

To: Mayor Fleetwood, County Executive Sidhu, and County Councilmember Buchanan

From: Jason McGill, Executive Director, Northwest Youth Services

cc: Colleagues of the Homeless Strategies Workgroup

RE: Dehumanization of our Unhoused Neighbors

Greetings,

Two weeks ago, I could not have imagined that this would be our first correspondence.

As one of Bellingham's newest citizens, I moved here late last month to take the lead of Northwest Youth Services. Following my life's work to support young people who've experience trauma that often results in experiencing homelessness: this roll felt like more of a calling than a career move. Coming from Seattle, I recognized Bellingham as a tolerant and compassionate community that had a reputation for supporting its neighbors and continue to be excited to call Bellingham HOME.

A HOME provides many vital benefits that are easy to take for granted; safety, a place to sleep, storage for belongings, and protection from the weather. People experiencing homelessness are, by definition, without a home, and so they lack all the benefits a home provides. While certainly not a substitute for proper, permanent homes, homeless encampments provide residents with benefits that alleviate the stress and fear associated with experiencing homelessness. Encampments provide a community of support, a respite from danger and an alternative shelter when community solutions do not meet individualized needs.

From what I can deduce, from my limited time in our community, is that the leaders of the City of Bellingham felt unsafe and threatened by the community that was formed at 210 Lottie, and the young organizers that have sought to support campers. **Moreover, it seems like the tensions between the protesters and the City took precedence over the last three months, and that the needs and lives of our unhoused neighbors were surpassed in the name of protecting our community.**

In the shadow of tomorrow's second sweep of the encampment at Frank Geri Field, I am writing to shed some light on trauma that is being inflicted on our communities most vulnerable neighbors, which seems to be an afterthought when it needs to be at the forefront.

1. There cannot be an emphasis by our City on just ending the visibility of homelessness; rather we need to focus on ending homelessness itself. The actions that the City of Bellingham is taking on its residents experiencing homelessness is futile and counterproductive. Breaking up the encampments without offering residents sufficient housing or shelter leaves the residents without any where to go or any sense of support in getting there.

2. Destroying personal property of these individuals is unacceptable and ineffective. Taking away and destroying the belongings of individuals is against the law. Moreover, there is lack of evidence or statistics that show people experiencing homelessness will move to shelters after a sweep. They are forced to move out of that area into another area which only puts them into a more harmful situation.
3. There have been cases raised to courts over cruel and unusual punishment in the context of homelessness, such as in the case *Pottinger v. Miami*. It is time for our community leaders to understand that sweeping encampments is inhumane and unacceptable.

I look forward to joining each of you as we work toward community solutions that meet the needs of our whole community. I believe that together we can be the seed of the solution.

1. Let us work together to find creative solutions to work alongside our unhoused friends and neighbors to find them long term sustainable housing.
2. Let us maintain encampments while building more affordable housing. If the worry is that encampments will be permanent, then start taking action to make them not permanent and provide opportunity elsewhere.
3. Let us increase shelter accessibility. There simply are not enough accessible and trauma informed shelter beds and space for the population that is currently experiencing homelessness.
4. Let us ensure that our shelters are accessible to everyone, regardless of age, race, sex, neurodiversity, or health issues.
5. Let us limit encampment disruptions. If adults are working on saving for affordable living or trying to get their basic needs met, doing a sweep on their home is not in the best interest of them or our collective community.

Keep on keepin' on!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JM', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jason McGill, Executive Director
Northwest Youth Services