

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Many lawmakers and community members would like to combat homelessness in effective ways, but pervasive myths and stereotypes about chronic homelessness have led to the pursuit of ‘solutions’—like criminalization—that only exacerbate the problem and lead to more human suffering. Chronic homelessness is a systemic problem that must be solved through systemic solutions. Policies that criminalize the life-supporting behaviors of individuals have a negative impact on physical and mental health outcomes, increase the likelihood that an individual will remain trapped in the cycle of homelessness, and perpetuate existing racial disparities, as well as disparate impacts on other already marginalized people including veterans, victims of domestic violence, people with disabilities and LGBTQ people. On a larger scale, these policies also hinder the advancement of real solutions to end chronic homelessness.

Alternatives to criminalization and solutions to ending chronic homelessness exist and have been advanced successfully by local governments and communities, often through deep relationship building. Educating decision makers and working within our networks to directly dispel myths and create a new public narrative about ending homelessness is a key part of advancing real solutions to solve this crisis.

This toolkit is designed to help communities better understand and influence the systems and players involved in preventing and ending homelessness. It provides examples of concrete steps and actions to educate decision makers and build the public will to prevent and end homelessness. Members of local homeless networks across Washington state informed the strategies outlined in this document.

This toolkit will help advocates, direct service providers and other community stakeholders to:

- 1. Articulate** the harms that the criminalization of homelessness causes and educate decision makers about alternatives, using local and statewide data and lived experiences.
- 2. Develop** effective relationships to move key decision makers.
- 3. Respond** to common myths that underlie criminalization policies, and advance a new public narrative about ending chronic homelessness.

**Chronic homelessness is considered systemic because there are many systems that have failed to meet an individual’s needs, and it is unlikely to end on its own.**