

Addiction, mental illness complicate help for the homeless

By **Phuong Le**

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EVERETT, WASH. » This is the lesson that the working-class city of Everett has learned: It takes a community to rescue the hardcore homeless.

It takes teams of outreach workers — building relationships with men and women struggling with addiction or untreated mental illness, prodding them to get help. It takes police and other agencies, working together to provide for their needs.

Everett, hard-hit by the opioid epidemic, is trying an array of strategies to tackle homelessness, addiction, untreated mental illness and other problems on its streets.

For starters, the city put together a team that would track the 25 most costly and vulnerable cases, and hover over each one individually until he or she was in treatment or housing.

“It was when everything else seems to have failed,” said Hil Kaman, who left his job prosecuting the homeless about a year-and-a-half ago and took up the challenge of finding solutions as the city’s

public health and safety director.

Officials also are pushing new permanent supportive housing and sending social workers out with police officers.

The city of 110,000 people north of Seattle and surrounding Snohomish County saw a 65 percent jump in people living outside in the past two years — among the largest increases on the West Coast in that time.

The number of unsheltered chronically homeless — those who have been homeless for longer than a year while struggling with a serious mental illness, substance use disorder or physical disability — has grown steadily in the Everett region, more than doubling since 2015.

The opioid epidemic, poverty, lack of unskilled jobs, rising rents and a shortage of affordable housing have made it harder for those who fall into homelessness to get out.

The problem is not limited to Everett. Up and down the West Coast, the high cost of housing has forced thousands of people to live on the streets, a trend that opioids have exacerbated.

“These are expensive places to live. It’s expensive for everybody. But the burden falls the hardest on people with the biggest problems,” said Steve Berg, vice president for programs and policy with the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

In 2011, roughly one in every five opioid-related deaths in Washington state took place in the city and surrounding Snohomish County. That was the peak, but heroin deaths remain high and deaths from synthetic opioids such as fentanyl are climbing.

The crisis had become so dire that Everett city officials became among the first to sue the manufacturer of the painkiller OxyContin in January. The lawsuit blames Purdue Pharma for an addiction crisis that has overwhelmed city resources and deepened its homelessness problem.

While that case works through the court, outreach workers are fanning out to find people camping under the freeway or living in the woods and try to connect them to services. Many of them initially deflect treatment. Some are too ill to even know they need aid.

PROBLEMS ON THE STREETS