

# King County councilmember proposes spending \$1 million to bus homeless people out of the region

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Metropolitan King County Councilmember Reagan Dunn says there's a substantial number of people who would take advantage of a Greyhound ticket as... (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times) **More** ▾


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Seattle Times staff reporters

King County would spend \$1 million on bus tickets for homeless people who want to reconnect with family or close friends in other states, away from Seattle, under a new proposal County Councilmember Reagan Dunn unveiled Monday.

Modeled after similar programs in a smattering of cities around the country, the program — which would still need county council approval — would be a one- or two-year pilot aimed at helping people who have someone in another community willing and able to take them in but just can’t find a way to get there.

Such busing programs, in place since at least the 1980s in some places, have had varying degrees of success: They can be an inexpensive way to connect people with housing but they can also lead to vulnerable people being sent to unfamiliar environments with no guarantee of permanent — or even better — housing.

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Dunn pointed to [King County’s annual homelessness count](#) to argue that there’s a substantial number of people who would take advantage of a Greyhound ticket as a way out of homelessness.

That [survey found that 9% of respondents](#) said “family reunification” was one piece of support that they needed to obtain permanent housing. That was near the bottom of the list of what homeless people said they needed, trailing obvious answers like rental assistance and increased income as well as things like a new ID and help clearing credit history.

But still, in a county with more than 11,000 people dealing with homelessness during this year’s one-night count, 9% is 1,000 people, Dunn argued.

“It’s inherently controversial, but it’s the kind of discussion our community isn’t having and we need to have it,” Dunn said in an interview. “Folks will say you’re just busing away the homeless population, but if you look a little deeper, you realize it’s family reunification.”

King County Executive Dow Constantine offered a tepid reaction to Dunn’s proposal.

“This kind of program is already being funded by King County,” Alex Fryer, a Constantine spokesman, said. “Councilmember Dunn is welcome to propose to increase the budget and convince his colleagues to support him.”

Dunn’s proposal comes a week after he came out as [a vocal opponent](#) of Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan and Constantine’s plans to consolidate the region’s fragmented homelessness services into one regional authority, an effort to streamline services and, hopefully, get more people off the streets. Some county elected officials still have questions about the plan details, but the concept has fairly broad support across the region.

King County Councilmember Jeanne Kohl-Welles said Tuesday Dunn’s engagement with the regional plan was helpful but added, “I wish he would have done it earlier.”

She expressed skepticism about the idea that a large number of people were coming to King County from across the country to receive homelessness services, but said she was “pleased” to look into Dunn’s proposal.

Dunn said he had not yet consulted with his fellow council members to gauge their interest in his plan.

The county’s homelessness count found that the vast majority (84%) of King County homeless residents were already living here when they lost housing, but that more than half (54%) may have family somewhere else, having lived here less than 10 years.

Both Seattle and King County use diversion, a onetime financial assistance strategy that can go to things like bus and airline tickets, to prevent homelessness.

King County currently spends about \$37,000 across five different programs on transportation for homeless individuals trying to reunite with families, Dunn said.

Lauren McGowan, a senior director at United Way of King County, said the organization doesn’t see the need for spending as much as Dunn proposes and has “deep levels of concern” about promoting it.

“It perpetuates a narrative that people experiencing homelessness should leave our community, that they are not from here, that they are not welcome here,” McGowan said. “The reality is that the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness in our region are from this community.”

United Way spends about \$2 million annually on diversion programs to help people out of homelessness. Less than 2% of that — about \$35,000 — is used for things like bus tickets and last year bought transportation for 116 people, McGowan said.

A [2017 investigation by The Guardian](#) found communities across the country have been buying bus, train and plane tickets for homeless residents for years. For instance, of the 7,000 people San Francisco claimed to have helped out of homelessness from 2013 to 2016, half were given a bus ticket.

There’s no guarantee that people end up finding permanent housing after their journey. Seattle received 54 people in 2016 from other western cities and counties that had paid for their homeless residents to move elsewhere, according to The Guardian.

The legislation Dunn introduced is fairly bare-bones: It calls for the funding and for a pilot period to evaluate if the program is working. He said the council could fill in details, including what sort of due diligence the county would do to ensure people have somewhere to live on the other end.

Dunn also announced separate proposals to create a special homelessness outreach team focused on Metro transit facilities and to create a system that would notify prescribing doctors when one of their patients dies of an opioid overdose.

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