

Homeless Strategies Workgroup Meeting – August 23, 2019

Comments & recommendations for the workgroup from Carmen Gilmore, Bellingham resident and volunteer with BasicsPNW's Safe Storage Lockers program:

- In the July 26th Homeless Strategies Workgroup meeting summary, I noticed the following statement regarding the lockers program, "Safe Storage is interested in leading the project." This is not really the case. We would actually love to see the city, county, and port lead the locker program, and our role to be offering our assistance in getting the program up and running. We want to be out of business as soon as possible, because that would mean everyone is housed. We see the storage lockers as a temporary, interim program that can be converted into lockers for travelers, once everyone has housing. The only reason BasicsPNW is taking the lead on this program is because no one else stepped up. So, what we have are concerned community members, all part-time volunteers, bringing this program to life because no other existing entity would take it on. I'd like to point out, that because of this, we've had to spend valuable time, years even, putting in place and setting up things that the City, County and Port already have. For example, we've had to get...
 - lawyers
 - insurance
 - property to install the lockers on
 - a bank account & business entity
 - staff, and
 - funding

Every single one of these things are things the city, county and port already have. In fact, the Port already has some day-use, outdoor storage lockers in use at the ferry terminal. Frankly, it's frustrating to think how quickly the City, County, and Port could set up storage lockers, if the will was there.

- I also happened to take a look at that the Member List for this workgroup, and noticed that it seems to be almost absent of homeless voices. There are 6 members from the county, 4 from the city, 1 from the port, some from service providers, a church, the Lummi Nation, a business advocate, and only one homeless advocate. It's not clear by looking at the list how many of the 19 members have personally experienced homelessness, but I'm guessing it's not close to a majority and may even be only 1 or 2 people. I seriously question the effectiveness of a Homeless Strategies Workgroup that doesn't have a majority of voices at the table informed by the personal experience of homelessness. The people who know the most about what homeless people in Whatcom County need and what measures will be effective, are the people who are currently or formerly homeless. There's a saying, "Nothing about us, without us." Meaning that if we're going to have an effective Homeless Strategies Workgroup, it's vital to have a significant number of people who've experienced homelessness sitting at the table and being part of the decision making. And, it would also be a good to include voices from the grassroots organizations involved with homelessness like HomesNOW, BasicsPNW, Cascadia Volunteer Advocacy, and Homeless Voice.

- I would also like to acknowledge the historical and current influences of settler colonialism, white supremacy, white fragility, patriarchy, religion, capitalism and ableism in our community and in these meetings. If we think these influences have nothing to do with the current state of homelessness in Bellingham and Whatcom County, we are sorely mistaken. Our Coast Salish brothers and sisters have lived right here, for some 12,000 years, ever since the beginning of human existence on this land. In those many millennia, prior to the arrival of European settlers in Whatcom County, there was not the homelessness like we see today. Not only do we have an outrageously high amount of homelessness in Whatcom County, but our local statistics show much higher rates of homelessness in our populations of Native Americans, people of color, LGBTQ, people with disabilities, and women facing domestic violence. Actively dismantling the influences of settler colonialism, white supremacy, white fragility, patriarchy, religion, capitalism and ableism everywhere, including right here at these meetings is imperative, and I believe critical, to ending homelessness in Whatcom County. A few ways we can begin to dismantle these influences in this workgroup setting are:

 - #1. Start each meeting with a Land Acknowledgement and moment of reflection that those of us who live in Whatcom County, and are not Coast Salish, are occupying the lands of the Coast Salish peoples. This very moment. This serves to remind us of the current existence of settler colonialism, but not only that, challenges us to think and act in ways that we can actively dismantle it right here, right now, in this present moment.
 - #2. Have a standing agenda item that invites and allows time for any of our Coast Salish community members to share their thoughts, if they care to do so.
 - #3. Have an ASL interpreter at every public governmental meeting.
 - #4. Have each of us be aware of our privileges in the situation (e.g. race, perceived race, able-bodied, non-immigrant, straight, housed, etc.) and how these might be shaping our perspective. If you are someone who has more of these privileges than others, be aware of how much space you are taking up in these meetings and make room for other voices to come to the front. Prioritize the wisdom of those most affected by the topic at hand, homelessness (*credit: parts of #4 taken from and inspired by the Racial Justice Coalition's 'Posting Guidelines' document posted on their facebook page*).

- Finally, I think we need to expect discomfort in these meetings and conversations around homelessness, and welcome the discomfort. If we're not being pushed out of our comfort zones, then we're most likely not doing the work needed to end homelessness. It's intolerable that there's even one person who's homeless in our community. In 2008 there was a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Whatcom County. In 2016, there was a request to the Governor, from our Mayor and City Council, to declare a state-wide emergency around the issue of homelessness. Yet, the 2019 Point-In-Time Count still shows 700 people homeless and the actual number is more likely in the thousands. These are our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters and sons who are suffering. Let's act like it. Let's have an urgency about ending homelessness, and get people into homes now! And continuously think outside-the-box about how to do this. We have incredibly creative, resourceful, amazing people in our community, who are just waiting to be inspired and led. We can do this. It's time for all options to be on the table, and for us, especially our elected leaders, to be bold and courageous. Those with the most privilege and power, have the most responsibility. Thank you.