

March 3, 2021

Dear Homeless Strategies Workgroup,

Please see below, my open letter regarding ending homelessness in Bellingham and Whatcom County, which includes a list of urgent community-generated, grassroots needs and solutions.

After reading this, if you have questions or would like to contact me for any reason, Cathy Halka, who helps facilitate the HSW meetings, has my contact information.

Sincerely,

Carmen Gilmore  
Bellingham, WA  
Whatcom County

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## **Thoughts On Ending Homelessness in Bellingham and Whatcom County February 2021**

### Acknowledgements:

- Land acknowledgement: I acknowledge that this letter I am writing today, is written from a place on the traditional, ancestral lands of the Lhaq'te'mish - Lummi Nation and Nuxwsá7aq - Nooksack Nation; as well as all other Salishan families who shared the ancestral homelands and salt waters of Whatcom and the Salish Sea. As a guest to this land, I am thankful and consider it a privilege to be able to live and do my writing here today.
- I also acknowledge my privileges as a housed, white, able-bodied, cisgendered person. My liberation is bound up with the liberation of all people who are marginalized, impacted, economically oppressed, and underrepresented.

***“Respondents rank Homelessness as the most important challenge facing Bellingham.”***

- City of Bellingham Survey, November 2020

**Homelessness can happen to anyone.** People can become unhoused through no fault of their own. People who are unhoused want the same things as housed people: a safe place to live, a sense of purpose and meaning in life often found through work (unpaid or paid), and a community to call home.

**We have a choice to make as a community...** we can choose to make life unbearable for people who are unhoused so that they'll leave and go elsewhere, or we can choose compassion and shelter for all who want it. What kind of community do we want to be?

I believe in a community where housing is a basic human right for all who want it, regardless of mental health, ability, substance use, income, etc.

**Yes, homelessness is an incredibly complex issue.** Yes, the City and County are already doing a lot to address it. But, when we still have thousands of people who remain unhoused, many who are camping rough, clearly more needs to be done. Urgently. Homelessness needs to be treated as the emergency that it is.

**What doesn't work.** Continuously forcing people to move their camps is not a solution. Ticketing and criminalizing unhoused people is not a solution. All of this only heaps more trauma on people who have already been traumatized, discriminated against, and marginalized.

**What might work instead.** Embracing people with compassion, dignity, and assistance. Let's take action toward this end, now.

Act Now. For years, there has been so much talk, so many meetings, so many suggestions for how to move forward on the immediate need for emergency shelters and direct assistance for people living on the streets and camping rough. Yet, very little substantive action has been taken.

More actions, emergency shelters, and direct assistance are needed now. Begin with steps addressing the most urgent needs first, and then continue moving toward with longer-term, more complicated options as we go. "Perfection is the enemy of progress." When we decide we want to try something new, there is often fear of failure and rejection. Let's listen to these fears, but not let them stop us. The end of fear is where great things can happen.

**Considerations to Keep in Mind As We Move Forward With Solutions.** Homelessness is a year-round emergency. Shelter is an essential, basic human need. Because of this, year-round emergency shelters are needed, not just winter emergency shelters. In Bellingham and Whatcom County, there is life-threatening cold in the winter, and life-threatening air quality (smoke) in the summer. Winter emergency sheltering that is set up now will be needed year-round.

Homelessness is a racial justice issue. What is our community doing to address racial disparities among people experiencing homelessness? The Whatcom County 2020 Homeless Point-In-Time Count states, "Persons of color experience rates of homelessness in greater numbers than their white neighbors." And the Whatcom County data shows, people who identify as:

- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander are **10 times** more likely to be unhoused;
- American Indian or Alaska Native are **3 times** more likely to be unhoused;
- Black or African American are **2 times** more likely to be unhoused; and
- Hispanic/Latino are **1.3 times** more likely to be unhoused.

This racial disparity can largely be attributed to long-standing historical and structural racism. Efforts to end homelessness in Bellingham and Whatcom County must also eliminate racial and ethnic disparities within the system. On November 24, 2020, the Whatcom County Council, acting as Health Board, "passed a resolution affirming that racism constitutes a public health crisis in Whatcom

County.” By ending homelessness, by making housing/shelter accessible to all who need it, Whatcom County will be taking an important step toward the racial equity that they have committed to.

The best solutions come from the ground up. “Nothing about us, without us.” People who are unhoused and living the experience of homelessness, know what is needed and what solutions will work best. These are the voices to prioritize. By centering and listening to these voices, and the voices of allies, below are some of the solutions that can be heard...

## **SOLUTIONS** (listed from urgent to longer-term)

- **Urgent:**

- Stop all threats of another sweep. People who were formerly at Camp 210, are now located by Geri Field. Allow a space where people can be guaranteed, in writing, that they will not be swept. Where they can stay in peace, without the constant fear of being moved from place to place.
- Provide for basic human needs. At the bare minimum, provide adequate toilets or porta pots, water (running water or hand washing stations), and garbage bins. The toilets, sinks, showers and garbage bins already located at Civic Field could be used. These basic services are life-saving and health-promoting at all times, but especially during a pandemic.
- Warming shelters, as needed. Continue setting up emergency warming shelters this winter as needed, like the recent warming shelter that was set up at Depot Market. Needed improvements for next time: 1) A larger space. There were times when the Depot Market was too crowded, especially for proper covid precautions. This may have prevented other people from coming inside to seek shelter; 2) Provide enough public notice about the opening so that unhoused community members without access to phones or the internet can be notified; 3) Provide blankets and/or sleeping bags, in addition to the cots and food that were provided. If the City does not provide blankets or sleeping bags, at the very least make public requests for donations of these items.

- **Next:**

- **Rapid Rehousing.** Our community has a rapid rehousing program, which is used to immediately house people when they become unhoused. This helps to avoid the daily trauma people experience from living on the streets. Implement this program to immediately house everyone who is currently unhoused. Additional services will also be needed. If the City and County are unsure how to fully fund this program, jointly issue a community call-to-action to creatively rally the ideas and funds needed. If enough funds are not immediately available to rapidly rehouse everyone, then immediately implement safe camping spaces, and tiny home villages as discussed below.
- **Safe camping spaces - indoor or outdoor.** Immediately identify 3-4 camping sites (20 to 40 people per site), with additional sites as needed. The spaces could be indoors with sufficient airflow, or outdoors with large coverings over the individual tents to help protect the tents from the wind and elements. These camping sites will be places for people to safely camp (with basic services like toilets, running water, garbage bins, etc), without the fear of being forcibly moved. These safe camping sites can then

transition into tiny home villages. Safe camping sites could be set up in less than 2 weeks (the Swift Haven tiny home village was up and running in about 2 weeks).

- **Tiny home villages.** As safe camping spaces are being put in place, also work to:  
1) immediately identify space for 4 tiny home villages (20 to 40 people per village);  
2) build or order the corresponding number of tiny homes or pallet homes; and  
3) immediately hire enough housing managers for 24/7 coverage.  
Campers can use their own tents until the tiny homes or pallet shelters arrive. Expand the number of tiny home villages as needed.

A proven model. This type of tiny home sheltering has been proven to work in Bellingham, it is quick to set up (Swift Haven was set up in about 2 weeks), and is the most cost-effective housing/shelter model that has been instituted in town so far. Institute the Foursquare Tiny Home Village Model on one piece of property, or locate 4 pieces of property for four different villages. (In the Foursquare Model, tiny homes are arranged into adjacent groups of 25, in a foursquare configuration, with a large service building also divided 4 ways and centered between the four villages. The service building has kitchens, bathrooms, showers, services, etc.)

No-barrier to High-barrier. Have a variety of barrier options: no-barrier, low-barrier, med-barrier, high-barrier. Survey potential residents to determine each person's preference. We absolutely need no-barrier options, but also varied barrier options. Some campers will want some barrier requirements for where they live, some won't, so let's have a variety of options to meet the variety of needs.

Specific populations. Some villages could cater to specific populations: elderly and medically fragile, families with children, women with an emphasis on transgender and LGBTQ+ women, veterans, etc. Survey potential residents to see what preferred or natural groupings there might be, and then set up the number of villages needed, with no more than 40 people per village.

City/County get these up and running, and then search for operators/organizations/partners to take over operation of the villages. The City and County already have the land, money, and hiring ability. Time is of the essence. We have a homelessness emergency situation, and no organizations have responded to the City's RFPs for emergency winter sheltering. In this situation, we desperately need the City and County to step up, either jointly or separately, and provide these life-saving emergency shelters. We cannot wait for, or rely on, nonprofits to fill this gap. This point cannot be stressed enough. Housing/shelter is a basic human right and need, like water, sanitation, etc. The City and County can get the shelters up and running, quickly. HomesNOW, a 100% volunteer-run organization, has shown how medium-barrier shelters can be up and running in 2 weeks. If HomesNOW can do this, the City and County definitely can. Once the City and County get the shelters up and running, they can work with existing or new nonprofits/NGOs to take over operation of the villages. Some villages, as they become mostly self run (like Unity Village), could even be supported to eventually become their own nonprofit operators, if they desire.

Run these tiny home emergency shelters year-round. Emergency Winter Shelters are not enough. We need year-round emergency shelters, due to year-round weather emergencies (cold, smoke, heat), and because a large number of people in our community are experiencing homelessness year-round.

- **Hotel rooms, etc.** Tiny home shelters will not work for everyone, and there need to be other available options. For example, hotel rooms, apartments, single-room-occupancy or boarding room type options. The City/County could buy motels or hotels, like Morning Glory Inn & Suites. If Morning Glory will sell to the City, the City could become the operator until another operator can be found. There are many housing management companies, could the City pay one to operate Morning Glory?
- **24-hour, year-round, public rest stops** (warming centers in the winter months, cooling & clean air centers in the summer months). A place, or places, where people can go to get out of the elements, use the bathroom, rest, use the internet, get some water and a snack. There is a rest stop in the works. What can be done to expedite its startup?

**Where there's a will, there's a way.** Any problems or concerns with the above-listed, ground up solutions can be figured out. We are only limited by our creativity and imagination. If there is the will to provide these life-saving services for our community, the answers to address any problems or concerns will be found.

As someone who's been paying attention to the issue of homelessness closely for the past 5 years (by providing direct services, volunteering, attending meetings ad nauseum), what has become super clear to me is that the only thing keeping us from ending homelessness (or at least getting to functional zero) is the lack of political will. There is a lack of political will and leadership to unite behind the goal of ending homelessness in Bellingham and Whatcom County and to use our public resources to that end.

This realization is both positive and negative. Positive, because our elected officials can decide to help if they choose. Negative, because our elected officials can decide to not help if they choose.

The City and County control our public resources, and these resources can provide everything needed to end homelessness in Bellingham and Whatcom County. We have: the land, the money, the partner nonprofits/NGOs, the ideas, and the community support.

If our elected leaders can create the call for action and unity needed to bring it all together, there is no doubt in my mind that we can get to functional zero, and soon. Let's start with one action at a time, now, today, and move on from there. Elected leaders, rally our community together, take action today. We can do this, together!

Sincerely,

Carmen Gilmore  
Bellingham & Whatcom County resident

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## OTHER REFLECTIONS:

- **The City and County Are Not Service Providers (“Operators”)**

*We Should Rely On Nonprofits To Meet The Needs Of Our Unhoused Community Members, Because the City and County are Not Service Providers, or “Operators.”*

The nonprofits and other NGOs in our community are not currently able to meet the need for emergency sheltering for people who are unhoused. The City’s RFPs for emergency winter sheltering and safe parking have gone unanswered. We cannot wait for, or rely on, nonprofits to fill this gap. Nor should we.

We desperately need the City and County to step up to fill this life-saving, emergency need for shelter. With all of our public resources and power at their disposal, the City and County can quickly get these emergency sheltering options up and running, and then work with existing or new nonprofits/NGOs to take over operation of the villages. Some villages, as they become mostly self run (like Unity Village), could even be supported to eventually become their own operators, if they desire.

The City and County already have the land, money, and hiring ability. Housing/shelter is a basic human right and need, like water, sanitation, etc. HomesNOW, a 100% volunteer-run organization, has shown how medium-barrier shelters can be up and running in about 2 weeks. If HomesNOW can do this, the City and County definitely can.

The argument is often made that the City and County cannot be the ones to set up tiny home villages because they are not service providers, or “operators.” Not true. The City and County provide all types of services for our community (utilities, libraries, parks, street infrastructure, emergency medical services, etc), and have all types of specialized employees (lawyers, engineers, medics, etc). Why couldn’t the City and County hire specialized housing managers to help run tiny home villages (until these villages can become mostly self-run, or run by other NGOs)? The City pays the salaries of the Opportunity Council’s HOT team, and the OppCo already employs Housing Case Managers. Why not work with OppCo to have the City/County pay some additional salaries for tiny home housing managers to help manage the tiny home villages?

The mission of the City of Bellingham, as stated on their home webpage (<https://cob.org/gov>) is to: “support safe, satisfying and prosperous community life **by providing the citizens of Bellingham with quality, cost-effective services that meet today’s needs** and form a strong foundation for the future.”

There is currently an emergency need for housing services for our unhoused citizens. In lieu of housing, the following essential, basic-need services would be needed: safe camping spaces, safe parking spaces, tiny home villages, storage lockers, and public rest stops. The City could provide these services, and these services would fall under the City’s mission of supporting “safe, satisfying, and prosperous community life.”

The City’s home webpage (<https://cob.org/gov>), also lists existing City-provided services, including: street infrastructure, parking, utilities (water, wastewater, and stormwater),

emergency medical services, a golf course, cemetery, museum, pool, libraries, nearly 100 parks, a stadium, and athletic fields.

Many of these services are NON-lifesaving services and prioritize housed people and dead people. It seems like providing lifesaving shelter/housing for our unhoused community members would supersede many other City services. Especially since, according to the City's Services webpage, "**The City of Bellingham is committed to addressing the homelessness crisis in Bellingham.**" (See <https://cob.org/services>, under the Housing and Human Services button (<https://cob.org/services/housing>), and then the Addressing Homelessness button (<https://cob.org/services/housing/homeless>.)

- **Where Will All of the Needed Safe Camping Sites or Tiny Home Villages Be Located?**  
*If More Than 4 Tiny Home Villages Are Needed Where Will Additional Sites Be Located?*

Many suitable locations for tiny home villages have previously been identified. These include:

1. The site that the Port recently offered for 25 tiny homes;
2. The site on Northwest Ave that the County previously offered to HomesNOW;
3. The 911 call center lot [former Safe Haven site];
4. The parking lot behind city hall [former Winter Haven site];
5. The old St. Luke's parking lot would be another good location.

Each of Bellingham's 25 neighborhoods, plus every neighborhood throughout the County, could also host a tiny home village. Each City throughout the County could help each of their neighborhoods get a tiny home village up and running. Our elected officials could call on our cities and County to come together and make this a County-wide goal and challenge. We're all in this together! Each neighborhood association could be invited to come up with a spot for a tiny home village in their neighborhood, choosing a location and design that they prefer. If any neighborhood declines the invitation, the City could then determine a location in that neighborhood. There could be friendly neighborhood contests to see which neighborhood can come up with the best design and fastest startup. During the months-long process that it would take for each neighborhood to get their tiny home village up and running, the City/County/Port could provide temporary camping sites for people on any of the 5 above-listed sites, or elsewhere.

Additionally, our public educational institutions could be asked to help out, in the spirit of "we're all in this together!" Western Washington University, Whatcom Community College, Northwest Indian College, and Bellingham Technical College could all be invited to provide locations for one or more tiny home villages - for the many unhoused students, as well as for unhoused community members.

- **Unhoused People Can Go to Base Camp for Emergency Shelter**  
*We Don't Need Additional Emergency Shelters Because We Have Base Camp.*

Base Camp is not open 24/7, and there is a certain population of people that cannot, or will not, stay at Base Camp. The reasons people give for not staying at Base Camp are numerous and have been stated over and over again, for years. These reasons include, but are not limited to: people with PTSD; people who are medically fragile or who have certain conditions that make sleeping on a floor or on cots in confined areas impossible; couples (and parents

with dependent adult children) with different gender identities who want to stay together for safety purposes, but are not allowed due to the separation of women's and men's sleeping areas; people who identify as LGBTQ+ and do not feel safe staying at Base Camp; people with past religious trauma who do not feel comfortable accessing religious-run services of any kind; people who do not feel safe at Base Camp for whatever reason, especially during covid; people who have been banned from Base Camp either temporarily or permanently, etc.

- **What's Wrong With Sweeps or "Camp Clean-ups."**

Continuously forcing people to move their camps is not a solution. Ticketing and criminalizing unhoused people is not a solution. All of this only heaps more trauma on people who have already been traumatized, discriminated against, and marginalized.

Stop the sweeps. Sweeps are expensive and a huge waste of public resources. Sweeps do not solve the problem, they only exacerbate it. It's whitewashing to call these actions "camp cleanups." People being forcibly moved from place to place, facing harassment, and losing property causes additional pain, suffering, and trauma. Instead, offer people individualized housing support and services.

- **Animals Are Treated Better.**

*Why Are Stray Animals in Town Treated With More Services And More Humanely Than People Who Are Unhoused?*

What does it say about us as a community, when stray dogs and cats receive better treatment than people without housing? When we encounter stray dogs and cats in Bellingham and Whatcom County, they are brought to an indoor shelter and offered food, water, healthcare and a bed to sleep on. Meanwhile, people without housing are harassed, marginalized, criminalized, traumatized, and chased away. People are not offered the same, basic services as stray animals in our town.

- **How Will This Be Paid For? The Cost is Too High.**

*The Cost to Shelter Everyone in Tiny Home Villages is Too Expensive. Who is going to pay for this expense?*

More cost effective to shelter/house people. Data shows it is more cost effective to shelter/house people, than for people to remain unhoused.

Also, tiny homes are the most cost effective shelter/housing option currently available in Bellingham/Whatcom County. HomesNOW has shown how extremely cost effective their tiny home villages are. Unity Village, which houses approximately 20-25 people, costs around \$1,600/mo to run. These costs are covered by a combination of private money donations, utility payments by the residents, and some City-donated utilities. And, Swift Haven costs only what the City is paying in additional utilities (water/sewer/electric). Both tiny home communities are being run by volunteers and residents, so for City- and County-run sites you would need to include the additional cost of employees to provide 24/7 housing management. However, even with this additional cost, tiny home villages are still the most cost-effective shelter/housing solution currently available in Bellingham and Whatcom County. The City and County could also help offset expenses by using their own land, or seeking donations of land, materials and money.

The City already pays Homeless Outreach Team salaries, and the Opportunity Council already employs Housing Case Managers. Could the City partner with OppCo to hire additional HOT team members or Housing Managers to be these specially-trained housing managers?

Additionally, with the City and County running these emergency shelters, they can make sure the residents are connected with all available housing and health services.

Money is not the issue.

Also, I keep hearing electeds and others say that money is not the issue for why additional emergency shelters cannot be run. There seems to be enough City and County money currently available for emergency sheltering solutions.

- **These Services Will Bring More Unhoused People To Bellingham/Whatcom County.**

*We don't want to increase services because this will bring more unhoused people to Bellingham and Whatcom County.*

Ideally every community would provide services for their unhoused community members, and people would not have to travel to other towns to access services. Locally, about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of people who are unhoused had their last stable housing in Whatcom County. The Whatcom County 2020 Homeless Point-In-Time count states, "that statistic has been fairly stable despite new investments toward ending homelessness. This data refutes a common misperception that new services attract new people from elsewhere."

To be sure though, an important piece of the puzzle of ending homelessness in Bellingham and Whatcom County will be for us to share and shout our successes far and wide. It will be important for us to proactively share what is working for us, regarding getting people into shelters and housing. We will especially want to share this information with nearby cities and counties, including: Mount Vernon, Marysville, Skagit County, Everett; and encourage and assist these cities and counties to set up their own services. If every city/county in WA, and throughout the country, is able to provide shelters/housing for people when they become unhoused, then we will truly have a shot at ending homelessness (getting to functional zero).

Having shelter and housing available in every town, for every person who becomes unhoused, would also allow people to maintain their existing support systems (friends, family, neighbors, current service providers), and make it easier for people to get back into housing.

If we lived in a community where everyone's basic needs were met, think of the unleashed human potential, ideas, and contributions that would be possible. What a beautiful, healthy community we would be.