

## Policy Statement: Homelessness

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Seattle and King County have increasingly become unaffordable for many low-income residents. The high cost of living, a lack of affordable housing options, and insufficient social services have led to unprecedented numbers of individuals and families living unsheltered.

Architects have a unique perspective on and important knowledge of the ways that the built environment can impact people's lives. Architects have a crucial voice in advocating on behalf of those in our community who are experiencing homelessness.

### Key Messages

- ⇒ **Every human being has a fundamental right to housing.**  
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 (Article 25 [1]) states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."
- ⇒ **Housing is the first priority for people experiencing homelessness.**  
People experiencing homelessness should be offered permanent housing with minimum preconditions, behavioral contingencies, and barriers. This approach is commonly referred to as "housing first" and is based on overwhelming evidence that all people experiencing homelessness can better address other issues once they achieve housing stability.
- ⇒ **Poverty is not a crime.**  
Research shows that those living unhoused are disproportionately punished for crimes of circumstance. While the criminal justice system is generally considered to be a less productive approach to addressing homelessness compared to social services, it is important that a compassionate response to homelessness be balanced with maintaining the safety and security of all Seattle residents and their property.
- ⇒ **Homelessness must be considered holistically.**  
While the provision of affordable housing is the first priority, short term solutions are necessary and important. It is critical that we support preventative programs, social services, and principles that uphold dignity and respect for all people.
- ⇒ **Solutions to homelessness must balance impacts on affordable housing.**  
The largest barrier to ending homelessness is a lack of housing affordable to those making well below area mean income. While policies can improve outcomes for

unsheltered and vulnerable residents, it is important that they do so in a way that minimizes adverse impact on affordable housing production.

## AIA Seattle Action

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### Advocacy Goals

#### *Prevent Loss of Housing*

One of the best ways to address homelessness is to prevent loss of housing in the first place and facilitate long term housing stability for people who are at high risk of homelessness. AIA supports:

- ⇒ Increasing funding for diversion programs (including emergency rental assistance<sup>1</sup>) for individuals and families at risk of losing housing. This is often more effective than rapid rehousing and can prevent entries to homelessness.
- ⇒ Expanding the mandatory notice period to 90 days when landlords propose to increase rent by more than 5%. This will provide economically vulnerable renters with more time to adapt to changing financial circumstances.<sup>2 3 4</sup>
- ⇒ Increasing the amount of funding for tenant relocation. This will help prevent entries to homelessness where displacement occurs.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Provide More Subsidized Housing*

Housing production must be increased significantly, and more housing must be made accessible to low- or no-income individuals and families. AIA supports:

- ⇒ Establishing new public funding mechanisms to expand and maintain permanent supportive housing. This will give people transitioning out of homelessness a

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<sup>1</sup> Seattle's rental assistance program is administered by the Human Services Department and has been funded by the Seattle Housing Levy since 2009. It operates with an annual budget of about \$850k and funds a number of local non-profit agencies that provide rental assistance services. See pages 14 and 15 of [this 2016 report](#) on the Housing Levy for more information.

<sup>2</sup> As of July of 2019, 60 days' notice is required in Washington for a rent increase of any amount per [RCW 59.18.140](#). See also [Engrossed Substitute House Bill 1440](#).

<sup>3</sup> Prior to the state law changing in 2019, legislation governing the required notice for a rent increase in Seattle was [SMC 7.24.030](#), which required 60 days of notice for a rent increase of more than 5%.

<sup>4</sup> Since April of 2016, Oregon has required 90 days of notice for a rent increase of more than 5%. See [ORS 90.600](#).

<sup>5</sup> Currently this is governed by [SMC 22.210](#). See also this [tip](#). Tenant relocation assistance is only provided to renters making less than 50% AMI. The amount is ~\$4000 and is split 50/50 between the city and the landlord.

subsidized housing option that can act as a bridge to the private rental market.

- ⇒ Strengthening enforcement of existing source of income discrimination (SOID) legislation. This will help prevent landlords from discriminating against potential low-income tenants simply because they intend to use housing vouchers.
- ⇒ Promoting economic incentives that encourage landlords to rent to low-income individuals and families. This will help bring more private market housing within reach of people making below area mean income.

### *Decriminalize Homelessness*

We must uphold the principle of basic human dignity, not punish the most vulnerable among us for their economic situation. AIA supports:

- ⇒ Allowing individuals to live on public land<sup>6</sup> when no alternative living arrangements can be made available to them,<sup>7</sup> provided that their inhabiting of that land does not conflict with the land's intended use. This will allow people experiencing homelessness to improve their situation by dedicating less of their time and resources to moving and re-acquiring their personal possessions.
- ⇒ Protecting individuals who are living in their vehicles by establishing additional criteria for City seizure of vehicles that are being inhabited lawfully.<sup>8</sup> Laws that allow for vehicle seizure impose unfair hardship on people whose car is not just an important financial asset but also their primary place of residence.

### *Improve Shelter and Services*

Given the severe shortage of housing, high quality shelter and social services should be available and accessible to anyone experiencing homelessness. AIA supports:

- ⇒ Allocating funding and surplus municipal land for temporary encampment and enhanced shelter uses. This will give people experiencing homelessness a more safe, secure, and dignified place to live while transitioning to more stable, permanent housing.
- ⇒ Allowing longer land leases for city-sanctioned encampments. Current land leases are too short and are often extended beyond legal limits, causing friction with neighborhood groups. Allowing for longer encampment leases will decrease

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<sup>6</sup> A 2018 federal appeals court ruling in the case of [Martin v Boise](#) found it unconstitutional for law enforcement to evict someone living on publicly-owned land without providing a practical alternative like a shelter bed.

<sup>7</sup> The Seattle Auditor's [2018 Q1 report](#) on the Navigation Team, which is responsible for removing encampments, shows that shelter vacancy rates are very low and that shelter beds are often not available.

<sup>8</sup> Seattle's scofflaw provisions ([SMC 11.35](#)) allow the City to immobilize, tow, and impound vehicles that have more than four unpaid citations and can have devastating impacts on people who are experiencing homelessness and are living in their vehicles.

operational costs and provide for more stability among encampment residents.

- ⇒ Removing barriers to shelter access like drug and alcohol testing and promoting enhanced shelters that allow pets, co-location with family, storage of personal belongings, and flexible hours for coming and going. This will allow more people to get off the streets and take advantage of shelter services.
- ⇒ Increasing funding for social, medical, and mental health services. This will promote health and wellbeing, create stability, and improve the likelihood of exiting to permanent housing.
- ⇒ Providing public waste and sanitation services for use by homeless residents such as trash pick-up, public restrooms, and urban rest stops. This will create a more humane built environment and improve public perception of homeless communities.
- ⇒ Modifying local land use code, building code, and director's rulings to reduce restrictions on temporary shelters. This will allow shelter providers to increase their capacity and better serve their clients.

### **Proposed Actions**

- ⇒ Facilitate member and community education and awareness on homelessness issues.
- ⇒ Provide opportunities for interested members to take direct action through volunteer service and through directly engaging with individuals experiencing homelessness.
- ⇒ Directly advocate for homelessness policies on behalf of the AIA and encourage AIA members to participate in advocacy efforts.
- ⇒ Find opportunities for partnership with other trade organizations, advocacy groups, and experts.