



MAYOR'S OFFICE
CITY OF BELLINGHAM
210 Lottie Street
Bellingham, WA 98225
Telephone (360) 778-8100
Fax (360) 778-8101

January 14, 2016

The Honorable Jay Inslee
Office of the Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Re: Homelessness Emergency in the State of Washington

Dear Governor Inslee,

I am writing to ask you to declare a state of emergency for the State of Washington around the issue of homelessness.

Bellingham applauds you for the actions we have already taken and the City of Seattle and King County for recognizing the urgent need to address homelessness in our communities, and I agree that the state plays a significant role in ensuring that all communities have the tools and resources they need to prevent and end homelessness. This is a crisis faced by communities throughout the West Coast, and we are asking that Washington join Hawaii in declaring this a state-wide emergency.

Homelessness is a crisis experienced by communities across Washington, including Bellingham. In our community, the 2015 Point in Time Count found at least 651 people in Whatcom County who were homeless. Throughout the year, hundreds more face the prospect of losing their homes due to economic reasons, family break up, mental illness, drug or alcohol abuse, and domestic violence. People being released from psychiatric hospitalization and incarceration face challenging community re-entry issues. Furthermore, the rising cost of housing and stagnant wages increases the risk of people losing their housing and makes it increasingly difficult to find affordable housing.

Even though our community has found some success since 2008 when we began implementing our 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, our numbers increased by 17.7% between 2014 and 2015. This trend has been reflected across the state, with an increase of 13% in unsheltered homelessness statewide over the previous year. I believe the State of Washington's response should include addressing the emergency for the many people experiencing homelessness tonight and implementing long-term solutions to the affordable housing crisis in our state.

There are actions that will be considered this session which we believe should be adopted.

Immediately investing in services that bring people indoors and prevent others from falling into homelessness:

- Allocate significant new resources to the Consolidated Homeless Grant
- Reduce the set-aside and increase the flexibility of state homeless dollars that require 45% of all the state's funds be set aside for private, for-profit landlords
- Support the Health Care Authority and DSHS's request to the federal government for flexibility with the use of state and federal Medicaid dollars

Investing State dollars and allow more local funding options to create affordable homes:

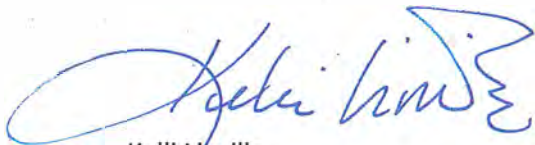
- Invest significant capital dollars into affordable housing, especially permanent supportive housing
- Allow the new local option sales tax for affordable housing and mental health facilities (passed last session as HB 2263) to be quickly implemented with local government action
- Allow local communities to implement a new Real Estate Excise Tax to pay for local affordable housing needs
- Provide additional capital dollars for crisis triage beds, housing support, and additional health and human services which you have proposed

Taking action to eliminate barriers to housing, including these key strategies:

- Pass HB 1460 and SB 5376 to require accuracy and fairness in tenant screening reports by only allowing evictions in which a tenant has lost in court to be reported
- Pass HB 1565 and SB 5378 to outlaw discrimination against low income renters who rely on government assistance to help pay the rent
- Pass the Governor's supplemental budget

I believe it is only with support at the state level that local jurisdictions will be able to adequately address this homelessness crisis. We are facing a large number of people without homes or secure access to housing, and this endangers the health, safety and welfare of the people, including families and children, and poses a threat to the environment and community development. We need decisive and swift action to prevent further suffering from this humanitarian disaster, and we look forward to working with you and your administration on collaborative solutions to this acute crisis.

Sincerely,



Kelli Linville
Mayor, City of Bellingham



Pinky Vargas
President, Bellingham City Council