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April 16, 2020

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Councilmember Dean Johnson
City Manager Steve Kirkelie

Sent via email

Re: COVID-19 and Homelessness

Hello Mayor Door, Councilmembers, and City Manager Kirkelie,

We trust that Puyallup City officials are being vigilant in protecting yourselves and the general population from COVID-19.

The initial effort the City of Puyallup has made to provide hotel rooms for some unhoused residents who are sick or at high-risk of serious illness from COVID-19 is a good public health and safety strategy. We also appreciate the City's decision to establish a lawful, safe place for unhoused neighbors to shelter-in-place in outdoor tents. These designated spaces help Puyallup residents without housing to access critical services, such as food and healthcare, and help to protect public health.

However, more must be done to curb the spread of the virus and to protect the health of all Puyallup residents. **First**, we ask the City of Puyallup to place more unhoused people into hotel rooms and/or other individual housing units, because that is the safest option for limiting spread of the virus. It also lowers the chances that those individuals will need to be hospitalized, including for reasons unrelated to COVID-19. **Second**, we ask Puyallup to establish additional places where unhoused residents may be sheltered in tents or vehicles and have access to handwashing and shower stations, food, toilets, and outreach services. **Third**, we ask Puyallup to issue a formal policy to leave intact homeless encampments that do not pose immediate public health or safety risks and to cease towing and impoundment of vehicles used as shelter throughout the COVID-19 State of Emergency, consistent with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Interim Guidance for Responding to Coronavirus Disease 2019 Among People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness* ("CDC Interim Guidance").

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The CDC Interim Guidance highlights the need for individual housing units to enable unsheltered people to maintain physical distancing and appropriate hygiene – the primary tools available for fighting the spread of COVID-19. COVID-19 primarily spreads from person to person, so remaining physically distant from people is critical to avoid spreading the virus. It is not enough to avoid people who are exhibiting common symptoms of COVID-19, as an estimated 18-30% of infected people will show no symptoms despite being highly contagious. Homeless people struggle to maintain appropriate physical distancing from others due to their lack of housing, but they can be enabled to do so if they are placed into individual housing units, such as hotel rooms. Not only will individual housing units help to contain the spread of the deadly coronavirus, but it will also help to reduce the likelihood that unhoused people will need to be hospitalized.

People without housing, who experience disproportionate rates of chronic disease and are exposed to outdoor elements, are already far more likely to be hospitalized than people with housing. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this problem. Recent reports indicate that homeless individuals infected by COVID-19 are roughly twice as likely to be hospitalized, 2 to 4 times as likely to require critical care, and 2 to 3 times as likely to die as the general population.¹ Because stopping the virus' spread between people and reducing the burden on hospital systems is critical for saving lives, we urge Puyallup to expand upon its initial good work and to place more unhoused people in hotel rooms and/or other individual housing units. New funding under the federal CARES Act is available to local governments for that purpose, and we encourage Puyallup to expeditiously use these new resources.²

To the extent hotel rooms and other individual housing units are unavailable for all who need them, we ask that Puyallup establish additional places where people may shelter-in-place in tents and vehicles. It is estimated that less than 50 people without shelter have relocated to places designated by the City, such as the Puyallup Recreation Center parking lot. According to the 2019 County Homeless Management Information System yearly summary, Puyallup had 1278 people without shelter, including 825 households, 244 chronically homeless and 333 minors. Roughly 50% of these neighbors were disabled.

All of Puyallup's unhoused residents need a safe place to be and to access critical services - for their own health and for the health of all Puyallup residents. We urge Puyallup to establish additional encampment sites in other locations within the City, and to ensure that each location provides sufficient handwashing and shower facilities and access, toilets, and food services. These services can be offered through a public/private partnership with some of Puyallup's excellent homeless service providers, such as the New Hope Resource Center, which currently prepares and serves food and supplies to the people staying at the rec center with the help of many volunteers and private donors.

Finally, we urge Puyallup to issue a formal, written policy ending encampment sweeps during this time, consistent with the CDC Interim Guidance that dislocating existing encampments and dispersing people without shelter elevates the risk of disease spreading throughout the

¹ Dennis Culhane et al., "Estimated Emergency and Observational/Quarantine Capacity Need for the US Homeless Population Related to COVID-19 Exposure by County; Projected Hospitalizations, Intensive Care Units and Mortality," University of Pennsylvania (March 27, 2020), https://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-paper_clean-636pm.pdf.

² National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, COVID-19: CARES Act Language and Citations, available at <http://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CARES-Act-Funding-Summary-with-Citations.pdf>.

entire community. Sweeps furthermore sever connections with service providers by displacing people to areas where they cannot be found or from which they cannot access needed services. Likewise, seizure of tents, tarps, medications, and other survival gear makes homeless individuals, who are already more likely than members of the general public to be hospitalized, even more vulnerable to hospitalization due to COVID-19 or other illnesses.

Puyallup's policy should also put a moratorium on towing and impoundment of vehicles used as shelter when those vehicles do not represent an urgent traffic safety risk. By living in their vehicles, unhoused individuals are able to shelter in isolation from others. Towing and impoundment puts these individuals at risk of losing their sole source of private shelter and transportation, potentially forcing them to live outdoors or in a congregate setting – less safe options for them and for all Puyallup residents. This relief would be consistent with the practices in several other cities, including San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and Los Angeles.

Absent physical distancing and other preventive measures, a person carrying COVID-19, often asymptomatic, will transmit the deadly disease to others. **There is no time to wait.** To protect the health of the entire community, we urge the City of Puyallup to expand on its good work and take the additional steps recommended in this letter. The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty would be happy to work with the City to develop and implement solutions beneficial for everyone. If you are interested in such support, please contact Tristia Bauman at tbauman@nlchp.org or at (202) 638-2535 x. 120.

Sincerely,

Tristia Bauman, Senior Attorney at the National Law Center for Homelessness & Poverty
Ted Brackman, Puyallup homeless advocate