

King County announces new proposal to bring 500 homeless residents into shelter using federal stimulus funds

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📷 1 of 2 | At The Salvation Army's shelter in Sodo, Doreen Webley says she's made a lot of friends. "We feel like a little family here," she says. The 241-bed shelter opened in November 2020, and the county plans to expand it... (Greg Gilbert / The Seattle Times) **More** ✓

By [Anna Patrick](#) 🐦

Project Homeless engagement editor

King County Executive Dow Constantine announced a \$100 million plan Thursday to bring at least 500 people in off the streets of Seattle by the end of the year — one of the most ambitious local plans in scale and timeline announced in a year of big promises to expand housing and shelter.

To hit the large target on a short timeline, Constantine said the county plans to use more than \$100 million from the estimated \$437 million it received in federal dollars through the recently passed American Rescue Plan. The money will fund tiny homes, large-scale shelters, behavioral health services and housing vouchers. An estimated \$40 million of it will go to a jobs program to employ 400 people living in shelter or housing programs, as well as rental subsidies for people in shelter.

“What we’ve lacked over the last four years is a federal partner in our efforts,” said Constantine, standing in an empty bay in Seattle’s Sodo district, hundreds of feet away from one of the largest mass shelters in King County. “We finally now have a Congress and a president who share our values and are willing to invest in solutions for our residents.”

PROJECT HOMELESS

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An influx of pandemic-related federal funds, as well as growing frustration with the visible symptoms of homelessness, have spurred several large-scale proposals from local leaders in the past year. Last fall, Mayor Jenny Durkan [announced a “shelter surge”](#) intended to create 300 more hotel shelter beds and 125 units of more traditional shelter. In January, Seattle City Councilmember Andrew Lewis [announced a private-public proposal](#) to double the city’s stock of tiny houses within a year.

Both are still in the works.

Doreen Webley was just one wall removed from Constantine’s podium. She moved into the [Sodo shelter, run by the Salvation Army](#), shortly after it opened in November 2020, and is likely the kind of person King County officials hope to get into housing.

Webley was homeless in Renton and Seattle before getting into shelter, where she’s hung colored pictures of flowers on her temporary wall and a calendar to cross off the days.

It’s lonely being a woman living outside, she said.

“A lot of people are happy this is here,” she said of the shelter. “Really relieved, too.”

But the money for creating more shelter accommodations like Webley’s has yet to be approved.

At the end of March, the county announced a \$600 million COVID-19 supplemental budget that includes \$337 million from the \$1.9 trillion federal American Rescue Act, as well as \$263 million in county, state and FEMA funds. The Metropolitan King County Council could vote on the budget as soon as next week.

Some organizations that are the most vocal about their concerns regarding people living outside quickly threw support behind the plan.

“These new resources will afford outreach teams, like our own, more opportunities to get our unsheltered neighbors into housing and on a path to stability,” said the Downtown Seattle Association in a statement.

Compassion Seattle, the group behind [the recent proposal to introduce homelessness targets in the city of Seattle’s charter](#), encouraged the effort.

“With a significantly larger budget, the city of Seattle should follow the county’s lead and take similar action without claiming a lack of resources, especially with historic federal investments continuing to come to the area,” the group said in a statement.

The plan has also won the support of some advocates and people who work in homeless services. Alison Eisinger, executive director of the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness, said she appreciates that the plan uses new funding sources for a longstanding problem.

“It’s saying we have to use American Rescue Plan resources to lift up the people who were in extreme need before the pandemic,” she added.

Dan Malone, executive director of homeless services nonprofit Downtown Emergency Service Center, said he’s glad to see these new federal dollars going toward homelessness.

“I don’t think we have a bigger problem in our area than homelessness and the vast suffering that is going on,” Malone said.

State Sen. Joe Nguyen, D-West Seattle, who recently announced his candidacy for King County executive as the first person to challenge Constantine, said he hopes the county isn’t too quick to celebrate.

“I get frustrated when people say, ‘Look at these great things we’re going to do,’”

Nguyen said. “There’s a lot of work to be done.”

Included within the stimulus-funded plan are both new ventures and ideas already in use by the county.

Constantine said he wants to reopen the former overnight shelter at Fourth Avenue and Jefferson Street for people leaving jail or a hospital, as well as expand the large Sodo shelter (currently 241 capacity) by 28 beds. The county currently funds the shelter in partnership with the city of Seattle.

Some new initiatives include launching a 24/7 behavioral health team to support people on the streets of downtown Seattle who are in crisis. People with mental health issues or substance-use disorders face some of the largest barriers to obtaining and staying in shelter or housing. [Nationwide, this population grew by 15% in the past year.](#)

The county also plans to open a safe parking lot for about 50 to 60 families and individuals living in their RVs. A location has yet to be announced, but Constantine said the site will include bathrooms, showers, electricity hookups and security.

“And I’m also going to bring a mechanic once in a while,” Constantine added, “so they have the ability to be able to move when they are ready to go.”

Leo Flor, director of King County’s Department of Community and Human Services, said a large portion of the effort will be 300 new rapid rehousing vouchers, which are designed to stop people on the verge of homelessness from losing housing, or make sure they aren’t homeless for long.

In addition, Flor said the county is looking to purchase hotels to offer people a private room with support staff on site, as they have done during the pandemic. The county uses four hotels as shelter — two in Seattle, one in SeaTac and one in Renton. Constantine also proposed a new behavioral health shelter in downtown Seattle.

“If you just did one thing, it wouldn’t work,” Flor said. “When people have choice, we think we can really change the dynamic of the debate.”

Flor said the county is also dabbling in the real estate market, looking to lease or buy housing to create more immediate permanent housing options. Flor said all of these efforts and more will total up to 502 new housing units, not including the 300 rapid rehousing vouchers.

“When you add that up it’s actually a number that is a lot higher than 500,” Flor said.

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