Catholic Community Services of Western Washington (CCSWW) has served families in the Tacoma and Pierce County area for more than 100 years. One of the largest Catholic Charities affiliates in the country, CCSWW provides a range of services, from behavioral health to housing supports, to help families who have been impacted by poverty and inequity in one of the toughest housing markets in the United States. “What sets us apart is our heartfelt commitment to the poorest of the poor,” says Rosemary Zilmer, CCSWW’s VP of Development.

In 2018, Pierce County was dealing with a troubling rise in family homelessness, as families with children represented about a quarter of the county’s total homeless population. Moreover, research showed that people of color were disproportionately affected by homelessness in Pierce County. CCSWW theorized that by improving access to the homelessness services and housing system, with an intentional focus on equity, they would help address and lessen these persistent problems.

CCSWW was able to put this theory into action when it became an inaugural recipient of a Day 1 Families Fund grant in 2018. The $5 million grant, one of the organization’s largest gifts to date, generated excitement and optimism both within the organization and across the community. “We started to really think about not just what Catholic Community Services could do with the grant but also how it could impact the whole homelessness system in Pierce County,” says CCSWW Housing Services Director Alan Brown.

Guided by this focus on partnering with organizations across the community to improve access to housing and services for all families in crisis and without housing, CCSWW has taken a three-pronged approach to leveraging its Day 1 Families Fund grant. They have:

- Connected ~2,400 families with needed services
- Provided ~150 unsheltered families with safe shelter
- Diverted ~450 families from homelessness

Tacoma, WA—2018 Day 1 Families Fund grantee

November 2023
1. Supported the Tacoma Ministerial Alliance (TMA), a Black-led nonprofit, in expanding their work to combat family homelessness, especially among Black families. CCSWW’s training, consultation, and funding has enabled TMA to become a coordinated entry provider for families experiencing homelessness in the Pierce County system.

2. Launched a program to train other entities that interact with families—such as school districts—on strategies to help divert families from homelessness, such as by supporting them in problem-solving and finding safe shelter.

3. Opened the Family Day Center in Tacoma—a trauma-informed space that offers families food, laundry and shower facilities, and support in working on a housing plan.

The flexibility of the Day 1 Families Fund grant has been a game-changer that helped us support families in real crisis situations whom we may not have been able to help otherwise.

ALAN BROWN
HOUSING SERVICES DIRECTOR

With the support of the Day 1 Families Fund grant, these three initiatives helped CCSWW connect families in need to critical services, divert more than 450 homeless families from shelter, and advance racial equity in western Washington. Five years after receiving the grant, the CCSWW team is more energized than ever about deepening their efforts to stabilize Pierce County families in safe, permanent housing.

FAMILY STORY

When a young single father in Pierce County found himself and his 10-year-old daughter on the brink of homelessness, TMA was there to help. Drawing upon strategies learned during training provided by CCSWW, TMA helped the father enter a 30-day diversion program that aims to empower families experiencing homelessness to find a housing solution based on strengths identified through conversations with staff. Within a week of this strength-based conversation, the family had identified housing and secured it thanks to an $800 grant from TMA to help with move-in costs. The father also secured employment with a business operated by TMA, which served as a steppingstone to more ample employment. TMA reports that the father is continuing to serve the Pierce County community in a positive way.