

## Coronavirus changed King County's homelessness system. Could it now be working better for Black people?

Aug. 3, 2020 at 6:00 am | Updated Aug. 3, 2020 at 7:16 am



Giovanni Johnson and her two daughters now live in a two-bedroom apartment, thanks to a change in the way the county selects people for... (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times)

More ▾



By [Sydney Brownstone](#) 🐦

Seattle Times staff reporter

Giovanni Johnson didn't want to be a victim.

She had been living in a shelter for more than a month and was fleeing domestic violence with her two kids. But a victim? No.

"I won't be your stereotype," she remembers thinking as she answered questions on an evaluation meant to measure how vulnerable she was – one of the main data tools King County relies on in order to decide, in a landscape where housing is scarce, who is picked for housing opportunities first.

Local policymakers have embraced a housing philosophy that says the most vulnerable people should be at the front of the line for permanent housing. Under normal circumstances, Johnson likely wouldn't have been considered at risk enough to get into a rare spot.

But during the pandemic, early data shows that Black people have been more likely to get housing when they are no longer required to have the highest scores on the evaluation, which has been criticized in the past for favoring white applicants. Now, housing providers are asking whether relying less on the evaluation, a fluke of the pandemic, should become the norm.

### PROJECT HOMELESS

The Seattle Times' [Project Homeless](#) is funded by BECU, The Bernier McCaw Foundation, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Campion Foundation, the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Schultz Family Foundation, Seattle Foundation, Starbucks and the University of Washington. The Seattle Times maintains editorial control over Project Homeless content.

Johnson's resilience served her well during years of housing instability, formerly making ends meet through sex work when she needed to and, finally, leaving her abuser. But once homeless, in order to get into housing, the terms had switched. Now, the more vulnerable she was, the better.

The questions, which included a tool used by the county known as the VI-SPDAT, asked Johnson whether she struggled with mental health issues and drug use. It asked her how often she had been homeless in the last three years.

Johnson worried that some of the questions might be used against her one day, maybe to take her kids away. Johnson also hadn't dealt with serious substance use or mental health issues – and was concerned that meant she wasn't a candidate for housing.

Johnson didn't end up scoring very high and stayed in the shelter for five more months. Then the coronavirus struck.

In the face of a rapidly spreading virus, King County's homelessness system decided to make a change: In order to get people into housing quickly, they would shorten the process for selecting someone to fill a coveted unit. If homeless service providers couldn't quickly find someone ready to fill the unit from their priority pool – the people with some of the highest vulnerability scores who may not be the right fit for the unit or turn it down – they could pluck someone else from the community and give that person the spot. The lack of housing options means people in the priority pool can wait long periods to find a place to land.

Johnson had a case manager who knew she needed housing, even if she didn't have the highest vulnerability score. The unit became hers.

Preliminary data after King County's COVID-19 policy change shows that in the last three months, a greater proportion of Black people, like Johnson, have been referred to housing through what the county calls "external fills" – housing

providers directly choosing people to house — compared to the old system in which people were sorted by their scores on the vulnerability tool.

The dataset is small — only 361 referrals overall between April 1 and July 17. But among the 203 referrals during that time from the old system, 63, or 31%, were for Black households. Among the 158 external fills, 71, or 45%, represented Black households.

Now, after years of efforts to make its homelessness system more racially equitable, intense debate has arisen among homeless service providers about whether the county should continue to rely more heavily on providers to choose people to house rather than a vulnerability evaluation.

Jeanice Hardy, regional director of family and related services at the YWCA, says the new data shows that organizations like hers, that primarily serve Black families, know how to meet their communities' needs.

“Isn't this telling us something?” Hardy asked. “If we're finally meeting our [racial equity] benchmarks why would we go back to the other way?”

Hedda McLendon, the county's homelessness services and stability manager, said she was happy to see that the new process was still housing people with relatively high vulnerability scores. But because of the data's small sample size, McLendon warned against drawing too many conclusions from it.

“I do think we need to continue to track not just those who are referred, but are they placed and did they maintain that housing,” McLendon said.

### **“Maybe we don't need to reinvent the wheel”**

Homeless-service providers in King County have long criticized the housing tool as one that favors white applicants. A study published last year by human services consultancy C4 Innovations found that [being white predicted higher vulnerability scores](#) in King County.

The study found that people of color who were homeless were much less likely than white people to say they were facing certain challenges — for example, on questions that asked whether substance use led them to be kicked out of housing. That meant their vulnerability scores — key to getting housing — were going to be lower.

Some of it might be due to who's asking the questions, Hardy said.

“Most of the folks who are doing the VI-SPDAT are white folks,” said Hardy, who also is a member of the county's coordinated entry policy advisory committee.

Hardy said that white evaluation administrators may not ask follow-up questions of candidates that might get them to describe the challenges they're facing. And Black applicants may not feel as comfortable trusting a white administrator.

The VI-SPDAT also doesn't ask questions “that will get Black folks to the top of the list,” according to Hardy.

Research suggests, for example, that it's much easier for people of color to fall into homelessness because they often don't have generational wealth or family members who can give them money or a place to stay. The VI-SPDAT may not capture those realities.

King County has tried to add questions to the tool about experiences that Black people face more often, like a history in the foster care system, but Hardy says the system is still lacking.

“The whole point is to get the most vulnerable to the front of the line, but right now nothing's at the front of the line but white people,” Hardy said.

Johnson didn't think she was any less comfortable answering questions for a white administrator, but she also didn't feel like the questions reflected her experience.

“You have to score really, really high in order for them to feel like they need to house you,” Johnson said. “I felt discouraged ... I need all the resources I can get, but I'm not going to run around here telling people I'm not mentally stable. I'm not going to run around and say I want drugs.”

She didn't want to be seen that way. She had spent a long time building herself up from the vision she had of herself when she was being abused.

“I'm a domestic violence survivor, I'm not a domestic violence victim,” Johnson said. “I am a sex work survivor, I'm not a human trafficking victim.”

Racial disparities are already rife throughout the homelessness system. According to the 2020 one-night count of homelessness in King County, Black people made up 25% of the nearly 12,000 people estimated to be living homeless, despite making up only 7% of the overall county population. People identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native made up 15%, though only representing 1% of the population.

Homelessness systems, however, aren't allowed to take a person's race into account when housing them under the Fair Housing Act. And it's virtually impossible for homelessness systems to just ditch a housing triage tool: If local governments want federal funding, they're required to use a standardized assessment like the VI-SPDAT.

Before coordinated entry systems like King County's existed, people experiencing homelessness would have to "shop" around for services from different providers. Now, the county's coordinated entry system organizes its resources through a single point of contact. A housing triage tool helps sort who should be at the front of the line.

But even though external fills may be working better for Black people, the data also shows that it may not be working as well for other groups.

The newer method referred a smaller percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic/Latino people to housing than the usual housing prioritization process.

People who identified as Hispanic or Latino made up 20% of all referrals through the usual county process over the last three-and-a-half months, for example. The same group only made up 14% of external fills, though they represent 15% of the county's homeless population, according to the 2020 one-night count of homelessness.

Derrick Belgarde, deputy director of the Native-led Chief Seattle Club, said he suspects that providers may be housing fewer Indigenous people because organizations like his are having fewer face-to-face interactions during the pandemic, and many of their clients choose to stay away from other resources.

He agrees with Hardy, however, that community organizations know best how to assess vulnerability.

"There shouldn't be no government system deciding prioritization," Belgarde said. "Our Native community was totally left out, pushed to the margins and nobody was housing our people the slightest bit. But we've shown that we can actually house people and do it successfully."

Noah Fay, director of housing programs at Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC), cautioned against drawing conclusions based on the small amount of data, but said he was excited to see the trends in referring Black households to housing.

"The assessment tool we've been using has been wholly inadequate for a long time," Fay said. "We need a system ... without sacrificing race equity. And it feels like in this interim moment we're making quick impactful steps in that direction."

Race plays a role in how vulnerable people are because of institutional racism, Fay added, which is something providers doing external fills understand.

Fay still worried that people with major behavioral health conditions were being left behind. He was optimistic, though, that the system set up during COVID-19 pointed to a way forward.

"This interim process shows that we can quite quickly create something better than what we have," Fay said. "Maybe we don't need to reinvent the wheel. Maybe we just need to tap the expertise of our local providers."

### **"Fighting over scraps"**

This summer, the county's policy advisory committee on homelessness has decided to continue relying on more external fills to get people into housing quickly. They continue to watch the data to see whether to keep the new system going.

Some are cautious about calling the recent change a victory. At a recent meeting, Wayne Wilson, community impact manager on homelessness at the United Way of King County, pointed out that the root of the problem, to him, was the system's overall lack of housing.

"Until we get that volume up, we're always going to be fighting over scraps," Wilson said at the July 23 meeting. "To me the volume is the real crux of our problem."

The true test of the homelessness system's shift during the pandemic, according to McLendon, will be whether the people housed by external fills stay in housing. In the meantime, the county, McLendon said, is willing to go along with what the policy advisory committee recommends as long as government funders continue to give them flexibility during the spread of the coronavirus.

Today, Giovanni Johnson lives in an impeccable two-bedroom apartment, one she got through an external fill and received financial help moving into, off of Rainier Avenue South. It smells of cleaning spray and the dining room table is set with plates, placemats and glasses.

She has a stable job, and so far, is managing to pay the apartment's \$1,460 rent on her own.

She loves Seattle. And in the future, she wants to start an organization to help people like her get out of sex work.

"I am focused, I am driven, I am ambitious," she said. "I am loving. I am strong. ... I feel like I am at the exact place I need to be right now, and I have never ever felt that way."

**Sydney Brownstone:** 206-464-3225 or [sbrownstone@seattletimes.com](mailto:sbrownstone@seattletimes.com); on Twitter: [@sydbrownstone](https://twitter.com/sydbrownstone).

The Seattle Times occasionally closes comments on particularly sensitive stories. If you would like to share your thoughts or experiences in relation to this story, please email the reporter or [submit a letter](#) to be considered for publication in our Opinion section. You can read more about our [community policies here](#).