



King County

Reagan Dunn

Councilmember, District 9

Metropolitan King County Council

March 27, 2021

King County Executive Dow Constantine
Chinook Building
401 5th Ave. Suite 800
Seattle, WA 98104

King County Councilmember Jeanne Kohl-Welles
Chair, Budget and Fiscal Management Committee
516 Third Ave, Room 1200
Seattle, WA 98104

Dear Executive Constantine and Chair Kohl-Welles,

I'm writing to request your urgent action to address the pressing and escalating crisis of addiction in King County.

I first want to express my appreciation for the significant behavioral health investments you've proposed in the American Rescue Plan emergency budget transmitted to the King County Council on March 24, 2021. Your proposed budget includes \$18 million to expand services related to mental health and addiction recovery services, and in our current behavioral health crisis, each of these dollars counts. I especially applaud your proposed funding to establish a new sobering center and the commitment to behavioral health service needs in rural King County.

Data reported by the King County Medical Examiner's Office reveals that in the year 2020, 539 people in King County tragically lost their life to a fatal drug or alcohol overdose—a 24% spike in overdose-related deaths compared to the year 2019. While the overdose rate has greatly worsened since last year, likely due to the effects of COVID-19, the increase in overdose deaths is not an issue that is confined to the pandemic. In fact, over the last decade, overdose deaths have dramatically increased by 118%. In addition, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention just published a study that found that 40% of U.S. adults reported considerably elevated adverse mental health conditions associated with COVID-19, including increased substance use.

These figures illustrate a crisis of addiction. I believe that our communities' failure to connect individuals who are battling substance use disorders to recovery services is contributing to this overdose rate. Death rates are not just statistics—they reflect the friends, family, and loved ones who have lost their lives to the sickness of addiction. As a recovering alcoholic with years of sobriety under my belt, I know that to save lives, we must provide comprehensive behavioral health services that provide struggling individuals with an achievable way to fight for their long-term recovery.

At the same time that we're experiencing this behavioral health crisis, multiple Substance Use Disorder (SUD) treatment facilities have closed since just 2019. In June 2019, the King County-funded Dutch Shisler Sobering Center in downtown Seattle closed its doors, resulting in a loss of 60 beds. Then, the Salvation Army's inpatient facility in SODO shut down in September 2019 due to a lack of funding, which was a loss of 120 inpatient beds. The Thunderbird Treatment Center's closure in February 2020, also due to a lack of funding, was a loss of 65 inpatient beds. While the new funding provided in the American Rescue Plan emergency budget to establish a new sobering center is a mark of progress, we should still do more.

In order to take a first step in addressing the skyrocketing overdose deaths that have co-occurred with multiple closures of SUD facilities, I'm requesting that King County dedicate additional funding from the American Rescue Plan emergency budget to contract with a professional firm to perform an independent assessment of the current state of available addiction services in our region. I hope the assessment will also identify any gaps in connecting individuals with these services. The assessment should include a directory of available inpatient and outpatient treatment services and describe the process of how individuals can gain access to those services, highlighting any potential barriers that may be experienced such as lack of medical insurance or too few inpatient beds. I am also hopeful for a review of outpatient treatment services too. Since there has been such a huge increase in deaths during the pandemic, I suggest that the American Rescue Plan emergency budget is an appropriate place from which to draw the funds for this assessment.

I appreciate your attention to this urgent issue. Lives hang in the balance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Reagan Dunn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Reagan" being more prominent than the last name "Dunn".

Reagan Dunn
Vice Chairman
Metropolitan King County Council

Cc: Dwight Dively, Director, Office of Performance, Strategy, and Budget
King County Councilmembers