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# How Seattle Credit Union is helping the homeless during coronavirus

By Melissa Angell

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Millions of Americans have received their relief payments from the government, but one population faces considerably more obstacles in accessing these monies — the homeless.

Seattle Credit Union is looking to change that.

In partnership with the Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness, the credit union launched an initiative in March to help bank the homeless and ensure they receive their relief payments.

The goal is to get these individuals into the mainstream banking system in hopes of them becoming long-term members of the institution.

"That's the immediate thing: It provides a way for people to safely receive and use the money that they're entitled to through the economic impact payment, but I think more important than that is the long-term potential," said Maureen Howard, a volunteer at the Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness and a principal at Maureen Howard Consulting. "I think it provides a way for people to come into the ordinary banking system and once you're in, now you've got options."

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Congress. That means it has the third largest homeless population in the U.S., according to the report.

## Regions with the largest populations experiencing homelessness

Region	Total people experiencing homelessness
New York City	78,604
Los Angeles city & county	56,257
Seattle & King County, Wash.	11,199
San Jose, Santa Clara city & county, Calif.	9,706
San Diego city & county	8,102

Source: The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress

Seattle Credit Union, formerly known as Seattle Metropolitan Credit Union, is encouraging these individuals to apply to open a checking account. It will even pay the required \$5 fee to join the institution, if the person is unable to cover the cost.

Once the account is set up, these new members can visit the Internal Revenue Service's website to use the non-filer portal and request stimulus payments to be issued through direct deposit.

The credit union's field of membership covers the state of Washington so anyone experiencing homelessness there is eligible. So far, 70 people have become members of the institution through the initiative.

This is the first time the credit union has reached out to individuals dealing with homelessness to help them get banking services, though management has considered it in the past.

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Those experiencing homelessness face a host of barriers to entering the traditional banking sector. They may not have a Social Security number, could lack the knowledge of how to use the banking system or may not even feel welcome, according to Howard.

"If you're constantly moving or either experiencing sheltered homelessness or in a shelter, you may not be able to secure valuables, identifications and things of that nature," said Marcella Maguire, director of health systems integration at the Corporation for Supportive Housing.

"People experiencing homelessness commonly lose their identification, and it costs money to get identification so I think that's a really difficult challenge."

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Many homeless individuals also lack a permanent address, which is required in Washington to join a financial institution. Seattle Credit Union was able to meet this regulation by allowing members to use a family member's address when opening the account.

The credit union is working with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services to explore changing the requirement.

To reach members eligible for the program, Seattle CU has mostly used word of mouth for advertising. Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness along with another nonprofit, New Connections, have reached out to shelters to let them know about the program.

Still, some of these individuals who join the credit union may take more time to cultivate a long-

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The specific services offered for each of these accounts varies by person and their banking history, said Ziquora Banks, the credit union's assistant vice president of strategic partnerships and diversity, equity and inclusion. Some accounts may have overdraft protection while others may go straight into a free checking account, for example.

Still, there's nothing stopping someone from opening an account, collecting their stimulus payment and then ending their banking relationship.

The credit union hopes that won't be the case, but conceded that if a new member wants to do one transaction and end the relationship, then that's fine too.

"Know that people have to struggle each day with immediate basic needs: what am I eating today, where am I getting food, where am I getting shelter, where am I getting shoes and clothing and things like that — and so they may not even be aware that the stimulus payments are out there and that it's something that they're entitled to," said Maguire.

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