

Opinion

Four critical steps to tackle homelessness



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Unless improvements are made, the system we use to help the homeless will remain ineffective and thousands of our neighbors will continue suffering on the streets, in their cars and under bridges. Some will do more than suffer: They will not survive.

By [Peter Orser](#) and [Jon Fine](#)

Special to The Times

A growing frustration over the fragmented response to homelessness was captured in a recent Seattle Times news story [[“In King County’s fragmented homelessness system, calls for a change,”](#) Page One, April 23.] The article suggests as long as All Home, King County’s coordinating agency for homelessness services, lacks any real decision-making power over where and how taxpayer money is spent, the system will remain

ineffective and thousands of our neighbors will continue suffering on the streets, in their cars and under bridges. Some will do more than suffer: They will not survive.

At United Way, we couldn't agree more that something has to change if we're going to solve this crisis. That starts with accountability, something customers and clients demand every day in the business world, and a bold move: handing over the reins to one decision-making body that decides how to invest the combined \$200 million dollars spent on homelessness in King County every year.

The most recent count of people in King County living on the streets, in vehicles or in shelters took place in January. We should have the data soon and we don't expect drastically different numbers from last year's count of 11,643 people. With millions invested, there's disappointment and anger the number of people experiencing homelessness isn't cut in half or a quarter from 2017.

All Home, city of Seattle, King County and United Way of King County currently make funding decisions and can point to results in getting people housed. The problem is, other people are falling into homelessness at the same time. Many factors are at play, including a lack of affordable housing, decreased federal funds for affordable housing, increased income inequality, mental illness and substance abuse. While valid, those reasons can't be an excuse.

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There are four actions that could move the needle faster in solving our region's crisis, starting with tapping one group to make funding decisions.

- Create a combined city-county department focused solely on homelessness and give it the authority to make funding and strategy decisions. That will speed up a system

currently weighed down by bureaucracy and prevent funding priorities from being undermined by conflicting agendas.

- Adopt a comprehensive approach to homelessness prevention that includes scaling effective, data-driven diversion programs. Here are two examples: King County's Best Starts for Kids Initiative, which in its first year prevented 3,000 youth and families from becoming homeless, and United Way's Streets to Home program, which uses flexible dollars to do things like pay a person's housing deposit and first month's rent. Streets To Home moved more than 1,000 people into housing from July 1, 2017, to March 31, 2018, at an average cost of \$1,000 per person. Homelessness prevention should also include outreach to people on the verge of eviction and those leaving hospitals, foster care and incarceration.
- Recognize that most people who become homeless will not receive a long-term housing voucher. In the past five years, Seattle lost one-third of its federal funding for affordable housing, which is why last year, 19,000 Seattle households sat on a waitlist. We need to help people increase their income and that's where the business community could step in and consider a new stream of workers for positions employers are looking to fill.
- Acknowledge that this community doesn't have enough housing for people with low or no income. Rents across the region soared 48 percent over the past five years. Experts estimate our region needs 90,000 to 100,000 additional units of affordable housing. We're far from that number right now so we'll need creative housing solutions and additional funding sources. It also means as a community, we are going to need to start recognizing that in order to bring more people inside, we need to start saying, "Yes in my backyard."

We need to get serious about accountability across the entire system because however well intentioned, we can't keep trying the same approaches to solving homelessness and expect anything to change. A new structure will reduce duplication, react to problems more quickly, and provide more opportunities to act on new ideas and solutions. It's what our vulnerable neighbors — and our community — deserve.

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