

Dear Mayor Durkan:

I understand that your office has approved a sweep this morning of people camped around the perimeter of the Ballard Commons and along the adjacent street. Since you have previously stated that there will not be such actions during the COVID19 pandemic unless there is an emergency, I ask you to explain what the emergency is. As I am sure your office is aware, the relevant [Interim Guidance from the Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) clearly states that “Unless individual housing units are available, do not clear encampments during community spread of COVID-19. Clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for infectious disease spread.” This dispersal action seems arbitrary, and will potentially place a large number of people, including city employees, city contractors, and local residents both housed and not, at risk of exposure. It will not address the underlying reason why people are there, and does not seem to reflect adequate consideration by your administration of the public health risks of our current crisis.

I write on behalf of the Coalition on Homelessness to request that you halt this and any other planned actions until you revise City policies to center people and public health in city actions towards people experiencing homelessness. The first thing that should happen is to request that appropriate staff from the Public Health Department visit and assess the location, provide recommendations about how to enhance health and safety for people living in the area, and offer individual assessment and referrals to all who are willing.

The FAST team (Field Assessment and Support, Technical Assistance) is a specifically designated group of public health professionals who are available to assess indoor and outdoor locations where people experiencing homelessness live or receive services. They should be immediately requested to add this location and any other locations where you are concerned about people’s health and safety to their roster of field visits. Interdisciplinary health care outreach teams (our community is fortunate to have several), should be allowed time and afforded resources to engage with people in this area and make individual plans for them to relocate, IF there be a truly emergent reason for them to move. To this end, the city’s extremely limited and precious supply of available shelter resources should be allocated through a transparent process of matching available resources with individuals who have high priority need to access them. The Health Care for the Homeless Network should be asked to coordinate all available adult shelter resources. They are best positioned to coordinate with outreach teams regionally, and to take a public health approach to the complex matter of prioritizing how to use what shelter is currently available. Of course, we need more individual housing and shelter options as quickly as possible, because preliminary data both locally and nationally show that giving people individual accommodations and access to sanitation reduces spread of the coronavirus among people experiencing homelessness.

It is extremely difficult to understand why you are pursuing this course of action, which is rash, disrespectful, and unlikely to assist people in need of help in a crisis.

- There are no obstructions of sidewalks or parks activities at the site. I visited the location myself yesterday and spent several hours there. The site is clean, and aside from the fact that the handwashing unit is not working, the facilities seem to be well-used. There were many parks users engaging in normal activities across the space and on the adjoining streets.
- There was an option under consideration by your office to work with the Co-LEAD team to provide skilled outreach and offers of hotel rooms with staffing support to people in the area, but this approach was rejected.
- City staff have not provided anything like adequate notice to the people in this location or to the people who are contracted by the city to assist them. I spoke with several people yesterday who had not been contacted by city staff, had no idea where they would go, had not been offered assistance, and were clearly anxious about their fates. A Navigation Team staff person sent an email on Saturday to outreach workers across the city, not a usual practice, stating “To assist you in supporting your clients, please know that Ballard commons and Ballard Library have been posted today for obstruction removal on Monday morning.” I presume this

person understands full well that this would not allow for any outreach workers to ensure continuity of care, plan for alternatives, or meaningfully assist – indeed, it doesn't even allow for communication, given that many in the area do not have phones and cannot charge them, as I understand the city has cut off power to the outlets in this park.

In short, it seems that your administration is engaged in “business as usual” in a pandemic, the only difference being that staff will presumably be wearing masks and gloves. I wonder whether your plans include offering those protective items to the people being moved?

Members of the Coalition and I remain willing and ready to engage in reasonable dialogue and partnership informed by best practices and public health guidance to address shared areas of concern and promote health and well-being for people in our community.

Sincerely,

Alison Eisinger
Executive Director
Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness
www.homelessinfo.org

*We mobilize our community to challenge systemic causes of homelessness and advocate for housing justice.
We envision a region that acts on a shared sense of responsibility to ensure that everyone has a home.*

cc: Seattle City Council and other relevant officials