



Is King County's plan to end homelessness working?

Submitted by KOMO Web Staff

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*George Sidwell is among thousands of homeless residents living in King County.
(Photo by Joshua Lewis/KOMO News).*

SEATTLE - George Sidwell didn't wake up one day hoping to become homeless. He didn't plan to suffer a stroke, lose his business, and wipe out his bank account paying his medical bills. But it happened, all of it. More than four years later he's living in a homeless encampment for the second time. And he's far from alone.

"I have been trying to get off the streets," Sidwell said.

So, when you ask Sidwell if he thinks King County's 10-year Plan to End Homelessness is working, his answer is simple. "Definitely not. I believe they are going about it in the wrong way."

On any given night, the Nickelsville homeless encampment provides shelter to as many as 100 men and women, including Sidwell. Those staying at the site in West Seattle were not included in [this year's One Night Count](#) of unsheltered homeless in King County because technically they have a roof over their heads. But, the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness reports more than 2,700 men, women and children

had no place to live during the count this year, an increase of about 5 percent over last year.

"It's a real snapshot for us," said Alison Eisinger, director of the [Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness](#). "The total number from the count has significance and tells us the scope of the issue in King County. But, generally speaking we also know that roughly three times that many people experience homelessness in the course of a year."

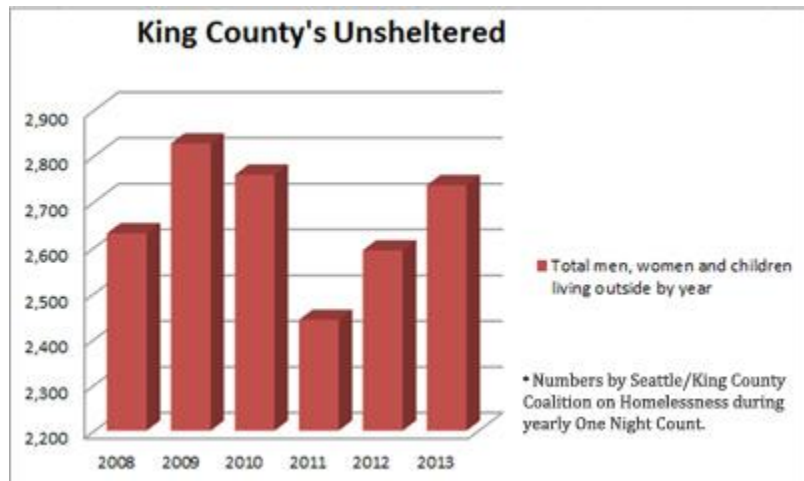
Housing first focus

Since its beginning in 2005, creators of the [10-year Plan to End Homelessness](#) have focused their attention on providing permanent, affordable housing options, not emergency shelters, in King County. And supporters say it's worked, with more than 5,100 housing units for those who are homeless created under the plan. That's more than 50 percent of the goal to build 9,500 housing units by 2015.

"We have produced as many housing units as we expected and are successful in keeping on track with our original goals," said Seattle City Councilmember Nick Licata, who also serves on the Governing Board for the [Committee to End Homelessness \(CEH\)](#).

But after seven years and increasing numbers of people still struggling to find night-of shelter, critics question the priorities of the plan.

"We have pushed really, really hard on the (CEH Governing) Board to ask them what they are doing about shelters," said Tim Harris, founding director of Real Change.



[Real Change](#) is part of Occupy CEH, a group of homeless advocates who want to see more immediate nightly shelters, tent cities and/or encampments included into the county's 10-year plan.

"We are asking them to come up with solutions to people who are homeless on the street tonight," Harris said.

A shift in priorities?

In 2011, as part of a mid-plan review, the Committee to End Homelessness created the Single Adult Shelter Task Force to look at the county's immediate shelter needs. Currently, there are 1,700 emergency shelter beds offered in King County each year - 91 percent of which are located in Seattle.

After spending a year looking at these numbers and gathering information, the task force shared its findings with the CEH Board in January. They found that despite the success building thousands of affordable housing units, the county isn't keeping up with the thousands of residents still living on the streets.

"We've been successful in providing a significant amount of permanent housing, but the economic conditions have overrun our ability to provide emergency shelter to as many people that need it," Licata said. "That's where we want to close the gap."

The task force's report offered a series of recommendations focused largely on investing more resources into the shelter system, including adding shelter capacity outside of Seattle's city limits and developing 24-hour-a-day shelter options countywide. CEH leaders and board members see these recommendations as a real shift in the priorities of the 10-year plan, which up until now has focused nearly all its resources on creating permanent housing and not shelter.

But, Harris and other homeless advocates still don't think the task force recommendations go far enough.

"This report doesn't touch on how to effectively engage with car campers; it's silent on the issue of whether the city should be more supportive of tent cities," Harris said. "What this report does is outline some ways to make the existing system more efficient. But, it doesn't address the core issue: how do we better meet the needs for people not in the emergency shelter system that have been left out?"

And money is an issue.

"The priority to integrate shelter into 10-year plan efforts means shelter has a place at the table, but it doesn't mean there is new and additional resources," said Gretchen Bruce, interim project director for the Committee to End Homelessness.

Critics believe this is where working with homeless communities, such as Nickelsville, would prove useful.

"Homeless people are taking actions to meet their own needs because the shelter system isn't meeting their needs," Harris said. "We need to look at low-cost, effective ways of meeting the needs that are initiated by the homeless themselves and how can they work with them as part of the solution."

<http://lakecity.komonews.com/news/840054-king-countys-plan-end-homelessness-working>

The CEH Governing Board voted to approve the recommendations by the task force in January. But, it's the financial supporters of the 10-year plan who will decide whether or not more money will be put toward immediate shelter needs. What they decide will be shared with the board next month.