



SAFESTREETS

Dec. 21, 2015

Mayor Stephanson shares Streets Initiative progress, looks ahead to 2016

EVERETT - *From Mayor Ray Stephanson:*

Tonight I'll join Snohomish County officials and other community members for the National Homeless Day Memorial Vigil in front of the County courthouse. This annual event remembers and honors homeless citizens who have died in the past year. It's held at the start of the longest night of the year, to draw attention to the many challenges the homeless face at night.

As part of our [Community Streets Initiative](#) process, we've spent the past year and a half digging into the obstacles and risks the homeless in Everett experience and the factors that might keep them on the streets, including mental illness and addiction. We have forged better connections with our partners at Snohomish County's Human Services department and jail, and with the many exceptional service organizations that provide care, treatment and housing for our most vulnerable citizens. These organizations have been doing the heavy lifting on these difficult issues for many years, and we are grateful for their knowledge and leadership.

Personally, I've experienced an evolution over the last year in my thinking and approach to the homeless. When we began the task force process, my focus was on the problems created by people living on the streets. But as I've had the chance to talk with our service providers and heard the stories from our police officers and social worker, and as I've interacted with our homeless citizens, it's become clear that this is a complex challenge, and it can't be solved simply by telling people to "get a job."

When you get not too far below the surface, you see that many people are impoverished and on the streets because of the loss of a job, substance abuse, family problems, difficulty acclimating after returning from war, or any one of the many challenges that afflict us as human beings and make life difficult. Some of us are better at dealing with challenges, but for others, these obstacles or setbacks can send them over the edge. We are all human, and it is easy to get in a tough way.

What we learned collectively from the Streets Initiative task force is that we need a balanced

Learn more:

For more information on the Community Streets Initiative, visit www.everettwa.gov/streetsinitiative.

For more information on the Safe Streets Plan, visit www.everettwa.gov/safestreets.

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approach to our street-level social issues. There is no question that the challenges on our streets are impacting our community, and many business owners are combatting trash and vandalism on their properties. We need to hold people accountable; they can't infringe on other people's safety or quality of life. We won't allow people to break the law. Our [Safe Streets plan](#) is intentionally designed to provide enforcement mechanisms for those who are breaking the law and preying on the vulnerable.

But we also know that an enforcement-only approach won't work. We now have dedicated police officers and social workers to focus time and attention to people on the streets. This gives us an opportunity to find out who these people are, what is their affliction, and how we can help them. The more we can put a face on the people at risk, the more human it makes it for all of us. We have some tremendous police officers in Everett who want to help people and have good instincts and want this to be a better community.

We are also expanding our successful alternative sentencing programs. Diversion is about breaking the patterns in a lifestyle. If someone is nonviolent and a first-time offender, we offer different sentencing terms. For example, if you are capable, you might be in a work crew cleaning up the very area you messed up. It is important for our citizens and businesses to know that even though we are going to help people, we are not going to let them run roughshod over the city.

We've learned that it all begins with providing stable housing, and we have set some ambitious goals for ourselves. By the end of January, we will have placed five of our chronically homeless in permanent, supportive housing, and we will house another 15 by the end of June. At the same time, we are developing plans for a facility that would house 60 or more chronically homeless individuals. What we've learned from [Lloyd Pendleton](#) and others is if we can get people into low-barrier housing, that says to those in need, "You don't have to get clean and sober before you get housed. We will get you the housing you need and then we can wrap the services around you to help you deal with life."

It has been heartwarming to see how much our community cares and wants to help. That will be important as we move forward collectively.

Everett has a lot of great and positive things happening. We have an improving economy, emerging waterfront, growing downtown and increase in education and jobs. The street issues have felt like a black cloud, but for the first time I feel like we have the tools to help people find more productive and satisfying lives and to help them be safe. There is a collective benefit in all of this, and I feel more hopeful about our future than I have in a long time.

Watch: Mayor Stephanson discusses the Streets Initiative and Safe Streets plan in the [December Mayor's Update](#) on the Everett Channel.

Learn more about the [Community Streets Initiative](#) or the [Everett Safe Streets Plan](#).

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