

# Community Resource Providers Listening Session

## Olympia Homelessness Response Plan

High-Level Listening Sessions Summary | March 28, 2019 Workshop



On March 28 the City of Olympia convened a listening session with approximately 80 community resource providers. Participants were asked to consider what does it look like to successfully address homelessness in our community, and what are the barriers to success? Below is a high level summary of what we heard:

### Areas of Agreement

- Everyone is impacted by homelessness in one way or another
- Success will be defined by creation of more and more-accessible affordable housing
- Success is contingent on access to housing-first solutions and access to essential services
- Success will require better-coordinated system and service delivery (among jurisdictions and organizations)
- The stigma of homelessness is a significant barrier to community acceptance and solutions
- Future progress will require expanded community involvement and understanding
- Any response must include trauma-informed approaches and solutions
- Reasons for homelessness are varied, and there is no uniform solution
- The system may be too confusing to start or navigate for many of those in need

### Areas of Disagreement

- Whether we should drive people to specific housing options
- Whether police interaction is necessary
- Whether success = making progress on homelessness vs. ending homelessness
- What system (vulnerability index or other) to use to prioritize need and funding
- Whether systems are structured to help the homeless or protect the housed population
- Whether our local social service “carrying-capacity” is being strained by people coming here to seek those services

### Areas to Learn More

- Better understanding the root causes of homelessness and functional solutions
- How the response system works now, and how to address gaps or shortcomings
- Involving those experiencing homelessness in the development of solutions
- How to reasonably fund or otherwise resource effective response mechanisms
- How to incentivize or otherwise encourage the construction of affordable housing, taking into account challenges posed by the private market and limits on where certain types of housing can be built

### Transcribed Listening Sessions

Would you like to see all the input that was collected and transcribed from the listening session? Contact Stacey Ray at [sray@ci.olympia.wa.us](mailto:sray@ci.olympia.wa.us) or 360.753.8046

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# Downtown Owners & Employee Listening Session

## Olympia Homelessness Response Plan

High-Level Listening Sessions Summary | April 18, 2019 Workshop



On April 18, 2019 the City convened a listening session with approximately 90 members of the Downtown community. Participants were asked how homelessness impacts them, what it looks like to successfully address homelessness Downtown, and what they perceive to be barriers to success. Here is a high-level summary of what we heard:

### Areas of Agreement

- Want to feel proud of my community and clean it up
- Existing businesses' ability to succeed or simply stay in business is impacted
- Don't want to see demise of community icons and special places (e.g. Hands-on Children's Museum)
- Have been personally threatened or driven away
- Families no longer feel safe visiting Downtown
- Homelessness negatively impacts the environment (e.g. clean water)
- Mitigation site (growing homeless population and intense concentration in one location) has accelerated impacts and urgency of response
- The costs for Emergency medical responders, police, and service agencies to respond is unsustainable
- Don't think people should have to live like that (or their children); everyone should have place to live
- There have to be common-sense, middle-ground solutions
- Want ALL people to be treated with respect and understanding
- Help people find pathways to self-sufficiency with easy access to services
- Want to help people who want help (homelessness vs. lawlessness)
- There are root and spontaneous (job loss, domestic violence, rent increases, etc.) causes of homelessness; need to address accordingly
- The State and County have to help
- This challenge is overwhelming and difficult to discuss, let alone solve
- Voter and taxpayer fatigue due to no measurable or demonstrated impact

### Areas of Disagreement

- Police officers are not empowered to act and enforce the laws
- Relative effectiveness/impact of camp sweeps (i.e. Do people just go somewhere else? Does the sweep just exacerbate their situation?)
- Resentment that there's greater concern that "people don't want to go Downtown," when homeless suffering is more important
- Resentment that "people can't go Downtown" because of aggressive behavior, needles, panhandling, etc.
- Whether bathrooms should be left unlocked (safety/security vs. dignity)
- Whether homelessness is preventing investment/economic activity Downtown
- Ability of a small Downtown to financially absorb and support solutions – e.g. too many homeless individuals in a relatively confined space, ability of small businesses to afford security, taxes and other response costs
- Where social services should be located (Downtown vs. spread around county)
- Appropriate role of society in responding to homelessness
- Appropriate balance between supporting homeless vs. waste, crime, health (i.e. how much do we invest in addressing homelessness while also having to fund increasing costs associated with public health and safety?)
- Appropriate balance of drug enforcement, drug treatment and rehabilitation
- Impacts to and role of community institutions (Library, City, Churches, etc.)
- What it means to "hold people accountable"

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## Areas of Disagreement Continued

- Community members choose not to engage in solutions because an “angry/aggressive” crowd doesn’t allow for a real dialogue
- The role of a capitalist economy in causing homelessness
- Whether responders are trained to administer assistance homeless need
- Role of parenting and individual decision-making that leads to homelessness
- Resistance of “housed” to supporting solutions for unhoused (“not in my backyard”)


## Areas to Learn More


- Want to learn about peer community solution success stories and failures
- Want to know what the City’s response will be over long-term
- Want to know how we’re going to measure success
- How private companies can participate and invest in solutions
- How churches/others can impact, balance solutions with downtown viability
- Better defined pathways and steps to permanent housing solutions
- Role of affordable housing solutions in solving the challenge
- Whether creating jobs, offering counseling, training and schooling works
- Why people don’t “move along” when shelter beds exist
- Whether “lack of funding” is the primary barrier to solutions
- People don’t understand “human side” of homelessness: info and education
- Need to hear from houseless individuals in a conversation about solutions
- Lack of understanding that US Government slashed support for low-wage people
- How do people with chronic health issues live on \$157/mo.?
- Why don’t we establish “umbrella” fund vs. multiple small funds to solve problem?
- Why can’t we set aside land to create affordable, temporary housing solutions?


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*Participants discuss the workshop questions and record their answers.*



# April Community Workshop Listening Sessions

## Olympia Homelessness Response Plan

### High-Level Listening Sessions Summary | Session Held at Olympia High School



The City of Olympia convened a community workshop on April 20, 2019, at Olympia High School. Approximately 115 community members participated in a conversation about how homelessness impacts them, what it means to successfully address homelessness in our community, and barriers to success. Below is a high level summary of what we heard:

#### Areas of Agreement

- People want to be part of the solution, but don't see a clear or meaningful way to participate.
- People are feeling shut-out or afraid of engaging in discussions about solutions because conversations aren't managed or respectful.
- Homelessness has spread beyond Downtown and residents are reporting an increase in thefts, aggressive panhandling and drug paraphernalia in parks and neighborhoods.
- Residents are increasingly upset the City is being "trashed" and feeling less safe doing routine activities (examples: going to the park, riding the bus, using trails, going downtown).
- Growing concern about detrimental environmental impacts (examples: water pollution, needles, forests, garbage).
- People expect a shared effort to preserve a vibrant Downtown, eliminate camps and reduce crime.
- Success means the vast majority of unsheltered people (excluding those who don't want shelter) have somewhere to live, and no children live outside or in unstable shelters.
- Solutions require easy and adequate access to medical treatment, mental health resources, job training and accountability/support through case management.
- People understand the causes of homelessness are complex (examples: attitudes, drug abuse, lack of affordable housing, lack of skills, etc.).
- There's a desire to ensure "all" people are/feel safe (housed and houseless).
- General support for creating or incentivizing a range of housing solutions.

#### Areas of Disagreement

- While participants agree social service support (and the recent increase in investment) is well-intentioned, there's some disagreement whether it's "helping" or "enabling" the situation.
- Uncertainty about the public's willingness to develop or invest in solutions versus resistance to it.
- Some believe the impacts of "lawlessness" and "dangerous behavior" has exceeded the public's ability or interest to continue supporting services versus moving more towards law enforcement solutions.
- Fatigue over "repeat customers" – people unwilling or unable to accept assistance.
- Frustration with lack of measurable outcomes to show progress.
- Disagreement over the "major" causes of homelessness; for example, widespread systemic causes versus individuals' poor decision-making. And a resulting "lack of empathy" or "resentment of enablers."
- Conflict regarding providing continued support versus where to draw the line on preserving livability for those whose taxes help fund solutions.
- Disagreement over "camps" and "mitigation sites," and whether "people have a right to live/sleep somewhere safe" vs. whether "property owners" have a right to "preserve their investment" and feel safe.
- Disparate opinions on "free will" vs. "unmitigated drug culture."
- What to do with people who "don't want to be helped" or "refuse to be a respectful citizen."
- Disagreement over whether federal funding or local investment should drive solutions, and the role funding solutions plays in the spike in homelessness.

## Areas of Disagreement Continued

- Whether homeless camp “sweeps” solve or “exacerbate” the problem.
- Whether increasing funding or agency presence will truly solve the problem.


## Areas to Learn More


- How to help and truly make a difference. Can we develop a citizen-base mentorship program?
- Facilitating childhood preschool access for kids experiencing homelessness.
- Collective action is tough. How do we work this out as human beings?
- Interest in how other communities address this challenge.
- Are there upstream solutions? Examples given included: affordable housing, eviction prevention, etc.
- Can we repurpose existing buildings or identify vacant parcels to supply affordable housing solutions?
- Will multistory projects with onsite service providers and a strong mentor program work?
- What is the role of the WA State Department of Transportation? They own considerable chunks of property here with encampments located on them.
- How to increase awareness of the causes of homelessness, and support for solutions?
- How are we going to measure progress?
- If prior offenses are a major problem to homeless solutions, what can we do to create barrier-free housing options?


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# May Community Workshop Listening Sessions

## Olympia Homelessness Response Plan

### High-Level Listening Sessions Summary | Session Held at Capital High School



The City of Olympia convened a community workshop on May 4, 2019, at Capital High School. Approximately 75 community members participated in a conversation about how homelessness impacts them, what it means to successfully address homelessness in our community, and barriers to success. Below is a high level summary of what we heard:

#### Areas of Agreement

- Feeling overwhelmed by the scope of the challenge to respond to homelessness; a desire to hear from others and find ways to help.
- Growing concern about public health impacts.
- People should not have to live in the streets, period.  
Success = functional zero homeless.
- All people should have access to basic necessities, including shelter, security, healthcare, mental health resources and drug treatment.
- The rapid surge in homelessness has desensitized some to the plight of the homeless population, and there's a sense people are becoming angry or discouraged by crime, trash and other effects.
- There is no broad-brush solution to address the complex reasons behind homelessness.
- Growing concern for impacts on the environment.
- Acute concern over degradation of Downtown, and a reluctance to visit.
- Growing perception that this is not just an Olympia problem, but a national epidemic.
- More can be done "upstream" to prevent homelessness.
- Need more, easier access to drug treatment and mental health services.
- Many are torn between compassion (want to help) and anger (no longer feel safe in their community).
- More help is needed from the State and Federal Government (financial investment and policies).
- For many, the challenge is affordability – i.e. they work but can no longer keep up with rent prices).

#### Areas of Disagreement

- Divergent perceptions about the causes of homelessness (participant examples: unfair capitalist society, neoliberal policies, stagnant wages, personal decisions, bad luck, etc.).
- Concern that the police are not enforcing laws or are not allowed to.
- Disagreement whether many homeless individuals are from Olympia (even if they say they are in surveys).
- Agreement that homelessness reflects poorly on community, but disagreement on how – e.g. because we have not stepped up to help the vulnerable versus we how allow or enable lawless behavior.
- Whether we are applying the right combination of tools to address the challenge (participant examples: The Home Fund only addresses 80% AMI (average medium income), not enough funding available for rapid rehousing, for every 30 low-income housing units built, there are 100 families that remain unsheltered, etc.)
- Concern that solutions will remain elusive if conversations are driven by anger versus the perception that anger drives action and solutions.
- Disagreement on whether or not camp removals clean up the City versus destroying people's personal items and sense of security.
- How much to invest in homelessness versus other critical community issues and needs.
- Conflicting views on providing public bathrooms—it is a human right and dignity issue to have access to restrooms versus they attract criminal behavior.
- Whether it's possible to ever build enough "tiny homes" to serve everyone who needs them (and whether that would, in turn, attract more homeless to Olympia and Thurston County).

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## Areas of Disagreement Continued

- Whether the homeless population should be concentrated around services, or provided spaces throughout the community.
- How much (taxes) the public should be asked to invest in solutions.
- Resentment and/or mistrust between different groups (non-profits, private sector, government, tax payers) responding to homelessness.

## Areas to Learn More

- Ideas to create affordable housing solutions or limit rent increases.
- How churches and other community groups can help with the annual Point-in-Time survey or other initiatives.
- Explanation and community training with respect to “trauma-informed care.”
- What a successful “transitional housing” program might look like.
- The role publicly owned housing should play in the overall solution.
- General interest in learning more about any/all “best practices.”
- Appropriate roles for different community groups and organizations (e.g. clean-up teams, mentoring, basic necessity provision, etc.).
- Whether a “reward for progress” system would help people transition back into society.
- Whether there are response models that include job training and built-in housing, and if so, whether they are working as a more permanent solution.
- Whether investing more into transitional housing programs with long-term case management would help reduce the volume of homeless and those cycling back into homelessness.
- Whether a “one-stop” intake center would facilitate assessment, service connections, partner coordination and longer-term solutions.

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