

RESOLUTION NO. 2023-19

A RESOLUTION AFFIRMING THAT HOUSING AFFORDABILITY AND HOMELESSNESS ARE A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

WHEREAS, persistent and increasing houselessness is a public health and safety issue that impacts individuals and families experiencing houselessness, as well as our entire community; and

WHEREAS, Washington State residents identified housing costs and homelessness as the top two problems facing the State in a recent Housing Survey conducted by the Department of Commerce and Puget Sound Regional Council; and

WHEREAS, 77% of Statewide residents surveyed agree that “rents are too high,” 75% agree that “it costs too much to buy a home,” and 64% agree that “government agencies should do more to provide housing not being built by the market;” and

WHEREAS, the 2018 Whatcom County Community Health Assessment asserts that socioeconomic determinants of health (which include access to housing, education, employment, etc.) contribute to 40% of a person’s health outcomes; and

WHEREAS, qualitative interviews with Bellingham residents found that housing affordability is a strain on family resources, causing stress that affects families’ overall health; and

WHEREAS, the report also stated that, in Bellingham, “[s]chool nurses report housing insecurity and basic needs being at the forefront of their work rather than medical concerns;” and

WHEREAS, persons experiencing homelessness are more likely to have compounding health issues, such as a mental health condition or chronic illness. The stress and uncertainty of homelessness makes managing these conditions extremely difficult; and

WHEREAS, in our community, 56% of Bellingham rental households report being cost burdened (spending more than 30% of their income on housing) and 22% report that they are severely cost burdened (spending more than 50% of their income on housing); and

WHEREAS, studies show that every \$100 in median rent increases leads to a 9% increase in homelessness; and

WHEREAS, median rent in Bellingham has increased by 41% over the past 5 years, including a 15% increase in median rent from 2022 to 2023 alone; and

WHEREAS, the median price of a single-family home in Bellingham was \$640,391 in 2022; and

WHEREAS, the median household income in Bellingham was approximately \$59,163 in 2022, which is substantially less than the income required to purchase a median priced home in the city, i.e., \$176,092; and

WHEREAS, sharp rises in home prices in conjunction with slow wage growth for employees is making private homeownership increasingly unaffordable and putting more pressure on an already fragile rental market; and

WHEREAS, the City is taking significant steps to address housing instability and homelessness; and

WHEREAS, the City has allocated over \$6.5M for land acquisition and development to increase subsidized housing inventory for low-income residents in Bellingham during the 2023-24 biennium; and

WHEREAS, the City works with and provides funding to community-based service providers to assist families with children, seniors, and vulnerable adults that are experiencing homelessness with shelter and supportive services including:

- Gardenvue 35-unit tiny house village for seniors and medically fragile adults,
- Lydia Place's Family Services Program for families with children,
- DVSAS's Safe Shelter for households fleeing domestic violence,
- Northwest Youth Services emergency shelter and daytime drop-in center for youth,
- Larrabee Residence for single women,
- Emergency daytime warming centers during severely cold winter months, and
- Relocation, site preparation, and retention of 50 tiny houses operated by HomesNOW; and

WHEREAS, the City provides financial support to help over 200 low-income households that are at-risk of or recovering from homelessness to remain stably housed in the following programs:

- Francis Place,
- Gregg's House,
- 22 North,
- Lydia Place Heart's House,

- Whatcom Dispute Resolution Housing Stability Program, and
- Homeless Service Center's Housing Lab; and

WHEREAS, the City helps meet basic needs, other than housing, for at least 4,500 low-income residents per year through programs that provide services such as:

- Free groceries and hygiene supplies,
- Mental health counseling,
- Education and employment services for youth,
- Literacy and job training,
- Meal delivery for homebound seniors, and
- Parenting classes and family support programs; and

WHEREAS, the projects and activities described above are funded through the Bellingham Home Fund housing levy that was approved by voters in 2011, and again in 2018, as well as federal funding sources; and

WHEREAS, additional funding comes from local sales taxes allocated through HB 1590, passed by the WA State legislature in 2020, which allows a portion of local sales taxes be allocated to affordable housing; and

WHEREAS, there are approximately 2,923 units of subsidized, public or non-profit owned housing in Bellingham; and

WHEREAS, in addition to the subsidized housing units, there are 1,985 rental assistance vouchers that are administered by the Bellingham/Whatcom County Housing Authority (it is estimated that approximately 60% of these vouchers are used in Bellingham); and

WHEREAS, the City is actively partnering with the Whatcom County Health & Community Services Department, the lead agency responsible for addressing homelessness in our community; and

WHEREAS, despite the considerable resources that the City has dedicated to providing affordable housing and reducing homelessness, the shortage of affordable housing and the number of individuals experiencing homelessness continues to grow; and

WHEREAS, according to the 2023 Whatcom County Annual Report on Homelessness, there was a roughly 27% increase in people counted in the point-in-time census of homeless residents, from 832 people counted in 2022 to 1,059 counted in 2023; and

WHEREAS, the Whatcom County data shows a 141% increase in people over age 60 experiencing homelessness over the last five years (68 in 2019 to 164 in 2023); and

WHEREAS, Whatcom County's data shows persistently elevated rates of homeless families with children. Over the last three years (2021-2023), the number of homeless families counted has averaged 88 households. In the previous three years (2018-2020) the average was 68. Persons under the age of 18 accounted for 15% of all persons identified in 2023. The youngest person counted was an infant less than a year old; and

WHEREAS, the City of Bellingham passed a resolution affirming that racism is a public health crisis in 2021 and the 2023 point-in-time census of homeless residents found that people of color in Whatcom County are disproportionately impacted by the current lack of enforceable tenant protections and the rapid increase in rental rates: "14% of people surveyed identified as Hispanic, while only 10% of county residents identify as Hispanic, according to census data. People identifying as Black, African American, or African accounted for 4% of people counted as experiencing homelessness, but only 1% of the county's population according to census data. 10% of people surveyed identified as Native American/Alaska Native, while people who identify as Native American/Alaska Native represent only about 3% of the total Whatcom County population"; and

WHEREAS, as the City and our partners continue to prioritize preventing and resolving homelessness, the growing numbers reflected in the 2023 point-in-time census show the growing gap between what we are able to do and where we need to be in terms of affordable housing and the availability of services; and

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF BELLINGHAM:

The City of Bellingham declares that housing affordability and homelessness constitute a public health crisis in our community.

The City is committed to partnering with other local jurisdictions, the State of Washington, the federal government, non-profit organizations, stakeholder groups, and community members, to identify and implement policy solutions to address this crisis including, but not limited to, additional protections for tenants in order to reduce the number of tenants evicted from their homes.


We will continue to work together to take meaningful steps to increase the availability of affordable housing and reduce the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in our community.

PASSED by the Council this 24th day of July, 2023.



Council President

APPROVED by me this 26th day of July, 2023.




Mayor

ATTEST:



Finance Director

APPROVED AS TO FORM:



Office of the City Attorney