

## Homelessness Address to the City

Mayor Ed Murray

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Good evening and thank you for joining me. Tonight I want to speak to you, the people of Seattle, about the growing crisis of homelessness, but also about public health, public safety and the disorder that we see on our streets.

This is a difficult conversation that we as a city have been engaged in, not just in recent months, but for several decades.

The reasons for homelessness are complex and ending homelessness will not be solved easily or quickly. There are no simple solutions. It will take time.

I am speaking to you tonight from Mary's Place, which serves 200 women, men and children in a warm and caring environment. These families find a safe harbor from domestic violence, from extreme poverty, from addiction, and from the dangers of the street.

This shelter is located temporarily on City property. It is here because we engaged in creative problem-solving with Mary's Place to respond to this growing need.

The director, Marty Hartman, and her team here at Mary's Place are working miracles, saving lives every day.

Homelessness is a crisis – a growing crisis – not just here in Seattle, but in cities across the nation, up and down the West Coast, from San Diego to Portland. And it's not just a crisis of our largest cities, but also a crisis of our suburbs and smaller towns: places like Bellingham, Eugene and Santa Cruz.

Tonight in America, more than half a million people are homeless. And nearly 200,000 go to sleep without any shelter.

Before the Great Recession, there were 13,000 children in Washington state who were homeless. Today, that number has grown to 32,000 children statewide. This year, in Seattle alone, the number of homeless school-age children in our public schools has risen to 3,000.

As a City dedicated to racial equity and social justice, we cannot ignore the fact that African Americans and Native Americans are five times more likely to experience homelessness. Four out of five children who experience homelessness are children of color.

Too often we think about this as a Seattle problem with a Seattle solution. But this is a national tragedy. It should be a national emergency and it needs a national response.

The reasons for the growing crisis of homelessness are many, and they are complex.

It is caused by 35 years of federal cuts to affordable housing. In the last 5 years alone, we have lost one-third of our federal funding for affordable housing.

Last year, 19,000 Seattle households applied to be on the waitlist for a federal housing voucher.

Federal financial support for housing assistance has plummeted by more than half since 1980.

Over that same period, there has been a five-fold increase in federal tax breaks for higher-income homeowners.

For some, homelessness is caused by a mental health crisis. Our state has the second highest rate of mental illness, yet ranks near the bottom in access to treatment. We rank 46<sup>th</sup> in the nation in access to in-patient psychiatric care. This itself is a disaster and must be addressed.

Sometimes, homelessness is caused by drug addiction. We are in the midst of one of the largest heroin epidemics in our country's history. Addiction is on the rise in every community across the nation – urban, rural and suburban – in New Hampshire, in Kentucky, in Oklahoma and across the Pacific Northwest.

In King County, in the past two 2 years, deaths by heroin overdose have risen 60 percent.

Homelessness is also caused by the rising cost of housing. Nationwide, we need more affordable housing options, and we fail to do enough to prevent people from falling into homelessness. According to the Urban Institute, there is no county in America that has sufficient affordable housing.

And, finally, homelessness is only made worse by our own broken system of how we deliver services to those who experience homelessness. We have some extraordinary programs, but our approach is fragmented and not achieving the impact we need.

We cannot continue to fund programs simply because they have political support, even if they do not work.

We are allowing temporary shelter to be a dead end for too many families and individuals. Some people spend months or years living in a shelter, without a path to permanent housing. This is unacceptable.

We see the tents under the freeway. Run down RVs parked in our neighborhoods. People with signs on our sidewalks that read, "Disabled veteran. Anything helps."

This is what income inequality looks like. This is what a disappearing middle class looks like. This is what happens when the federal government inadequately funds affordable housing, addiction treatment, and other critically needed support services. This is what happens when we fail to reform our broken service delivery system.

It shouldn't surprise any of us that after 3 and a half decades of declining federal investments and a shrinking middle class, that it would result in the crisis that we see on our streets.

In November, I declared a state of emergency because 66 homeless people died on Seattle streets last year. This was an extraordinary action to take, and King County Executive Dow Constantine and I took it because we are dealing with an extraordinary crisis.

The City Council agreed, and using emergency powers together, in just a few days, we dedicated over seven million dollars in new one-time funding. That is in addition to the more than 40 million dollars in ongoing funding for homelessness.

Since the emergency declaration, we have opened more than 300 additional safe spaces – in Downtown for couples, in Queen Anne for senior men, in Greenwood for women, and two sanctioned tent encampments in Ballard and Interbay that serve individuals and families.

Just last week, we expanded here at Mary's Place, to provide emergency shelter for up to 100 women and children.

And to assist people living in their vehicles, we announced last week that we will open 2 safe lots for cars and RVs -- where individuals and families can find a safer place to sleep, and have access to sanitation and social services, as we transition them into housing.

As a City, we now provide a safe space for nearly 2,000 people every night, an increase of over 20 percent in just one year.

We are also bringing new services to the streets. Starting this month, a mobile medical van is moving throughout the city to provide mental health and substance abuse treatment, and access to medical care.

And this week, we are requesting that the state take even greater responsibility for reaching out to homeless people on underpasses and on-ramps of state highways that pass through our city. This is an area where we can continue to strengthen our partnership with the state.

But emergency responses, alone, are not the answer. Too much of the debate, energy and resources have been focused on these short-term strategies. We must shift that focus to longer-term solutions.

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness has looked at how Seattle spends its money. For years, they have urged us to adopt an approach that is person-centered, uses data to invest in what works, and is aligned with our federal partners.

But our City has been unable for decades to gather the political courage to make this shift.

I will propose that the city enact these recommendations, creating a new strategy based on outcomes, rather than our current method of simply funding projects and agencies in a fragmented way that does not result in a reduction of homelessness.

I will propose that we shift more resources toward diverting families and individuals from ever becoming homeless.

We must shift from simply putting mats on the floor in shelters to funding services that move people out of shelters and into permanent housing. I will propose that we invest in providers that succeed in doing this.

We know very little about each person living in those tents – what causes them to become homeless and what is keeping them there. Unless we understand the problems affecting each individual, how can we provide an effective solution? We will collect better data without

threatening individual privacy or service provider funding. And I ask our service providers to work with us on this.

With King County Executive Dow Constantine, we will convene all public partners and our non-profit providers to align our resources to better support outcomes.

And as we address the underlying causes of homelessness, we must continue to focus on housing affordability. Part of the solution to ending homelessness is getting affordability right.

Our region has already made significant investments in affordable housing, especially through the Seattle Housing Levy. Our region is third in the nation, behind only New York and Los Angeles, in providing 8,300 homes for people who were homeless.

But this is not enough and we will do more.

Beginning tonight at City Hall, we are holding community meetings across Seattle to share our city's vision for how we bring affordable housing to every neighborhood.

And in just a few weeks, I will lay out my vision for the renewal of Seattle's Housing Levy. I am proposing that we double the levy so that we can do much more -- including permanent housing for those who are homeless. Perhaps as a city, there is nothing more important that we can do this year than pass this levy.

With expanded services, long-term system reforms and an aggressive approach to housing affordability, Seattle is stretched to our limits.

Yet, this is a crisis driven by forces larger than this City, and responding will require resources from more than just this City. This is why I declared a State of Emergency. We cannot afford to wait.

If there had been an earthquake, if there had been a flood that had killed 66 people, the City would ask for and expect aid from the State and Federal government. And while this crisis has developed over time, the effects have been equally devastating.

With our State of Emergency, my hope was that we would come together, marshalling our resources to help where we can, recognizing the limits of what we can achieve alone, and working together to develop a unified call to Olympia and to Washington, DC.

With our new emergency funding, the City of Seattle will spend nearly 50 million dollars this year to serve our homeless neighbors – more than at any time in our city's history.

Yet I continue to hear from some advocates, joined by some members of the Council, who say that even with our unprecedented level of spending, we are still not doing enough. They seem to believe that we can solve this problem, by ourselves, regardless of the consequences.

The reality is, to provide emergency shelter to the almost 3,000 people that remain on our streets would cost us another 49 million dollars a year – or double our current investment.

I will engage Council, if they believe that Seattle should solve this crisis on its own, to propose how we should cut 49 million dollars from our existing budget.

But we must ask ourselves: Should we ignore our community centers in low-income neighborhoods that need more programming? Do we halt construction of sidewalks in neighborhoods without them? Do we cut enforcement of our newly-won worker protections? Should we not extend paid parental leave? And do we lay off hundreds of City employees?

Either we believe Seattle is doing our part and we advocate together for more state and federal resources, or we begin this exercise to cut \$49 million dollars from other priorities in order to fund basic emergency shelter -- that will still not move people out of homelessness.

Now is the time for us to make this decision and to end this argument.

To me, those are unacceptable trade-offs. We are a city of over 650,000 residents, and we must serve them all.

There is much work to be done. Working together, there is much we can accomplish.

I believe that we can come together to build a new federal agenda to support affordable housing and to address homelessness in America. I have seen this done before.

As a young man, I watched my friends die from HIV AIDS. I also saw a community come together, build a coalition and go to Olympia and to Washington, D.C.

We successfully pushed federal and state governments to change policy and fund programs that are still saving lives today.

I believe we can do it again.

So part of what I am asking today is that we challenge each other to do better without denigrating each other.

Instead of cooperation and a shared voice, we have seen too much division and extreme rhetoric about who homeless people are and how to solve the crisis.

In one tent on our streets, you may find a family that lost their home in a personal financial crisis. Go on down the street to another unauthorized encampment, you will find a person who is struggling in the grips of addiction. In another tent, will be someone who is either dealing drugs or systematically engaging in property crimes to feed his or her habit.

There is no single solution to all of these situations. That is why the polarized, one-size-fits-all rhetoric we increasingly hear from both sides is unhelpful.

Some say that we are conducting inhumane "sweeps," where all we do is force people out of unauthorized encampments, leaving them nowhere else to go.

Others claim that we are doing nothing, and tolerating dangerous criminal behavior, including open drug dealing and property crimes.

Neither of those views describe our efforts. We have adopted a middle approach, one that treats homelessness humanely, but also doesn't shy away from doing what we must to address the public health and safety risks that a small number of people are creating in our city.

Our approach has been to enter unauthorized encampments, to connect those living there with shelter and services, and a substantial number are beginning to accept that offer. We are cleaning up garbage, human waste and needles, as any City should, to avoid a public health crisis.

I do not believe it is humane to allow someone to camp on a freeway on-ramp where they easily could be struck and killed by a car. Or above a freeway where some have fallen to their deaths. Or in encampments where some have been murdered or raped. Instead, we go in and we offer services to get them out.

Is it humane to allow someone to struggle in the grips of addiction without professional help? We must reach out and offer access to the treatment that could save their lives.

We must acknowledge that in some cases, when people are struggling with addiction, some engage in criminal activity that harms our community and threatens the safety of those living in our neighborhoods.

I understand why some residents in our neighborhoods are upset about incidents of property crime and criminal activity. But some are also perpetuating a myth that we have ordered our police officers not to enforce existing laws. This is untrue.

This administration inherited a demoralized police force that had a declining number of officers and was stuck in cycle of de-policing. Crime was going up in our city. But under the leadership of Seattle Police Chief Kathleen O'Toole, morale has been restored and crime is now coming down across this city.

We are pursuing those who are engaged in open drug dealing or property crimes. We have more officers on the street and increased emphasis in neighborhoods with the highest rates of crime.

We have added officers, and are on track to meet our goal of increasing our police force by at least 100 additional officers by the end of 2017.

Let me give you another example of the hurtful rhetoric. Some advocates have recently been making outrageous claims that our efforts to clean up unauthorized encampments are a plot to drive people who are unsheltered farther into the shadows, so they won't be captured in the annual One Night Count later this week.

In other words, that we are trying to minimize the scope of the problem, when in fact we are doing just the opposite.

I made the emergency declaration precisely because I know the problem is growing, and I want all of us to come together to solve it by seeking additional aid.

I believe that we can make progress. We can do better with what we have. We can fix the broken parts of our service delivery system. We can put aside the polarizing rhetoric and our outdated thinking. We can come together to find common ground.

As a Seattle Times columnist wrote this week, the reality of the problem we face means that we must address both sides of the same coin -- enforce the laws, but also provide a path out.

As we work to address this crisis, I hear the frustration coming from all sides.

I hear your frustrations when we locate shelter services in your neighborhood.

I hear your frustrations with our slowness in addressing unsafe and unsanitary conditions in some unauthorized encampments.

I hear your frustrations that we are not delivering the right mix of services to those living on our streets.

I hear your frustrations, and I share them. I know we are not always getting it right.

But the fact is, we are in the midst of a growing national crisis of homelessness. People are dying on our streets.

We are working on a complex problem in real time.

I ask that you work with us, so that we can create positive change.

On a personal note, the most painful part of this discussion has been the vilification and degradation of homeless people -- at public meetings, on the radio and in social media -- as filthy, drug addicted criminals. Often these attacks have gone unchallenged.

Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker, who spent her life among homeless people in New York City, often quoted Dostoevsky, who wrote, "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

Anyone who has known, as I have, a friend or family member in the grip of destructive addiction, or watched mental illness destroy a person's life and often the lives of their loved ones, knows just how harsh and dreadful this experience can be for the person we love.

The hurtful language we hear is devastating not just to the people who are homeless but to any of us who know similar struggles of those we love.

The reality is the people on the streets of our city are living harsh and dreadful lives.

Ending homelessness will be as difficult as any challenge we face as a city.

I believe Seattle can do this, by listening to each other, by challenging each other, by collaborating with each other. And above all, by respecting those who are suffering.

Thank you and good night.