



## **King County**

**Regional Human Services Citizen Oversight Board**

**Veterans Citizen Oversight Board**

**Department of  
Community and Human Services**

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May 5, 2017

Dow Constantine, King County Executive  
Office of the King County Executive  
401 5th Avenue, Suite 800  
Seattle, WA 98104

Councilmember Joe McDermott, Chair  
Metropolitan King County Council  
King County Courthouse  
C O U R T H O U S E

Dear Executive Constantine and Councilmember McDermott:

We write as the members of Veterans Citizen Oversight Board and the Regional Human Services Citizen Oversight Board to respectfully offer our enthusiastic recommendation that the King County Executive and Metropolitan King County Council enact a proposition to ask the voters to renew or replace King County's Veterans and Human Services Levy (VHSL).<sup>1</sup> In addition to renewing or replacing the levy, we support the Executive and Council in considering how the levy might grow to continue providing existing services while meeting new community needs.

The VHSL's record of strong performance and accountability, the continued importance of empowering veterans and other King County residents, and emerging human services needs and opportunities in King County combine to present a powerful case to continue and consider expanding the essential safety net services that VHSL makes possible. We believe that the VHSL has been and will continue to be an essential ingredient in helping our entire community contribute to and benefit from the vibrancy of King County.

### **A Strong Record of Performance and Impact**

The VHSL has for more than eleven years helped keep King County's veterans and other residents in housing, connected to medical care for physical and mental health, and supported in raising families. For those who become homeless or involved in the criminal justice system, the levy has provided hope and resources for recovery and reentry to society. We reviewed and strongly support the accounting of the levy's accomplishments and impact contained within the

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<sup>1</sup> King County Ordinance 17072, incorporating King County Ordinance 15279, directs the VCOB and the RHSCOB to provide advice to the County Executive and the County Council on the issue of a VHSL renewal or replacement proposition.

VHSL Guidance Motion Response Reports submitted to the King County Council, accepted by the Council in Motions 14822 and 14823. In addition to recognizing those positive impacts, we share here examples of levy-funded activities of which we are particularly proud:

#### Mobile Medical

The mobile medical van program began as a levy-funded program. It has proven so effective that it now draws additional funding from other sources, allowing the VHSL to invest a smaller amount while leveraging the additional resources. The mobile medical van is an example of an innovative program tailored to meet pressing needs in new ways. Mobile delivery of health and human services is a promising concept for a future version of the levy.

#### Levy-Funded Housing

The levy has contributed funds to building more than two-thousand units of affordable housing since its inception in 2006. The levy has also helped an average of 800 formerly homeless clients maintain housing each year since its renewal. Housing remains a cornerstone of stability for all people, and the levy plays a pivotal role in helping veterans and the vulnerable achieve stability. Addressing housing stability should be a major feature of a new VHSL.

#### Support for Veterans and Families Reentering from Incarceration

The Incarcerated Veterans Project and Passage Point are two programs that help reentering veterans and families gain elusive stability as they transition from incarceration back into society. These programs depend upon levy funding to serve a population that does not have many other viable sources of large-scale support. The VHSL should continue investing in people who are willing to invest in themselves as they look to move past prior challenges and onto future contributions in our communities.

#### Enhancing the King County Veterans Program

The King County Veterans Program (KCVP) supports thousands of King County veterans and family members each year. The addition of VHSL support to the King County Veterans Program has allowed the program to become a holistic resource for veterans, providing access to housing, healthcare, and employment resources in addition to direct financial support. Because of the VHSL, veterans seeking support at KCVP receive case management and broad connection to services to make their financial assistance more effective.

### **The Ongoing Responsibility to Empower Veterans and Other King County Residents**

The existing VHSL honors the essential contributions that veterans and their families make to our communities while also recognizing the potential of so many others to contribute as well. While the substance of the VHSL's programs focus on helping veterans and vulnerable populations meet basic needs and prevent crises, the levy's purpose has been closely tied to

improving self-sufficiency and setting residents up for long-term success. These efforts remain necessary.

Although the VHSL's programs for veterans have been effective, there are many more and new veterans who are not fully connected with opportunity and prosperity in King County. Between 2010 and 2015, King County's veterans witnessed a 43% increase in household incomes at or below 100% of the federal poverty level. Homelessness among veterans has also increased. Veterans who receive levy-funded reentry support while incarcerated are still likely to exit incarceration into homelessness. The challenges of concentration of poverty and homelessness are not unique to veterans in King County, but King County is unique across the Country for our willingness to voluntarily and repeatedly impose a levy to meet the responsibility of empowering veterans to contribute in society as we know they can.

There is similar ongoing need to provide support for vulnerable populations in our communities. Homelessness is increasing as difficult market conditions make housing harder to maintain for an ever growing portion of our communities. As with veterans, the broader community is experiencing increasing rates of poverty even as average incomes in the region rise. The levy remains an essential force to reconnect vulnerable populations with the health, housing, and human services they need to keep connected to our community.

### **How Changing Conditions Make the VHSL More Important than Ever**

Even as the existing levy's current areas of focus remain pressing, community conditions have changed in ways that present new areas in which the levy can be a leader and a resource. As inequity impacts the county community leading to crisis for individuals and families, VHSL-funded programs react to crisis as well as improve systems and programs to increase service equity. We highlight here three areas that we believe merit new support in the next proposal for a levy: senior citizens, the needs of rural veterans and residents, and transportation.

#### Senior Citizens

Seniors are an increasing share of King County's veteran population, surviving veteran spouses, the homeless, and other groups within our county. King County's elderly population is growing as a share of the overall County population while economic conditions are making it harder and harder for seniors to remain in their homes and in King County. While the population of seniors increases and conditions become more difficult, funding for senior services has been falling for a long time, and unpredictability of federal funding for seniors creates uncertainty about whether declining support may worsen. We strongly support a renewed VHSL that would include robust support for senior citizens. Too many seniors are aging into poverty. The people who contributed a lifetime to making our communities should be able to remain a dignified part of our communities as they age.

### Rural Veterans and Residents

Homelessness and hardship are not just urban issues. These challenges are increasingly apparent in the most rural parts of our County, and we recommend that a new levy make expansions that prioritize improvement of access and services for rural residents. Many veterans, older adults, and other residents cannot practically make it into Seattle or other urban centers, but local networks in rural communities lack the resources to provide necessary support in large numbers. Programs like the mobile medical van provide a model that could be expanded to bring health and human services to rural communities in ways that support existing community networks.

### Transportation

Whether in rural, suburban, or urban areas of King County, transportation is a significant challenge for residents who seek support. Local networks of volunteers cannot meet the demand within their communities for rides to the VA hospital, rides to buy or receive food, or rides to appointments for care and treatment. When it comes to building a health and human services system that works, it is essential—and often overlooked—to get people to where they can connect with services. We recommend that a renewed VHSL strongly consider how investments and partnerships can present opportunities to get residents to where they need to go to benefit from the investments that we are already making in addition to the significant resources that exist from support by other levels of government and by private or philanthropic organizations.

As boards with membership drawn from King County's council districts, we recognize our responsibility to thoughtfully consider how residents' finite resources should be deployed to meet the broad array of needs and priorities that are present within our county and communities. We realize that there are many unmet needs in our communities and many that will likely emerge in the future as a consequence of budget trends and priorities that we see today. We also recognize that the VHSL is not the best or the right tool to address all of these unmet needs.

After thoughtful consideration of the current levy's performance, an assessment of King County's current health and human services needs, and mindful of the current economic environment, the VHSL oversight boards strongly support the renewal or replacement of the Veterans and Human Services Levy to continue serving veterans and vulnerable populations in our county. We also support the Executive and the Council in considering an increase in the levy amount to meet new community needs, with particular support for a new levy investment in seniors, rural services, and the resources to meet the ongoing challenges of homelessness and housing affordability for the vulnerable.

We are proud of the role we have played in providing citizen oversight to the use of VHSL revenues in helping veterans and others in need in King County. We look forward to the opportunity to continue the levy's strong tradition of citizen oversight and participation.

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We are proud of what we, our funding partners and many community based providers have done to help improve the lives of those they have touched. Most importantly we are proud of the voters of King County who recognized that by each giving a little, we can catalyze a collective impact that recognizes what our veterans can contribute back to our communities, the importance of keeping vulnerable populations connected to our communities, and our responsibility to help the oldest among us remain in the communities that they helped to build. We look forward to what we can accomplish going forward together.

Sincerely,



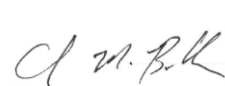
Lynnette Jordan  
Co-Chair, RHSCOB



Francisco Ivarra  
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Elbert Reed  
Vice-Chair, VCOB



Chad Buechler  
Co-Chair, RHSCOB

cc: King County Councilmembers

ATTN: Carolyn Busch, Chief of Staff

Melani Pedroza, Acting Clerk of the Council

Carrie S. Cihak, Chief of Policy Development, King County Executive Office

Dwight Dively, Director, Office of Performance, Strategy and Budget

Adrienne Quinn, Director, Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS)

Pat Lemus, Special Projects Manager III, Community Services Division, DCHS