

For more information, contact Eric Bronson at ebronson@ywcaworks.org

Communicating about housing and homelessness toolkit

People across our region are frustrated that so many King County residents are experiencing homelessness, and are concerned that progress is not happening quickly enough, at a large enough scale.

How we talk about these issues matters. Together, by building common understanding about who is experiencing homelessness, why, and what we can do about it, we can proactively push for solutions, and respond to myths with a shared voice.

Communications can help connect our community

We can help people better understand homelessness and how we'll solve it when we use common language and framing.

Used consistently by the whole community, strong messaging will help us:

- Increase awareness of the causes behind homelessness and complicating factors, such as systemic racism, underfunded public housing, mental health, and addiction.
- Increase understanding of who is experiencing homelessness.
- Increase confidence in proven solutions and our ability to deliver those solutions as a community.
- Increase awareness of YWCA Seattle | King | Snohomish and the role it plays as part of a united community, working together.

How to use this Toolkit

In this toolkit, you'll find sections about the causes of homelessness, who is experiencing it, and what are the solutions to the problem facing our families. In each section there is a key message to use, sample support messages to follow up with, data points to prove them, and YWCA programs that work towards each solution.

As a YWCA board-member, you can use this information in your conversations with other business leaders, lawmakers, journalists, and with board members of other nonprofits. The more often we use these messages, the stronger our case will be for solving homelessness for all our neighbors, including the highly-impacted populations of women and people of color that YWCA serves.

Key Messages

Causes of homelessness in King County

- Our economy is booming, but not everyone is sharing in the prosperity. In recent years, King County has experienced accelerated growth, contributing to housing shortages and rising rents.

Who is experiencing homelessness?

- People experiencing homelessness are our neighbors and members of our community.

Solution: Whole community working together

- Homelessness impacts our whole community—it hurts those of us who experience it, and frustrates those of us who see our neighbors suffering. Solving it will take our whole community.

Solution: Affordable homes and rents

- Creating more housing with affordable rent will help prevent homelessness. This solution is necessary for any other solutions to work.

Solution: Early intervention

- By working directly with people on the brink of homelessness, we can often prevent it altogether, or keep the experience brief.

Solution: Stability & treatment

- For people experiencing addiction or mental or physical illness, the stability of housing with treatment services is the first step to better health.

Solution: Funding

- We all want a safe, healthy community—and we all have a role in creating it.

Poll Summary Findings

The following insights come from a poll conducted in 2019 in King Countyⁱ

People's sense of who is experiencing homelessness is not accurate. On average, those surveyed believed that:

- 43% are not from this community. (Reality: 83% of respondents reported living in Seattle/King County immediately prior to loss of housing.)

People agree we need more affordable housing in every neighborhood.

- 71% of respondents agreed that we should be putting affordable housing in every neighborhood, only 28% disagreed with that strategy.

When presented with “success stories” in the fight against homelessness, large majorities said the information would increase their confidence in the community's response to homelessness.

- 70%+ said their confidence would increase when given statistics around successes with connections to housing, prevention, and veteran and youth homelessness.

People believe we are not spending enough money on this issue.

- 62% said we are not spending enough upon hearing that similarly sized cities were spending 2 to 3 times the amount Seattle is spending, and seeing results.

Causes of homelessness in King County

Key message to use

Our economy is booming, but not everyone is sharing in the prosperity. In recent years, King County has experienced accelerated growth, contributing to housing shortages and rising rents.

SAMPLE SUPPORT MESSAGES

- *Too many people can't keep up with the increasing cost of living, especially rising rents.*
- *Racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression push some people into homelessness more quickly—and make finding housing more difficult.*
- *Our community has never adequately funded our homelessness response system—along with our addiction and mental health services and criminal justice system—to address our community's needs. With these needs increasing, it's harder still.*

DATA POINTS

- According to a recent McKinsey report, there is a direct correlation between the rise in rents and the rise in homelessness—Seattle needs an estimated 10,000–14,000 more affordable housing options in order to meet the current demand.ⁱⁱ
- In King County, a worker should earn nearly \$30 per hour to afford a one-bedroom apartment. Minimum wage is \$12 per hour.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Black & African Americans make up 6% of King County's population, but make up 32% of those experiencing homelessness because of racist oppression. (Count Us In 2019)

Who is experiencing homelessness in our community

Key message to use

People experiencing homelessness are our neighbors and members of our community.

SAMPLE SUPPORT MESSAGES

- *Homelessness is something people experience, not a character trait.*
- *Most people in our community were already living here before losing their homes.*
- *For some, homelessness follows an unexpected event: a medical bill, job loss, or late rent payment. However, belonging to a marginalized population makes your chances of experiencing homelessness higher.*
- *People already experiencing mental illness or addiction often find those problems exacerbated after they've lost housing.*
- *Our neighbors experiencing homelessness attend our places of worship, sit next to us at work and at school, are in line with us at the grocery store, and are members of our community.*

DATA POINTS

- People of color make up 33% of King County's population, but make up 52% of people experiencing homelessness.^{iv}
- 83% of people living outside on a given night in King County were living in King County when they became homeless.^{iv}
- Job loss is the most commonly reported reason for losing housing (25%).^{iv}

SOLUTION:

Whole community working together

Key message to use

Homelessness impacts our whole community—it hurts those of us who experience it, and frustrates those of us who see our neighbors suffering. Solving it will take our whole community.

SAMPLE SUPPORT MESSAGES

- *We all want safe, healthy communities.*
- *Solutions must come from the whole community: nonprofits, businesses, philanthropists, residents, government, faith communities, those who've experienced homelessness—all of us.*
- *We have evidence demonstrating what is working—more affordable homes, early intervention to prevent homelessness or keep it brief, and housing that includes mental health and addiction treatment.*

DATA POINTS

- By funding proven solutions, and scaling them up, our community has already:
 - Reduced homelessness among veterans by 31% from 2017 to 2018.^{iv}
 - Reduced homelessness among children and youth under the age of 18 by 22% from 2017 to 2018.^{iv}
 - Increased the number of families housed through King County's homeless response system by 63% between 2014 and 2017.^v

SOLUTION:

Affordable homes & rents

Key message to use

Creating more housing with affordable rent will help prevent homelessness. This solution is necessary for any other solutions to work.

SAMPLE SUPPORT MESSAGES

- *We all want safe, livable, healthy communities.*
- *There is a direct correlation between rising rents and rising homelessness.*
- *People being priced out of our region include teachers, service workers, and members of the community we rely on.*
- *It's better for families and society (plus the environment) when people can afford to live close to where they work.*

DATA POINTS

- In 2018, 4,227 households were prevented from becoming homeless or moved from homelessness to housing with support from human services programs receiving City of Seattle funds. This represents an increase of 17% over 2017.^{vi}
- 80% of people experiencing homelessness in King County surveyed said more housing with affordable rents and rental assistance were key factors in finding housing.^{iv}
- The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment rose by 67% between 2013 and 2017, and wages have not kept pace—especially for those earning smaller incomes to begin with.^{vii}

YWCA PROGRAMS WORKING ON THIS SOLUTION:

- YWCA owns and operates 978 units of housing, including permanent and transitional housing.
 - The need exceeds our capacity, in part because there is little to no affordable housing on the market for people to move on to after utilizing transitional housing.

SOLUTION:

Early intervention

Key message to use

By working directly with people on the brink of homelessness, we can often prevent it altogether, or keep the experience brief.

SAMPLE SUPPORT MESSAGES

- *Often, a small, one-time payment can keep people from getting evicted or losing their home.*
- *Other times, a one-time payment, like a deposit or rent, can help get someone back into housing quickly.*
- *There are a variety of simple assists that, when offered early, can make the difference.*

DATA POINTS

- More than half of all people who are evicted in Seattle owed less than one month's rent.^{viii}
- Black mothers are four to five times more likely to be evicted than white men in King County.
- By engaging with families early—in part to identify housing options based on their own resources—the average cost to get them back into housing was \$1,668, a lower amount than other interventions.^{ix}
- More than 75% of families ended up in their own rental unit without a housing subsidy.^{ix}

YWCA PROGRAMS WORKING ON THIS SOLUTION:

- YWCA Family Homeless Prevention Program – King County
 - Provides supportive services to help families facing homelessness overcome multiple barriers, regain stability, and maintain their current housing.
- YWCA Housing Stability Project – King County
 - This unique project offers grants that can be used to assist tenants that are in danger of eviction

SOLUTION:

Stability & treatment

Key message to use

For people experiencing addiction or mental or physical illness, the stability of housing with treatment services is the first step to better health.

SAMPLE SUPPORT MESSAGES

- *No one gets better living on the street—whether suffering from mental illness, addiction, or any other challenge.*
- *The safety and stability of housing allows people to more effectively get support to address other needs, like addiction, physical and mental health, education, and employment.*
- *We can serve more people, more quickly, through treatment on demand—if someone asks for help, they receive it.*

DATA POINTS

- With supportive care, individuals experiencing homelessness who struggle with alcohol are significantly more likely to reduce their usage. A **University of Washington study** found:
 - A 66% reduction in participants' alcohol use.
 - A 71% reduction in alcohol-related problems.
 - A 63% reduction in the number of alcohol-use disorder symptoms.^x
- Approximately 70% of individuals experiencing homelessness in King County report living with one or more health conditions, including psychiatric or emotional conditions (44%), drug or alcohol abuse (35%), and physical disability (26%).^{iv}

YWCA PROGRAMS WORKING ON THIS SOLUTION:

- YWCA's Project Reunite – Snohomish County
 - Helps parents suffering from substance abuse disorders get treatment and reunite with their kids. It's easier to stick to your goals when your kids can be part of your life, and no one gets better on the street.

SOLUTION:

Funding

Key message to use

We all want a safe, healthy community—and we all have a role in creating it.

SAMPLE SUPPORT MESSAGES

- *We have to be honest about the cost. To scale these solutions, we need to invest sufficient funds and make sure they're used wisely.*
- *Solving homelessness is not going to be quick or easy, but it is achievable when we unite to invest in what works.*
- *Holding our elected officials accountable for progress is a critical part of success.*

DATA POINTS

- By funding proven solutions, and scaling them up, our community has already:
 - Reduced homelessness among veterans by 31% from 2017 to 2018.^{iv}
 - Reduced homelessness among children and youth under the age of 18 by 22% from 2017 to 2018.^{iv}
 - Increased the number of families housed through King County's homeless response system by 63% between 2014 and 2017. ^v
- Getting people into stable housing is the most efficient use of community dollars.
 - It currently costs about \$30,000—\$50,000 per year for the community to provide services to someone experiencing homelessness, and it costs about \$39,000 per year to pay for someone who is incarcerated.^{xi}
 - By contrast, when in housing with services like addiction and mental health treatment, this cost is brought down to around \$16,000—\$22,000 per person per year.^{xii}
- In a 2019 poll of registered voters in King County, 53% said we are not spending enough to address homelessness when they heard that homelessness is increasing by 9% every year while spending on social services is increasing by 2.4%.ⁱ

YWCA PROGRAMS WORKING ON THIS SOLUTION:

- YWCA's public advocacy is pressing for more public investment in these solutions, which is desperately needed to match the scale of the problem we face.

FAQ

Aren't we already spending enough on homelessness? Can we spend that money more effectively?

- We are not. We currently need between 10,000 and 14,000 more affordable housing options in our community to keep up with demand. To address this, along with increasing need, current spending would need to double to \$410M a year, according to the McKinsey Report.ⁱⁱ

If it's too expensive to live here, why don't people just move away?

- We want a Seattle and King County that are affordable to all, not just a select few. People being priced out of our region include teachers, service workers, and others who are neighbors and important members of the community we all rely on.

Why should we provide City services to newcomers looking for a free ride?

- Seattle is a magnet for people from all walks of life. That said, 83% of people experiencing homelessness said they were already living in King County at the time they most recently became homeless.^{iv}

Why don't homeless people just get jobs?

- Many people experiencing homelessness do have jobs, but simply cannot afford housing.
- Additionally, without a permanent address, or a consistent place to get ready for work, applying for jobs and getting to work can be a significant challenge.

Isn't homelessness just the result of bad personal choices?

- No. The number one reported cause of homelessness in King County is the loss of a job (25%)^{iv}
- For some, choices may play a role, but for many, homelessness is the result of structural discrimination in housing, hiring, or criminal justice, which compounds over time.
- As a result, certain populations experience homelessness at higher rates: people of color, people identifying as LGBTQ+, and those who've been in the foster care or criminal justice system.

Aren't many homeless people choosing to be homeless?

- More than 90% of all people experiencing homelessness in King County said they would move into safe and affordable housing if it were offered to them.^{iv}
- Homelessness is often caused by a series of systemic failures. For example, according to Seattle University, "many homeless women are survivors of domestic abuse. These women lack a support system and may be unable to seek resources. If they depend on their abuser for financial stability, it's difficult to find the money for a new home,

especially when prevented from working by their abuser.”^{xiii}

Why should I help a homeless person find housing when I can barely afford my own rent?

- We want a Seattle that is affordable to all, not just a select few.
- We do know that it’s tough for many. Rent in Seattle has grown by 43% since 2009. According to a recent McKinsey report, there is a direct correlation between the rise in rents and the rise in homelessness.^{xiv}

What are the City and County doing to address homelessness? Why aren’t we seeing progress?

- Our community has never adequately funded our homelessness response system—nor our addiction and mental health services and criminal justice system—to address our community’s needs. With these needs increasing, it’s harder still.
- However, the City and County are making progress in a number of areas:
 - Best Starts for Kids prevented more than 4,000 people—including 2,400 children and teenagers—from becoming homeless in one year.
 - Homelessness among veterans was reduced by 31% from 2017 to 2018.
 - Homelessness among children and youth under the age of 18 was reduced by 22% from 2017 to 2018.
 - In March 2019, the Seattle City Council unanimously passed a citywide version of the Mandatory Housing Affordability program, paving the way for 6,000 new affordable homes in Seattle.
- Despite this progress, more people are experiencing homelessness as a result of lack of supply of affordable housing, particularly for low- and middle-income households. This is not a unique problem to Seattle, but something communities up and down the West Coast in particular are experiencing.

Why aren’t we doing what other cities are doing to solve this?

- Seattle and King County is working to incorporate lessons from cities all over the country—especially those using the Built for Zero model that has been proven to be successful in solving chronic and veteran homelessness across the country.^{xv}

Why can’t we just force everyone into shelters at night?

- We simply do not have enough beds for every person experiencing homelessness in King County.
- Currently, there are 2,032 shelter beds in the city of Seattle, which are 93% full every night, and an additional 462 shelter beds counted in King County. In 2018, there were more than 5,400 individuals living “unsheltered” on the street or in cars.^{iv xvi}
- When it comes to new shelters, our community has a real need for “low-barrier” shelters, or those that allow people to bring their pets or partners, and can support

and shelter individuals struggling with substance abuse.

Why can't we just ban homeless people from sleeping on the streets or in parks?

- It costs time and police resources to enforce this—keeping officers from attending to other crimes.
- Once someone is arrested and charged for a crime like this, it is significantly more difficult for them to find a job or housing.

Can't we solve this by putting drug addicts in jail? And why aren't we putting homeless people committing crimes in jail?

- We cannot arrest our way out of homelessness in our community. If someone is struggling with mental health or addiction, they will most likely continue to struggle with those same issues, regardless of how many times they are arrested, until they are able to receive treatment and a safe place to live.
- It currently costs about \$39,000 per year to incarcerate someone in Washington State, but when a person experiencing homelessness is connected with housing that offers services like addiction and mental health treatment, the cost is less than a third of that.^{xi}

Aren't a lot of homeless people addicted to drugs and alcohol?

- While alcohol and drug abuse are huge concerns when it comes to those experiencing homelessness, it's the experience of homelessness itself that can drive people to start using drugs/alcohol.^{xvii}
- Getting people into stable housing that offers addiction and mental health treatment on site is the most efficient way to help these members of our community.
 - It currently costs about \$16,000 to \$22,000 per year to house someone with these supports, but about \$30,000-\$50,000 per year for the community to provide services to someone experiencing homelessness on the street, and about \$39,000 per year to pay for someone who is incarcerated.^{xi}

Where is new affordable housing going to be built?

- In a 2019 poll of registered voters in King County, 71% agreed that we should increase the amount of affordable housing in every neighborhood as a way to address homelessness.
- By increasing the amount of affordable housing across the community, rather than in one area, we can share the responsibility for creating the healthy, safe neighborhoods we all want.

ⁱ bit.ly/2GFRnpS

ⁱⁱ bit.ly/2vnYQEK

ⁱⁱⁱ bit.ly/2UMwWwa

^{iv} bit.ly/2IMT9c2

^v bit.ly/2UGOpGp

-
- vi bit.ly/2GRDix5
 - vii bit.ly/2ULebJH
 - viii bit.ly/2WdXZ55
 - ix bit.ly/2UKc498
 - x bit.ly/2L7Yxsg
 - xi bit.ly/2LaG3rg, bit.ly/2ZL31bN
 - xii bit.ly/2LaG3rg
 - xiii bit.ly/2V2JGUD
 - xiv mck.co/2UMYf9V
 - xv bit.ly/2UMFbbA
 - xvi bit.ly/2INpOOy
 - xvii bit.ly/2WeNP4u