

Sept. 16, 2019

## **Statement by Anita Khandelwal to proposals announced by the region's High-Barrier Individuals Working Group**

Last week, members of the region's High-Barrier Individuals Working Group held a news conference announcing four proposed pilots to address the problem of people cycling through the criminal legal system. The announced pilots, for the most part, fail to recognize that our clients need more community-based services (stable, long-term housing and community-based mental health and behavioral health services) and less of the criminal legal system.

Of the four pilots advanced, only one represents an investment in something other than the criminal legal system – and that is the proposed “enhanced shelter with on-demand behavioral health services.” An enhanced shelter that provides services is an important step to getting people off the streets and into a safe and supportive environment. But it will make a difference only if clients are then connected to long-term housing and ongoing services.

The second proposed pilot – reentry services for people who rapidly exit jail – underscores how misguided our actions are when we continue to rely on jail and the criminal legal system. Why are we booking people for periods of 12-48 hours? Research shows that even short jail stays like this are destabilizing. Nonetheless, while we continue to engage in this misguided practice, ensuring that our clients are released to community-based services is a good idea.

The third proposal – enhancing probation at Seattle Municipal Court – is completely contrary to everything we know from our years of work within the system. Probation is a perennial failure and does not lead our clients to lead healthier lives, and it makes no sense to bolster it with more money.

The last pilot – case conferencing – could be a positive approach if it leads to more diversions and fewer filings. It's positive if it means more clients are referred to programs we know work, such as LEAD and Vital. But again it reflects another investment in the criminal legal system.

I participated in this working group in the hope that we would agree not to invest more of our precious resources into a criminal legal system that already eats up the lion's share of our city and county budgets. Strengthening our communities begins by valuing every person, regardless of where their struggles have led them. Mitigating the crushing effects of poverty, homelessness, past trauma, and behavioral health disorders is an enormous challenge that does not yield to quick fixes. We know that when we look to the criminal legal system to provide answers to those issues, we end up only compounding the problem and harming the very people who most need our help.

*Anita Khandelwal*  
*Director, King County Department of Public Defense*