

# Seattle's rapid response to shelter the homeless in cold emergency should be the norm

By

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On a crisp, bright winter morning, looking out from the top of Starbucks' headquarters just south of Seattle, it's easy to see how our glistening Emerald City earned its name.

Each week, hundreds of tech pioneers, biotech geniuses, respected academics and diverse professionals seek success in a city that has produced some of the great enterprises of the world. A skyline full of swinging construction cranes shows that the innovative spirit and skilled labor that created modern Seattle are alive and well.

But take the elevator downstairs and walk outside on the streets of Seattle, and the daily scene is a shock to the senses. Iconic images of the Space Needle, Mount Rainier and the Monorail are subsumed by discarded needles, illegal tent encampments and broken RVs. Here in Sodo, the small business owners courageous enough to remain fight daily for civility on their sidewalks and have largely given up on city promises to address persistent, unchecked criminal behavior.

Many believe the lawlessness and despair in Sodo are the future of our hometown. But as we have recently seen, it doesn't have to be that way.

The recent severe weather tragically cost lives due to exposure, but it also brought unprecedented action and compassion by city officials who protected the lives of the most vulnerable. Throughout our region, experts conservatively estimate that there are [hundreds of](#)

[unsheltered families with young children](#) and babies sleeping in cars and trailers.

For many, they are an afterthought because we don't often see them in downtown Seattle. But for them, a severe winter storm can bring death, not just deprivation and desperation. The practice by previous Seattle government leaders during weather crises was to open emergency shelters that allow only adults. Families with children under 18 were not welcome. Desperate women with children were directed to the cities of Kent or Renton that welcomed them, or Mary's Place, which would overflow beyond capacity.

Last week, that changed, and it likely saved lives. Thanks to the deliberate decision made by Mayor Jenny Durkan's administration, families were finally welcomed inside from the bitter cold and snow. They took critical action to open a safe place for families at the Garfield Community Center. Instead of freezing in a car, children had access to coats, stuffed animals, hot meals and a warm bed. The heroic efforts by our leaders, shelters such as Mary's Place and employers such as Vulcan created something that we have long hoped for: for at least a few desperate nights, no child in Seattle had to sleep outside.

Frustrated taxpayers, take notice. Your mayor and city worked for the most vulnerable when it mattered. The recent severe weather mobilization by the city, providers, small and large employers, and hundreds of volunteers showed that Seattle can work to solve the family homeless crisis.

And the good news does not stop there. Every day and night across our region, quiet miracles are performed for unsheltered moms, dads and kids by the United Way of King County, Mary's Place, Wellspring and many other responsible providers supported by the employer community. The Union Gospel Mission continues an 85-year-long tradition of bringing comfort and hope to thousands of homeless each night. Navigation Teams and the Seattle Police Department are engaging 24/7 to save lives in a county with great compassion but perhaps not enough appreciation for its public servants.

We need to act with the same urgency at 40 degrees as we did when it was 20 degrees. Tonight, hundreds of babies are back sleeping in cars around King County because there are not enough safe places for them. If a society is judged on how we treat our most vulnerable, we still have a lot of work to do, fast. Together, we can:

- Act on the spending reform recommendations from the [2016 city-funded Poppe Report](#).
- Direct diversion assistance and affordable housing first to vulnerable families.
- Support the employer- and citizen-led [No Child Sleeps Outside](#) campaign, which has helped hundreds of unsheltered families find a home.
- Elect city council members who share the mayor's focus on solving the unsheltered family crisis.
- Be the voice of these tired, desperate moms, dads and babies who do not have the means to show up and advocate for themselves before city or county officials.

These steps and more are on the agenda of the first Family Service Provider Convening of experts, funders and employers at the Starbucks Support Center. We met this week knowing that change is possible and our unsheltered family crisis is solvable.

We can be the Emerald City again when no child sleeps outside.