December 17th, 2021

Councilmember Reagan Dunn
King County Council Member
516 Third Ave, Room 1200
Seattle, WA, 98104

Councilmember Dunn,

Thank you for your letter, dated December 7, 2021, on your concerns about the Point-In-Time (PIT) Count, and the importance of data, accountability, and public trust in homelessness response efforts.

As a social scientist, I could not agree more that full transparency is key to good government and the stewardship of public funds. With King County's release of integrated cross-systems data showing that approximately 45,000+ people are experiencing homelessness over the course of a year (please see the analysis here), we now have a much more accurate data set and a valuable tool to help policymakers understand trends and issues.

Begun in 2018, this cross-systems data became available in early 2020, and has already helped the County better prioritize resources during the global pandemic, and identify gaps between systems serving your most vulnerable constituents. It's an incredibly complex undertaking, and I want to thank the data scientists and Performance Management and Evaluation (PME) team at DCHS for their tireless efforts in the public interest.

Data systems integration means that not only do we have better quantitative data than the PIT Count, we also have a better understanding of who we are serving, including their health care needs.

I also want to assure you that our federal funding is safe and accounted for. We have been in regular communication with senior officials at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development about our proposed methodological exception to the traditional volunteer-driven PIT Count since early November. I am pleased to report that the exception has been approved and there is no risk to our federal funds.

I also want to respond to your thoughts about the importance of the PIT data as a bellwether for our community. There have been numerous critiques of the veracity of the PIT as an indicator, most recently raised by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), which issued two consecutive reports, one in 2020 and another 2021 (which can be viewed here and here) that both questioned whether HUD could better support communities in understanding the number of

people experiencing homelessness in their communities and whether the PIT count was the appropriate method to gather this data. Indeed, in 2017, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty noted (which can be viewed here) that "PIT counts often mobilize large numbers of volunteers and serve to educate communities about homelessness. However, despite all the community effort and goodwill that goes into them, and due to no fault of the professionals and volunteers who carry them out, the counts are severely flawed."

Another paper reviewing the methodology of the PIT and whether or not it was an appropriate use of precious community resources given the data it yielded found "a nontrivial amount of resources [are] spent on the PIT, yet the product from this count does not provide adequate information to address the issue of homelessness on a local, state, or national level. Findings from this comparative case study approach confirm that the cross-site methodology is inconsistent, and therefore the PIT yields inconsistent results." This paper, dated from 2016, can be viewed here.

Because we could not agree with you more on the importance of quality data moving forward, the Authority is working on the creation of a By Name List (BNL) that will build on integrated data and add granular information about who is homeless, where they are, which service providers they have been connected with, and what they need. A BNL turns numbers back into actual people, and allows us to manage a system that can help people achieve health, housing, safety, and stability—allowing the whole of our community to thrive.

Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any other thoughts or would like to have a deeper discussion on the matter. The Authority team is deeply committed to working in partnership with our partners across the County and across the country to produce quality data that allows to end homelessness in our community.

Sincerely,

Marc Dones, CEO, King County Regional Homelessness Authority

CC: Dow Constantine, Executive and KCRHA Governing Committee Member, King County
    Jenny Durkan, Mayor and KCRHA Governing Committee Member, City of Seattle
    Bruce Harrell, Mayor-Elect and incoming KCRHA Governing Committee Member, City of Seattle
    Claudia Balducci, Council Member and KCRHA Governing Committee Member, King County
    Joe McDermott, Council Member and KCRHA Governing Committee Member, King County
    Leo Flor, Director, Department of Community & Human Services, King County
    Anne Martens, Director of External Affairs and Communications, King County Regional Homeless Authority
    Nigel Herbig, Intergovernmental Affairs Manager, King County Regional Homeless Authority
    Jacques Imperial, Legislative Aid, King County Council Member Reagan Dunn