

Office of the Director

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November 23, 2020

Mayor Armondo Pavone
Renton City Hall
1055 South Grady Way
Renton, WA 98057

Renton City Council
Renton City Hall
1055 South Grady Way
Renton, WA 98057

City Clerk's Office: cityclerk@rentonwa.gov

Re: Proposed Emergency Ordinance on Use of the Renton Red Lion for COVID-19 Shelter De-Intensification

Dear Mayor Pavone, and Councilmembers,

I am writing to strongly urge you not to pass Renton's proposed emergency ordinance regarding use of the Red Lion Hotel for COVID-19 shelter de-intensification. If passed, the ordinance will interfere with our efforts to control the spread of COVID-19.

I am a medical doctor trained in both internal medicine and infectious diseases. I received my medical epidemiology training at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I sit on the CDC's Board of Scientific Counselors, Office of Infectious Diseases, and on the Board of Directors for the Infectious Disease Society of America.

For the past five years, I have served as the Local Health Officer for King County and our county-wide health department, Public Health – Seattle & King County. As the Local Health Officer, it is my job to take such action as necessary to maintain public health within King County, to control and prevent the spread of any dangerous, contagious or infectious disease. I have been leading Public Health's efforts to control the spread of COVID-19 since February. This is the most serious, complex, and challenging health problem that I have ever worked on.

From the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, public health departments across the country and the CDC have been very concerned about preventing outbreaks among people experiencing homelessness. Persons experiencing homelessness are a particularly high-risk population for developing severe COVID-19, and to require hospitalization, because they tend to be less healthy than the general public, with underlying medical conditions and co-morbidities.

Large numbers of people with severe COVID-19 can overwhelm hospitals, as occurred previously in New York, Florida, Texas and Arizona, and is now occurring in multiple states.

When overwhelmed, hospitals are unable to care optimally for their patients; the standard of care can drop significantly. When hospitals are overwhelmed, patients needing care also stay away and defer treatment they may need.

Preventing outbreaks of COVID-19 among the homeless is a crucial component of our county-wide strategy. Other common methods to control COVID-19 spread (e.g., testing, contact tracing, physical distancing, and restricting movement) are difficult to implement among persons who are experiencing homelessness, and stay-at-home orders are impractical.

Those residing in congregate homeless shelters also face additional serious risks for contracting COVID-19. Congregate shelters are often very densely populated environments in which COVID-19, or any infectious disease, can quickly spread. Congregate shelters are generally poor environments for controlling the spread of an outbreak once it begins, because they lack individual rooms, adequate space for physical distancing, and enough bathrooms to maintain personal hygiene. Once an infectious disease begins to spread within a congregate shelter, it threatens all residents, plus the doctors, nurses, food providers, and other staff who serve them. Even a small number of homeless individuals contracting COVID-19 in densely occupied shelter settings could cause a major outbreak.

States and local health departments throughout the nation have moved congregate shelter residents into safer spaces, including hotels and motels, to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention recommends that local communities decompress shelters via additional, temporary housing to reduce crowding, particularly for the highest risk populations.

Hotels and motels are particularly well-suited for disease control because they provide individual rooms and sufficient bathroom facilities. Use of hotels and motels for quarantine and isolation is an established, traditional resource public health departments use to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. We at Public Health have previously housed patients in hotels and motels to prevent the spread of hepatitis A, measles, and tuberculosis.

For all these reasons, “shelter de-intensification” is a crucial component of our local COVID-19 strategy. As Local Health Officer, on March 31st, I ordered and authorized King County, and local cities and towns, to implement this shelter de-intensification strategy for reducing the spread of COVID-19.

I ordered shelter de-intensification to encourage and enable local cities, towns and King County government to rent, lease, or purchase available hotel and motel rooms to temporarily house persons experiencing homelessness, only until the epidemic is sufficiently under control so that they can return to their congregate or other living situation.

Following my order, King County leased and paid for the Red Lion to house residents of the very crowded DESC main shelter. With this strategy, King County is providing some of the most vulnerable shelter residents with a safe place to stay until the epidemic is sufficiently under control so that they can return to the main shelter.

If passed, the proposed emergency ordinance now before you will hinder our de-intensification strategy by arbitrarily requiring former DESC main shelter residents to leave the Red Lion by

June 1, 2021. Although we cannot predict the timeline of the epidemic with certainty, the best scientific evidence indicates that the epidemic will not end by June 1. In addition, it is highly unlikely that enough of the population will have been inoculated with a vaccine to end the epidemic by this coming summer. The virus will likely still be with us and the risk of contracting severe COVID will remain high, particularly for persons living in congregate shelters. The proposed ordinance will risk the health of the homeless persons now safely staying at the Red Lion, and the community.

I ask that you not pass the proposed emergency ordinance and help us control the spread of COVID by supporting our temporary use of the Red Lion.

When I wrote my order in March, I was concerned that a local government could see it as authorizing *confiscation* of private property. To avoid such a misinterpretation, I authorized the use of “legally available resources to: de-intensify or reduce the density of existing homelessness shelters and encampments....” With those words, I was not referring to zoning or land use codes, and only meant to ensure that nobody would read my order as allowing the seizure of private property.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeff Duchin', written in a cursive style.

Jeffrey S. Duchin, MD

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