

TRAFFIC ALERT

Expect closures, delays as repaving work on southbound I-5 begins this week

The tents will not go away until the state helps fund services

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Tents housing homeless individuals are pitched just a few feet from Interstate 90 in Seattle. (AP Photo / Elaine Thompson, 2017)

By [Jonathan Sposato](#) and [Karen Marcotte-Solimano](#)

Special to The Times

Whether you loved KOMO-TV's "Seattle Is Dying" piece on the homeless or hated it, it's clear that we have major challenges in our community that need to be addressed:

- Rents have risen 43% in Seattle since 2009, and wages have not kept pace — especially for those earning smaller incomes to begin with.
- People suffering with serious mental-health problems often have fewer options — there are just 729 public psychiatric beds in all of Washington (a 40% decrease in less than a decade), and substance-abuse treatment is difficult to access.
- For every 100 households with the smallest incomes, there are only 29 homes in Washington state that are available.

These challenges have resulted in an estimated 12,000 people experiencing homelessness in King County each night, and a total of 30,000 over the course of the year. This is unacceptable, and we think it can change.

Every day we are inspired by the generosity and compassion of people in our community who want to help address our homelessness crisis. They know that Seattle is booming — not dying — but that last year a record number of people experiencing homelessness died on our streets. Without adequate shelter, housing and behavioral health resources, the most vulnerable in our community have nowhere to turn. The trauma of homelessness can often lead to substance abuse and addictions that make it even harder to exit homelessness.

We don't like seeing tents along our freeways, needles in our parks and people sleeping in our shop doorways. It shouldn't be this way. But you can't just tell them to go away or arrest them for having no place to go — jail is not the solution. It's time to step up for our homeless neighbors and build a healthier, safer community for all.

We are raising money and investing in proven solutions to the homelessness crisis — eviction prevention, diversion and employment programs for those who are homeless. As business leaders, we understand that this funding needs to be spent effectively and efficiently. That's why we've partnered with the city of Seattle and King County on performance-based contracts. Together, we are helping thousands exit homelessness every year — but philanthropy and local government can't do this alone.

If we want to see a visible difference in the homelessness problem, we need to significantly increase public funding for housing and behavioral-health services. That may not be the answer you want to hear, but it's the truth. We also need to hold government accountable for effectively using those dollars to help people move off the streets into housing and services when needed.

Do you have something to say?

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The Washington state Legislature has the opportunity to take action now to increase funding to address homelessness and improve our behavioral-health system. We think the House budget is a step in the right direction and urge both houses of the Legislature and Gov. Jay Inslee to make even bolder investments.

- **Prevent homelessness by supporting eviction reform:** Evictions are a leading cause of homelessness and disproportionately impact people of color. The bipartisan Senate Bill 5600 would increase the time tenants have to “pay or vacate” and create a risk-mitigation fund for landlords.
- **Invest \$69 million in the Housing & Essential Needs Program:** The program helps Washingtonians with a serious mental-health or physical disability keep their homes while they address their disability.
- **Build affordable housing:** By investing \$200 million in the Housing Trust Fund, we can leverage federal dollars, bring jobs and income to local communities and ensure affordable housing is available to all who need it.
- **Improve our mental-health system:** \$91 million to increase community behavioral health beds and services that will help low income people — housed and unhoused.

These are active proposals on the table today, which frankly are just a start but demonstrate that business leaders, philanthropists, voters and caring neighbors can come together to address our homelessness crisis. Everyone can play a role. Please join us.

Jonathan Sposato is the chairman and co-founder of *Geekwire.com*, and co-chair of *United Way of King County's* fundraising campaign.

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