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Cc: mayorsoffice@cob.org; [Satpal Sidhu](#); hahuthman@cob.org; laanderson@cob.org; hestone@cob.org; [Pinky T. Vargas](#); [Gene R. Knutson](#)
Subject: Regarding communications
Date: Wednesday, January 15, 2020 7:36:33 PM

Dear Homeless Strategies Workgroup:

Tonight I just read *The Bellingham Herald* article about the unsheltered gentleman that was found dead from exposure and hypothermia last week. https://www.bellinghamherald.com/news/local/article239314573.html?fbclid=IwAR14faDt66KgY-Qm-4RKvsqjKE_VNO1FAw7huX3TtTFP187POQamuRosyyE It was disturbing to me to read the way the information was presented and I wanted to alert this to you because I know you all are working on communications and I feel it's important to avoid the kinds of mistakes that were made in this article.

For those who can't view the article, here are the paragraphs to which I am referring: "Though a homeless man was found dead last week after suffering from exposure or hypothermia, Whatcom County's most recent rounds of extreme cold and snow have apparently not claimed any other lives. "The emergency department at St. Joseph's hospital in Bellingham also has not seen a noticeable increase in the number of cold- or weather-related injuries or ailments, though spokesperson Bev Mayhem told *The Bellingham Herald* that the department's 'volume has been heavy.'"

My general perception from listening to Homeless Strategies Workgroup meetings is that there is an effort to present information of a positive nature. I do not object to positive information being provided, and of course it has its own value and inspirational energy that is critical for people staying engaged. We need to know about the instances where our efforts are achieving desired outcomes. We are putting our minds, hearts, and bodies into attempting to achieve those outcomes, and it is valuable to acknowledge that.

However, it is dangerous to do so to an extent where we are not acknowledging what is happening at the same time we are possibly achieving success. We need to continually acknowledge there are victims everyday to our inability to get enough people doing things that are needed in enough places and manners of doing so to keep people from dying or being injured or becoming ill. Acknowledging these casualties is one thing that allows those people to be granted dignity.

At the most recent Communications subcommittee meetings there was a discussion about getting a sheet of information out that helps staff at organizations open up conversations with the broader community - who may be under some misconceptions - about issues surrounding those who

are unsheltered. Our ability to offer dignity in the way we speak about individuals living in inhumane conditions is going to be critical to successfully having these discussions. I think a lot of what has been discussed by the Communications subcommittee meets this goal, however there are times when language falls into coming more from a marketing perspective, and that's when I feel there is danger of dignity being lost.

When we have had another death of an unsheltered person in winter weather, we can't afford to look at the glass that holds our current sheltering solutions as half-full. Someone without shelter has died of exposure. We don't even know their name. If they had a name that family members could read, do you think the author would have spoken about this person in this way? This is on our watch. There's a heavy volume of folks with cold or weather-related injuries. We are all making mistakes, even though we are talking about how smooth everything is going at the shelters, and how much better folks are getting at putting information out, etc. And our mistakes have consequences that are going to eat up budgets, make more people homeless, and create losses that our community and loved ones will feel, regardless if we make less mistakes and do things better in the future.

So I encourage us all to speak of our efforts, but speak of the inhumane circumstances that exist despite them and of those who are experiencing those inhumane circumstances; speak of what appears to be progress, but speak of where we are still failing and who we are still failing; speak of any reduced tragedies, but speak of the current people who are suffering loss of life, or who missed the cut-off times to sign in to a severe weather shelter, or people who weren't informed of sheltering options, or people who had no transportation to get to a shelter, or people who received information that was in error, or people who are disabled or elderly or have PTSD or have children and pets or stuff they can't afford to lose, or people who - despite the current shelter options offered - feel they have no choice but to sleep outside next to a Depot Market Square building on a 15 degree snowy windy night.

Thanks to all of you for your efforts and accomplishments and I look forward to all of our combined efforts to acknowledge our mistakes and to improve, in preventing the deaths of other people without shelter this winter.

Sincerely,
Dena Jensen
Birch Bay, WA

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