

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

Since 2015, the region's unsheltered population has only grown, and efforts to address the crisis remain fragmented. In January 2024, the official point-in-time count recorded 16,868 people experiencing homelessness – a 22% increase from two years earlier. In 2016, one year after the declaration, there were 10,688.

Today, the Seattle area has the fourth largest homeless population in the county, behind New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago.

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been poured into shelters, and still there are only enough shelter beds for about 40% of people who need them, says Kelly Kinnison, CEO of the King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA).

State and local leaders, who have made strides to close the housing gap, acknowledge the emergency declaration was never intended as a quick fix. Now, as Seattle Mayor-elect Katie Wilson and King County Executive Girmay Zahilay take office, a decade-old crisis awaits the region's new leaders.

'There are still too many people on the streets'

Ten years ago, city and county leaders sensed the crisis unfolding, even though point-in-time counts only captured a fraction of the problem. More people would soon become homeless, so they preemptively declared a state of emergency on homelessness in 2015.

It was a trendy move among West Coast cities. That same year, Portland, Los Angeles and San Francisco issued similar declarations. Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell, who was a City Council member at the time, says the region declared the state of emergency while the "pot was hot, but not yet boiling."

"The smartest strategies don't often occur to you when you are facing an emergency," says Harrell, who lost his reelection bid to Katie Wilson in November.

Tiffany Washington, who served as chief deputy mayor under Harrell, notes that the city's unsheltered population has been growing faster than the county's overall population. Citing the 2024 King County point-in-time count, she says that for every



"NOW I HAVE A NICE, SAFE PLACE TO LIVE. I AM SO BLESSED TO BE HERE."

Searetha Simons has lived in her apartment in Plymouth Housing's downtown Seattle facility since 2013. She was connected with the organization through a county diversion program after a drug-related arrest.

1,000 new residents who move into the county, 1.4 become homeless.

"We knew a homelessness crisis was coming and we were trying to get out in front of it," Harrell says. "The idea was to build great policy, look at best practices and create an investment strategy."

Karen Lee, CEO of Plymouth Housing, says it's disheartening to learn that the number of unsheltered individuals increased between 2022 and 2024.

"Everyone has been working so hard," she says.

A state of emergency declaration helps inform budget and policy decisions. It allowed the city to fast-track some permitting for affordable housing and support the development of tiny home villages.

Former Seattle Mayor Ed Murray told KUOW in 2015 he hoped to use the state of emergency to hire social workers, provide medical services and create shelter beds. Funding would come from the sale of surplus city property, according to a transcript of the interview.

In 2015, the city's Human Services Department allocated more than \$40 million for homelessness prevention, intervention and permanent housing programs, according to a 2016 city report. At the time, Seattle's "one night count" – which measures how many people are living on the streets on a particular night – was 2,942, a 35% increase since 2012. In January 2024, it was 4,584.

Former King County Council member Claudia Balducci, who joined the council in 2016, says the emergency declaration helped maintain urgency around the issue but didn't deliver much in the way of concrete results.

"Myself and my colleagues have spent the last 10 years trying to move the needle on this issue," says Balducci. "I think the emergency declaration has served a purpose to push us to do more, but there are still too many people on the streets."

Harrell emphasizes that homelessness is closely tied to the shortage of affordable housing, an issue he has prioritized since taking office January 2022. He played a key role in passing the \$970 million housing levy in 2023.

Since 2022, more than 37,000 housing units have been built in Seattle, and another 22,000 are in



"MONEY AND THE APPROPRIATE FUNDING WOULD SOLVE A LOT OF PROBLEMS."

Karen Lee, CEO of Plymouth Housing, favors aggressive investment in housing



"THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS IN SEATTLE DID NOT BECOME UNHOUSED IN SEATTLE."

Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell played a key role in passing the housing levy in 2023

the construction pipeline.

The city is also on track to meet its 2023 housing levy goals, which includes building more than 3,100 new affordable homes and providing assistance to members of 9,000 households to prevent them from becoming homeless.

While Seattle is a major investor in affordable housing, Harrell says the city cannot bear the cost alone. How much Seattle takes on is a point of contention among leaders in the region.

"The majority of people who are homeless in Seattle did not become unshoused in Seattle," he says.

Harrell says other jurisdictions must provide resources and policy support.

"One of our main strategies in the fight against homelessness is tiny villages, but we are using them for people coming from outside of Seattle," he says. "We need to reinforce regionalism. So far, that has been an uphill battle."

'There is a lot more we can do'

In 2024, city-funded shelter programs successfully exited clients to permanent housing at a rate of 39%, according to data from KCRHA and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). That rate exceeds the national average of 34%.

Between 2022 and 2024, there has been a 50% increase in the number of people who successfully transitioned from city-funded shelter programs into permanent supportive housing. As of October, Seattle officials expected have more than 3,000 city-funded shelter units by the end of the year, which is an increase from 2,850 in 2024.

KCRHA was supposed to be the fix, but it's been mired in turmoil from the start.

The organization was established in 2019 through an interlocal agreement between Seattle and King County, but it didn't begin operating until mid-2021. Its goal is to facilitate a coordinated regional response to homelessness by aligning funding, policy and services for the unsheltered population. It tracks available shelter beds and connects individuals and families with housing resources.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17