



# Housing and Education Partnerships

## A Case Study of Vancouver, Washington

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## Introduction

The housing and education sectors are being asked to do more with fewer resources. School districts often struggle to meet the needs of low-income students who deal with challenges outside of school and to connect them to resources that can strengthen their academic competencies. Public housing authorities and other assisted-housing providers similarly recognize the need for an array of support services to help their clients achieve financial and family stability. Housing providers have been exploring the role they can play, particularly in improving child outcomes overall and educational outcomes specifically. The premise is that housing providers have a unique opportunity and entry point to improve children's outcomes by connecting them to services and by bringing opportunities right into their homes or developments. Housing authorities in particular are in a favored position to reach low-income families and connect educators, low-income students, and their caregivers outside the school day. By partnering, school districts and housing authorities can begin to identify and tackle barriers to learning that poor students may face, such as housing instability, truancy, and health problems. By combining their resources and leveraging their individual strengths—programmatic, financial, and social—educators and housing authorities are learning how they can have a greater impact on low-income students' lives. Those partnerships represent uncharted territory for many school districts and housing authorities.

The Council of Large Public Housing Authorities (CLPHA) is a membership association that represents 70 of the largest public housing authorities in the country. To support and expand its members' ambition and capacity to support educational outcomes, CLPHA kicked off an education initiative in 2013. As part of that initiative, CLPHA is providing technical assistance and field-building support to practitioners, conducting policy advocacy on Capitol Hill, and entering partnerships with other national organizations to advance meaningful and sustainable partnerships between the housing

and education sectors. In 2014, with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, CLPHA enlisted the Urban Institute to examine promising practices emerging from partnerships in three diverse cities: Akron, Ohio; New Haven, Connecticut; and Vancouver, Washington. The overview of our findings from case studies in three sites, “Developing Housing and Education Partnerships: Lessons from the Field,” documents some creative approaches and promising practices to inform local efforts to launch partnerships, as well as national-level policy and advocacy efforts. This brief focuses on one partnership site: Vancouver, Washington.

## Study Site and Partnership

Vancouver, Washington, is in southwest Washington state, adjacent to Portland, Oregon. With a population of more than 167,000, it is the state’s fourth-largest city. Vancouver is made up mostly of white residents (roughly 80 percent) but is experiencing a demographic shift, with an increase in lower-income, Spanish-speaking residents. The Vancouver Housing Authority (VHA) is one of four Moving to Work (MTW) public housing authorities in Washington state (Overbay 2014).<sup>2</sup> In 2014, VHA provided assistance to more than 5,000 low-income households. The vast majority of the 2,693 assisted-housing units—2,391 units—are provided through VHA’s housing choice voucher (HCV) program.<sup>3</sup> VHA also manages 302 public housing units, about half of which (150 units) are located in a single community, Skyline Crest. The Skyline Crest community is at the heart of VHA’s education initiatives.<sup>4</sup>

Because the bulk of VHA’s assistance is through tenant-based vouchers, VHA-assisted students may attend schools in any of Clark County’s eight school districts (which form Washington state’s Educational Service District [ESD] 112). VHA’s education-related work revolves around two sets of activities: services based at Skyline (some of which are available to all VHA families) and an emerging partnership with the Vancouver Public School (VPS) district.

Constructed in 1963, Skyline Crest will soon undergo a major physical transformation. In 2010, the 20-acre community of low-density duplex and fourplex housing was officially designated as VHA’s Campus of Learners. The campus is structured around the concept of supporting and encouraging education and training for adults and children, with the goal of working with residents to support their ability to achieve economic stability and self-sufficiency. Skyline is the site of VHA’s RISE & STARS Community Center and houses VHA’s education-related resident services and Skyline-specific programming. Resident services staff for adult programming is based at VHA’s main administrative offices.

As of 2014, VPS serves nearly 23,000 children in 40 elementary, middle, and high schools. Students represent more than 75 different language groups, with approximately 11.5 percent of students enrolled as transitional bilingual. During the 2012–13 school year, just over one-half of VPS students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.<sup>5</sup> A cornerstone of VPS’s programming is the network of Family-Community Resource Centers (FCRCs). Launched in 2007, currently 13 FCRCs are located in elementary, middle, and high schools in VPS’s “Opportunity Zone,” an area characterized by high poverty rates and concentrations of second-language learners, low-income and subsidized housing, and

children of color. VPS targets Opportunity Zone schools for additional investments and sees the FCRCs as “retrofitting” the community schools model that emerged from New York City in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> The FCRCs focus on connecting students and families to basic services through existing community networks. VPS currently partners with more than 650 organizations through the FCRCs. Those partnerships range from formal partnerships with local service providers or nonprofits to relatively informal volunteer relationships with local faith-based or community organizations.

## Key Elements of Partnership

Although VHA operates several education-related initiatives at Skyline, the core elements of VHA’s formal partnership with VPS center around three joint efforts launched since 2013: the pilot Stable Housing Voucher Program, a data-sharing agreement, and the shared hiring of an AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) member, who will be dedicated to expanding partner initiatives related to chronic absenteeism. For each effort, the two organizations engage with additional community stakeholders, either as formal partners or as supporting players, and in ongoing discussions about possible future collaborations.

Neither VHA nor VPS sees its role as to directly provide social services outside of its core areas of expertise, although both partners acknowledged the importance of an array of support services to the ultimate success of assisted-housing residents and low-income students. Rather, the organizations noted their unique position to act as liaisons between low-income families and students and the potential resources that may help such families achieve economic and academic success. As such, both view service partnerships—with one another and with other local organizations that serve similar populations—as critical to encouraging the success of their students and residents and to fulfilling their organizational missions. VHA’s executive director, Roy Johnson, noted that VHA recognized housing was not enough and that disrupting the cycle of poverty would require unique attention to additional support services for residents.

A network of formal and informal relationships and collaborations is a defining feature of the VHA/VPS partnership, as it is of Vancouver itself. Vancouver is a tight-knit community, with long-standing relationships between service providers. The VHA/VPS partnership has also benefited from a broader conversation focused on ending intergenerational poverty at the regional level and has included in its activities key organizations leading those efforts. Leaders from VHA and VPS meet frequently with one another and with their counterparts from local health organizations, foundations, and other stakeholders about a variety of issues related to the goal of addressing poverty in the city, county, and region. Those interactions have created opportunities for VHA and VPS to identify common policy problems or goals; to learn about each organization’s leadership, resources, and constraints; and to cultivate a productive working relationship.

An additional important feature of the partnership is the willingness of leaders from both VHS and VPS to pursue new ideas and initiatives and then to improve and expand their efforts through feedback, experimentation, and experience. Leaders from both VHA and VPS expressed the willingness to start

small, or to “try it, then fix it,” and to trust their staff members and partners to help refine new program models once in place. An example of that is the Stable Housing Voucher Program. Drawing from the McCarver Elementary School program<sup>7</sup> as a model, which has shown early evidence of success, VHA and VPS launched their own program with a very small number of vouchers and continue to adapt the initiative to fit the Vancouver context and resources. The VHA/VPS partnership is also grounded in frequent community stakeholder input, with the goal of ensuring that the activities directly respond to the needs and contexts facing the people VHA and VPS serve.

Together, those elements set the stage for innovative programming and flexible partnerships that respond quickly to collaboration opportunities and can leverage resources and feedback from multiple organizations. However, a potential challenge of the model may be to balance flexibility with rigorous attention to program design and performance measurement before launching new initiatives. Key aspects of sustainability are ensuring that new programs are implemented with clear goals and expected outcomes in mind, and that adequate resources are in place to measure short- and long-term outcomes. Those elements may initially be overlooked as a result of rapid design or implementation.

However, because housing and education partnerships are a new effort for VHA and VPS, as well as regionally and nationally—data sharing remains in development and the voucher program remains a pilot in Tacoma, as well as in Vancouver—the organizations have had limited empirical evidence to draw from when pursuing efforts to link housing and education. As a result, VHA and VPS have relied on a combination of their own data and staff expertise, community leadership and feedback, local partner experience with the challenges facing local low-income families, and the national evidence base describing the challenges facing low-income students generally. VHA and VPS will continue to inform and adapt their interventions based on those insights.

## **Shared Goals and Joint Strategies**

VHA and VPS have not yet defined a formal theory of change for their partnership, which they describe as having developed organically and as being a work in progress. Even so, both organizations articulate several common organizational goals and assumptions about the purpose of their efforts. Both organizations noted the limitations on the resources they could individually provide and the need to partner with other service providers to connect their populations to the array of supports that low-income students and families may need to be successful. Both organizations also recognized the importance of their current efforts (collaborative and individual) to future economic outcomes in their students' lives.

VHA described its work as guided by the principle of “planning upstream” to interrupt the cycle of poverty and to avoid multigenerational dependence on housing assistance—a theme echoed by VPS and other community stakeholders. Ultimately, the goal for VHA is to encourage turnover of housing subsidies and to allow VHA to serve more needy families. As VHA's executive director, Roy Johnson, and director of employee and resident services, Jan Wichert, noted, VHA's adult education and job-training programs have long been geared toward encouraging assisted-housing residents who are able to work to move toward economic self-sufficiency and out of assisted housing. The more recent focus

on youth education programming since 2011 is also geared toward preparing children for future economic success.

Working within this framework, VHA has identified improving school attendance and decreasing chronic absenteeism as the primary goals of its own education services, as well as its collaboration with VPS. Stabilizing students and their families' housing—with assumed stabilizing effects on school attendance and socio-emotional stability—is an implicit goal of the pilot Stable Housing Voucher Program. Chronic absenteeism was described as a specific and measurable outcome that can be tracked over time, and all partners agree that regular attendance is a fundamental step toward achieving academic excellence.

VPS has been targeting chronic absenteeism among low-income students through their family community resource centers and was recognized by The Data Quality Campaign for its use of data to address attendance. The campaign focuses on high-quality use of data to improve student achievement and recognized VPS for their strategic use of data in their FCRCs, including their use of data to identify chronically absent students and enroll them in attendance programs.<sup>8</sup> As such, improving attendance rates for students living in assisted housing was a logical target for VHA's internal programming, as well as the data sharing with VPS. Much of the Skyline-based efforts and the partnership with VPS focuses on understanding VHA student absenteeism, identifying the factors that might prevent VHA students from attending school, and encouraging and supporting attendance. As Wichert explained, VHA is operating from the assumption that tracking attendance in school and engaging with parents about absences will result in more students who consistently attend school and who are, in turn, more likely to succeed academically—and ultimately be better positioned to succeed later in life.

VHA's educational programming also benefited from local conversations and national initiatives seeking to advance the academic outcomes of low-income students. The Skyline Campus of Learners was modeled after HUD's Campus of Learners, embracing the focus to create educational opportunity for all residents within a public housing community, and it is tailored to meet the unique needs of the Skyline neighborhood.<sup>9</sup> The expanded focus on early learning and hiring early learning peer advocates was prompted by a meeting between the VHA director of employee and resident services with Clark County school district superintendents, in which the importance of school readiness was discussed. Participants discussed how early learning affects academic performance in third grade and, ultimately, high school graduation rates. The peer advocate model that VHA employed borrowed from VHA's longer-standing use of peer advocates for community health. Likewise, VHA replicated an existing scholarship program to create its own college-focused program to get VHA high school students thinking about college as a viable option.

## Leadership

The VHA and VPS partnership is led primarily through the efforts of Wichert at VHA and Tamara Shoup at VPS, with the vision and support of VHA's executive director, Roy Johnson, and VPS's superintendent, Steven Webb.

Wichert is the director of VHA's employee and resident services. She has been at VHA for a decade and has been the director of resident services for the past four years. Wichert supervises VHA's human resources, community relations, and resident services staff. Her responsibilities include serving as the executive director of VHA's Bridgeview Housing, a 501(c)(3) organization that provides development and resident support services for VHA. The organization is managed by and housed at VHA and will eventually absorb all of VHA's resident services.

Shoup is the director of family engagement at VPS, where her responsibilities include managing the network of FCRCs. She has been with VPS since 2013 and in her current role since August 2014, having previously been responsible for developing VPS's community partnerships. Shoup is now supported by VPS director of strategic partnerships Alishia Topper, who assumed Shoup's previous role and leads development and partnership efforts for the FCRCs. The centers have been in place since 2007, and Shoup's and Topper's current efforts are to formalize and standardize partnerships across the network of sites. As one example of Vancouver's interconnectedness, Topper is also a Vancouver City Council member.

Strong senior-level support at each organization, coupled with Vancouver's close-knit community relationships, has enabled the partnership to develop. Even so, VHA's and VPS's collective and individual efforts related to linking housing and education services are relatively new—beginning at VPS in 2013 and at VHA in 2010. Program leadership personnel at VPS in particular are relatively new to their roles.

## Staff

Wichert and Shoup take primary leadership for planning and implementing joint initiatives as part of their larger portfolios at VHA and VPS. They draw on existing resources within their organizations and enlist external partners and resources as need and opportunities arise. For example, Wichert, Shoup, and their staff members designed and implemented the first iteration of the Stable Housing Voucher Program. In the initial program model, the FCRC coordinators at the two target schools were responsible for identifying eligible families and referring them to VHA, which would then issue vouchers through the standard process. However, VHA and VPS quickly discovered that the voucher program target population is high-need families with limited rental history, poor credit, and other challenges that may limit their ability to find private market-rental housing without additional assistance that neither VPS nor the VHA staff were able to provide. VHA has since transferred administration of the program to the Clark County Council for the Homeless (CTFH), which is collocated at VHA's administrative office building. Going forward, CTFH will work with VPS's FCRC staff to identify families in need of housing. CTFH will then be solely responsible for the voucher issuance process and for providing housing search assistance as needed.

Independent of the VPS partnership activities, VHA's Skyline-based education services have dedicated program staffing. Three resident services staff members (one full time and two part time) are responsible for managing the youth activities and completing Family Plans at Skyline. In addition, VHA employs three part-time (five hours per week) peer advocates, who are also VHA residents, to assist

with education programming. Two of the advocates work on early childhood development efforts, and the third works with the college prep program. The advocates are provided a small annual stipend (\$2,400 each) by VHA. The early learning advocates design materials geared toward parents of young children and conduct outreach to VHA families so they are encouraged to take advantage of available resources at Skyline and in the larger community. The advocates play a key role in ensuring that program materials are designed and communicated in ways that resonate with VHA's population.

## Partners

VHA and VPS are the primary partners. However, VHA's partnership with VPS is difficult to discuss without also mentioning additional community stakeholders that indirectly or directly participate in various VHA and VPS initiatives. Those organizations include the Clark County Council for the Homeless (CFTH), the four-county Healthy Living Collaborative (HLC) of Southwest Washington, the Boys & Girls Clubs (B&GC) of Southwest Washington, and the Community Foundation for Southwest Washington. In addition, VHA and VPS are collaborating with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Southwest Washington to hire and manage the VISTA member who will explore issues related to chronic absenteeism for all three organizations.

### CLARK COUNTY COUNCIL FOR THE HOMELESS

As noted, VHA recently enlisted CFTH as a formal partner for the Stable Housing Voucher Program, which CFTH is now responsible for administering. In addition, CFTH and executive director Andy Silver clearly play an important role in Vancouver as a resource for VHA, VPS, and HLC, and they offer expertise in the homelessness and housing services systems locally and statewide. VPS is also in discussions internally and with CFTH about the possibility of administering a modest flexible emergency-housing support fund. That initiative emerged after a December 2014 housing crisis that affected a large number of VPS families that faced possible displacement from a privately owned below-market-rate housing development (Courtyard Village). CFTH has agreed to administer a fund of contributions from local organizations, including VPS, to assist families displaced from the development. VHA will also reserve a small number of available subsidized units for those families.

### HEALTHY LIVING COLLABORATIVE OF SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON

HLC comprises more than 40 organizations and representatives from four southwest Washington counties (Clark, Cowlitz, Skamania, and Wahkiakum). The multisector coalition focuses broadly on health protection and promotion through a combination of policy, advocacy, and direct engagement with low-income communities to target chronic disease and the root causes of poverty. The HLC effort brings together senior-level representatives from transportation, health, housing, education, and social service organizations in the four-county region. It also has helped establish a venue for stakeholders to share ideas, familiarize themselves with other stakeholders' priorities and services, and set collective goals. VHA, VPS, and CFTH each noted HLC's role in bringing together partners and igniting a common dialogue around collective impact goals. VHA has also recently enlisted HLC and CFTH to work with community stakeholders to help identify goals and priorities before instituting a new HCV program waiting list. Although HLC is not directly involved in the current VHA/VPS partnership, the organization



has clearly provided local stakeholders an opportunity to learn from and about one another's goals and to move stakeholders toward common interests, which has helped set the stage for productive partnerships.

#### **BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS OF SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON**

Boys & Girls Clubs provide services and recreational space to youths of all ages. The organization recently launched a capital campaign to fund a new center within the Skyline neighborhood, which would expand access to after-school programming and other services for youths in Skyline and the surrounding area. As an additional example of overlapping organizational relationships in Vancouver, VPS superintendent Webb is a member of the club's board of directors. In late 2014, VHA and the B&GC jointly received funding from The Community Foundation, as described herein, to support its partnership in Skyline Crest.

#### **NATIONAL ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS OF SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON**

NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization.<sup>10</sup> NAMI Southwest Washington is partnering with VHA and VPS to hire a VISTA worker who will be tasked with identifying best practices to reduce chronic absenteeism in Vancouver.

#### **COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON**

The Community Foundation serves Clark, Cowlitz, and Skamania counties, providing scholarships and grants to local education, health and social service, and community development organizations. Since 2013, the foundation has focused primarily on initiatives related to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty, including early learning initiatives. The foundation has also targeted investments toward innovative community partnerships. It has provided small grants to VHA to support early learning advocates and scholarship funds, and it recently awarded a large grant (\$50,000 annually for three years) to VHA and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southwest Washington to support collaboration in Skyline Crest.

### **Funding Sources**

VHA has been able to use its MTW flexibility to launch and fund the majority of its education initiatives, which require minimal funding. Local foundation grants also support some of VHA's Skyline-based initiatives. In total, VHA dedicates approximately \$82,000 of its annual budget to education initiatives (not including staff salaries for resident services) and has received approximately \$180,000 in grants to support current programming in Skyline and to improve programming and partnerships going forward.

For the Stable Housing Voucher Program, VHA will reserve up to 10 vouchers for 36 months, at an annual subsidy value of \$48,000, for each of three years. However, VHA does not view that expense as an additional cost for the agency because those funds would be spent on voucher assistance even if the stability program were not in place. In addition, VHA has reserved an annual allocation of \$5,000 for administration of the Stable Housing Voucher Program; \$5,000 for 10 scholarships (valued at \$500 each) for its College Focus Program; and \$7,200 for its peer advocates (\$2,400 stipend each).



VHA has received a total of \$30,000 from the Community Foundation for Southwest Washington to support Skyline activities: \$19,000 to support the use of peer advocates in Skyline (focusing on health and education) and \$11,000 for the College Focus Program for high school students.

As noted, in late 2014, the Community Foundation also jointly awarded VHA and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southwest Washington a three-year, \$150,000 award (three annual awards of \$50,000) to support future collaboration at Skyline. The award, which is the largest single grant that the foundation has made to date and the only multiyear grant, reflects the foundation's current focus on supporting innovative partnerships in the region. VHA and the Boys & Girls Clubs are each engaged in separate but related capital campaigns to build two new facilities at Skyline. A new Boys & Girls Club will provide youth services; the adjacent VHA facility will provide a new and expanded community center to house VHA's resident services staff and to replace the aging RISE & STARS building. The foundation's funding allows the two organizations to collaborate on how to coordinate and streamline youth services going forward. That funding may ultimately enable VHA to transfer much of its current youth education programs from Skyline to the Boys & Girls Clubs, which will allow them to redirect resources to additional programs or services. The grant is unrestricted, and VHA and the Boys & Girls Clubs are just beginning to explore possibilities for using the funding.

## Programs and Services

VHA is engaged in three main activities that are in partnership with VPS and that supplement the additional education-related activities centered at Skyline Crest.

### HOMELESSNESS

**The Stable Housing Voucher** pilot program is based in part on the Tacoma Housing Authority's McCarver Elementary School program. VHA will provide housing choice vouchers (HCVs) to 10 families with children who attend one of two VPS schools that contain FCRCs and who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The families must meet HCV eligibility requirements and remain within the VPS district. Whereas the goal of the McCarver program includes encouraging school stability and minimizing student turnover, the Vancouver program is focused on family stability and avoiding homelessness—which is disruptive to student attendance and achievement. The emphasis on family rather than school stability is in part because of the small size of the program and also because it draws from two different schools. Moreover, the pilot program could not notably alter school turnover rates. Even though children are not explicitly required to remain in their original, prevoucher school, VPS expects that they will remain in the same school.

Families who may be eligible for the program will be referred by the VPS staff to CFTH, which will establish eligibility, issue vouchers, and provide housing search support as needed. Selected families will receive a subsidy of approximately \$400 per month for 36 months (the amount of the subsidy may be adjusted as the program design continues to evolve). In exchange, families must agree to work with the VPS staff to develop school engagement plans and with the VHA staff to move toward self-sufficiency. Two families were enrolled before CFTH's administration of the program, and the remaining eight

families will be enrolled in 2015. VHA is open to expanding the program as funding allows or to incorporating lessons from the program into its existing HCV program model.

#### ABSENTEEISM AND ATTENDANCE

**Vancouver Public Schools Chronic Absence Solutions (Joint AmeriCorps VISTA member).** In 2014, VHA, VPS, and NAMI Southwest Washington applied jointly for the three-year AmeriCorps VISTA member appointment to focus on all three organizations' priorities related to chronic absenteeism. That person is housed at VPS since February 2015 and works with local partners to identify best practices, identify existing attendance-promoting activities, and create a community awareness campaign for attendance-related issues. The VHA and VPS staff noted that research suggests undiagnosed mental illness among both students and parents is a big factor in chronic absenteeism. Bearing that possibility in mind, VHA hopes the VISTA member's work will provide insights into appropriate supports that are for families and that can be incorporated into education programming. VPS and VHA initially intended for the VISTA member to manage the process of implementing a data-sharing agreement. However, a draft agreement moved forward during the VISTA hiring process. Originally, each of the three partner organizations submitted a separate VISTA application; those applications were later consolidated once the partners became aware of their shared interests involving student absenteeism. A key component of the ongoing VHA and VPS collaboration is data sharing, which both organizations view as critical to their ability to address chronic absenteeism in Vancouver.

#### THE SKYLINE CREST CAMPUS OF LEARNERS

The Skyline-centered activities and programming are internally managed by the VHA Skyline staff and are supported by proximity (two schools are located across the street from the Skyline community) and informal working relationships with local teachers, the educational service district (ESD) 112 staff, and a network of service partners and volunteers. The goals of the Skyline programs are (a) to encourage a positive learning environment for children of all ages, (b) to help youths develop problem-solving skills, (c) to start a dialogue with students and families about the importance of education and learning, and (d) to encourage academic success.

A major component of the VHA education efforts at Skyline is the public housing lease requirement that households create an annual "family plan" with a VHA resident services staff member. The plan includes self-identified educational, familial, and employment-related goals, as well as the requirement that families with school-age children provide attendance records for all students in their household so the Skyline staff can monitor absences and discuss attendance with parents. Families also must agree to check in with resident services staff semiannually to discuss family plan progress.

Located within the Skyline community is the RISE & STARS Community Center, which contains office space for the VHA resident services staff and meeting and activity space for the center's youth programs. Several programs, including the following, operate out of the RISE & STARS center and are available to all VHA residents and students:

- *Early learning:* A key feature of the Skyline programming is the availability of two part-time (five hours per week) early learning advocates, who are VHA assisted-housing residents and are

provided a small stipend by VHA to design and conduct resident outreach with other VHA families with young children. VHA provides the advocates and their supervisors with lists and contact information for households with children and provides the birthdates of children. The advocates directly contact families to encourage them to participate in age-appropriate early learning activities and to take advantage of community resources. The advocates are responsible for developing a community outreach approach and materials and information that are appealing and accessible to VHA residents.

- *Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP).* RISE & STARS offers space to ESD 112 for ECEAP, a state-funded preschool program similar to Head Start. In exchange for classroom space, ECEAP gives priority to students in the Skyline community, as well as to children entering kindergarten the following year. ECEAP students are connected to health care and dental providers, in addition to other service providers. Skyline resident services staff members also encourage Skyline and VHA-assisted households to enroll their children in ECEAP and ESD 112 school-readiness programs.
- *Youth after-school activities.* After-school programs are the longest-established VHA/Skyline youth and education-related services (approximately 10 years) and are provided to youth through age 18 during the school year and throughout the summer. Activities include art, homework time and assistance, computer access, tutoring, and volunteer-led recreational activities for younger children in the early afternoon and older teens in the early evening. That programming is grounded in the Love and Logic<sup>®</sup> behavioral model, which targets children's executive function by allowing them to develop solutions to any problems or questions that arise at the center, from difficulty obeying established rules to challenges interacting with other students or designing recreational programs.
- *VHA's College Focus Program.* VHA-assisted teens (students 16 to 18 years of age) living anywhere in Clark County are encouraged to think about college as an attainable goal. Students are assigned a mentor to help them design a plan to reach college. Each student who completes program orientation, attends monthly activities, and graduates from high school receives \$100. VHA also offers 10 scholarships worth \$500 each to youths who ultimately attend college. Currently, 25 high school students are enrolled in the program.

## Data for decisionmaking

VHA and VPS do not currently share student data, but a data-sharing agreement is in process. The agreement will require legal approval from both organizations to protect the privacy of students and families and to ensure compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. VPS is taking the lead on drafting the data-sharing agreement.

The two organizations expect to sign an initial agreement in early 2015 that will eventually allow VPS to provide VHA with aggregate or summary-level data about shared students. A future agreement may provide expanded access to individual-level data and would likely require consent from VHA

families. The data-sharing agreement currently under review by VHA and VPS would allow the housing authority to provide the school district with a list of identifiers for school-age children living in VHA-assisted housing (both HCV and public or multifamily housing units). The VPS staff would match the list to student records and then provide VHA with basic information, such as the number and characteristics of VHA students attending VPS schools, and with summary-level information for a limited number of measures specifically related to absenteeism and attendance.

No individual-level data or information on student achievement would be provided to VHA. Internally, VPS would have the opportunity to analyze individual-level performance data or VHA student characteristics in more detail. VHA and VPS anticipate that linked data will be used to identify schools with high concentrations of VHA students and determine absenteeism rates for VHA students compared to benchmark rates. That data could then be used to inform future programs.

VHA and VPS noted that the initial data sharing will ideally provide preliminary insights about shared VHA and VPS students and the extent to which absenteeism—known to be a problem among low-income students generally—exists among VHA students. On the basis of the success of the initial data-sharing collaboration, VHA and VPS will explore additional opportunities to examine linked student data.

In the absence of a data-sharing agreement, VHA currently collects attendance information from the parents of students living in Skyline. The Skyline Crest lease agreement requires that all families provide attendance information for school-age students twice annually (in December and June) in the form of a report card or attendance report provided by the student's school. Parents of children who fail to meet minimum attendance expectations are required to work with staff to improve performance, and families with children found to have chronic absentee problems receive additional supports. VPS defines chronic absenteeism as missing more than 10 percent of school days (or approximately 18 days) annually. As of 2015, Skyline students are expected to maintain a 90 percent attendance rate. In addition to tracking attendance, VHA staff monitor progress on individualized goals established in annual family plans, and developmental asset improvement and high school graduation for VHA students. Students that attend the VHA after-school program also set individual academic goals, which are tracked and supported by VHA staff.

Over time, monitoring the attendance information will ideally allow VHA to develop a record of student attendance by family and child and to maintain a dialogue with parents about the importance of attendance, the frequency and reasons for absences, and any barriers to attendance. VHA's goal is to understand Skyline students' attendance patterns so it can engage effectively with parents about ways to prioritize attendance. As of fall 2014, Skyline staff had met with families and collected family plan and attendance information for one year and was entering its second year of engagement and data collection.

Skyline staff suggested that interactions with families and data collected thus far do not show that chronic absenteeism is a widespread problem in Skyline. The majority of students do not miss school frequently, or at the chronic level. However, among students that do miss school frequently, the

absences are significant and seem to staff to be at the chronic level. Staff are not yet prepared to assess or categorize systematic attendance barriers that may be specific to students living in assisted housing or that are related to the chronic absenteeism they see in a subset of students—in part because of limited data collection and in part because staff are still at the early stages of their interactions with families. Currently, staff are working (a) to get the Skyline community to understand the importance of school attendance and absenteeism, (b) to obtain more precise attendance data, and (c) to improve their understanding of how absenteeism fits into the broader contexts and challenges of Skyline families' lives.

Interviews with the Skyline staff revealed some early challenges encountered in this work. For example, attendance records provided by families are inconsistent across schools or families, and staff members—who are not formally trained educators—struggle to interpret the baseline attendance patterns and information. The staff also noted difficulty understanding the complex range of challenges and trade-offs that parents may face getting their children to school and the contexts within which Skyline families operate. In the long term, reaching that understanding may require additional resources or staffing at VHA. Currently, the staff is focused on engaging with parents, documenting attendance, and attempting to understand the nature and extent of chronic absenteeism problems among VHA students. An early lesson noted by VHA leadership is the need to target children whose school attendance is at the cusp of the chronic absentee category (between 6 and 9 percent of school days missed), as well as students who miss 10 percent or more of school days.

The attendance-tracking effort is new and has not collected sufficient data from which to draw conclusions about the effect of VHA services on targeted outcomes. Resident services staff noted that going beyond tracking to assess effects will be challenging and is beyond the scope of their current skill sets or capacity. An effort is currently under way to survey local kindergarten teachers in an effort to capture baseline and ongoing measures of school readiness among VHA's youngest students. Nevertheless, going forward, VHA staff members may not have the resources or capacity to evaluate the effects of education-related efforts. VHA's staffing structure will change in 2016 to increase capacity in this area.

## **Systems and Protocols for Coordination**

### **COMMUNICATION**

Few formal systems or protocols are in place to support the partnership with VPS, which is primarily coordinated as needed between Wichert at VHA and Shoup at VPS. The organizations do not currently have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or formal agreement in place outlining overall roles or expectations for each organization. Also, no structured meetings, committees, or schedules are in place and specifically devoted to discussing new collaborations between VHA and VPS. Instead, both partners noted that they interact regularly through community engagements and HLC meetings, and their interaction is frequent despite a lack of formal structure. Both partners also noted simply that they “know who to call” at partner organizations when questions or opportunities arise.

The Stable Housing Voucher Program has a more formal relationship and protocols in place. The housing authority has MOUs with both VPS and CFTH for voucher program administration. With the transfer of the voucher program to CFTH, a formal procedure manual was created that outlines partner roles, program eligibility, and the procedures that CFTH will follow. As the program design evolved, VPS, VHA, and CFTH established a standing monthly meeting with all staff involved with the program to review progress and address the unique challenges involved with launching the program.

VHA expects that a more formal, monthly meeting schedule will also be established with VPS going forward.

## COLOCATION

VHA does not see itself as a direct social service provider and has intentionally connected or colocated with organizations that can provide additional supports and resources to VHA households. ECEAP, a state-funded preschool program run by ESD 112, uses classroom space at the RISE & STARS Center in Skyline neighborhood free of charge and gives priority to Skyline residents. Although ECEAP is not part of the VHA/VPS partnership, it is an avenue for bringing early learning resources to VHA-assisted households.

Likewise, CFTH is colocated at VHA (which owns its administrative office building and leases space to other nonprofits) and sometimes uses VHA's human resources. Sharing office space and other resources may have made the collaboration between VHA and CFTH particularly successful because the two organizations are familiar with each other and communication happens easily. CFTH plays a key role in the VHA/VPS partnership through the Stable Housing Voucher Program and an important supporting role in a variety of regional program and policy efforts related to housing and homelessness.

Finally, the future colocation of a Boys & Girls Club at Skyline Crest and the emerging Community Foundation-supported partnership with the Club has created a potential opportunity for VHA to expand and adjust services going forward. Transitioning after-school programs to the new Boys & Girls Club once it is in place will potentially allow VHA to redirect staff and other resources.

## Summary and Next Steps

The VHA/VPS partnership and activities are a work in progress that has emerged over a relatively short period. The efforts continue to gather new energy, partners, support, and structure as they develop. The working relationships between VHA, VPS, and other community partners are bolstered by strong leadership and the existence of supporting organizations and networks in Vancouver and regionally. VHA and VPS also share a commitment to the concept that academic success is important to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and may require a diverse array of resources.

In 2015, the partners will continue to roll out and expand their initiatives. VHA, VPS, and CFTH plan to issue the remaining vouchers for the Stable Housing Voucher Program and to make further program adjustments as needed. VPS and VHA also intend to begin to exchange data, thereby allowing them to explore information about joint VHA/VPS students and ways to use the new information. In addition,

VHA will begin to work with the Boys & Girls Clubs to explore opportunities to augment or revise youth programming at Skyline Crest as the new facilities become available, thereby leveraging the Community Foundation funding.

The Skyline public housing units will soon undergo major exterior and interior renovations, and that will make individual units more appealing to residents. Skyline's population is expected to increase from 400 to 450 because of the addition of 20 new units.<sup>11</sup> With the building of a new Boys & Girls Club in Skyline and the new transformation of the neighborhood, VHA is rethinking how best to offer educational programming to its Campus of Learners and, ultimately, to each of its properties.

Longer-term goals for the partnership have not yet been fully identified by either organization, aside from strengthening existing efforts and applying insights gained from their early experience to new initiatives. Ideally, the work that VHA and VPS are engaged in, coupled with the ongoing support of local partners, will provide the foundation to build a longer-term vision.

## Notes

1. City Population, "USA: Washington," accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.citypopulation.de/USA-Washington.html>.
2. MTW is a US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) demonstration program that provides designated public housing authorities (PHAs) greater flexibility to make administrative and programmatic reforms. As of October 2014, HUD had conferred MTW status to 39 PHAs. MTW authorizes the use of HUD funding otherwise earmarked for voucher, public housing, or capital funds to invest in programs and services to promote employment and self-sufficiency for households in the public housing and voucher programs. Thus, although MTW status is not a requirement for PHAs interested in educational partnerships, it does provide advantages for funding educational services and implementing policies to promote academic success. Other MTW agencies in Washington are the Seattle, King County, and Tacoma housing authorities.
3. US Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Picture of Subsidized Households—Vancouver, WA," accessed March 25, 2015, <http://www.huduser.org/portal/datasets/picture/yearlydata.html>.
4. VHA also owns or manages numerous units through other programs and is in the process of converting its public housing stock to Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) housing units. In 2015, VHA operates 122 RAD units, 1,487 Workforce Housing units (which may not be targeted to low-income households), 508 units for seniors, and 276 transitional housing units.
5. Vancouver Public Schools, "Quick Facts 2013–2014," accessed March 25, 2015, [http://portalsso.vansd.org/portal/page/portal/VSD\\_Home\\_Public/VPS\\_About\\_Us/VPS\\_Quick\\_Facts](http://portalsso.vansd.org/portal/page/portal/VSD_Home_Public/VPS_About_Us/VPS_Quick_Facts).
6. Coalition for Community Schools, "What Is a Community School?" accessed March 25, 2015, [http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/what\\_is\\_a\\_community\\_school.aspx](http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/what_is_a_community_school.aspx).
7. The Tacoma Housing Authority's McCarver Elementary School program provides housing choice vouchers to low-income or unstably-housed families with the goal of reducing student turnover within McCarver Elementary School, reducing student residential mobility for children in recipient families, and improving student outcomes. For more information, see [http://usich.gov/usich\\_resources/solutions/explore/mccarver\\_elementary\\_school\\_special\\_housing\\_program/](http://usich.gov/usich_resources/solutions/explore/mccarver_elementary_school_special_housing_program/).
8. Our Kids, Our Future, "Vancouver Family Resources Get National Attention." *Success Stories*, April 1, 2014, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://www.ourkidswa.com/2014/04/01/vancouver-resource-centers-highlighted-by-national-groups/>.



9. US Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Campus of Learners," accessed March 25, 2015, <http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/programdescription/campus>.
10. National Alliance on Mental Illness, "About NAMI," accessed January 12, 2015, [http://www.nami.org/template.cfm?section=About\\_NAMI](http://www.nami.org/template.cfm?section=About_NAMI).
11. Scott Hewitt, "VHA Has Big Plans for Skyline Crest." *The Columbian*, January 15, 2014, <http://www.columbian.com/news/2014/jan/15/vha-has-big-plans-for-skyline-crest-area/>.

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Overbay, David. 2014. *Moving to Work 2014 Annual Plan*. Vancouver Housing Authority. [http://www.vhousa.com/docs/VHA%202014%20MTW%20Plan\\_Final.pdf](http://www.vhousa.com/docs/VHA%202014%20MTW%20Plan_Final.pdf).

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