



By [Sydney Brownstone](#)

*Seattle Times staff reporter*

An idea to spend \$100,000 to reunite homeless people with family by transporting them out of town made it into next year's King County budget – but already, at least one county council member regrets voting for the measure.

King County and Seattle already spend some money to transport homeless people to their family and friends who live outside the region. The budget item, passed on Wednesday, more than triples the county's current allocation of funding for bus tickets and other modes of transportation.

County Councilmember Reagan Dunn first proposed the idea in September after pushing back on an ongoing plan to merge King County and Seattle homeless services into a single regional authority.

Dunn slammed the regional governance authority as “pushing Seattle’s failed policies to the surrounding region.” He then proposed a [\\$1 million program to bus the homeless out of the region to reunite with family](#).



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His original plan earned skepticism from some of his colleagues. But at a budget meeting last week, the council overwhelmingly approved what Dunn referred to as a “stop-gap”: an additional \$100,000 for existing programs that aim to reunite people experiencing homelessness with family out of town.

“The reason I agreed to put it in there was because it seemed important to me,” explained budget writer and Councilmember Claudia Balducci during the meeting. Balducci said that after checking in with the King County Executive’s office, which supported the idea, she thought it made sense to give more people the option of reuniting with family outside the county if that’s what they wanted.

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King County already spends an estimated \$37,000 on family reunification across five programs that include bus tickets out of town. The additional \$100,000 wouldn't create a new program, but augment existing ones — as well as require a reporting mechanism to the county council a year out about where people end up after six months and whether they remain housed.

San Diego, San Francisco and Portland spend more money on similar programs.

However, Councilmember Jeanne Kohl-Welles, who voted for the measure, now has buyer's remorse.

She feels the budget addition has fueled a narrative that undermines her work on the regional homelessness authority.

“What went from the vote on a late amendment that had to do with family reunification, and to really have a study done on this to see if it can be helpful, went right back into the fray of attacking Seattle,” Kohl-Welles said.

Dunn said that the budget add was an important interim measure while the county studies how to implement his original idea, which he has called Homeward Bound, mirroring the names of similar programs in other cities.

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“It's important to note that this isn't intended to be a cure-all solution,” Dunn said in a statement. “This is just one way to help folks who need a leg up. At a time when the regional homelessness crisis hasn't shown any marked improvement, it's critical that we have all potential options to help on the table.”

It's unclear, however, how well busing people out of the county actually works and how many people return.

Nine percent of respondents surveyed as part of King County's 2019 homeless one-night count said that family reunification was needed to obtain permanent housing. Dunn [quoted this statistic](#) as part of his argument for the Homeward Bound program.

The one-night count also found that 84% of people surveyed said they had been living in King County before they became homeless.

Lauren McGowan, senior director for ending homelessness and poverty at United Way of King County, said she believed the \$100,000 should instead be going to something called a centralized diversion fund – a mechanism that allows flexible, onetime funding to keep people out of the homelessness-services system. Diversion can fund things like bus tickets, if that's what people need, as well as deposits on apartments, or help with transportation to a new job.

“Starting a separate program with \$100,000 doesn't feel like a regional response that's embedded in and informed by data and would have the most impact,” McGowan said.

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Of her organization's \$2 million diversion fund, for example, McGowan said only \$35,000 went to bus tickets.

Steve Berg, vice president for programs and policy at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, said a bus ticket family reunification program's success depends on how it's implemented.

"This is one tool among many that communities have," Berg said. "And I think it's like a lot of the tools to deal with homelessness: If it's done well, it can be really helpful, and if it's done poorly it can be harmful."

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Portland and Multnomah County spend about \$200,000 a year on transportation to reunite people experiencing homelessness with family, less than a percentage point of their \$70 million homelessness budget. Between July 1, 2018 and June 30 of this year, 383 people received a bus, plane or train ticket out of town.

Portland and Multnomah County follow up at three months to see how a person has landed, but only 41% responded this last fiscal year. Of those who did, 58% remained housed.

San Francisco, which spends \$1.2 million on its own Homeward Bound program out of a \$285 million homelessness budget, credits the program with half the city's "exits" out of homelessness. A [San Francisco Chronicle investigation](#) published earlier this year found that out of 262 Homeward Bound exits in a year, 57% were considered a success.

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