position since 2004. Previously, he served as THA's general counsel beginning in 2002. Before joining THA, Michael practiced law for about 22 years with Columbia Legal Services in Washington state and for 2 years before that for legal services in Tennessee. His areas of practice included fair housing, the Washington State growth management act, landlord-tenant law, the homelessness of children, the intersection of child welfare and homelessness, and nonprofit governance. Michael graduated from Vanderbilt Law School and the University of Chicago. He grew up in Queens.

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USICH has invited THA to present to the Council because it is an excellent example of a Public Housing Authority using its flexibility to support more rapid re-housing and partnering with schools and the child welfare system to improve both outcomes for homeless families and systems outcomes.

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### **SOME THEMES OF THA'S WORK ON FAMILY HOMELESSNESS**

- **Tailoring the availability, type, amount, and duration of assistance to the need**

Efficient, effective intervention into family homelessness should account for the following lessons learned from 10 years of experience, data, and evaluation in the Puget Sound area and elsewhere (much of it from efforts and evaluations funded and led by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation):

- It is hard to tell in advance which families at risk of homelessness will become homeless if they do not receive additional assistance.
- Most families who need assistance to prevent homelessness or to escape from it do not need a deep, permanent housing subsidy in order to stabilize their housing. A more shallow subsidy of limited duration will work most of the time.
- Intervention should be tailored to the need: some families need more housing assistance for longer periods; some families need specialized supportive services; most families need help to become more self-sufficient.
- The mainline programs of Housing Choice Vouchers and public housing are not well suited to intervene effectively into the crisis of homelessness. Their long waiting lists and program design make them generally inaccessible to families in crisis. The amount and duration of assistance they provide is not calibrated to the needs of individual families.

- **Linking housing dollars with services**

THA seeks to combine its housing dollars with supportive services or with the efforts of other systems such as the public school system and the child welfare system. This makes both the housing and the services more accessible and effective. It is a good use of a housing dollar.

- **Helping people succeed not just as tenants but also as “parents, students, wage earners and builders of assets”**

THA seeks to help the people it houses succeed, not just as tenants but also as parents, students, wage earners and builders of assets. THA wants their time in its housing programs to be transforming and temporary. Housing programs can be effective staging grounds for these efforts and good launching pads for family success.

- **Moving to Work Flexibility is Essential**

THA’s initiatives to intervene into homelessness require the programmatic flexibility that comes with its HUD Moving to Work status. (Moving to Work is a demonstration program for public housing authorities (PHAs). It does not provide more money. Instead, it allows public housing authorities more flexibility in their use of the money by exempting them from some normal program rules. This program provides the chance to design and test innovative, locally-designed strategies for three purposes: to help families become self-sufficient, to increase housing choice, and to save money in program administration.

### **THREE TACOMA HOUSING AUTHORITY INITIATIVES ON HOMELESSNESS**

#### **THA’s Rapid Rehousing Project**

THA will redirect substantial housing dollars annually into the city and county’s rapid rehousing program to serve homeless families. (The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded the redesign of this program. THA helped the redesign effort.) THA intends to work up to at least \$1 million annually (as allowed by its voucher turnover rate.) It will also redirect a separate sum for homeless, unaccompanied youth.

- A redirection of \$1 million would mean that THA would serve about 130 fewer households on its Housing Choice Voucher program. This same amount of money invested in the rapid rehousing program will stabilize over 300 homeless families every year.
- The rapid rehousing program will also assess and address each family’s needs for supportive services, including education and employment assistance.

#### **THA’s Education Project: McCarver Elementary School Initiative**

The McCarver Elementary School Initiative is part of THA’s Education Project. The Education Project is THA’s experiment to find out whether and how a public housing authority can spend its housing dollars in ways that accomplish two other things:

- improve the education outcomes of the children it houses;
- improve the outcomes of the schools that serve its communities.

McCarver Elementary School has the region's poorest student population. It has the highest number of homeless children. Its educational outcomes are poor. Its annual student turnover rate in the last four years ranged from 107 percent to 170 percent, with destructive effects. The McCarver Initiative has four main elements:

1. *THA*: THA provides rental assistance to homeless families of enrolled children. This will help stabilize the school. The assistance to each family is limited to five years. Over that time, the amount of rental assistance starts high and tapers to zero. THA and its service partners provide intensive support services to help ready the family for the private rental market.
2. *Parents*: As a condition of the assistance, parents agree to, (i) keep their children enrolled at McCarver, (ii) get their children to school on time daily, (iii) give their children homework time and space, (iv) attend all teacher conferences and all PTA meetings, and (v) participate actively in an individualized plan for their own education and employment advancement.
3. *School District*: The school district committed to changes and investments in McCarver. Notably, it has committed to the substantial investment necessary to turn McCarver into an International Baccalaureate Primary Grade Program, substantially raising academic standards and expectations for students and faculty.
4. *Evaluation*: Third party evaluators will track and evaluate the program's outcomes, using detailed data.

#### **Collaboration Among Washington State's Child Welfare Agency and Housers**

Seventeen public housing authorities and three nonprofit housers in Washington State are collaborating with the state's child welfare agency. This innovative partnership will match housing with child welfare and other services to prevent or shorten the need for foster care and to prevent homelessness among older youth who age out of foster care. This effort also seeks to address the short-comings of HUD's Family Unification Program (special designation Housing Choice Vouchers for child welfare-involved families) by more solidly linking housing to critical supportive services. The State of Washington has included this collaboration in its recent application to the Department of Health and Human Services for a Title IV-E Waiver.