State of Emergency: Communicators Rising to the Challenge of Homelessness


Thank you, PRSA, for inviting us to present this conversation. For more information: columbialegal.org firesteelwa.org gatesfoundation.org spl.org wliha.org

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Starting Points For Conversation

Anne Martens, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Why is there so much homelessness in our region?
Homelessness is an issue—and has been declared an emergency—up and down the West Coast. There are many reasons a person or family may become homeless; for example, domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children. Medical and mental health services, racism or intolerance for LGBTQ youth, substance abuse, and economic insecurity are all contributing factors. Research shows that an increase of just $100 in rent is linked to a 15% increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness.

To address these issues, we need your help. Local, state and federal budget and policy decisions directly affect homelessness, and your advocacy can influence those priorities. Better, more accurate data clarifies what works and can drive more effective decisions. Expanding job training and economic opportunity will bring us closer to shared prosperity.

Homelessness is a symptom of societal ills, and to address it effectively, we must look to the root cause.

Brandy Sincyr, Columbia Legal Services

What are we doing to help public school students experiencing homelessness?
Last year, during the 2014-2015 school year, 35,511 students were identified as experiencing homelessness in our Washington state schools. That is enough students to fill 500 school buses.

Homelessness and high mobility for students has lasting effects. On average, every time a student changes schools they lose 4-6 months of learning progress. These students also have the second-lowest graduation rates, with only 52 percent graduating, compared to 78 percent of their housed peers.

For students living in cars, couch surfing, and staying temporarily in shelters, school often becomes a place of safety and stability.

That is why Washington state passed the Homeless Student Stability and Opportunity Gap Act. This program creates two competitive grants: for school-housing partnerships between school districts and housing authorities, and for a doubling of the state investment for in-school supports for students experiencing homelessness.
What is our state doing to help homeless people get housing?
One of our state’s most important tools is the Washington Housing Trust Fund. The Housing Trust Fund allocates state dollars on a competitive basis to build and preserve affordable homes. For every dollar we invest in the Housing Trust Fund, nearly 6 dollars are leveraged from other public and private sources to create homes for people who are homeless or have experienced housing instability. Since 1987, the Housing Trust Fund has awarded almost $1 billion in funding and helped build or maintain nearly 40,000 affordable homes statewide. We know that a home is a foundation for health, education, and well-being. Everyone in Washington deserves the opportunity to live in a safe, healthy, and affordable home.

Who are the people who get overlooked when we think of homelessness?
Because of our country’s long history of racial and gender-based oppression, some groups of Americans are over-represented in homeless populations. In our region, African-Americans are five times more likely to be homeless than white people, and Native Americans are seven times more likely. One in four women will experience domestic violence, a leading cause of family homelessness. An estimated 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBTQ. We can help by sharing information, elevating stories, talking with policymakers, and getting out the vote. Are you registered?

Why did The Seattle Public Library decide to make homelessness a focus this year?
We cannot change institutional racism if we do not change institutions. I wanted an issue that is a fulcrum. Housing is listed as an equity driver at the Seattle Office of Civil Rights. The library is the last city team to make the race and social justice work plan, and I thought that talking about our city’s housing crisis would be timely and also urgent for many library patrons dealing with transition. Secondarily, this type of work has a staff engagement component, where with community listening to patrons and advocates, we could think critically about the behaviors we want our staff to start and stop. We also learned how to have insight into how to treat people with care and compassion in our messaging, so that we do not unintentionally conflate the experience of being in transition with being a real, whole person with hopes and dreams like everyone else.