

## Helping families before they become homeless



Myisha Rawlings, 27, of Suitland, Md., is a single mother and a mail carrier. She was helped by a new program called Family Connect, which is helping to alleviate family homelessness in the Washington area. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

by [Tara Bahrapour](#) February 23 [✉Email the author](#)

When Myisha Rawlings returned home last summer after giving birth to her son, Carter, she was greeted not with balloons and casseroles but with an eviction notice.

Rawlings, 27 and single, had to stop working as a mail carrier when she was seven months pregnant because the work was too strenuous, causing her income to dry up for a couple of months. By the time Carter was born, she was behind on the rent on her two-bedroom apartment. She was also dealing with postpartum depression.

“I didn’t know what I was going to do,” said Rawlings, who lives in Suitland, Md., and said she does not have much family support. She hated the idea of taking the baby, her first child, to live with friends, where his crying might disturb them. “I just want us to have a home for us; I don’t want to be in somebody’s way,” she said. “I was hurt, I was scared, a lot of emotions at one time that I couldn’t deal with.”

Rawlings didn’t lose her home. Instead, she got help from a new initiative called Family Connect that is taking aim at the region’s

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/helping-families-before-they-become-homeless/2018/02/23/ad457e26-129e-11e8-8ea1-c1d91fccc3fe\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3165](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/helping-families-before-they-become-homeless/2018/02/23/ad457e26-129e-11e8-8ea1-c1d91fccc3fe_story.html?utm_term=.3165)

escalating family homelessness crisis. Launched in September, the program is run by Friendship Place, a 27-year-old nonprofit group that focuses on homelessness in the Washington area, and is privately funded with a \$1 million matching grant from Amazon, which has supported similar initiatives in other U.S. cities. (Jeffrey P. Bezos, owner of The Washington Post, is founder and chief executive of Amazon.)

Homelessness among families has gone down in many area counties in recent years. But in the District, it rose by 23 percent between 2013 and 2017 as housing prices have escalated, according to a report by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

Family Connect focuses in particular on families who are facing imminent homelessness or who have recently become homeless, by paying back rent and also helping with needs — such as child care, food, storage unit costs, car repairs, and job training and placement — to get them to a point where they can support themselves. So far, the program has helped 36 families and “graduated” five, which means they no longer need help. The majority are headed by parents who are 29 or younger.

“We have been able to stop the eviction process in as little as 24 hours, by calling the management company and offering to pay back rent,” said Jean-Michel Giraud, Friendship Place’s president and chief executive.

Often, he said, the families are days away from being evicted.

“To be able to intervene quickly is absolutely essential,” he said, adding that it is easier to help a family stay in housing than find new homes after becoming homeless.

The organization also helps recently evicted families. In such situations, the sooner the assistance, the better, Giraud said.

“If you let the family fall into chronic homelessness then the rebuild is going to be more difficult,” he said.

The average amount spent on a family for rental assistance is just under \$5,000, and their average stay in the program is just over four months.

Family Connect “really is a good complement to what we’re doing,” said Laura Zeilinger, director of the District’s Department of Human Services. “This isn’t something government can solve alone.”

The program’s ability to help people across different jurisdictions and to serve families whose children are no longer minors give the nonprofit group extra nimbleness, she said, adding that in 2016 and 2017 the District has begun to reverse the uptick in family homelessness by introducing more preventive measures similar to what Family Connect offers and increasing access to shelters, where they can get help stabilizing their lives.

[A place where they can take their shoes off and say ‘I’m home’]

For Precious Middleton, 36, of Landover, Md., the program stepped in after she moved here from Kentucky to follow a job in human resources. The job ended after her boss suddenly died, and she tried to cobble together enough work, unemployment payments, and food stamps to support herself and her 13-year-old daughter, Ralijah.

But within a few months she had fallen behind, and one Thursday she got a call saying she would be evicted the following Monday. “I was frantic,” she said. “I told my daughter to take all of our belongings out of the cabinet and to throw stuff away — food, canned goods. Because I knew that I didn’t have the money between now and [Monday] morning.”

She tried several organizations, which said they could not help her because she had some income. She even called a homeless shelter, but was told she had to already be on the street to qualify for residence. Then she remembered that she had interviewed for a job with Friendship Place, based in Northwest Washington. It occurred to her that she was just the kind of person they might help.

She called, and on Friday the organization called her to get the details of her situation. “Then I got a call saying they had a check for me for the rental office,” she said. Middleton and her daughter got to stay in their apartment, and the organization is also paying for her to get trained for a certification in human resources management, which she said will open up new job opportunities for her.

Her daughter was happy, too. “She invited her friends back over and we just felt a sense of relief between the two of us.” Family Connect also paid Rawlings’s back rent within a couple of days, helped her find a day care for Carter near her house and paid for the first few months of it.

She is back at work now, driving her truck in her mail-carrier uniform and a gray knit hat with rhinestone cat ears that she got at a thrift shop for 40 cents. By next month, she expects to be fully supporting herself.

“It’s a sense of security. I know I’m going to be here every day and I’m going to get my check and I can do something for my child on my own. It’s a good feeling,” she said.

Tara Bahrapour, a staff writer based in Washington, D.C., writes about aging, generations and demography. She has also covered immigration and education and has reported from the Middle East and North Africa, and from the republic of Georgia. 🐦 Follow @TaraBahrapour

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