

Bezos \$100 million housing fund benefits Simpson Housing Services

By Neal St. Anthony

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Simpson Housing Services, the 35-year-old nonprofit that shelters the homeless and works with them on permanent housing and financial stability, has received its largest private donation ever, as part of a \$97.5 million national housing initiative by billionaire Jeff Bezos.

The Amazon founder donated \$2.5 million to Simpson to expand its family-housing program.

Jeff and MacKenzie Bezos announced a donation of \$97.5 million to 24 nonprofits in late November, that was made at the same time Bezos was being criticized for negotiating large public subsidies to locate regional headquarters for Amazon in New York and the Washington D.C. area.

The CEO of Simpson Housing, which works with hundreds of families annually on a \$7.3 million budget, said it was grateful for the Bezos philanthropy.

“This support from the [Bezos] Day One Families Fund will increase our capacity to end homelessness for more families and deepen our impact with each family by increasing the reach of our education support programming, which targets the end of generational homelessness,” said Executive Director Steve Horsfield.

Simpson Housing this year will work with 300-plus families, including 650 children who are homeless during at least part of the year. Simpson Housing is one of the nonprofits delivering services and coordinating the move of dozens of people from the homeless encampment along Hiawatha Avenue,

Simpson focuses on long-term housing stability, individualized case management, and connecting families to resources and services such as employment, healthcare, and educational support for children, including tutoring and mentoring through staff and volunteers.

Bezos, considered America's wealthiest capitalist, announced in September that he's dedicating half of his new \$2 billion Bezos Day One Fund to create schools nationwide for children under 5 years old, as well as housing in low-income neighborhoods.

Bezos is worth more than \$150 billion in the stock of Amazon, which he founded in the 1990s.

Bezos also has donated to homeless solutions in Seattle, Amazon's hometown.

Some have criticized Bezos for not giving enough, particularly since some Amazon warehouse workers qualify for government food stamps, and other public assistance.

Bezos told *Business Insider* this year that he is interested in addressing transient homelessness and helping people without family or a support system.

"You only have to help them for six to nine months," Bezos told B.I. "You get them trained. You get them a job. They are perfectly productive members of society."

Bezos is also the only American in Bloomberg's ranking of the five richest people in the world not joining the Giving Pledge, which people sign to commit a majority of their fortune to charity. Those include Warren Buffett, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and Netflix CEO Reed Hastings. Some philanthropic billionaires, including Gates, didn't get deeply involved in philanthropy until they had stepped away from their companies. Bezos, 54, is still building Amazon.

Minnesota's biggest private foundations include that of Richard Schulze, the founder of Best Buy. Schulze, 77, in 2013 pledged to give away about half his net worth over time.

"I get such tremendous satisfaction from the contributions given," Schulze told the Star Tribune in 2015.

"My goal is to offer up to \$1 billion of my wealth, hopefully to be distributed for the common good. We're on the road to doing that."

The foundation will distribute \$40 million-plus this year, 10 times the amount of 2012. It donates up to 15 percent of its growing assets, compared with 5 percent required by law.

The Schulze foundation focuses on education, health, human services and “transformational ideas.”

It gives seed money to leverage other donations for major capital projects, such the \$100 million Dorothy Day Center for housing and training, operated by Catholic Charities in St. Paul.

Other beneficiaries in recent years include scholarship funds, the Twin Cities YMCA, Simpson Housing, Beacon Interfaith Housing, Our Saviour’s Lutheran Community Services and Project for Pride in Living.

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