

Seattle may take new tack in helping the homeless: focus on housing

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Two reports that Mayor Ed Murray plans to release this week could change the way Seattle handles homelessness.

Murray intends to use the long-anticipated reports by homelessness consultants as a springboard to announce a new, long-term strategy.

The mayor and King County Executive Dow Constantine proclaimed states of emergency last November to address what they called a growing homelessness crisis.

They allocated several million dollars in emergency funding beyond the more than \$70 million that the city and county had already budgeted to help the homeless this year, with mixed results.

Now that the year is drawing to a close and Murray is preparing to propose a new budget, the mayor will seek to overhaul the city's spending on homeless services and the system that delivers those services, which for years has been characterized by a slew of nonprofit organizations doing many different things.

Murray will likely argue for less spending on interventions such as shelter, street outreach and meal programs, and for more spending on housing. He'll likely call for a budget that rewards nonprofits that show measurable results and that penalizes organizations that don't, however noble their work might be.

The mayor tipped his hand in an Op-Ed last month and in an interview when The Seattle Times reported in June on Houston's recent success in reducing its unsheltered population by an estimated 75 percent.

"I believe we can reform our system and get significantly better results," Murray said. "I believe there are significant things we can do, like Houston."

During a City Council briefing Tuesday, Councilmember Sally Bagshaw said she had read the two reports and said they recommend the city provide more housing to people living without shelter.

One report will come from Barbara Poppe, a nationally known expert who ran the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness for President Obama until 2014. Poppe has a \$80,000 contract to develop new spending priorities for the city.

She caused a stir while visiting in February when she spoke out against Seattle authorizing tent encampments. Murray and the City Council had passed legislation giving support to such encampments for the first time, describing them as a safer alternative to the many illegal camps springing up.

"I find it horrifying you have children living in encampments and that is somehow acceptable to this community," Poppe said at the time.

The Ohio-based consultant offered her opinion without having toured one of the authorized encampments, which upset some proponents. During a later visit, she did check them out.

Now that Poppe's report is near release, encampments are once again in the news, thanks to heated debate over the ongoing evictions of homeless people from illegal sites.

The other report has been completed by Focus Strategies, a California-based firm with a principal, Katharine Gale, who spent time with Poppe at the Interagency Council.

Seattle, along with King County, United Way and All Home private-public partnership managing homelessness countywide, asked Focus Strategies for a data analysis of homelessness spending here.

The report, said All Home Director Mark Putnam, should answer questions such as, "What does it cost for each person in the system to move from homelessness to housing?" and "What interventions are more expensive than others?" It should also make recommendations for how the region can get better results.

The county and All Home recently launched a new, more streamlined setup for assessing the needs of homeless people and determining what help they should receive and where.

Whether local officials carry out further reforms may depend on whether the various politically connected nonprofits that serve the homeless are willing to play along.

"Many of the (Focus Strategies) recommendations will be in line with things that are already under way," Putnam said. "But this could be the most thorough analysis we've had, and I believe there's a commitment to using the recommendations for change."

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