



City of Tacoma
WASHINGTON

Catherine Ushka - District 4 Spring Update

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Dear District 4 residents,

This e-newsletter is dedicated to issues related to homelessness. This is the top issue I hear from community members, and I hear from all sides of this issue, from folks asking the City to build tiny houses on our sidewalks to folks asking the City to arrest individuals camping in public spaces. I want you all to know that I am deeply committed to finding solutions for everyone. This means housing options for our most vulnerable and mitigating impacts of encampments in our neighborhoods. In this newsletter I will share a more in depth understanding of the City's work to address housing needs and how you can be a part of it.

Sincerely

Catherine Ushka
District 4 Tacoma City Council Member

In this newsletter:

- [Chair of Community, Vitality and Safety Committee](#)
 - [Providing Shelter and Housing During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
 - [Managing Trash and Dumping in the Community](#)
 - [It is not illegal to be homeless](#)
 - [How the community is working together to address this problem \(and what you can do\)](#)
 - [How we fund affordable housing](#)
 - [List of COVID resources](#)
-

Chair of Community, Vitality and Safety Committee

I am honored to have been elected by my peers to serve as the Chair of the City Council's Community, Vitality and Safety Committee. The purpose of this committee is to vet and develop policy and provide recommendations to enhance the living standards and safety of residents of Tacoma.

The scope of this committee is broad, and encompasses many of the topics I hear most about from you, the residents of District 4. Today's hot topics of policing, human services, homelessness and affordable housing all fall under the purview of this committee. As chair, I will bring these crucial discussions forward. Details for this Committee can be found [online here](#). I am working with staff now to set the agenda for the year, which will include deep dives into what the City is doing to address homelessness and other humanitarian concerns.

I also serve on the following committees, boards and councils:

- Tacoma Community, Vitality & Safety Committee (Chair)
- Tacoma Economic Development Committee
- Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department (Vice Chair)
- National Association of Local Boards of Health
- Association of Washington Cities Legislative Priorities Committee
- National League of Cities Large Cities Committee
- Crystal Judson Family Justice Center (Chair)
- Law and Justice Council
- Law and Justice Community Oversight Subcommittee
- Parks Policy Group
- Pierce County Commission Against Domestic Violence
- Pierce County Regional Council
- Youth violence reduction Committee (Vice Chair)



Providing Shelter and Housing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Too many of our neighbors are without housing or shelter. The top cause of homelessness, according to Pierce County data, is lack of affordable housing and family crisis, a challenge that is only growing. While the City is aggressively pursuing our [Affordable Housing Action Strategy](#), we are also seeking ways to mitigate the immediate impacts of individuals experiencing homelessness. The City has been operating under a Declaration of State of Public Health Emergency since 2017 to address the health and safety concerns caused by growing encampments.

Unfortunately, our efforts to provide housing and shelter options have faced new barriers as we adapt to a deadly pandemic that requires more physical space and resources than ever before. I am deeply grateful to the network of shelter providers in our city that have risen to the challenge and re-thought how services could be delivered to our community.

The City has been part of this work. Since onset of COVID-19, we have launched the following:

- Tacoma Emergency Micro-Shelter (TEMS) Site at 6th and Orchard: 40 shelter units, serving up to 60 individuals.
- Tacoma Emergency Micro-Shelter (TEMS) Site at 6th and Orchard: 50 shelter units, serving up to 65 individuals.
- Three temporary warming centers provided shelter during the winter season, located at the Eastside Community Center (through February), Center at Norpoint (through February), and the Salvation Army (through March).

Throughout February, Council engaged in rigorous discussion about what else we can do as a City to respond to the needs of our community. On February 23, staff committed to review City-owned property for opportunities to set up additional sheltering sites and potentially a safe encampment.

Managing Trash and Dumping in the Community

I hear from you, and see for myself, the increase in trash dumped on the side of the road and in other places across our community, as well as trash, debris, and dumping in and around encampments.

To address this concern, the City is contracting with small businesses that understand the unique nature of debris removal in these environments. The City is also exploring other potential opportunities, including hiring local business to address litter and debris in City rights of way and contracting a service provider to create a pilot program to employ individuals experiencing homelessness to perform litter removal from area businesses that are impacted by homeless encampments, at no cost to the businesses supported.

You can help us clean up trash and dumping in our community. Tell us when you see a problem by reporting it to [Tacoma First 311](#). You can report by phone (calling 311 or 253.591.5000), through the [311 website](#), or by downloading the Tacoma First 311 app on your apple or android device.

If you're looking to do more, you can also sign up through the City's [Adapt-A-Spot program](#). The Adopt-A-Spot Program is a year-round partnership between the City and neighborhood groups, businesses and residents to help reduce litter and keep public spaces clean.

Tacoma's neighborhood councils are also organizing their annual Litter Free 253 event on April 17. This is a great way to connect with your community! Early signups get a FREE Litter Grabber and other fun giveaways! Learn more on the [Litter Free 253 facebook page](#). Note: The LitterFree253 event will adhere to the City of Tacoma's COVID-19 safety protocols.



It is not illegal to be homeless

I hear and empathize with every constituent who contacts me to share how an encampment near their home is creating hazardous conditions. We are all human. We create trash and waste, it is part of living. The City declared encampments a public health crisis because of the negative health impacts that are part of this living condition.

However, it is not illegal for an individual to be homeless. The number one cause of homelessness is lack of affordable housing and family crisis. We must understand as a community that the most vulnerable among us still deserve to exist with dignity, and the City Council cannot legislate away their right to live in our city.

This notion has been formalized by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which has jurisdiction over Washington State. This court found that fining or jailing homeless people for staying outside or in unauthorized places if a bed at an emergency shelter is not available is unconstitutional. Practically, what that means for Tacoma is there are legal limitations preventing us from moving individuals experiencing homelessness if there is no other sheltering options available.

Again, the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the situation. In addition to limiting our ability to offer alternative sheltering options, we also have to consider public health risks. The [CDC has published](#) recommendations for interacting with individuals experiencing homelessness and living in encampments. This includes “If individual housing options are not available, allow people who are living unsheltered or in encampments to remain where they are” in order to limit increased potential for infectious disease spread.

The City still takes action. Our Homeless Outreach Team visits known encampment sites throughout the city. They offer resources and shelter options to individuals living in encampments. City staff continue to explore alternatives for shelter, housing and encampment impact mitigation. We are in constant communication with state and federal delegations informing them of our struggles and asking for additional resources so we can respond to our community’s need.

How the community is working together to address this problem (and what you can do)

I am deeply appreciative of the provider network in Tacoma, which has created [the Tacoma-Pierce County Coalition to End homelessness](#) and hosted the Safe Shelter Summit in December. This a network of individuals, non-profit agencies, government agencies and community businesses working together to serve people experiencing homelessness. The Coalitions’ goal is to help folks establish safe housing as quickly as possible and help them to retain that housing so their homeless episode is short and never repeated. They also work to address many of the factors that drive homelessness. I have attended the Safe Shelter Summit and subsequent meetings, and will be staying engaged with this organization and its collaborative work.

As a City, we want the community to understand that we are open to partnering on providing services to individuals experiencing homelessness. If your religious organization, nonprofit or other entity has space available that they would like to offer for some sort of shelter, safe encampment site or safe parking site, please don’t hesitate to reach out. We are committed to being collaborative and innovative as we seek out the solutions our community needs.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that every community member has a part to play in addressing homelessness. This crisis does not impact us equally, but we are all impacted. I ask that you consider how many of our neighbors are struggling during these unprecedented times, and how the COVID-19 impact is causing many to fall even further behind. I ask you bring compassion and have patience as we work through these struggles. We will find solutions together.



How we fund affordable housing

Tacoma continues to lack adequate affordable housing for very low-income individuals. Tacoma also continues to lack permanent housing and services for individuals experiencing homelessness. The City's current level of funding is inadequate, as we continue our work to address what we recognize are regional issues that require a regional, coordinated approach.

On February 23, Council began a discussion whether or not to raise revenue in support of these needs. We are considering a proposal to implement – by councilmanic action – an additional 1/10th of 1 percent sales tax. 1/10th of 1 percent equates to 1 cent of sales tax for every \$10, or a dime of sales tax for every \$100, of retail sales.

The funding from the additional 1/10th of one percent sales tax is estimated to raise between \$4.5 and \$5.5 million on an annual basis, and would allow for quick deployment of resources to respond to new opportunities or emergent needs that may arise.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this proposal and how we work together as a community to address our affordable housing crisis.

List of COVID resources

City of Tacoma – cityoftacoma.org/coronavirus

Make It Tacoma – makeittacoma.com

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department - tpchd.org

TPU Bill Assistance - mytpu.org/payment-billing/payment-information/payment-assistance

Rental Assistance - <https://www.piercecountywa.gov/7142/Rental-Assistance>

Washington State Governor Jay Inslee COVID-19 Response - coronavirus.wa.gov



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