

Response to Seattle Is Dying, KOMO special

The Housing Alliance will not comment directly on Seattle Is Dying, out of a desire to avoid drawing more attention and more views to a flawed, inflammatory portrayal of the homelessness crisis, which used ethically-dubious tactics.

We know many have watched the special, however, and have likely been misinformed by its content. We hope these talking points might help allies in your one-on-one conversations with people who saw the special and express concerns because of it.

We recommend avoiding referring to the special as “news” or “reporting,” since it had a strongly editorial bent and failed to adhere to basic principles of objective reporting.

For a critical analysis of the piece, see this Crosscut editorial: <https://crosscut.com/2019/03/6-reasons-why-komos-take-homelessness-wrong-one>.

Although Seattle Is Dying claims to be about homelessness, it really highlights breakdowns in our system for helping those suffering from drug addiction, and to a lesser extent, with mental health.

- We agree that the systems are underfunded and ineffective in Washington. A 2015 report found that Washington ranks 48th in terms of access to mental healthcare¹.
- Medically-proven treatment protocols, such as the medicines highlighted in the special, should be available on demand for anyone who wants or needs them – without them having to go to jail first.

There is an overlap between addiction, mental health and homelessness.

- We know that having a safe place to sleep is essential to be able to address addiction or mental illness.
- Over a period of decades, research has proven that providing housing without conditions (such as requiring someone to be “clean and sober” before moving in) is effective at reducing drug use and improving health. It’s also cheaper to the public than the alternative.
- Seattle and Washington should invest in these tested housing approaches, known variously as permanent supportive housing or housing first, that are proven to save resources, misery, and lives.

It’s unfortunate that the special conflated addiction with homelessness.

- It focused on a small group of people who are suffering very publicly and without effective help for their addiction.
- But we know that more than 12,000 experienced homelessness in King County last year alone.
- This figure includes families with children, veterans, seniors, people with disabilities, young adults, and men and women struggling to afford a modest home.

Their situations vary and each story is different - but the significant drivers are known.

¹ <https://www.namiwa.org/images/programs/lobbyday2017/2017Budget.pdf>

- Rents have risen 43% in Seattle since 2009, and wages have not kept pace – especially for those earning smaller incomes to begin with.
- 71% of the lowest income households in Washington are paying over 50% of their income towards their housing costs. This means many are already living on the financial edge. A sudden crisis like job loss, serious illness or needing to care for an ailing family member can quickly push them into homelessness.²
- There is a strong relationship between rising rents and increased homelessness in Seattle and other cities.³

Our private rental housing market in Seattle simply doesn't supply housing that is affordable to people with the lowest incomes.

- It's a fundamental failure of our local marketplace, and many housing markets across the country. This is why we need mission driven nonprofit, and public housing in Seattle and in every community across Washington State.

Traditionally, we've turned to the federal government to invest in affordable housing and correct the market failure, so that all Americans can aspire to live in safe, healthy, affordable homes.

- But the federal government has cut back significantly for decades, leaving a severe shortfall of affordable homes.
- The Seattle metro area has only 30 available, affordable homes for every 100 households living on the smallest incomes.

Fortunately, there are proven solutions ready to go – we just need the political will to invest in them at scale.

- Since 1986, the state Housing Trust Fund has built almost 50,000 affordable homes across Washington, and in every county.
 - Two thirds of Housing Trust Fund homes serve people who are considered extremely low income.
 - Every dollar invested in the Housing Trust Fund leverages about five additional dollars from public and private sources.
 - Lawmakers in Olympia are considering a \$200M investment this year along with policy bills that could generate up to an additional \$400 million for affordable homes.
- Housing & Essential Needs rental assistance program provides time-critical rent assistance to Washingtonians diagnosed with a disability that keeps them from working, preventing them from losing their housing.
 - Eighty-five percent of those receiving Housing & Essential Needs are struggling with a behavioral health disability, making this a frontline investment in our state's behavioral health system. With a secure home, they are better able to address – and move forward from – a mental health crisis.
 - Since it was established in 2011, Housing & Essential Needs funding has remained flat, while rents statewide have soared by 21%.
 - Lawmakers are considering a \$69M investment in Housing & Essential Needs.
- Evictions are a leading cause of homelessness. Lawmakers are considering eviction reforms that will help keep people in their homes and prevent a disproportionate number of people of color and women from becoming homeless.

² <https://reports.nlihc.org/gap>

³ <https://www.zillow.com/research/rents-larger-homeless-population-16124/>