

Op-Ed 2014

November 11, 2014

For more information, contact:

Peter Theisen, United Way of Whatcom County, ptheisen@unitedwaywhatcom.org, (360)733-8670

Tamara Tregoning, United Way of Whatcom County, ttregoning@unitedwaywhatcom.org, (360)733-8670

IMPROVING LIVES FOR VETERANS AND FOR ALL

Home. It's a simple word that sparks a variety of emotions and thoughts in all of us. For our fellow men and women in the military, home means a country that they are fighting for and dedicated to, home means coming back after months away from their friends and family, and home means a safe and comforting place to lay their head at night. In an effort to make sure that our veterans have a place to call home, I'm proud to say that after extensive collaborations and hard work, our community has been able to decrease homelessness among veterans in Whatcom County by 65% since 2008, and in that same time there has been an overall decrease of 30% in our homeless population. Thanks to a community-wide plan to end homelessness, our work here at Opportunity Council and support from groups like United Way of Whatcom County, we are taking a stand on this crucial issue and lending a hand up to those most in need.

The effects of homelessness are far reaching, rippling outward to touch each of us in some way. Studies show that when individuals and families have a safe and secure home their overall health improves and there is a reduction in costs to the public system. We have seen that when individuals have a home they are less likely to utilize emergency room services, less likely to be incarcerated, and more likely to access crucial services to lift them even further out of poverty. United Way of Whatcom County is focusing on advancing Education, Income, and Health because they know, just as we know at Opportunity Council, that these issues are intertwined and impact us all.

United Way of Whatcom County has adopted these specific community-wide goals in their Income focus area: Increasing financial stability, increased income through workforce preparation, and ensuring safe, stable, and affordable housing. To do this they are investing in strategies and programs that are working in the same direction to make a measurable difference in the community. Opportunity Council is proud to partner with United Way of Whatcom County on programs that increase financial stability and encourage stable housing.

Opportunity Council's Financial Stability Program encompasses two goal areas: Employment Readiness and Financial Capability. Services include employment readiness classes, life skill classes, facilitated vocational job search labs, financial literacy and asset building workshops, and employment case management. Program outcomes show that families who received employment case management had a larger increase in income compared to those who did not receive this service. In fact, as a percentage of their income upon entry into services, families that participated had three times the income increase compared to those without these services.

One of the programs that has been crucial in helping to reduce homelessness among veterans is our Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. Now in its third year of operation, SSVF helps hundreds of veterans and their families obtain and retain stable housing through case management services, temporary rent assistance, and financial stability services. We help veterans increase their readiness for employment, and we also help them advocate for disability benefits to which they are entitled. SSVF partners with Whatcom County Health Department's Veterans Program Office and the local Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) program administered by Bellingham Housing Authority. These and other partners are collaborating to reduce veteran homelessness to near zero by next year.

It takes all of us working together to impact these issues and right now you have the opportunity to be a part of an effort to build a better community by choosing to give to United Way of Whatcom County's Community Impact Fund. United Way is currently conducting work-place campaigns all over the county to raise money and awareness of issues such as homelessness, early literacy, and access to healthcare. You can give at your workplace if your employer conducts a workplace giving campaign, or give online at www.unitedwaywhatcom.org. Your gift to their Community Impact Fund will join with others to be invested right here in Whatcom County in to strategies and programs to create hope and opportunity for a brighter tomorrow. Please join me in contributing to this important cause that is increasing caps and gowns, ensuring that everyone has a place to call home, and helping people achieve safe and healthy lifestyles.

On this Veteran's Day I want to say thank you to all the men and women in uniform who have dedicated their lives to serving our country. I also want to say thank you to our community for taking a stand for our veterans to ensure that they have a place to call home. Homelessness is an issue that we can solve, but we can only do it if we work together. As you have seen, there have already been some incredible successes in our community in reducing homelessness and we are going to build on those successes as we strive towards our goals. Great things happen when we live united.

Debbie Paton
Community Services Director
Opportunity Council

About the author

Debbie Paton is Community Service Director at Opportunity Council.