

MEDIA CONTACT

Jacque Seaman / Aaron Blank
compassion@feareygroup.com

(206) 343-1543

***Interviews available upon request*



Social Service, Business and Neighborhood Leaders Advance Plan to Address Chronic Homelessness and Racial Inequities Among the Homeless Population

Proposed City of Seattle Charter Amendment would require provision of low-barrier, rapid-access mental health and substance use disorder services combined with emergency and permanent housing; poll data show 71% in favor of amendment’s approach

Thursday, April 1, 2021 (SEATTLE) — A group of diverse civic and community members, business and neighborhood leaders, has filed a City of Seattle Charter Amendment focused on tangible, supportive solutions for the homelessness crisis that has grown worse during the Covid-19 pandemic. Homeless services and housing providers have also expressed their strong support for the proposed measure.

The groups worked collaboratively to craft specific action steps to address homelessness through a citizen initiative to amend the City Charter. It would require the city to provide low-barrier, rapid-access mental health and substance use disorder and services; field engagement; and emergency and permanent housing options with a focus on people with high barriers to services and those who are chronically homeless.

Behavioral health support is often a key missing component of current interventions. Along with the mandate to provide immediate care related to mental health and substance use disorder, the plan requires the city to provide an additional 2,000 units of emergency or permanent housing within one year of the charter amendment being adopted by Seattle voters. Results from a February 2021 poll show 71% of Seattle voters are in favor of the charter amendment’s approach, including the focus on behavioral health services. The charter amendment requires the city, in conjunction with King County, to deploy a behavioral health rapid-response capability as an alternative, where appropriate, to a law-enforcement crisis response.

The amendment also prioritizes addressing factors known to drive the overrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color experiencing homelessness.

The amendment further proposes a coordinated plan to move people experiencing homelessness into emergency and permanent housing, instead of living in encampments, including enhanced shelters, tiny houses, hotel-motel rooms and other forms of non-congregate emergency or permanent housing. It requires the city to ensure that “city parks, playgrounds, sports fields, public spaces and sidewalks and streets remain open and clear of encampments” once the programs and services required by the amendment are made available.

As long as the declared civil emergency related to homelessness is in effect, the charter amendment directs the city government to accelerate the production of emergency and permanent housing by waiving building permit fees, treating housing permit applications as “first-in-line” for expedited treatment and refunding to the payee the city’s portion of the sales tax paid for these facilities. The

amendment also allows the city to waive normal land-use regulations, to the full extent permitted by state law, so emergency and permanent housing can be more quickly established.

The charter amendment petition will be available for signature in April. Signatures will be gathered through early June. It is the goal to have the measure placed on the November 2021 ballot for city voters. To qualify for the ballot, the signatures of at least 33,060 registered Seattle voters must be collected.

The last official count of people living unsheltered in Seattle, completed in January 2020, estimated there are 3,738 individuals living in unauthorized encampments and vehicles in Seattle. These individuals are living outdoors in tents and other structures in parks, playgrounds, sports fields, sidewalks and streets, and in vehicles.

Support from community and civic leaders:

“We can and should be doing more for our people experiencing homelessness. We need a committed, concerted effort that prioritizes mental health and drug addiction support,” said Erin Goodman, executive director of SODO Business Improvement Area. “By shifting existing funds and resources to address critical human services, we can prioritize helping our city’s most vulnerable people with the most basic needs and ensure public health and safety for our community.”

“I’m excited for this initial first step in ensuring an equitable response towards the crisis we are currently facing. The only way to address the unjust racial disparities is with an all-encompassing culturally appropriate approach in every aspect from the outreach to the physical placement,” said Derrick Belgarde, deputy director at Chief Seattle Club.

“We’ve seen recently that almost everyone living on our streets is willing to relocate to a hotel room or other lodging that feels secure and leads to permanent housing, not back to the street a week or so later. We’ve also seen that many people have major barriers and need a lot of support, at least initially. This framework offers the promise of actually prioritizing the people who have been left out for so long and making a plan that will reach and sustain them with assistance they welcome,” said Lisa Daugaard, director at Public Defender Association.

“We know the need for emergency housing in our region is vast, so the idea of opening 2,000 housing units in conjunction with behavioral health services is something we have long supported. However, we know from previous experience that without the resources, people will remain on the streets. We must remember there are people behind the statistics. These are individuals, sometimes families, neighbors and coworkers, or even our children’s classmates. We must do everything we can to support them,” said Gordon McHenry, Jr., president & CEO of United Way King County.

“We’re heartened whenever we see the need for more housing amplified. But the rich promise offered by safe, healthy, and affordable housing can only be fully realized when housing is addressed as a part of a comprehensive strategy that recognizes, respects, and responds to all challenges to a person’s well-being and stability. These interrelated challenges require not only urgency and clarity, but the kind of forceful cross-sector resolve this action so powerfully embodies,” said Marty Kooistra, executive director at Housing Development Consortium of Seattle-King County.

“I believe this is a first step in true collaboration between the business and provider communities. Chronic unsheltered homelessness is too big of an issue for any one sector to go it alone. This charter

provides a road map for business, service providers, government, and philanthropy to address this crisis together. It ensures ALL members of our community are treated with dignity and care and have access to basic needs, like housing and services,” said Paul Lambros, CEO at Plymouth Housing.

“The root causes of homelessness are complex and many stem from deep systemic, social inequalities. The solutions must be collaborative, comprehensive and empathetic to better support our unsheltered neighbors. This amendment provides a pathway for our community partners to come together and bring about real change,” said Angela Dunleavy, CEO at FareStart.

“The experience of homelessness is extremely hard on people, and disproportionately affects people of color and people with disabilities. What works to change that is a caring and compassionate approach combined with the resources needed for people to have a safe place to stay and receive services tailored to their individual needs. I am glad to have this vision clearly stated and endorsed by such a wide range of people,” said Daniel Malone, executive director at Downtown Emergency Services Center.

“Homelessness is not a political statement. It's a humankind crisis. This amendment isn't perfect, but it is an important first step in working collaboratively, as a community to develop effective solutions to help our most vulnerable citizens.,” said Gina Hall, executive director, Uplift Northwest.

“It's good to see agreement emerge that it's going to take all of us working together to build homes for all, and it's gratifying to see so many diverse leaders commit to that effort,” said Steve Woolworth, CEO at Evergreen Treatment Services.

“DSA has been at the table with key stakeholders to help shape this much-needed action to address the crisis of chronic homelessness,” said Downtown Seattle Association President & CEO Jon Scholes. “This is the type of approach our members have long advocated for to ensure we can bring more people inside and provide the services they need.”

For more information about the citizen initiative and to be notified when the petition is available for signature, please visit www.compassionseattle.org.

About the Campaign to Collect Signatures

Compassion Seattle is the registered campaign committee for the purpose of collecting signatures. It is an alliance of business, civic, and community leaders that has come together to adopt the Charter amendment through the citizen initiative process. Compassion Seattle will deploy volunteers and a signature collection firm to obtain the 33,0060 valid signatures. Signature collection will begin immediately after Seattle City Clerk review and the City Attorney provides the ballot title.

For more information, to donate or volunteer, visit www.compassionseattle.org. To join Compassion Seattle in social discussion, visit [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).