



Washington State Coalition for the Homeless

2009 Legislative Agenda

In the current economic climate, we understand that the Legislature faces a difficult task in developing an agreeing upon a balanced budget. We recognize that many valuable programs and services are at equal risk of being cut. However, the need for housing and related services is far greater in a depressed economy than in a prosperous one. Reducing funding for programs that prevent and end homelessness will result in increased costs to taxpayers for emergency services and law enforcement. The Washington State Coalition for the Homeless (WSCH) has therefore adopted the following legislative agenda for the 2009 session to ensure that basic housing and survival needs are met to the greatest extent possible.

Funding Priorities

The mission of the Washington State Coalition for the Homeless is to end homelessness in the State of Washington.

Our goal is to provide housing and supportive services to those who are presently homeless and to prevent at risk households from becoming homeless.

According to the January 2008 Point in Time Count, there were a total of 21,947 people reported as homeless. Based on HUD 2000 CHAS Data, there are also some 99,000 renter households at risk of becoming homeless because they earn less than 30% of the area median income and spend more than 50% of their income on their housing.

Statement of Principle:

It is imperative to retain the level of housing and services currently available to homeless households and expand these resources where possible. Where funding is too limited to meet overall need, priority in state programs should be given to serving those with the lowest incomes first.

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Provide shelter for the unsheltered homeless population and prevent homelessness by allocating \$13.5 million for the State's Emergency Shelter Assistance Program (ESAP) for the 2009-2011 biennium. ESAP has remained at approximately \$10 million per biennium for the last ten years while the demand for shelter has only increased. Increasing ESAP by \$3.5 million will not meet the current need, but will provide an inflationary adjustment to cover the increased cost of doing business in the last decade. ESAP is a versatile tool that can also be used for various homeless prevention activities and is our primary tool for rapidly re-housing homeless families and individuals. **WSCH Lead Item.**

Provide short term rental assistance for homeless and at risk families and individuals by allocating \$15 million for the State's Transitional Housing Operating and Rent Program (THOR) for the 2009-2011 biennium. Last year, THOR was given a supplemental allocation of \$2.5 million, and the eligible population was expanded to serve single adults and unaccompanied youth in addition to families with children. We seek to maintain the eligibility expansion and the baseline funding level of \$10 million, and if possible, increase it to \$15 million. **WSCH Lead Item.**

Maintain and increase the number of housing units available to extremely low-income households by increasing operating and maintenance funding. As wages stagnate and decrease for low-income tenants, they are able to contribute less of their income toward rent. At the same time, the cost of maintaining and operating low income housing is increasing. Increasing O&M funding will allow more units to be affordable to extremely low income families and individuals. **WSCH Support Item.**

Provide permanent supportive housing for special needs populations. Many people leaving incarceration and state psychiatric institutions will not be ready to live independently after two years of transitional supportive housing, if they are ever able to live independently. Creating a funding partnership where CTED provides housing vouchers to ex-offenders under active DOC supervision and DSHS PACT clients will provide a stable, supportive housing environment that will allow participants to achieve the highest level of self-sufficiency possible while decreasing recidivism and the use of high-cost emergency services.

Ensure the success of people exiting state systems of care by:

- ◆ Reinstating Department of Corrections (DOC) transition funding and making permanent the State's Re-Entry Housing Pilot Program (RHPP)
 - ◆ Maintaining funding for the State's Independent Youth Housing Program
- WSCH Support Item**

Ensure continued production of affordable housing by maintaining funding for the Housing Trust Fund at \$200 million. **WSCH Support Item.**

Policy Priorities

Prevent homelessness and ensure the success of the Homelessness Housing and Assistance Act (E2SHB2163) passed in 2005 by requiring state agencies, especially DOC and DSHS, to track the housing status of people leaving their care and develop plans that outline the resources and policy changes needed to avoid discharging people into homelessness by 2011. The current practices and capacity of the criminal justice, mental health and child welfare systems are resulting in the unintended—and inadequately addressed—consequence of releasing people from their care into homelessness. Ex-offenders are released from their sentences with no home to go to, people with mental illnesses are being released from psychiatric facilities without stable housing, and parents whose children are taken away by the child welfare system often lose their housing when they lose their children, making family reunification nearly impossible and placing undue burden on the foster care system. In order to reduce homelessness by 50% by the year 2015 as mandated in E2SHB 2163, the legislature should require DOC and DSHS to discontinue the practice of discharging people into homelessness by 2011. ***WSCH Lead Item.***

Eliminate evictions as a cause of homelessness by limiting access to civil court records, setting screening criteria, allowing portable screening reports and requiring longer notice for terminating tenancy without cause. The creation of a “masking provision” similar to systems successfully used in other states. Filed eviction lawsuits would be “masked” publicly for a period of time during the eviction process, and unless the landlord prevails the court will permanently seal the record. A regulatory framework must be established to ensure fairness, consistency of reporting requirements, and to establish agreed-upon “rentworthiness” criteria acceptable to be collected and disseminated to landlords. If a tenant pays to receive a background check the report will be portable for a period of time for use in other housing applications. If a tenant paid once for the report it will be required of landlords to accept the same report. And finally, landlords should give tenants longer notice when evicting them without cause. Currently, landlords are only required to give 20 days notice. Current proposed legislation suggests that this should be raised to 45 days notice for tenants of less than one year, and 90 days for tenants who have been in a unit for a year or more. ***WSCH will take the lead on increasing notice for no cause evictions.***

Ensure that hardworking families and individuals do not have to choose between paying rent and putting food on the table by enacting a Living Wage in Washington State. The present federal and state minimum wages generate income at a level below the amount required to support a family at a basic level, artificially inflating the need for affordable housing, support services and mainstream services such as TANF and food stamps provided by the state and federal government and paid for by taxpayers. Raising the minimum wage would significantly reduce the demand on public assistance, and reduce the need for new affordable units that are costly and time-consuming to build and maintain. Enacting a living wage is the single most effective strategy to reduce and ultimately end homelessness caused by poverty. ***Support.***

Increase access to market-rate housing for low income tenants by ending source of income discrimination in housing. Tenant-based rental assistance is Washington’s largest source of affordable housing. Renters from across the state rely on this support to stabilize their lives, raise families and engage in their communities. We should ensure that people in need of housing assistance are able to effectively utilize section 8 vouchers and other forms of government assistance that help them pay the rent. ***Support.***

Improve Access to and Quality of Mainstream Services

We should remove any barriers that prevent homeless people from participating in these programs. We also must maintain or increase the funding for the following programs if we are to eliminate homelessness in the State of Washington:

Emergency Food Assistance Program	Prevention of Domestic Violence
Temporary Assistance to Needy Families	GAU/GAX
Food Stamps	Mental Health/Substance Abuse Treatment
Subsidized Child Care	Basic Health Care
Medicaid	Job Training