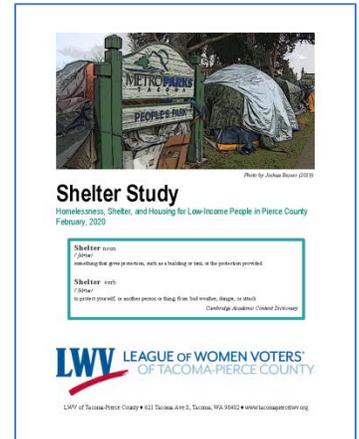


Shelter Study Executive Summary

In February 2020, the League of Women Voters of Tacoma-Pierce County (LWVT-PC) published a study on homelessness, shelter and housing for low-income people in Pierce County. Called the “Shelter Study”, this publication will form the basis of League member discussions and ultimately a decision by the Board, to be later ratified by the membership, about what should be modified in the League’s current position on affordable housing in Pierce County. The current position can be found at http://www.tacomapiercelwv.org/files/position_on_affordable_housing.pdf.



Much has changed since this position was adopted in 2009. In particular, the great recession, subsequent enlargement of income inequality and gaps between housing prices and wages has led to significant increases of people experiencing homelessness. This study focuses on the needs of those people.

The experience of people in Pierce County is within a context of a nationwide shortage of affordable housing units. The relationship of Pierce County’s circumstances to national and state conditions is described in the study. Rising housing costs and low vacancy rates in Pierce County bring significant housing challenges. The monthly rent that is affordable for a person earning 30% of Area Median Income (AMI) in Tacoma Metro area (including all of Pierce County) is \$602. However, in that same area, the average market housing rental rate is \$961 for an efficiency apartment, \$1,075 for a one-bedroom apartment and higher for more bedrooms.

The Pierce County 2019 point in time data identified nearly 1,500 people experiencing homelessness on a single night, and of those, 629 were unsheltered (living outside, in cars, camps or abandoned buildings).

Possible methods for addressing this crisis were investigated in Part 2 of the study. It considers not only potential interventions and outcomes but also the comparison of the cost of providing interventions to the cost of doing nothing. This section again places the Pierce County options within a context of what is occurring nationally and around the rest of Washington State.

Some of the options available to Pierce County include:

- One-tenth of 1 percent sales tax. Adoption of this tax for behavioral health programs could generate significantly more than \$10 million per year, much of which could address the factors causing some people to be chronically homeless.
- Retention of WA state sales tax. Approximately \$1.6 million annually could be generated from this option and bonded for use to construct and maintain affordable housing units.
- Enhancement of tenants’ rights. Just cause eviction, the opportunity to pay first/last/damage deposit over time, rent stabilization policies, and more are available as options to reduce the number of people who become homeless or can’t re-enter housing because of unjust treatment or costs.
- Employment programs. Offering retraining and other employment opportunities can aid in keeping people housed or providing an opportunity to re-enter housing once they become homeless.

- Housing first. This policy leads to a number of potential programs that can reduce homelessness through the evidence-based finding that people can address underlying issues more successfully if housed than if not housed. Underlying issues might include illness, substance use disorder, behavioral health issues and more.
- Land use changes. A variety of land use changes can provide the opportunity to construct or renovate housing in a way that reduces cost by increasing density.
- Capturing land value. Through a variety of tax-based or policy interventions, retention of property as affordable housing units for people at or below 80% AMI, and particularly those at 50% AMI and below, can be increased and gentrification, which leads to higher costs of housing, decreased.
- Community benefit agreements, such as land-banks and land trusts can be used to permanently install affordable housing units.
- Shared housing. Shared housing offers opportunities for people with extra bedrooms to share a home with someone who needs an affordable place to stay and often allows trade of service at the home for rent.

The question arises why an encampment might be needed, given all the options described. Unfortunately, the time involved in setting policy, arranging financing and providing housing still leaves many people experiencing homelessness. A tent can provide protection from harsh weather and disease, as well as a small measure of privacy and may be better for people experiencing homelessness than no shelter at all. Codes related to how encampments are handled are described in the study. Mostly they are considered costly and unsustainable as a permanent response to homelessness. However, as a short-term emergency response they may be the best option available. Strategies for optimizing encampment opportunities are discussed in the study.

The cost of homelessness is described in detail in this study, including the racial components, the cost to jurisdictions of responding to people experiencing homelessness who have nowhere to sleep and the effects of criminalizing homelessness. The effects of financialization of housing, loss of single-occupancy rooms, gentrification, and location of housing relative to job sites are all explored in Part 4 of the study.

This study does not draw conclusions but is awaiting membership discussion to determine what policy actions are deemed most appropriate in response to the problem statement and options described therein.

For a copy of the complete study, contact the League of Women Voters of Tacoma-Pierce County at lwvtacomapierce@gmail.com or 253-272-1495.