

Governor Jay Inslee
Director Lisa Brown
Director John Wiesman

Cc:

David Postman
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Amber Leaders
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The undersigned organizations write with great urgency to focus your attention on the immense risk that COVID-19 poses to people experiencing homelessness and to those in unstable housing situations who are one step away from homelessness.

This crisis is unfolding rapidly, and we are all forced to work to prepare, mitigate, and plan for multiple scenarios simultaneously. We appreciate that the state is working rapidly to take measures to slow the spread of this disease, support public health measures and health care interventions, and keep people as safe as possible. We fear that without direct and specific focus on the health, safety, sanitation, and shelter needs of people experiencing homelessness, this already-vulnerable population will not get the immediate and necessary care, practical assistance, and mitigation support resources they need to prevent severe illness, complications, and death. Washington residents who are currently homeless have much more serious health concerns than those who have homes. They are likely to have multiple acute and chronic health and behavioral health needs and are disproportionately living with disabilities. Many have complex medical needs or are medically fragile or elderly. In too many shelters, thousands of these vulnerable people are in close quarters, where they may not be able to comply with current public health guidance. Others may be in shelter that is only available overnight or only part of the day, or without shelter altogether. People who are homeless are at increased risk of serious illness or worse when (not if) they are exposed to the coronavirus. Therefore, the undersigned organizations, many whom work to provide shelter, housing, health and behavioral health services, prevention, food, transportation, employment, childcare, and other vital human services respectfully and urgently request the following:

- Please assign a state agency to be in charge of coordination and act as a “centralized command” for providers, agencies, and local government to point to. Commerce is best equipped for this role given their staff who have deep expertise on homelessness, shelter, housing, and their connections with providers across the state.
- More shelter beds are needed in order to employ social distancing in the homeless shelter system. In addition to what is needed to keep our shelter system operating safely and in accordance with local and state guidance at current capacity, we need to shelter thousands more people in a variety of ways.
- More beds are needed for isolation, quarantine, and respite for people who do not have homes in order to provide appropriate care at sub-hospital sites.

- More personnel are needed to staff shelters and related services, and to fill in as shelter workers fall ill. These personnel will need training and orientation to match the settings in which they will be deployed. Funds are needed to increase staffing.
- Homeless direct service providers must be prioritized for testing in order to allow quick action to identify and slow the spread of infection and disease among this medically fragile population.
- Additional supplies such as personal protective equipment, cleaning, sanitation, and hygiene materials and equipment (including portable handwashing stations and mobile hygiene units), and blankets, tents, and tarps and field kitchens are needed to support those who will shelter in place are needed.
- Providers of affordable and rent-restricted housing to those who are vulnerable or medically fragile, including Permanent Supportive Housing providers and providers of housing to seniors and to people with disabilities, need access to testing and guidance on how to support and care for tenants who are quarantined or who are in isolation. Basic care resources like food and supplies for these households will be needed as well.
- On-going and updated training is needed for homeless service providers and housing providers on all of the basics of containing the spread and of supporting clients, guests, residents, and tenants who are in isolation or in quarantine.
- State resources are needed for all of the above.
- Lastly, we must act now to prevent more people from experiencing homelessness by
 - a) Placing a moratorium on evictions for the duration of this crisis. Already we see many tenants who have been served with eviction notices who are not able to attend court to defend themselves because their health status means that they should not risk exposure by using public transportation or being in crowded public areas. Even with a solid defense, tenants who are unable to show up in court will lose. Should add something about the people who are losing income, hours, or jobs and will shortly be unable to pay rent – need for rent subsidies and,
 - b) Providing rental assistance to households to prevent evictions. Many households are facing unemployment or reduced work hours, and evictions statewide will increase without a significant investment in rental assistance. Increases in rental assistance should go hand-in-hand with a moratorium on evictions.
- We must ensure that we do not make people who are currently homeless and without shelter more susceptible to COVID-19 or other diseases, and worsen existing health conditions. Personnel whose focus is to identify and displace people who are homeless and living outside or in vehicles should be redirected to work under the supervision of teams with relevant outreach, public health, health care, and behavioral health expertise to disseminate health information, assess and monitor health status, and distribute shelter-in-place resources and sanitation and hygiene supplies to people who cannot be accommodated in shelters.

Please act swiftly to address the needs of this population. Washington State has thousands of people experiencing homelessness, most of them highly vulnerable and in one or more of the known categories of people who are at high risk during the CORVID-19 outbreak.

Thank you,