



## **Seattle Human Services Coalition's concerns and questions about City of Seattle Charter Amendment Measure 29**

June 24, 2021

**The Seattle Human Services Coalition (SHSC)** is a multi-cultural, multi-racial community of 182 nonprofit human service agencies and programs who help Seattle residents reach their full potential by providing support like food, shelter, supportive housing, health care, and services for people with disabilities, elders, youth, and survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. SHSC was formed 34 years ago at the request of a Seattle mayor to bring providers together to bring forward the best collective thinking of the City's provider partners on policies needed to reach the goals for community well-being we share with our elected officials.

**Seattle relies on human service providers to build and support well-being, so that all of us have what we need to thrive at every stage of life.** Human services are an essential part of Seattle's infrastructure of well-being, working to ensure that all our neighbors can thrive - across diverse neighborhoods, cultures, and generations. From youth development to senior centers, community clinics, domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy, food banks and meal programs, homeless shelters as well as prevention: human services build well-being. We support Seattle residents to reach their full potential.

SHSC's leaders have discussed the City of Seattle Charter Amendment Measure 29, referred to as the "Compassion Seattle" initiative by its organizers. This measure would take the step of changing our city's charter to set policies for how the City will respond to people living in our city without homes.

**SHSC members agree heartily with the big picture goals regarding the need to bring more resources to bear on the issue of homelessness in Seattle and the necessity of public and private entities, nonprofits and businesses collaborating on solutions, but SHSC's members are very concerned about some of the potential ultimate impacts of this particular measure.**

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**1) There is no additional source of funds identified in this measure. Where will the funding come from? Will other successful human services that support Seattle residents and prevent homelessness be cut?**

**One of our concerns with this charter amendment is how it will affect all other human services the City of Seattle currently funds if this unfunded mandate is put in place.** The charter amendment measure requires setting aside an amount equal to 12% of the city's General Fund for a "Human Services Fund" to allocate to solutions specifically around shelter and housing as well as the full range of community health and human services. Currently the City of Seattle already allocates about 11% of the General Fund for a spectrum of services that build well-being in communities throughout Seattle which includes a significant portion funding homelessness services. In addition, early childhood education, gender-based violence prevention and intervention, youth development, and services for seniors all contribute to successfully preventing and addressing homelessness. We achieve results by building, maintaining, and repairing well-being at different points in people's lives. Human services both prevent problems before they occur and provide tools and support when challenges arise. The human service system is made of nonprofit organizations that are already efficient and results-driven. Providers combine purposeful planning, a reliance on research and evaluation, skills and expertise, and a deep connection to their communities to provide the tools and materials needed to construct community well-being. Nonprofits leverage a range of private and public funding sources and utilize sound financial practices to achieve results. Decades of accountability, prioritizing, and re-prioritizing has gone into building the set of effective supports Seattle currently provides for residents.

However, the additional 1% the measure stipulates must be added to current levels of human services funding, will only equal about \$18million, which will not be sufficient to fund the actions required by the charter amendment measure. **There is no additional new source for funds identified.**

**So, where will the funding needed to implement the new shelter, housing, and services at the scale required by the measure come from?** While the charter amendment measure is silent on where the funds for the actions required by the measure will come from, some of the advocates for the measure have suggested that funding from current successful programs should be "reprioritized" with those services cut and funds moved into the shelter, housing, and services required by the measure. This would mean **removing or reducing those programs that currently support Seattle residents to avoid homelessness, which ultimately means putting more of our neighbors at risk of homelessness.**

- How will our Mayor and City Councilmembers prevent this from happening?
- What are some of the financial trade-offs that are allowed or required if this charter amendment is put into place? What current allocations could be cut to meet the requirements of the proposed amendment? Where could the money come from?



## **2) People living the challenge of homelessness were not included in proposing this “solution.”**

Our second concern with this proposed charter amendment is that it was developed without the perspective and wisdom of people with lived experience. It is critical to work in coalition with people who are currently experiencing or have previously experienced homelessness in order to propose solutions that will work in real life.

We also know that People of Color are disproportionately at risk of housing instability, homelessness, and displacement. If encampments are removed without housing or acceptable shelter available, we are at risk of causing additional harm to an already endangered Black and Brown population.

- If this measure passes, how will Seattle’s Mayor and Councilmembers solicit and follow leadership from groups of people with lived experience in defining the appropriate solutions as well as homeless services and housing providers before any removals of people without homes?



## **3) This measure is proposing a unilateral Seattle-centric approach, just at the moment we finally are implementing a multi-lateral, regional approach.**

**Another one of our concerns is that the approach laid out by Charter Amendment Measure 29 unrealistically leaves the federal government as well as the rest of King County out of the solution.** Since it is clear that homelessness is not a problem that ends at Seattle’s, or any city’s, city limits, stakeholders across King County have agreed that the best approach is, at minimum, a regional approach. However the proposed charter amendment does not allow for regional partners to make decisions together on priorities or best strategies. This forced, unilateral approach brings forward several questions.

- How would this change in the charter impact the regional effort that is just coming on-line through the Regional Homelessness Authority? Would it undermine that long sought effort? Have these questions been addressed by the charter amendment’s organizers? Have these questions been discussed with Marc Dones, CEO of the Regional Homelessness Authority, and leaders throughout King County?
- What will the impact be outside of Seattle when encampments in Seattle are removed without enough appropriate shelter or housing? Will some of the people

without homes move out into other areas of King County? Are those areas prepared for this with the full range of supportive services?



**4) Proponents of this charter amendment have expressed ongoing opposition to new sources of revenue to pay for services they agree are needed AND at the same time the actions required by the amendment may cause us to lose federal funding for homelessness services in Seattle and King County.**

Another unanswered question that concerns us is how this measure will impact the amount of federal funding allocated to Seattle and King County to address homelessness going forward. Housing and Urban Development provides funds across the country for services related to homelessness. They allocate the funds using a complicated metric which includes needs in the area and success of strategies to date. Our area could lose federal funding because we have increased the type of housing or shelter that charter proponents believe will help them get to the 2000 units in the short time frame required by the proposed amendment, but could negatively affect this measurement and reduce federal funding.

If action required by the charter amendment increases the number of people who are considered unsheltered by HUD, we risk losing funding from the federal government to fund homelessness services because we are less able as a region to show effectiveness by reducing the number of people experiencing homelessness.

This is very wonky policy talk, but HUD contributes about \$50 million a year to this work, so the funds at issue are significant.



**5) Embedding public policy, including budget policy, into the city charter instead of using legislative tools, will slow Seattle's ability to respond to changing opportunities and needs.**

Another one of our concerns is that this measure would change Seattle's charter in order to set public policy or make budget decisions. The charter of a city is usually where the methods of voting and governance are laid out. An example of a recent change was when we moved to district representation for City Council, for example. These actions change how we elect our public leaders, but still leave policy decisions to the people we elect through the processes laid out in the charter. We don't set policy by charter because the

charter cannot be responsive to the needs and opportunities of any given moment or year. This ability to be agile is why we set policy, including annual budget policy, in a more flexible, responsive manner, through legislation not charter amendment.



**SHSC supports taking the steps necessary to end homelessness across Seattle and King County. Proposed Charter Amendment Measure 29 will not accomplish that and could lead us in the opposite direction:**

- SHSC members support building 2,000 additional new units of permanent supportive housing and enough behavioral health treatment to eliminate waiting lists within the next year, as described in Charter Amendment Measure 29. However, this particular mandate does not identify an additional revenue source to do this work, and since municipal boundaries are porous and the current need is large, 2,000 new units with services will not address the full challenge, so **we must be certain that our actions as a community support regional collaboration instead of undermining it with unilateral mandates that fall short of achieving our objectives.**
- SHSC members also do not support reductions in the broad range of successful community health and human services currently supporting Seattle residents in order to accomplish creating more shelter, housing, and supportive services. **All of these services are needed by different people in our communities.**
- Many analyses, including one commissioned by the Chamber of Commerce, have concluded that **our community needs additional sustained, dedicated investments of the size necessary to address the magnitude of our challenge with homelessness.** We agree.
- And finally, public policy should be decided by legislation, not by amending the city charter. And public policy should include the voices of the people most affected, unlike the way this charter amendment was formulated.

**We know what works! The path to solve the regional challenges of homelessness is to invest in the solutions at the magnitude of the challenge together across the county. Let's do this right instead of taking paths that look like short cuts to reach our shared goals, but cause more problems in the long run.**