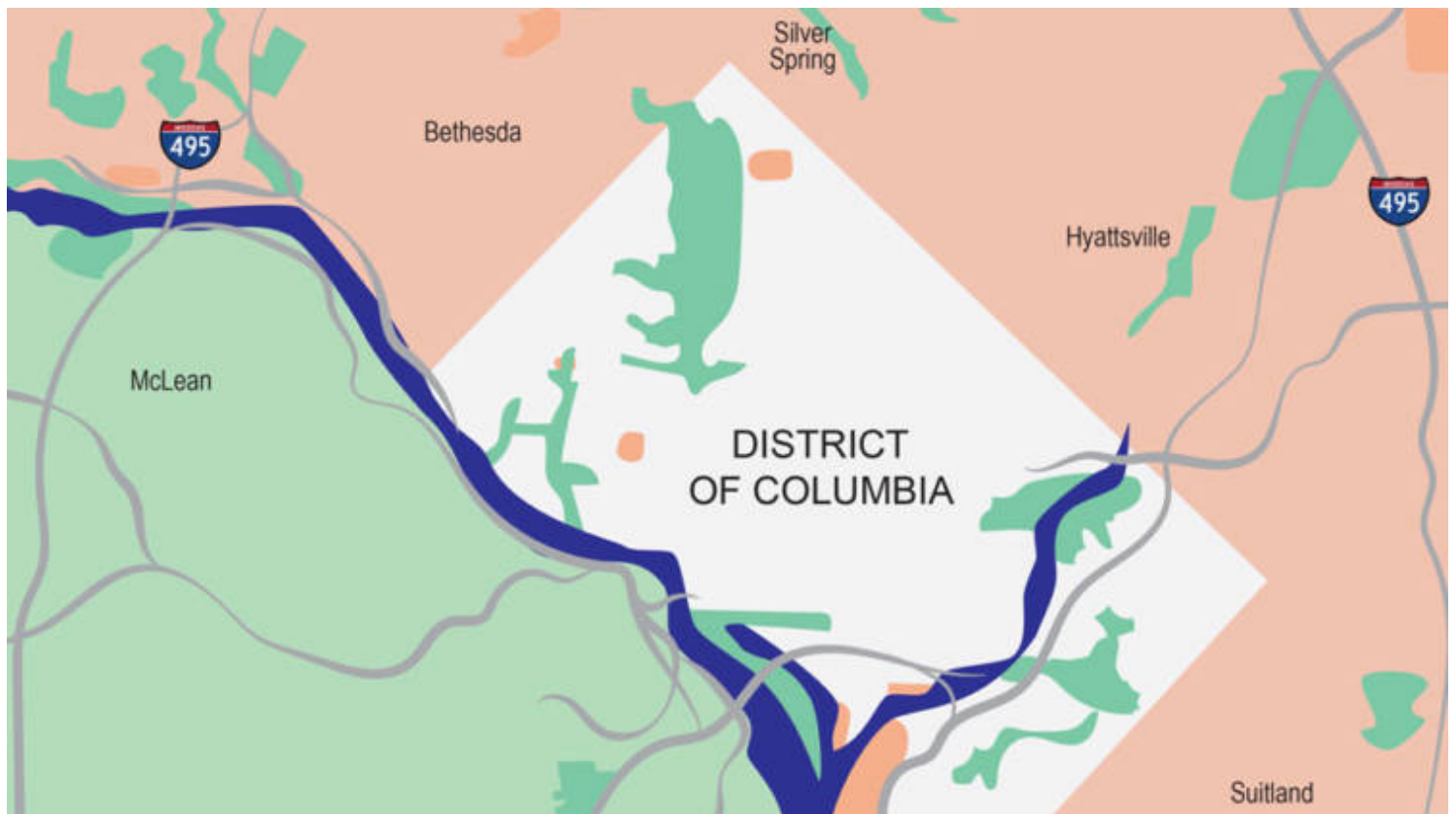


A \$1 million donation from Amazon is keeping D.C. families out of homelessness

by [OLIVIA RICHTER \(HTTPS://WWW.STREETSEMEDIA.ORG/STAFF_MEMBERS/OLIVIA-RICHTER/\)](https://www.streetsemmedia.org/staff_members/olivia-richter/) // News // May 16, 2018



credit: [Tiffany Newman \(/staff_member/tiffany-newman\)](#)

With the help of a \$1 million donation from Amazon, the D.C.-based nonprofit Friendship Place recently launched “Family Connect,” a privately funded homelessness prevention and diversion program. The 115-day program focuses on getting participants into stable housing and helping them gain employment quickly.

Family Connect is a regional program serving families and individuals throughout the D.C. Metro area. The program served one family as far away as St. Mary’s County, 85 miles from the organization’s headquarters in Tenleytown.

“We feel that family homelessness is a regional phenomenon,” said Jean-Michel Giraud, president of Friendship Place, who explained that working remotely through phone calls and emails expands the program’s range. “It really doesn’t matter to us where the family is, because it is private funding.”

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[Read more: [D.C. Council revised the Homeless Services Reform Act Amendment of 2017 to ease the proposed residency requirements \(https://www.streetsensemedia.org/article/hsra-2017-dc-council-client-provider-rights/#.WvxEqKQvxD4\)](https://www.streetsensemedia.org/article/hsra-2017-dc-council-client-provider-rights/#.WvxEqKQvxD4)]

The program’s top priority is to ensure families and individuals have stable housing. If a family is served eviction papers, Giraud says, Family Connect will step in to pay the fee and stop the eviction, sometimes within 24 hours of the eviction notice being posted. It will also help pay security deposits and application fees. Stable housing is central to Family Connect’s model, so families and individuals have a place where they can sleep well, maintain good hygiene, and relax in comfort and safety – all things Giraud cited as leading to much better job retention.



Mayor Muriel Bowser, Friendship Place President and CEO Jean-Michel Giraud and D.C. Department of Human Services Director Laura Zeilinger. Photo courtesy of Friendship Place

One current Family Connect participant, who asked to remain anonymous to protect the privacy of her family members, described her life as changing “drastically” since contacting Friendship Place before Christmas last year. She lost her job and was forced to move into her boyfriend’s grandfather’s one-bedroom apartment with their three children. Her boyfriend was also struggling to find employment because of his criminal record. Friendship Place helped the family pay the security deposit on a two-bedroom apartment, where they were able to move before the holidays.

“The children’s behavior has gotten a lot better because we didn’t have a structured environment before,” she said. The extra space in their new apartment has made a huge difference, she added, because the couple and their children now have bedrooms to themselves.

The program participant's husband is now employed, and Family Connect is working with her to find employment. Family Connect sends out applications for its participants to partner organizations. It also holds practice interviews, helps participants obtain interview attire, teaches computer skills and shows participants how to apply for jobs online.

Amazon surprised Friendship Place with its donation last April, on the condition Friendship Place would match it within six months. It did. The Family Connect model was then designed using strategies Friendship Place already had experience with, such as rapid re-housing, a program that places individuals and families experiencing homelessness in apartments and subsidizes the cost of rent for four months to a year, and Employment First, a program originally instituted by former District Mayor Vincent Gray that prioritizes helping working-age youth and adults gain employment.

"We assume employability," Giraud said. "Everybody has a skill set that they can get paid for, and we help the person get in touch with that skill set."

Family Connect also helps families with children over 18, whether the children live with their parents or not. The District government does not provide these services. The program also serves multi-generational households, diverting young families away from shelters and public housing by helping to make it possible for them to live with their parents or grandparents.

[Read more: [Family homelessness drops by 20 percent from 2017 to 2018](https://www.streetsensemedia.org/article/dc-homeless-housing-budget-2019-pit-count-spending-data/#.WvxN0qQvxD4)

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Family Connect is working with 34 families and has graduated seven others who have achieved stability. Because the 115-day program length is relatively short compared with D.C.'s rapid re-housing program, which provides support for between four months and a year, Giraud said Friendship Place is prepared to step in and help a family get back on track if they begin to struggle again after they graduate from the program.

"It's a bit like relapse and recovery," Giraud said. "We've never been about that at Friendship Place, letting people unravel all the way down because of some rule, some rigidity. Our system is not rigid. It's flexible."

Friendship Place estimates it has the funds to help approximately 70 families per year for two years. Giraud expressed his gratitude to Amazon for its contribution and is hopeful the partnership will continue. Friendship Place has also been in talks with representatives from the Department of Human Services about the possibility of obtaining government funding for Family Connect.

The Family Connect participant said she is incredibly grateful for the help Friendship Place and Family Connect has provided her family over the past few months. She recalled fondly the time an employee at Friendship Place gave her family a turkey to take home over the holiday season.

“They just truly want to help,” she said. “You can really tell that they are genuine people, and they really care about your well-being. I really appreciate that. It’s inspired me to want to help someone myself, in any way that I can.”

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