

PUBLIC DEFENDER ASSOCIATION

RACIAL DISPARITY PROJECT

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Greetings:

We write this letter in solidarity with Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness (SKCCH), SHARE/WHEEL, and other organizations and individuals who have recently expressed concern for the welfare of people experiencing homelessness.

We are a civil rights law firm that, among other work, advocates for the rights of marginalized people in public spaces. We have great concern about the City of Seattle's interventions requiring individuals who are living without shelter to move from public spaces.

Commonly referred to as "homeless sweeps," these so-called interventions are not interventions at all, unless the individuals being forced to move – often compromising their personal property, and sense of security and community– has a meaningful alternative. Short of specific, documented safety concerns, sweeps of encampments should not occur until the City can ensure that every person displaced has a safe and secure place to stay, and keep their possessions, which the person actually is qualified to remain in (even if they are active drug users, have warrants or particular criminal history) and to which the person knows they have a right to return, day after day.

For an alternative option to be meaningful, it must meet the need of the person to whom it is being offered for a home – a place one knows one can return. A referral to temporary shelter which may or may not be available the next night is not, for many, a meaningful alternative to living in an encampment. A referral to facilities which will not house active drug users is not a meaningful alternative for active drug users. A referral to a facility that does not allow the companion animal of a person for whom such an animal is necessary is not meaningful. A referral to facilities that separate couples and family units who want to live together is not a meaningful alternative.

As so well stated by SHARE/WHEEL,

"The honest alternative to being in an unsanctioned encampment is a private space to sleep in, with storage and 24 hour availability, near your neighborhood, job or school. Until that is available, Stop the Sweeps!"

Homelessness has costs. Homeless people, if they survive, must regather their lives, regain their property, find new jobs, find new housing and while doing so often get treated like second class citizens.

Taxpayers pay the cost of trash and waste. And nobody likes to either see it or live in it. Too often Human Services people ignore this fact. They think that a 'referral' to services equals the reality of change. Usually these 'referrals' are smoke and mirrors, and don't provide what is needed to change a living situation."

We understand the City's desire that people not live outside. We share that desire. But unless and until we can provide a meaningful alternative for individuals who are unsheltered, the focus of City efforts should not be on moving people who are unhoused "for their safety," but rather actually making life as safe as possible in the place people have chosen in the absence of a better choice.

Encampments often are not pretty. Those of us who are housed can better hide our mess. No ones can see the drawers stuffed with papers or the dust under the bed. Our trash is picked up weekly, our messy scraps and rotting waste safely ensconced in a bin. Our worst habits are hidden from view, whether it is an untidy bed or injection drug use. The neighbors needn't know. For those who must live exposed, hiding the mess is not possible. The answer is not and cannot be for the City to simply sweep it, and them, under the rug.

Sincerely,


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