

**Homelessness in Eastern King County:
Information Flow, Human Service Needs, and Pivotal Interventions**

SJ Alexander, Phil Edwards and Karen Fisher
The Information School, University of Washington

Julie Hersberger
Dept. of Library & Information Studies, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

IBEC: ibec.ischool.washington.edu

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Executive Summary

Research is needed to ascertain what efforts may be efficient and effective in reducing homelessness in the King County area. The purpose of this study is to identify the health and human services needs of homeless persons on the East Side of King County for the primary purpose of informing service planning and provision.

Given the United Way of King County's focus on interventions that might prevent and limit homelessness, this study will examine (1) the pivotal or hinging factors that lead to homelessness and areas where interventions are highly needed, (2) the needs and uses that homeless people make of health and human services along with other sources of help, (3) the critical factors that enabled previously homeless people to obtain stable housing, and (4) the barriers to successful help-seeking encountered by the homeless.

Key Study Facts and Findings

Participants:

- 14 total participants
- Two participants chose not disclose their ages.
- Six were age 18-23:
 - Of these six, one had at least one child living with other family members.
 - Four had not completed either high school or a G.E.D. program.
 - Two were enrolled in 2-year college degree programs.
- Six were age 33-45
 - Of these six, five had at least one child living with other family members.
 - Five had received either a high school diploma or G.E.D.
 - Five had either begun or completed 4-year college degree programs.

Factors/Tipping Points Leading to Homelessness:

Both younger and older participants articulated a variety of explanations for how they first became homeless. The primary factors reported across all participants included the following:

- unable to pay rent/move due to job loss, injury, or theft
- asked to leave home by parents or family members.
- drug abuse (self or others).
- unhealthy or abusive home situation.

What interventions, including information, might have prevented homelessness?

Participants discussed several interventions that might have helped them avoid becoming homeless:

- increased availability of transitional housing
- general decrease in the cost of living
- assistance in finding available jobs
- job (re)training

How can these informational and services needs be facilitated?

After becoming homeless, participants mentioned information needs being satisfied via both the formal shelter system and informal “word-of-mouth” sources. Participants shared the means through which they preferred to obtain general information:

- the Internet
- the newspaper
- formal personal sources (in-person or via the telephone)

For information specifically pertaining to homelessness:

- informational pamphlets (most frequent response however others mentioned pamphlets were not all that useful)
- informal personal sources (family, friends, serendipitous chats with strangers)

What barriers do homeless people encounter when seeking help?

A general sentiment that pervaded the responses was that participants were too overwhelmed (time-wise or emotionally) to pursue information, establishing this factor as the primary barrier to information seeking and use.

Recommendation:

Community/Social Network Effect:

The sense of community we observed among younger participants (and one of from the “older” group) was strikingly consistent with a “small world” conceptualization in which “insiders” learn much of what they know from other “insiders” and only seek information from other sources when necessary.

This is suggestive of a potential strategy that the United Way-sponsored shelters could employ: to target information dissemination efforts – about low-cost housing, health care, job services – at individuals who are “keyed in” to larger groups of their homeless peers. Spreading information in this manner, by engaging with receptive individuals who then, in turn, report this knowledge to other homeless persons, may be an effective and efficient means of providing information-related assistance to this population.

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1. Introduction to the Problem

Homelessness is rising in King County, despite increased societal awareness of the problem. The latest annual street and shelter count of the homeless in King County revealed that there was a “23% increase in the number of people found without shelter” over the past three years accounted (Education Committee of the Seattle/King County Coalition for the Homeless, 2003, p. 9). In addition, homeless persons encounter many barriers in finding useful information and instrumental help (Hersberger, 2001). Research is needed to ascertain what may reduce homelessness in the King County area. The purpose of this study is to identify the health and human services needs of homeless persons on the East Side of King County for the primary purpose of informing service planning and provision.

Given the United Way of King County’s focus on interventions that might prevent and limit homelessness, this study will examine (1) the pivotal or hinging factors that lead to homelessness and areas where interventions are highly needed, (2) the needs and uses that homeless people make of health and human services along with other sources of help, (3) the critical factors that enabled previously homeless people to obtain stable housing, and (4) the barriers to successful help-seeking encountered by the homeless.

1.1 About Homelessness

There are many types of homelessness. Some people choose to live on the street, sleeping under bridges or in doorways. Others seek help at emergency shelters. Still others are known as the "invisible homeless," sleeping in their cars or at a friend or family member's house, but still without a permanent residence. All participants in this study declared themselves as "homeless" and had experienced different combinations of the above situations.

For purposes of comparison, the McKinney Homeless Act (1987) defines homelessness as follows:

- an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
- an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is -
- a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
- an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
- a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

Homeless is on the rise in King County, Washington. According to the most recent figures of the Annual One Night Count of People who are Homeless in King County, Washington, Study, homelessness has increased 23% between the years 2001 and 2002. The annual count, conducted by the Seattle/King County Coalition for the Homeless (SKCCH), is a one-night accounting of homeless persons on the street and in emergency transition shelters. The most recent figures, from the 2003 study, indicate that an estimated 7,980 people are homeless in King County. This is an increase from the 2002 estimate of 7,350 people (One Night Count). In their report, the SKCCH indicates that many members of the homeless population, known as the “invisible homeless,” will never be recorded in this count. The intention of the SKCCH is to track broad trends year-by-year rather than provide exact numbers.

Trends appear in King County shelter demographics. The most recent figures indicate that most shelter residents are single men (36% of total population), which was reflected in this study's sample pool (UWKC Community Assessment for 2002-2004). It should be noted that currently there is no shelter for single, childless women in King County; it is possible that many women are forced to find other alternatives, such as sleeping in cars, outdoors, or "couch surfing." Single women with children made up 31% of the shelter population in 2000.

1.2. Information Received by the Homeless

For the purposes of this study, the particular form information takes or the "type" of information is secondary in importance to the ability of the content of the information to create an impact on people's lives. Information may be considered as an object, such as shelter information on a directory or webpage. Information may be knowledge obtained that helps people make sense of their situations. In this study, information is broadly considered to be that which reduces uncertainty and decreases gaps in a person's knowledge.

Persons in emergency shelters who seek to change their living situations are concerned with and are given access to particular types of information by shelter administrators and staff. It should be considered that residents of emergency homeless shelters are in a transitional, crisis state and therefore basic living needs usually take precedence over more trivial information concerns. Typical examples of information provided to and sought by residents of emergency homeless shelters include:

- Transitional or low-cost housing programs
- Child care and schooling options for minor children
- Clothing resources
- The location of food banks and/or access to food stamps
- Free or low-cost health care options

There are many reasons for the failure to obtain information and satisfy the need. Harris and Dewdney (1994) point out five main themes for what they term "information failure" in information and referral services, such like that, which provide services to homeless persons:

- The needed service may be geographically inaccessible
- People may not know what services they are entitled to, or what agency to contact
- People may be blocked by language barriers or "social isolation"
- The system itself may present barriers, such as fee requirements or difficulty with bureaucracy
- Inadequacy of the service; for example, a lack of information in the person's native language or limited hours of service

In the current study, information behavior is grounded in the interactions of people with information, such as their reaction to and use of information. It is assumed that information-seeking is an iterative process that may result in the information need being partially resolved, or only resolved after one or many attempts at satisfaction, because of the acquisition of incomplete information or because of barriers to information. This study additionally considers Chatman's Theory of Life in the Round (1999), discussed in the following section of this report.

The interactions of people with information with the purpose of bridging one's knowledge gaps inherently connotes that the information seekers have a need for information. To put it simply, it is assumed that information seekers are looking for information that will help them to make a decision (Fidel, 2000). In the library and information science context, needs may be considered in many different ways. One way to consider an information need is by type, such

as a proxy or self-imposed need (Gross, 1995). Self-imposed needs of a homeless person are matters that directly relate to themselves, such as procuring shelter or food. Proxy needs arise from the needs of dependent others, such as the need to find information on schools or childcare for one's child while homeless.

Another way to distinguish between types of an information need is by what Fidel calls a "facet" of information needs (2000). These facets are distinguished by "information wants, the information the user thinks he or she needs"; the "information demand, the information the user says he or she needs"; and "information needs, the information that is objectively needed to solve a problem" (2000). Additionally, Fabisoff and Ely (1976) point out that there is a distinction between an information "demand" and an information "desire", implying that some people know the exact nature of their information need, whereas other people only know that they are missing information. The disparity between actual and expressed need is a common topic in the library and information science literature, and adds an additional layer of difficulty to the problem of attempting to help resolve people's information needs.

Information needs may also be dynamic, evolving through cognitive "phases" before the problem can be expressed or solved. Taylor (1968) considers that there are certain phases in the information need "continuum": 1) the visceral need; 2) the conscious need; 3) the formalized need; 4) the compromised need.

1.3. Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

The study will be framed by Elfreda Chatman's (1999) theory of Life in the Round. A renowned ethnographer in information science who studied marginalized populations, she developed this theory from her study of the insular social world of women prisoners. A participant of life in the round has a "small-world conceptualization;" it is a world in which the insiders define limits such as boundaries, social norms, and language used (Chatman, 1999, p. 214). A life in the round is lived out under the close examination of others, and it is a life that is generally routine and predictable, making information seeking outside of the small world unnecessary and undesirable. In context of Chatman's theory, the following research questions guided this study:

- What factor(s) or tipping points lead to homelessness in otherwise stable living situations?
- What interventions, including informational, might have prevented homelessness for particular people?
- What types of information, and health and human services do the homeless need?
- How can these informational and services needs be facilitated?
- What barriers do homeless people encounter when seeking help?
- What factor(s) or tipping points can lead a person out of homelessness?

Given the goals of the proposed study, Chatman's theory will provide insights into (a) the boundaries of the "small world" of homeless persons and how it affects their ability to seek health and human services and, (b) how "outsider" agencies can best provide health and human service information to homeless "insiders."

1.4. Methodology

Data were collected in the field using in-depth interviews and the investigator's field and theory notes. Interviews with fourteen homeless persons took place at three emergency shelters in Eastern King County; all interviews were audio-recorded. Data were analyzed using

recommended naturalistic research methods and the resultant coding scheme was focused by theory brought forth in Elfreda Chatman's "Life in the Round" study (1999).

The naturalistic method, developed out of the naturalistic-constructivist model pioneered by Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, allows for qualitative inquiry in research environments where context is of the utmost importance. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) acknowledge that though the extremely qualitative nature of the naturalistic method makes it difficult to generalize about the results of the inquiry, "the intricacy of the context that is revealed by naturalistic inquiry permits applications to social settings that are impossible with most studies that allow prevailing research strategies" (p. 17). However, in an environment where social change is desirable, such as ending or reducing homelessness, results obtained through natural inquiry "provides great power for understanding and making predictions about social settings" (Erlandson, p.17). The research process, consisting of gathering, focusing, and analyzing the data, is iterative in nature, with every phase of the process augmenting overall understanding of the situation and research problem.

Naturalistic data collection lends itself to the collection of rich data, "a wide and diverse range of information collected over a relatively prolonged period of time" (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p.16). This method does not claim to be objective; rather, it is an immersion into peoples' thoughts and personal stories in order to have a detailed and intimate understanding of their situations. Distance and a lack of immersion in such a research setting may not bear worthwhile results.

The methodology was also informed by Brenda Dervin's sense-making approach (1992). Dervin asserts that in everyday life, people encounter "gaps" in their knowledge that must be bridged with "helps" or information in order to proceed. Though each gap in a person's knowledge may be unexpected, Dervin asserts that people cope with knowledge gaps by "making sense of their experiences" (1992, p. 67). She further suggests use of the micro-moment, time-line interview approach for collecting data where the respondent is asked to recall a situation in which he faced an information gap and what information would have helped the respondent proceed (1992, p. 70). Asking participants to provide narratives of their life incidents will provide insights into what informational and instrumental "gaps" homeless persons face, and what "helps" will enable them to meet their needs.

It should be additionally noted that in many ways the current study is exploratory in nature—no other researchers have yet explored the situations of the residents of emergency homeless shelters in Eastern King County. In some cases, participants made reference to the differences between Eastside shelters and shelters in Seattle, Washington, indicating that it would be difficult to use previous studies of Seattle shelters as a basis for comparison.

1.4.1. Field Setting.

The emergency shelters were chosen because the interest the United Way of King County had in assessing health and human services in emergency shelters in Eastern King County. As the UWKC was interested in learning about a broad cross-section of residents, shelter directors from a variety of shelter types were invited to participate. After the initial contact facilitated by the UWKC, I personally met with the director of each shelter to explain the study and provide them with the interview guide, the information sheet for participants, and to have the directors sign the consent form. The researcher explained to each director that the results of the study would be submitted to the United Way, in order to improve homeless services on the Eastside. All three directors agreed to proceed with the study and signed the consent form. This face-to-

face meeting also gave the researcher a chance to ask each director about shelter protocol (such as qualifications and intake procedures), what constitutes a "typical" resident, and the shelter's relationship with the UWKC, providing a more complete view of life in the shelter and the administrative perspective and priorities of the shelter.

The interview setting was chosen for a few key reasons. Conducting interviews in the emergency shelter was determined to be the safest environment for both the investigator and the participants, as the shelter staff was standing by to help with any difficulties that may arise and to facilitate the interviews. It was also easiest for the investigator to travel to the shelter and conduct two to four interviews a night, rather than arranging individual meetings with residents elsewhere. Additionally, as some of the research questions relate to the participants' experiences and impressions of Eastside emergency shelters and social services, it was almost certain that the residents would have opinions on these matters, as opposed to persons living on the street who choose to exist outside of the health and human services system.

To avoid the possibility or appearance of coercion on the part of the shelter staff, the researcher created flyers to be hung in the common area of the shelter to explain the study and recruit participants. Residents could choose to sign up for an appointment time to be interviewed. The researcher waited unobtrusively in the common area to meet residents and answer further questions, observing without taking notes. Interacting with the residents in the common area allowed them to develop a higher level of comfort with the researcher, as well as to allow the observation of interactions between residents and staff, and the general dynamic of the shelter.

1.4.2. Participants.

For this study, purposive sampling methods were employed to recruit participants of different ages, backgrounds, and shelter situations by collecting data in three different types of shelters, to reflect the demographics observed in the One Night Count Study (SKCCH, "One Night Count", 2003). One emergency shelter only accepts young people from the ages of 18-24 without dependent children; another only accepts families (married or single parents), and the third is a Catholic men's shelter that moves to a different church on a monthly basis. Purposive sampling is key to naturalistic research as "the researcher's major concern is not to generalize the findings of the study to a broad population or universe but to maximize discovery of the heterogeneous patterns and problems that occur in the particular context under study" (Erlandson, 1993, p. 82).

Participants were self-selected, choosing to participate on a volunteer basis. Residents could sign up for an interview time on the flyer that the interviewer placed in the shelter upon her arrival. The flyer explained the basics of the study and informed residents that they would be given \$20.00 cash for their participation. Not all residents who wished to participate could; in the youth shelter a resident was determined to be intoxicated to the point of belligerence and could not provide coherent answers. Additionally, the investigator was restricted only to interviewing persons who were fluent in English.

Before beginning the interviews, the researcher met with each participant in a private room or office to explain the study in detail. The residents were informed that they could choose not to answer any of the questions, and that as long as we made it through the questions they would be compensated for their time. The researcher directly asked them if she could audiotape the interview, and no participant refused to be audio-recorded. The researcher gave them an information sheet which they were invited to read and keep. The information sheet format was chosen to attempt to keep the participant anonymous; a standard consent form would have

created a record of the participant's signature. Participants were allowed to make up a pseudonym for themselves if they wished; some said they would rather the researcher choose one for them.

At the youth shelter, interviews were conducted in a private office. At the family shelter, the interviews took place in residential apartment units. Three interviews were conducted alone, one interview was conducted in the presence of the participant's child, and the final two interviews were conducted in the presence of children and spouses. At the men's shelter, the interviews were conducted in a private classroom for preschool-aged children.

1.4.3. Data Collection.

As is typical for a qualitative study, the researcher was the primary data collector in the interviews. The instrument used to collect the data was a three-part interview guide. On average, the interviews lasted 40 minutes. In addition to in-depth interviews, the researcher engaged in naturalistic observation, or "unobtrusive examination of real-life situations," by observing the participants' interactions with their family members (in the case of the family shelter), shelter staff, other shelter residents, and interactions with me outside of the interview (Bouma, 1996, p. 180). Observation took place in the common areas of the shelters, and in the case of the family shelter, in the participants' apartments. In addition to the interview transcripts, extensive note taking was employed in the form of theory, method, and field notes.

In *The Research Process* (1996), Gary Bouma observes, "the aim of qualitative research is often to describe what is happening in detail in a group, in a conversation, or in a community" (p. 173). Unstructured, in-depth interviews can be one of the most useful methods of getting at a high level of detail in order to describe a situation. Careful attention was paid to composing open-ended questions to "discover major relationships and patterns where little is known and to provide the basis for the more precise definition of variables and collection of categorized data" (Erlandson, p. 36). Further, open-ended questions prevent the interviewer from coaxing answers out of participants and instead allow them to share as much or as little information as they wish.

The use of an unstructured interview allows the interviewer to hear participants' opinions and gives participants the freedom to tell their personal stories. The interviewer may skip or reorder questions at will to avoid repetition or to probe into an answer more deeply. Do not know the answers. Skipped questions if already answered, or if too sensitive. On the recommendation of the director of the young adult, I frequently omitted the question "prevented from becoming homeless?" because many participants were asked to leave or were forced out of their homes by parents or caregivers.

The interview guide was divided into three parts. The first part was composed of easy-to-answer, factual questions that were designed to get a picture of the participant's past living situations and history. Questions were asked about the participant's previous living situations and about basic demographic information such as education level and whether the participant had any children. These questions were designed to provide insights into the participants' backgrounds, and to discover the commonalities and differences between the participants.

The second section of the interview guide was designed to elicit information about the participants' current living and employment situations. Questions were asked about information needs in relation to improving the shelter residents' current situations, such as information they felt they were missing, such as housing, employment, or childcare information. Participants were encouraged to talk about how they prefer to receive information, and social services they had heard about and had used or would consider using.

The third section of the interview guide was composed of specific questions

1.4.4. Data Analysis.

The complexity of naturalistic, qualitative data collection calls for the careful analysis of the resultant data. The transcripts alone from the in-depth interviews do not get at shades of meaning, such as words spoken nervously, or flippantly. The data analysis process is informed also by the researcher's field and theory notes. There is a strong desire not to lose any information, and using the researcher's observations as well as the transcripts helps to create and in-depth picture of the situation.

Aliases were assigned to each person and the audiotapes were transcribed. A coding scheme was developed based on the research questions and the findings emerging from the transcripts. Codes were assigned to words and phrases in the text using Atlas.ti software (version 4.1). The transcripts are put into the software and become easier to create complex codes for. Coding the data is an iterative process that is enhanced by the researcher's notes.

Several techniques were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the results. Consistent with the naturalistic approach, data and data analysis will occur iteratively such that data are analyzed as they are collected. This allowed for reshaping of subsequent interviews, as well as the formulation of relevant questions for member-checking, as recommended by Erlandson (1993). Member-checks took place with shelter directors, shelter staff, and subject experts on the information behavior of homeless persons during the data collection and analysis process.

Observer effect can be lessened by helping participants feel in control of the process (by emphasizing that questions can be skipped and that the interview can be stopped at any time) and comfortable with the interview. A few techniques were employed to reduce interference from observer effect:

- During the interviews, the researcher dressed appropriately to “fit in” with the participants, meaning I dressed casually to look like a volunteer. At the young adult shelter, dressed in jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, the researcher was mistaken as a new resident by returning residents.
- The researcher employed the use of a small, unobtrusive tape recorder. She explained to participants that audio-recording the interview would help her focus on the conversation.
- The researcher allowed participants to ask questions before beginning the interview. These questions usually had to do with the researcher’s purposes and what she would do with the information. Some participants wished to know why she was interested in persons in homeless shelters. Others wished to know more about her educational background and pursuits.
- During the interview, the researcher tried to position herself in a non-confrontational manner. She would attempt to seat myself next to a participant, rather than directly across.
- The researcher took a minimum of written notes during the interview, choosing to maintain eye contact when appropriate and to fully engage the participant in conversation.
- The researcher attempted to keep her overall manner calm, casual, and unhurried, and strove to be approachable and friendly while waiting for interviews in the common areas of the shelters.

Near the completion of the above iterative process, the data were grouped into 5 broad categories with several subcategories; the detailed codebook is presented as Appendix A along with the number of unique and raw instances of each code:

- Personal History and Current Situation
 - Personal Stories
 - Current Situation/Homelessness
- Information/Resource Needs and Information Sources
- Barriers to Information and Help
- Interventions

2. Summary of Findings and Themes

Participants were able and willing to discuss their personal stories and current situations rather freely. Some patterns did emerge which made it efficient and effective to consider the majority of the participants into two distinct groups. Younger participants tended not to have finished high school or to be pursuing higher education degrees while older study participants reported almost the opposite. The number of participants having children were also mirror images between groups- younger participants tended not to have children while all but one of the older study participants reported having one or more child. All participants reported having worked at a variety of jobs, mainly in lower wage positions. Only a few participants reported having lived in the Seattle area their whole life. The vast majority had moved to the Seattle area but had lived here ranging from a few months to several years. Eight of the fourteen participants reported having experienced homelessness prior to their current situation.

2.1.About the younger participants

Six of the fourteen participants self-identified as being between 18-23 years old. Within this group, one reported having at least one child living with other family members. While four participants from this group had not received a high school diploma or G.E.D., two were enrolled in 2-year college degree programs. Two participants declined to disclose their ages.

2.2.About the older participants

Six of the fourteen participants self-identified as between 33-45 years old. Within this group, five reported having at least one child living with them or with other family members. Only one participant from this group had not received a high school diploma or G.E.D., and five had either begun or completed 4-year college degree programs.

Study participants shared the events and reasons that resulted in their becoming homeless. Economic factors played a major crisis role with family issues also mentioned by several informants. For some, a series of poor decisions made led to multi-crises situations where homelessness became the only possible outcome.

2.3.What factor(s) or tipping points lead to homelessness in otherwise stable living situations?

Both younger and older participants articulated a variety of explanations for how they first became homeless. The primary factors reported across all participants included the following:

- Unable to pay rent/move due to job loss, injury, or theft
- Asked to leave home by parents or family members
- Drug abuse (self or others)
- Unhealthy or abusive home situation
- Result of relocating to the Seattle area
- Economic factors in general (rents too high)

Participants shared their personal stories about how they eventually became homeless:

Two years ago I came here and after 2 years of drug use I came here (Seattle) and I had to sleep in my car for 3 and 4 months and stuff, and this friend told me about it (the shelter). So I saw D___ and talked to her and she said come in here and I found a place, but I made bad decisions and that's where I am now. I had some people, I actually have an apartment, and I had a couple people move in but domestic abuse and stuff like that, end(ed) up getting kicked out six months later, That's why I'm here, yeah. That's what I mean by bad decisions. I just live by myself. – Glen, 24

This time around this was kind of half my own mistakes, half economic environment or whatever, the contributing factors were the economic environment, my personal mistakes, moving into my friend's place was my own personal mistake. I take responsibility for that, too. Economic environment probably the biggest contributing factor. Also my own mistakes. I could have stayed in Florida; but I chose to come back here. So those were my choices, my mistakes. – Phil, 36

My parents were, like, OK, you're not going to be on the streets, but you're going to go through the system, learn, like, the reality of it (homelessness). You can't just have money thrown at you and all that and enable me to do what I want. Really kind of screwed me up. I'm kind of recovering from pot for three years, smoking that. That's why I'm in this situation. That's why I got really screwed up. Had a criminal mind, thought of an easy way to make money, and I never have been caught until recently, which is really impossible not to... Yeah, I'm in this situation for smoking weed, having a criminal mind, thinking I can get away with it.
- Francis, 21

In summary, a combination of personal dysfunction and situational factors led to homelessness for the vast majority of participants. Better personal decision-making is a factor that each person could receive some help with through counseling or therapy while environmental factors (i.e. holes in the UW support service network) could be analyzed further in future studies.

2.4. How can these informational needs/services needs be facilitated?

After becoming homeless, participants mentioned information needs satisfied via both formal shelter system and “word-of-mouth”. Participants also shared the means through which they preferred to obtain general information: the Internet (7 participants), the newspaper (6 participants), and speaking with someone (in-person or via telephone; 5 participants). For information specific to their current situation, however, the single most popular method of obtaining information related to their homelessness were informational pamphlets (2

participants), yet two participants also stated that informational pamphlets were not useful to their information needs.

In their own words, participants describe information needs and services:

There's just not enough information. And it can't just be papers and pamphlets. I mean, They've got to have somebody there that you can directly talk to that knows all this stuff, and they can set up appointments and meetings and? I don't know if they already do that. I don't know. – Francis, 21

But primarily, um, easier phone and Internet access to, you know, computer and Internet access. Um, I think those are two very important things that would help a great deal as far as being able to do resumes, do job searches, and also email, because in the time it takes me to go here, here and here, you know, I could be getting several resumes out online...because, well, especially with her (her daughter), it's hard for me to be able to take her to the library and be able to get, you know, a computer at the library or something, because I can't exactly take her and actually get time on the computer [laughing]. -Rose. 41

I ask. If I need something, I'll ask for it. And if they don't know, [then I go to] the next resource, or go to another homeless kid, maybe, and say, hey, you look pretty set up. Where'd you get all your stuff?? That's pretty much it. Boring life! – Mitch, 19

My aunt just gave me a bunch of resource numbers, and I started just calling them and figuring out where I fit in. – Donna, 18

My friends told me about the food bank, so I went and applied because we had a low income. – Rose, 41

I found out through a program called Healthy Start at Friends of Youth, and one of the ladies who worked with me and my daughter, she gave me the shelter number, and I called and they said, yeah, we're open. Come on down. – Maria, 31

Um, actually, she's helping a great deal with, um, you know, basic stuff, with gasoline and things like that, things that I may need to retain my job. Um, she is checking into whether the company will pay for a cell phone. I have a cell phone allowance. But, of course, I need to get the phones to get the cell phone, to get the cell that's covered. So, um, you know, so she's checking into getting funds for me to get a cell phone since it is business-related. Things like that. – Rose, 41

Um, let's see? I know, um, previously, now Child Care Resources has been a tremendous help as far as child care with her. Um, but previously that had been the biggest issue, was, um, you know, you have to have the child care to find a job, and it's hard to get the child care without the job. – Rose, 41

It's nice, friendly, and there's not as much help as there is, like, in the city, but it's more structured. It's less people to deal with. Like, it's not a big variety of, uh, people that are in search of housing, in search of, like, necessary needs that they need. And it seems like they're able to focus more on one person, and it's more personal, instead of, you know, just files, that you just pick up. Just friendly over here. And I was finding a lot of good services, you know. They have pretty good stuff out here. – Phil, 36

CCS is nice. I kind wanted to stay there, like, every day. But I can't right now. The only reason I think that I'm not going to stay is because they don't have shower facilities or laundry facilities, and the Y does. But, you know, they have, like, a fresh, hot meal that somebody comes in and cooks every night. Um, somebody comes in and cooks in the morning. It's less structured, like, you know, go to bed at your own time, you can watch TV, read a book, whatever. Um, all the guys there, it's only men, all the guys there are not, like in Seattle shelters. It's really, like, you know, they screen all the people that come in, so, you know, they're like working, they're trying to get their act together, so I like CCS. It's really a nice program. – David, 21

Yeah, Friends of Youths are helpful to me. I'm not a client with Friends of Youth right now because I terminated my client...you know... Uh? When I left, I terminated, so I've got to wait a year. But Friends of Youth because they run this program, The Landing. And I stay at The Landing, you know, four days a week, so? – Francis, 21

OK, maybe once a week meet directly with this kid, or just keep in contact, and? I don't know. It's just a good alternative to having a case worker or somebody from the outside. Maybe job shadow with them. I don't know. There should be an outreach network like that. So? Guardian angel network. Whatever. – Jill, 18

I reckon the issue is housing. Stop building these damn luxury condos and selling them to, you know, the rich kids, you know. I mean, you know? You're going to rent them to us for \$500 a month. Stop this seven-, eight-, nine-hundred dollars a month for a two-bedroom basic apartment. We can't afford it, you know? I mean they brag about single mothers, but they want to just kick us in the teeth! And it's just like, don't brag about us, what a good job we're doing, you don't even make it affordable for us to do it! – Rose, 41

If the owner had told us a month in advance we would have had enough time to at least save a little money or find the money to get a house, to get an apartment or something, ya know. But he told us a few days before. So we didn't have time to find the money and to find the place. To get an apartment you have to fill out an application, and they have to look at your credit, and everything. So it wasn't enough time. – Lupe, 33

A really good job program, where, like, you know, we can do stuff that's regular like office work or something. I mean, you only have three pairs of jeans and, you know, one pair of shoes, and a couple of T-shirts, or whatever. You can't go out and work at Labor Ready every single day and get dirty? – Luis (age not disclosed)

Bulletin boards would be great. Um, like ads could be posted, cut out, and, you know, put on a bulletin board, or...word of mouth. – Jill, 18

Transitional housing. Transitional shelter, that's really what it should be. In the program that We've got now you leave your possessions, there's security and they keep the doors locked. Basic storage. That's what I need. And it's not available for people my age. – Phil, 36

Yeah, a lot of word of mouth. I mean, nobody's out there handing out flyers, or saying Hey, are you homeless, you know, It's pretty much you have to figure out you have to do it on your own. You just have to want to do it. You have to call the numbers, or find somebody who looks homeless and ask them. You just ask around. I don't know, that's the way I did. I don't know how the other kids did it. – Francis, 21

What happened, I think, every program you know allows you stay three or four weeks and then after that you have to find another program and find out if they have any space available. It's hard, not so easy, it's really hard to be homeless. I have one week left here to plan my next move. – Brenda, 23

In summary, participants voiced several information needs tied to service needs with a wide variety of information sources. A trend in the data showed that people sought more help and information from other people than print or electronic sources. Newspapers were mentioned as good sources for job information, one person used the Yellow Pages to find a shelter and one person was given a brochure from their aunt who had tracked down shelter information. Overall, participants did indicate that they were able to eventually find needed information concerning services but that they were not always able to connect with needed services due to conditions or availability.

2.5. What barriers do homeless people encounter when seeking help?

A general sentiment that pervaded the responses was that participants were too overwhelmed (time-wise or emotionally) to pursue information, establishing this factor as the primary barrier to info seeking and use. Other barriers were also mentioned:

So that was one thing that was, um, a little more difficult to overcome, was getting Internet and phone access. – Rose, 41

When you're totally broke you have no way of getting around, a bus pass to get to work or to wherever-very helpful. Glen, 24

I was kind of freaked out this place only goes Monday through Thursday, and so that gap in between there I had to find a place to stay. - Francis, 21

Because, you know, you're paying \$700 a month rent and everything, and you're on a budget, and the wheels are turning and everything. It's like a production line, you know? And when one wheel falters, and that makes the whole production line screw up, and its like, oh no. And that's what happened. So, I haven't been able to come up with \$1500 or \$1700 to move into another place, you know. I can come up with \$700, probably, but

they want first, last, deposit. Getting laid off really bumped me back about ten spaces now. It's amazing what, you know, just getting laid off will really ruin your life!
- Lupe, 33

Like someplace, cause like during the day, sometimes you won't have nothing to do. Like a place where you could just, like, go out and just hang out during the Day. Like, be able to hang out, watch TV, play games, stuff like that. Just like a teen center, cause sometimes teen centers aren't open until after most schools get out. Just like, like basically like a teen center open during, like, the day, like the morning hours. – Francis, 21

I wish I had more, like, I wish I had more services for I wish I had more, like, clothes, you know. They have, like, this underabundance of clothes, like? Skinny people can get plenty of clothes all the time, you know, they get donated all the time, but, like, people my size, it's very hard to find anything. Especially during the wintertime. So, you know, I've got to beg to get a jacket from somebody. I'd like the shelter to be open for more than Monday through Thursday, like the weekend that's accessible. Um, that's about it, too. – Brenda, 23

I mean, if there was more available housing, I could get my mind straight and work on the things I need to work on, you know? Going to school, and getting a job, and stuff. But, I've got to work on finding a place to live. I don't have time to find a job. I'm trying different avenues as far as types of employment, but I'm limited on that too because, you know, I have a certain part of the day I can work on that. And then I have to cut that short to work on the homeless issues. – Luis, (age not disclosed)

In summary, the time and energy it takes to resolve homelessness must compete with the daily struggle to find resources just to get through each day. Other barriers include transportation issues, lack of clothing (and cleaning facilities) suitable for job hunting. Having to find housing for the weekend took time away from dealing with homelessness for a couple of the participants. Economic problems finding rental properties given the fair market rent issues on the East side also were noted as barriers to overcoming homelessness.

2.6. What interventions, including informational ones, might have prevented homelessness for particular people?

Participants discussed several interventions that might have helped them avoid becoming homeless, often describing more favorable financial conditions such as an increase in the availability of transitional housing (5 participants) and a general decrease in the cost of living (5 participants). Another popular response was to have assistance in finding available jobs (3 participants). Job (re)training was mentioned by two participants. One younger participant (21-years old) suggested that an intervention one-on-one with a caseworker would have been helpful, but this is perhaps not as useful as a preventative measure.

2.7. What factor(s) or tipping points can lead a person out of homelessness?

Given our single-interview methodology, we are unable to specifically address the efficacy of any strategies for leading one out of homelessness since our participants did not have the requisite experience of emerging from homelessness. We might reasonably assume, however, that any restorative measures could align with the preventative interventions listed above: job assistance, locating transitional housing, locating additional low-cost or free resources within the community.

Participants in this study of homelessness on the eastern side of King County did not reveal perceptions radically different from typical studies of homeless populations and their information/service needs. What might be somewhat different could be the indication of a more connected group of younger folks who share information and provide some semblance of social support to each other. In other words, there appears to be more of a community spirit emerging that younger homeless persons express than some of the older folks. A follow-up study examining this possible phenomenon might be of value to the UW in determining the best placement and distribution regarding information about various programs and services.

3. Discussion and Recommendations

The above findings paint a picture of homelessness that is largely consistent with previous work in this area, and most participants found the programs, services, and assistance provided under the current system to be effective in satisfying their information needs. A question that remains open for discussion, and which compliments the “what” and “why” of homelessness, is “How do people who are homeless perceive their world and the sources of information within it?” We began this study using Chatman’s (1999) theory of Life in the Round to address that difficult, unanswered question, and looked for instances in which our participants shared their ideas about boundaries, social norms, and language used among their peers and shelter staff.

Several social service agencies and other organizations provided useful programs and resources according to study participants. In addition to providing resources, study participants also noted that staff members provided needed information. Information about these often-cited resources also was provided by those who had the occasion to previously utilize their services, i.e. other homeless people. Organizations and services cited as being particularly helpful by study participants include:

- Hopelink, the food bank, DSHS, Child Care Resources, the YWCA, the Homeless Intervention Project, Evergreen Hospital, washingtoncash.org (a small business startup assistance group), The Landing, transitional housing programs, Friends of Youth, Kirkland Teen Center, community voicemail, the free clinic in Redmond, and various churches

What emerged from the many interviews was a clear trend in utilizing human information sources, both those of professional aid workers and most importantly, friends, family and others met serendipitously on the streets. In a sense, there is a “community of information” concerning resources building in the eastern King County area. A more detailed study of this information network could prove useful to the United Way in aiding in disseminating important, needed information.

The sense of community we observed, particularly among younger participants, was strikingly consistent with a “small world” conceptualization that Chatman (1999) discusses, in which “insiders” learn much of what they know from other “insiders” and only seek information from other sources when necessary. Study participants indicated strongly that they felt an obligation to pass on information that they had found for themselves on to others. For instance, the following representative quotes were recorded:

“We’re kind of like a family [at the shelter], and [we’re used to] a few people, and then anybody who comes, we actually kind of look at them weird, and we accept them if they’re good people, but we kind of respect our own little group – everybody understands, you know? It’s kind of like a code. We make sure we all end up somewhere okay, and we’re all happy for every single person that gets out of here.” – David, 21

“A lot of these kids are very smart and very savvy, but they don’t show it. It’s sort of like a defense mechanism...and that’s how they go through the motions and slip through the cracks, but they’re smart.” –Sue, 21

“I have no clue if there [is any info need] or not. I’m pretty well-informed by the caseworkers that come in here.” –Ellen, 19

“[I] kind a stay on top of things – make myself aware of what’s going on.” –Paul, 36

“I know pretty much what I need to do.” –Jill, 18

This is suggestive of a potential strategy that the United Way-sponsored shelters could employ: to target information dissemination efforts – about low-cost housing, health care, job services – at individuals who are “keyed in” to larger groups of their homeless peers. Spreading information in this manner, by engaging with receptive individuals who then, in turn, report this knowledge to other homeless, may be an effective and efficient means of providing information-related assistance to this population.

The empirically derived suggestions proposed in this report are intended to equip social service agencies dealing with homeless populations with a set of perspectives on the services they provide. While an understanding of the particular characteristics of the population being helped are paramount, we hope that these suggestions and findings have some impact upon the services that are offered, and that any responses help alleviate the problem of homelessness.

4. About IBEC

In today’s world, viable access to high quality, usable information is vital to ensuring quality living for all. People need information for all aspects of daily life, including health, employment, education, transportation, family, recreation and lifestyle, civic and social engagement. How people go about expressing and meeting these needs, however, is poorly understood. Organizations are severely challenged in their efforts to disseminate information about their services and meeting the needs of clientele. Moreover, organizations are rarely aware of the diverse ways in which clients may use and benefit from their services, which results in gross under-reporting of service impact.

Our team designs and implements investigative tools that capture the nuances of real-life situations. We will study your current and prospective clients regarding how they seek and use different information sources as part of everyday living from different perspectives (as pertaining to your organization's particular interest). Our approach also entails studying how information products are created, managed and disseminated within your organization and how these approaches fit with clients' needs and behaviors. Findings from this holistic, user-based approach will reveal your clients' natural patterns or inclinations, barriers that they encounter, etc., which can be used to improve how you design and deliver information. Our goal is to facilitate the quality of everyday life through helping organizations deliver information. We can help you maximize the impact of your information in your community.

Our research team has helped many different organizations understand their clients' information behavior. We focus on people of all ages and backgrounds in diverse contexts--from employment and education to health, politics and recreation--and their interaction with different information sources, including interpersonal, organizational, print and electronic media.

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