
Homelessness Data Reveal Reasons for Collapse of King County Outreach Program

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Executive Summary

According to Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell, King County’s Partnership for Zero (PfZ) program to address homelessness produced “a disappointing end result—for the [King County Regional Homelessness] Authority, their workers, philanthropists, and, most importantly, people living on the street unhoused downtown.”¹ Consequently, on September 19, 2023, the city announced that the program has been shut down due to funding challenges. Our report below reveals the ineffective use of millions of private and taxpayer dollars, the majority of which remains unaccounted for.

When King County’s Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) launched its \$10 million Partnership for Zero (PfZ) program in February 2022, Marc Dones, then CEO of KCRHA, announced that within a year, PfZ would reduce the number of individuals experiencing homelessness downtown to 30 people. Dones also stated that “measuring success in any homelessness system is housing people,” saying, “that’s how we know what we’re doing is working.”² Yet a year later, with support reaching \$11 million, PfZ had only housed 115 people at a cost of nearly \$20,000 per person. Meanwhile, two private organizations with similar methods of outreach housed 2 to nearly 6 times as many people for a fraction of that cost.

Even with significant spending, the number of people living on the street or in vehicles in King County increased 38% between 2020 and 2022, with a total of 13,368 people experiencing homelessness, up 25% from 2016. While many King County organizations receive government funding to address this crisis, few make their outcomes public. In 2022, KCRHA distributed contracts totaling over \$107 million to 56 nonprofits. Only 10 of the top 18 recipients—receiving \$1-9 million contracts—provide data on the number of people they housed.

Key Takeaways

- **King County’s government-run Partnership for Zero program houses people at a cost 4-6 times that of similar Salvation Army and Union Gospel Mission programs.**
- **Many taxpayer-funded organizations addressing homelessness do not make data on their outcomes and finances available. This makes it difficult or impossible to assess their effectiveness.**
- **Private and government organizations addressing homelessness should make data available to the public to increase transparency and accountability.**

¹ <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/homelessness-authority-closing-downtown-seattle-initiative-that-lost-funding/>

² <https://www.seattlechannel.org/Mayor?videoid=x135571> at minute 39:00

- **Readily available data would enable funding to be directed to the most effective organizations, for improved outcomes.**

Overview

The report below provides a cost-benefit analysis of King County’s “Partnership for Zero” (PfZ) program, assessing the effectiveness of the program at meeting its goal of “helping people move from homeless to housed” by comparing it to other mobile outreach programs in King County.³ We conclude that better data is needed to make informed investments in outreach programs addressing homelessness, for improved outcomes and to avoid pouring money into programs that don’t work.

The Need for This Study

It is important that the public, as well as agencies and organizations addressing homelessness, understand the outcomes and efficiency of these programs, which are consuming enormous quantities of both public and private resources.

Discovery Institute’s Fix Homelessness initiative provides research, resources, and reporting on the homelessness crisis facing U.S. cities.⁴ A central focus is evaluating the effectiveness of current homelessness policies in cities like Seattle.

Background

The term “mobile outreach” is used in this report to refer to outreach programs that send workers where people experiencing homelessness reside to establish relationship and help them secure housing. Mobile outreach differs from other forms of homelessness programs in that it physically meets people where they are instead of initiating or providing services only once they arrive at an establishment. Because it has the potential to reach more homeless people who otherwise would not pursue services, mobile outreach has the promising capacity to close the gap between service providers and those in need of services.

The King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) is a government agency tasked with overseeing the county’s response to homelessness. Distributing county and city funding to service providers, KCRHA also operates Partnership for Zero (PfZ), a mobile outreach project of KCRHA funded by the City of Seattle, King County, and private businesses and philanthropies through the “We Are In” coalition. Coalition members include the Ballmer Group, Alaska

³ <https://wearein.org/partnership-for-zero/>

⁴ <https://fixhomelessness.org>

Airlines, Amazon, Boeing, Starbucks, Microsoft, JPMorgan Chase, Nordstrom, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.⁵ Figure 1 below depicts the flow of funding into and out of KCRHA.

Launched on February 17, 2022, with \$10 million in funding,⁶ the KCRHA CEO at the time, Marc Dones, announced that within one year, the PfZ program could reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness downtown to 30 people.⁷ In February of 2023, the “We Are In” coalition announced that the total investment in PfZ had reached \$11 million.⁸ But homelessness has increased, not diminished.

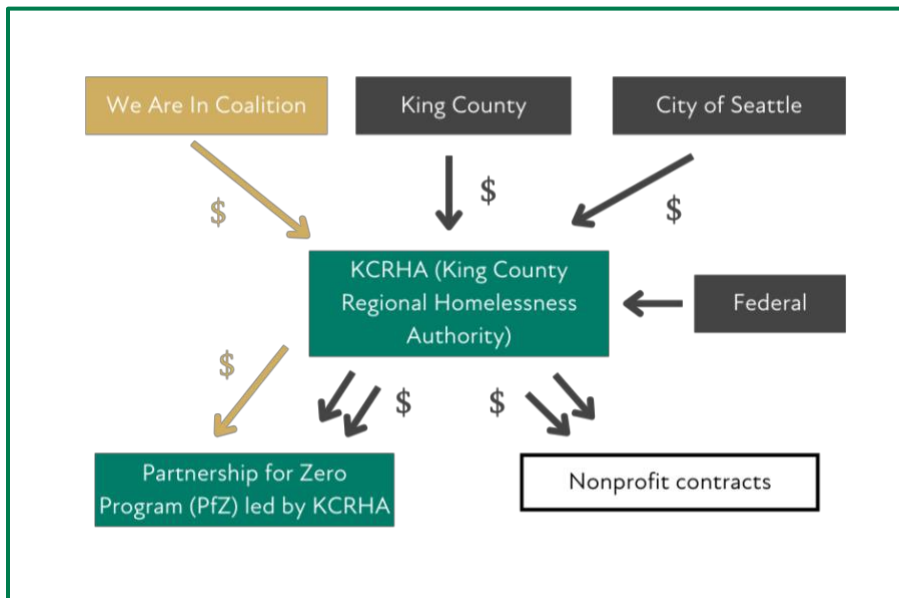


Figure 1: KCRHA Funding Flow

Study Approach

This report was compiled with findings from public disclosure requests and communications with homelessness outreach providers in King County. By comparing the funding and efficacy of the PfZ program to that of other mobile outreach programs that seek to bring people experiencing unsheltered homelessness into permanent housing, our aim is to demonstrate the need for data-driven responses to homelessness that allocate money where it is most effective.

⁵ <https://wearein.org/partnership-for-zero/>

⁶ <https://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/news/2022/02/17/seattle-group-unveils-homelessness-effort.html#:~:text=A%20new%20Puget%20Sound%2Darea,of%20more%20than%20%2410%20million.>

⁷ <https://www.seattlechannel.org/Mayor?videoid=x135571> at minute 34:30

⁸ <https://wearein.org/partnership-for-zero-initiative-to-reduce-homelessness-making-progress-earning-new-and-renewed-philanthropic-investments/8>

No two organizations approach homelessness, and mobile outreach, in exactly the same way. Consequently, exact comparisons are not practical. However, broad comparisons can be useful for revealing significant disparities in cost and outcomes. This report offers a reasonable comparison of three programs that have generally comparable goals and methods.

When paired with data on cost and outcomes, differences in goals and methods reveal practices that work, and those that do not. This report is a call for data that would facilitate advancing successful practices and divesting from those that don't produce positive results.

State of Homelessness in King County

King County has one of the largest homeless populations in the United States.⁹ In the last several years, King County and the City of Seattle have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to address homelessness, yet the number of men and women experiencing homelessness in the county has *increased*. The King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) distributed over \$107 million in contracts to address homelessness in 2022 and is operating on a 2023 budget of over \$253 million.¹⁰ The City of Seattle alone spent \$476,620,000 between 2021 and 2023.¹¹ Yet since 2016, the King County homelessness Point in Time (PIT) count grew from 10,688 to 13,368 in 2022, an increase of 25% as depicted in figure 2 below.¹² The trends in unsheltered homelessness (people living on the street and in vehicles) are even more alarming, with an increase of 38% between 2020 and 2022 as depicted in figure 3 below.¹³ In 2023, King County opted out of conducting a PIT count of unsheltered homelessness. However, sheltered homelessness (people living in emergency shelters or transitional housing) increased 11% from 5,748 in 2022 to 6,410 in 2023.¹⁴ In their recent 5 Year Plan, KCRHA projects year-over-year increases in homelessness and a need for increased funding.¹⁵

These trends are not isolated to Seattle. In San Francisco, spending on homelessness increased from \$200 million to \$360 million between 2016 and 2019. During the same time period, the homeless population increased from roughly 6,000 to 8,000.¹⁶ The proposed budget for 2023-2024 is \$690.3 million, nearly double the spending in 2019.¹⁷

⁹ <https://usafacts.org/articles/which-cities-in-the-us-have-the-most-homelessness/>

¹⁰ <https://kcrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/KCRHA-2023-Final-Budget-12.13.2022.pdf>

¹¹ <https://komonews.com/news/local/seattle-homeless-crisis-spent-a-billion-dollars-on-homelessness-but-numbers-of-unsheltered-grew-washington-king-county-homeless-budget-money-citywide-spending-human-services-department-decade-labor-contract-state-of-emergency-organizations-people-living>

¹² <https://kcrha.org/data-overview/>

¹³ <https://kcrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/PIT-2022-Infograph-v7.pdf>. The PIT count was not performed in 2021 due to Covid.

¹⁴ <https://deptofcommerce.app.box.com/s/ek9pu2w07oz8d77gq6c1rlpxuwcw0515/file/1277050510887>

¹⁵ <https://kcrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FINAL-KCRHA-Five-Year-Plan-6.1.23.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/S-F-has-an-unprecedented-1-1-billion-to-spend-16318448.php>

¹⁷ https://sf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/CSF_Proposed_Budget_Book_June_2023_Master_Web.pdf

Homelessness in the U.S. increased despite dramatic increases in federal spending to address the problem. Unsheltered homelessness increased 20.5% between 2014 and 2020. During the same time period, federal spending increased by almost \$2 billion.¹⁸

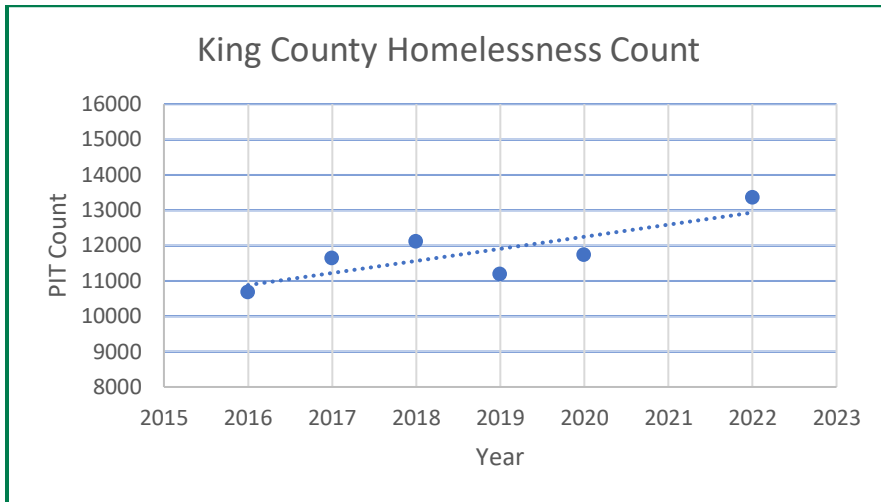


Figure 2: King County Homelessness Count

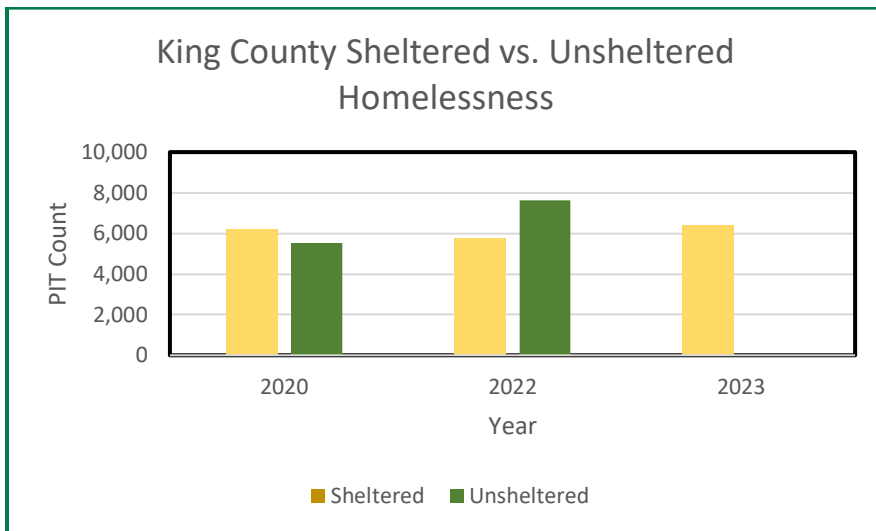


Figure 3: King County Sheltered vs Unsheltered Homelessness

¹⁸ <https://www.discovery.org/m/securepdfs/2022/10/How-Congress-Can-Reform-Governments-Misguided-Homelessness-Policies-20221011.pdf>

Comparison of PfZ with Two Private Mobile Outreach Programs

The “We Are In” coalition reports that in 2022, PfZ created a “Housing Command Center” with 26 “Systems Advocates” who logged 13,000 hours doing outreach beginning in September of that year.¹⁹ By January 2023, PfZ had created a list of 931 people in need of housing, less than 10% of the homeless population.²⁰ Public disclosure requests reveal that only 115 people were moved into permanent housing in 2022.

Partnership for Zero spent a total of \$2,280,363 in 2022. \$1,948,476 was spent for the Systems Advocates Workforce, \$256,229 was spent for rental assistance, and \$75,658 on furniture. Information obtained from KCRHA outlines \$10,672,350 in “approved funding” in 2022, nearly \$6 million of that designated from We Are In. Communications with staff at KCRHA explained that there was a \$10 million “multi-year commitment from private, philanthropic partners.” We received no explanation for the nearly \$8 million in unspent “approved funding.” We Are In did not respond to a request for confirmation on the funding numbers provided by KCRHA. According to the categories of “approved funding,” the program spent only 28% of its approved Systems Advocates funding and only 7% of its approved rental assistance funding.

Breaking down the \$2.3 million that was spent to house 115 people gives the following costs for each person housed:

- **\$16,943 for Systems Advocates per person housed**
 - **\$150 per hour of Systems Advocate outreach**
- **\$2,228 in rental assistance per person housed**
- **\$658 in furniture costs per person housed**
- **Total: \$19,829 per person housed**

We compared Partnership for Zero with two non-profit organizations, the Salvation Army and Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission, which also have mobile outreach programs with the same goal of creating pathways to housing for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in King County.

¹⁹ <https://wearein.org/partnership-for-zero-initiative-to-reduce-homelessness-making-progress-earning-new-and-renewed-philanthropic-investments/>

²⁰ See above.

Organization	Program	2022 Funding Spent on Program	2022 People Moved from Homelessness to Permanent Housing	Cost per Person Housed
King County Regional Housing Authority	Partnership for Zero	\$2,280,363	115 ²¹	\$19,829
Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission	Rapid Response Outreach	\$1,820,000	279 ²²	\$6,523
The Salvation Army	Street Level Outreach	\$1,470,605	640 ²³	\$2,298

In 2022, the Salvation Army’s Street Level Outreach program received just over 60 percent of its funding from the city or county. Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission did not receive funding from the city or county in 2022. The relative costs of providing housing to those experiencing homelessness through mobile outreach programs of the three organizations are shown in the table above.

In short, Partnership for Zero has a demonstrated cost per person housed almost nine times that of mobile outreach operated by The Salvation Army, and three times that of Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission’s mobile outreach. The Salvation Army housed 457% more people than PfZ, with 36% less funding. Likewise, Union Gospel Mission housed 143% more people than PfZ, with 20% less funding. Notably, the disparity in cost per person housed is largely due to the money spent on PfZ Systems Advocates. **Indeed, 85% of the cost per person housed was for Systems Advocates, and a mere 11% for actual rental assistance.**

The actual cost per person housed is even higher than the original number we’ve cited above. The PfZ data above is from 2022 and represents less than a full year of operating outreach, although the program began at the start of 2022. Data from the yearlong period of June 2022 through June 2023 reveals an increased cost per person housed of **\$26,499**. During that time, PfZ permanently housed 202 people at a total cost of \$5,352,877.

The cost above conflicts with the \$10,051 cost claimed by “We Are In” in an interactive homelessness quiz on their website and used in an ad campaign on Facebook.²⁴ However, it turns out that the \$10,051 number is based on a study done in central Florida nearly ten years

²¹ This includes 92 people housed in the private market and 23 people who entered permanent supportive housing.
²² This does not include 78 people who entered detox programs and 105 who were referred to other agencies that offer housing.
²³ The Salvation Army’s Street Level Outreach team has housed 1,200 people in 2023 as of mid-August.
²⁴ <https://wearein.org/homelessness-quiz/>

ago.²⁵ It has nothing to do with Seattle. The data from PfZ (which is funded in large part by “We Are In”) reveals a cost nearly double what is advertised by the “We Are In” coalition.

A comparison of the salaries of workers in the respective organizations is also revealing. Pfz’s “Systems Advocate” salaries range from \$82,400 to \$92,700, with benefits including unlimited vacation, 96 hours of paid sick leave, 14 paid holidays, as well as medical, dental, and vision coverage.²⁶ The compensation for outreach workers at Salvation Army and Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission is far lower. A comparison of the value of the remuneration packages of the organizations is shown in the table below.

Organization	Program	Median Outreach Worker Salary
KCRHA	Partnership for Zero	\$82,400
The Salvation Army	Street Level Outreach	\$50,000
Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission	Rapid Response Outreach	\$48,068 ²⁷

Non-Profits Receiving KCRHA Funding in 2022

While the three programs compared above represent a small fraction of the total programs addressing homelessness in King County, they reveal the existence of a wide range in spending and outcomes. This report compared only mobile outreach programs in order to control for general outreach method. It is helpful to place this data in context by expanding the focus to all non-profits addressing homelessness, by mobile outreach and other methods, that received funding from KCRHA and the data they make available to the public.

In 2022, KCRHA provided **\$107,396,058** in funding to 56 organizations addressing homelessness in King County. The top recipients of KCRHA funding are shown in the table below, with the data each organization makes available on the number of people they moved from homelessness to housing in 2021 and 2022. We contacted each organization, sometimes repeatedly, asking if they would provide their data. Shaded segments indicate data that is not available on the organization’s website and was not provided upon request via direct communication. While some organizations make homelessness-related data available, we are interested specifically in the number of people moved from homelessness into housing—the goal of efforts to end homelessness. KCRHA started in 2022, so 2021 funding from the agency is not applicable.

²⁵ <https://shnny.org/uploads/Florida-Homelessness-Report-2014.pdf>

²⁶ <https://fixhomelessness.org/2023/kcrha-ceo-marc-dones-steps-down/>, and https://kcrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/KCRHA_Jobs_Program-Specialist.pdf

²⁷ Based on an hourly rate of \$23.11 for a full-time outreach specialist (<https://www.paycomonline.net/v4/ats/web.php/jobs/ViewJobDetails?job=51800&clientkey=0CC84378EF47065006EC78DC46A36DA8>)

Organization	Year	People Moved into Housing	Funding from KCRHA
Catholic Community Services	2021		-
	2022	100	\$13,175,519
DESC (Downtown Emergency Services Center)	2021	277	-
	2022		\$10,104,811
The Salvation Army (King County)	2021	73 ²⁸	-
	2022	640 ²⁹	\$9,005,543
Low Income Housing Institute ³⁰	2021		-
	2022		\$8,750,203
Compass Housing Alliance	2021		-
	2022		\$6,658,008
YWCA Seattle, King County, Snohomish County	2021		-
	2022		\$6,490,435
Chief Seattle Club ³¹	2021		-
	2022		\$4,239,897
YouthCare	2021		-
	2022		\$3,454,723
YMCA Seattle	2021	1,456	-
	2022	1,526 ³²	\$2,784,149
Solid Ground WA	2021		-
	2022	775	\$2,760,000
Mary's Place	2021		-
	2022	656 ³³	\$2,360,338
SHARE/WHEEL	2021		-
	2022		\$2,336,707
Lake City Partners Ending Homelessness	2021		-
	2022		\$2,254,938
Urban League Metropolitan Seattle	2021	108 (provided upon request)	-
	2022	108 ³⁴ (provided upon request)	\$1,571,075
Seattle Indian Center	2021		-
	2022		\$1,359,063
Plymouth Housing	2021		-
	2022	260	\$1,216,464
Neighborhood House	2021	42 (provided upon request)	-
	2022	51 ³⁵ (provided upon request)	\$1,054,025

²⁸ SA spent 2021 growing their street level outreach program.

²⁹ Website provides data for fiscal years 2022 and 2023 (October 2021 - September 2022 and October 2022 - June 2023 respectively). 640 is the number for calendar year 2022 provided by Salvation Army.

³⁰ A 2021 990 form, not published by LIHI, shows Executive Director Sharon Li was paid a salary of \$253,462.

³¹ Staff explained via email that “given the often egregious history of research and data collection by non-Native entities, we are protective of our information and how it is used.”

³² YMCA 2021 and 2022 number includes people receiving eviction prevention.

³³ 496 of these were via mobile outreach.

³⁴ 216 over 2021 and 2022. ULMS did not provide a breakdown for each year, so an average was used.

³⁵ Neighborhood House notes that these numbers are lower than pre-COVID numbers due to a program shift towards extended support after housing placement.

Friends of Youth	2021		-
	2022		\$939,717
Sophia Way	2021	85	-
	2022	128	\$325,500
Total	2021		-
	2022		\$84,295,836

The table above reveals the lack of data available that could measure the relative effectiveness of nonprofit programs addressing homelessness. Only eight of the top-funded organizations above have published their 2022 housing outcomes on their websites, and two additional organizations provided outcomes upon our request. Yet these 19 top-funded organizations received **\$84,295,836** in taxpayer funding from KCRHA last year, and over 100 million in taxpayer dollars was awarded to 56 organizations in total.

Conclusion: Data-Driven Funding Decisions are Needed to Improve Homelessness Response

The success of homelessness outreach efforts is measurable — simply put, successful efforts house the most people for the least amount of money. Just as investors put their money where they can make the most return, and buyers choose products that give them the most for the best price, governments and private entities should use their financial resources where they have the greatest positive impact on human lives.

Consequently, transparent data is critical for assessing and promoting organizations that are most effectively stewarding resources for addressing homelessness. This data is greatly lacking among King County nonprofits addressing homelessness.

To correct this deficiency, every organization that receives government funding should be required to provide data on the number of people housed, and the associated costs. These outcomes should then be used to evaluate where further government funding is directed. Likewise, private funders should seek to invest in organizations with measurable outcomes of success. Government agencies that manage funding and operate outreach, like KCRHA, should be leading the charge on transparency and efficiency. Both taxpayers and private funders, as well as those suffering from homelessness, deserve no less.

Moving people into permanent housing, the focus of this report, is only one component of a comprehensive response to homelessness. Without addressing the root causes of homelessness, including addiction and mental illness, people are unable to sustain housing and healthy lives. Discovery Institute’s Fix Homelessness initiative promotes commonsense policy and decision-making to restore lives impacted by homelessness, and good data is a fundamental first step towards that end.