



## ***Gimme Shelter: When Families Can't Pay the Rent***

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*How is the Great Recession affecting the lives of economically vulnerable families raising young children in King County? To find out, [Communities Count](#) has interviewed a diverse group of low-income families struggling to make ends meet in what to many feels like chronic economic pain.<sup>i</sup> Previewing a fuller report release in December, over the next few months we will post findings from these interviews here on our Data Update page. To protect the confidentiality of participants, we use fictional names. In this update, we highlight some of the challenges King County families face in satisfying a very basic need – housing.*

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**C**arol is a single mom with three children – twin preschoolers and a teenage boy. She has a BA degree and works full time coordinating a before- and after-school program for elementary school children at a non-profit agency. She earns \$15 an hour, and went without a raise for three years. After a medical emergency and some unexpected expenses, Carol fell a couple months behind with the rent, exposing her family to the risk of eviction.

Over a period of weeks, she went through the “horrid” process of trying to contact a local nonprofit agency during the *one hour per week* that the agency receives calls from those seeking financial assistance to pay rent. There’s no voicemail, no message machine, no walk-in service – just a one-hour window during which a constant stream of calls is rebuffed by the rhythmic pulse of a busy signal. Carol finally did get through, and she’s grateful for the help she received. Many are not so fortunate.

Actually, Carol is fortunate in many ways. She has a college education, a job, and she was already participating in the Section 8 Rental Assistance Program when she needed emergency help. Because of this federally funded voucher program, Carol only has to come up with \$700 a month for rent. But getting into the program is far from easy. According to the King County Housing Authority (KCHA), “applicants must be homeless or about to become homeless, live in substandard housing, or be spending more than 50 percent of their income on rent. A typical house-hold in KCHA’s program has an average income of \$13,000.” In June of 2011, KCHA reopened the program’s waiting list *for the first time since June of 2007*. The list was open for only two weeks, during which 25,306 applications came in – the greatest number ever received. The new waiting list will be chosen by lottery and capped at 2,500. The number of vouchers issued each year depends on how many households leave the program. In 2010 that number was only about 540.<sup>ii</sup>

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*“Getting help feels like a lottery.”*

*~King County resident describing the experience of accessing benefits*

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What about all the other families struggling to keep a roof over their heads? The majority of 211 calls to the Crisis Clinic are seeking help with rent and utilities; about a third of those who call are families with children. Staff from social service agencies confirmed that they are forced to turn away many seeking housing assistance – and the numbers are not coming down. In the past, with intensive case management, it might have taken two years to link people in temporary housing with affordable permanent housing. Now the waiting times for public housing posted by the Seattle Housing Authority range from two to 37 years!<sup>iii</sup> The demand for affordable housing so far exceeds the supply that many families across King County are perpetually on the edge of homelessness.

Almost every parent we interviewed talked about the stress of juggling rent and other bills while trying to keep the family together and maintain hope for the future. In some ways, families who had never been in need before felt more challenged than those who were chronically poor. Several had been donors to charitable organizations in the past and imagined that resources would be plentiful. The reality they confronted was

shockingly different. In addition, they often felt uncomfortable seeking help and didn't know where to go. Social service providers mentioned that many of these families needed coaching about how to navigate the system, overcome their fear and shame, and get back on their feet.

Everyone we interviewed, even those more familiar with the system, echoed a common refrain – *“Getting help feels like a lottery.”* Nevertheless, most families showed great resilience, continuing to work hard to provide for their children and protect them from the stresses that entails. They are thankful for what they have, and often seek community resources only when absolutely necessary. Over and over, parents told us they wanted to be self-sufficient, and they worried that *others might need resources even more than they did*. One parent living paycheck-to-paycheck with two children said he was humbled when he thought of all the people facing more challenges than he does: *“There are people, refugees, immigrants that come into King County and they don't even know the language a lot of the times, so it kind of puts it into perspective...”*

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<sup>i</sup> This qualitative investigation is ongoing. So far we have interviewed 32 families across King County, targeting a variety of racial and ethnic groups, including communities of color, recent immigrants, and residents with limited English proficiency; families with very low household income as well as those with up to median income (about \$68,000 for a family of four in 2010); various family structures and age groups, including single-parent households, couples living in consensual unions, married couples, and participants living with extended family. We have also interviewed social service providers from agencies such as Crisis Clinic, Hopelink, Multi Service Center, and Child Care Resources, as well as staff from community colleges that offer worker retraining or similar programs to help King County residents find jobs.

<sup>ii</sup> “Demand for Housing Assistance Doubles,” *King County Housing Authority*, June 13, 2011, accessed July 14, 2011( <http://www.kcha.org/aboutus/newsreleases/Sec8Doubles2011.aspx>)

<sup>iii</sup> Seattle Housing Authority, accessed July 14, 2011 (<http://www.seattlehousing.org/news/email/porchlightinsider/EstimatedWaitTimes.pdf>)