



City of Seattle
Mayor Edward B. Murray

December 19, 2014

Dear Members of the Emergency Task Force on Unsheltered Homelessness,

First of all, let me reiterate my gratitude for your work. I know many of you spend a significant amount of time working on this complicated and difficult topic. In asking you to join this effort, I brought together a group of dedicated and thoughtful people to bring positive impact to the lives of our fellow men, women, and youth currently living on Seattle's streets. The number of people living without shelter in Seattle has increased by 30 percent since 2010, and they need and deserve the attention of our entire community. As we enter into the New Year and the cold of winter, I am committed to both short-term action that will offer immediate relief to those living outside, as well as long-term strategies that will seek to address the many causes of homelessness.

As you know, the City is pursuing a three-pronged approach to address housing and homelessness in our city:

- Your recommendations, which I received on December 15, 2014, to offer quickly implementable solutions for unsheltered homeless individuals;
- A report due in March 2015 from the Human Services Department (HSD) evaluating the City's investments in homelessness services and interventions—nearly \$37 million in total—with recommendations on better aligning our efforts with national best practices; and
- Recommendations due in May 2015 from the Housing Affordability & Livability Advisory Committee for creating more permanent, affordable housing options across the income spectrum, including housing for homeless or formerly homeless people.

Homelessness is a massive societal challenge created from a broad number of other societal challenges, including the growth of poverty. The fact is, even if our criminal justice, mental health and substance abuse, foster care, and safety net systems were fully funded, we still would not possess a complete answer to the challenge of our fellow brothers and sisters living among us without shelter. But the dramatic erosion of state and federal investments in these systems has only compounded this challenge and created a full-blown crisis. I know that this situation will require efforts across all jurisdictions in order to truly address the level of profound human need that currently exists in Seattle's streets.

I have had the opportunity to further review your recommendations and want to offer my appreciation for the thoughtfulness you put into meeting the challenge I set before you. While I will not be implementing all of your recommendations, I will move forward on a significant number of them.

Shelter Expansion

The City currently funds 1,724 shelter beds in Seattle. We know that shelters work in moving people past moments of personal crisis—roughly half of all individuals who use emergency shelter for a short duration of time are able to exit homelessness to some form of permanent housing. More often than not, shelter is the appropriate intervention and each shelter bed is typically used by 6 individuals in the course of one year. Despite the current capacity and the City's high level of funding toward these interventions, we know it is simply not enough. I believe that the current shelter system can be assessed for better efficiencies and management so that individual users are able to move out of homelessness as rapidly as possible. But in the short-term, I also know that we simply need more options for those who are living on the streets. Thus, I am committing to expanding shelter capacity by 150 beds in early 2015, with some of those beds coming on line as quickly as January. In order to do so, I will explore sites for expansion of current shelters, as well as options for new shelter sites, including use of existing City surplus facilities. Over the course of one year, these 150 beds will be able to serve 700-800 individuals in need of shelter.

Part of your recommendations for City facilities included use of community centers for emergency shelter. While I appreciate the spirit of this recommendation, I have reservations about this policy direction for the City. Seattle voters just this year passed a Parks District ballot measure with a strong message of support for addressing the need for ongoing maintenance and operating support of our parks and community centers. Additionally, Seattle is experiencing many crises at once—increased poverty particularly for children and seniors, violence in our community, abysmal graduation rates for our students of color, to name some of the most significant. All of these issues compound our need to activate our community centers from early morning into late night, including the potential use of space for classrooms to house the City's voter-approved preschool program, in order to offer alternatives and opportunities to address some of these critical issues. I believe that tasking our community centers with housing emergency shelters could be counter-productive to their charge to program and operate more effectively as accessible and supportive spaces that meet the needs of all members of our community. We should not pit the competing needs of some of our most vulnerable people against one another. However, I strongly believe that we should identify ways to better leverage City assets for shelter and I am very open to evaluating other surplus facilities owned by the City, and have charged my staff to locate all possible options for repurposing City resources in this way.

One of your proposals addressed the need to expand options for young people who are homeless. We know that youth who are homeless are at extremely high risk of unsafe and unstable situations and, if we do not intervene, are especially in jeopardy of becoming chronically homeless. With hundreds of homeless youth in our city and only 65 dedicated young adult shelter beds in Seattle, I believe that offering more alternatives for these young people is of the utmost importance. As part of the shelter beds I will add next year, I am committing at least 15 to be dedicated to homeless young adults in a new facility.

Encampments

Our focus on solutions for people who are homeless should be a roof-over-head and services to connect individuals with a pathway toward long-term housing. I've heard from our federal partners that encampments are not a sustainable solution to this issue and that without significant outreach or navigation services, people will struggle to find their way to housing. Having said that, I also recognize that our current system does not have the capacity to shelter everyone in need. I understand that encampments offer a sense of community and safety to people and that they are often the only place to go for homeless couples with pets. In recent months, more illegal

encampments have popped up on our streets and sidewalks than ever before and the need for alternative spaces has grown immensely. With this in mind, I am committing to the following.

In January, I will send to City Council a proposed ordinance to make a limited number of unused, vacant lots on private and public land in non-residential areas available for authorized encampments, not including City parks. My ordinance will build off of legislation proposed by Councilmember Nick Licata last year, but I strongly believe this policy should be linked to robust service provision focused on moving people quickly into shelter or more permanent housing.

First, services ought to be offered to all individuals living in encampments to ensure that individuals are connected with resources that provide a pathway to housing. To this end, I will propose committing two case managers to be contracted through HSD to act as service providers to individuals living in authorized encampments on public lands, but who will also be available to provide outreach to those authorized encampments existing on religious property.

Second, any organization that acts as the encampment operator should collect data regarding clients similar to our expectations for publicly-funded shelters, hygiene and day centers, and outreach services through the City's homeless management information system. I believe that good policy comes from good data and without this information related to the use of encampments, we are not able to evaluate the effectiveness of these options as short-term crisis response intervention strategies, which we all agree they are.

Third, funding should be available to defray the costs of organized encampments, such as utilities and supplies, on the condition that those operations meet the requirements set forth for service provision and data collection. I believe that legal encampments can be a part of the continuum in our crisis response system, but ultimately they are not a long-term solution to homelessness and nor should we establish them as such on public lands.

Process Improvements

Additionally, you recommended proposals to streamline the shelter permitting process with our Department of Planning and Development (DPD) and to create a toolkit for churches and private owners and organizations to add capacity to this system. I will direct DPD to evaluate and assess their process and requirements associated with new shelters in order to identify efficiencies and areas for improvement. I will also direct HSD to create a toolkit to help faith-based and non-profit organizations host shelters or encampments by providing information and resources to simplify navigating expectations and requirements of doing so. As part of this toolkit, I will offer a mitigation fund that organizations can apply for to assist with provisions for shelter space in their facilities.

I have also identified a need within HSD to find capacity to assist with better coordination of encampment siting and services. I will direct my staff to explore options to best meet the challenge of supporting authorized encampments through their processes and moves so that we can offer assistance to plan for potential new sites, coordinate services, and improve neighborhood notification.

With the help of the City Council, I believe that we can make some immediate impacts early in the New Year, and we will continue to work on additional long-term strategies to address the upstream causes of homelessness.

As Co-Chair of the Governing Board of the Committee to End Homelessness (CEH), I plan to work diligently with our regional partners at King County, suburban cities, and our state and federal partners to address this issue. In the coming months, I will work with the other members of CEH to pursue regional solutions, to restructure the governance model of CEH toward more effective decision-making, and to refine the next strategic plan to address this issue on a County-wide level. I believe we must coordinate more efficiently across jurisdictions so that we can find solutions to this crisis, which does not stop at our city boundaries.

As you know, January will bring the yearly One Night Count. While I would hope that some of the new investments and rapid efforts on behalf of the City of Seattle might have an impact on the 2015 count, I anticipate that the number will actually have increased since last year due to the impacts of the root causes of poverty that I have outlined above. I believe that this number will act as a challenge to all of us—to officials at all levels of government, to our service provider network, and to our advocate community. We must critically evaluate the question of why our generous resources and existing services have not changed outcomes for those in need. We must work together toward answering this charge.

Finally, I want to thank Deputy Mayor Hyeok Kim for chairing this task force and my City staff, who have worked to support this process with technical assistance and who will be implementing these efforts moving forward. I also want to thank Alice Shobe, Executive Director of Building Changes, and her staff for providing in-kind facilitation services to shepherd the process of the task force through to completion. It is due to the hard work of everyone involved that I believe we can make significant strides on this issue immediately and in the long-term.

Sincerely,



Edward B. Murray
Mayor