

# TOOLKIT

TO COMBAT THE  
CRIMINALIZATION  
OF HOMELESSNESS



The background image is a photograph of a protest or demonstration, overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. In the foreground, a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark jacket and a baseball cap, is looking towards the left. Behind him, a large banner is held up, with the text "WITHOUT SHELTER PEOPLE DIE" visible in bold, capital letters. Other people are visible in the background, some looking towards the camera and others looking away. The overall scene suggests a social or political gathering focused on housing issues.

# ABOUT THE WASHINGTON LOW INCOME HOUSING ALLIANCE

The Washington Low Income Housing Alliance (the Housing Alliance) works to ensure that everyone in Washington can live and thrive in a safe, healthy, affordable home. We do this through public policy advocacy and by organizing a wide array of individuals and organizations across the state to get engaged in promoting solutions to homelessness and expanded access to affordable housing. This toolkit builds on a history of Housing Alliance and allied organizations' materials that aim to demystify and explain legislative processes and policies.

More about the Housing Alliance at: [wliha.org](http://wliha.org).

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# 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.**



## 2. CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS AND CRIMINALIZATION IN WASHINGTON

“ *Legislators should know that homelessness is a lonely place that no one wants to be in. People need a stable environment to help heal from the devastation of the streets.*” –**MARGARET, who experienced chronic homelessness for 20 years**

The criminalization of homelessness occurs when governments use laws to remove visibly homeless or impoverished-looking people from shared public spaces instead of offering services. Criminalization treats the performance of life-sustaining activities, such as sitting, sleeping, eating, and bathing as illegal activities.<sup>1</sup> When community leaders or others talk about ridding the streets of homeless individuals, often they are referring to those who are experiencing chronic homelessness, as they are typically the people who look most visibly poor and who are more often seen living outdoors.

Often times, municipalities or decision makers defend criminalization policies by arguing that visible homelessness prevents non-homeless people from utilizing public spaces, or that it negatively impacts economic activity or

public safety. Ironically, the criminalization of homelessness feeds directly into the cycle of chronic homelessness because individuals are arrested for minor infractions, and then may spend time in jail. This exacerbates mental health issues and results in criminal records, making securing a home and/or a job more difficult. Additionally, criminalizing behaviors like sitting or lying in a public

**The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness explains chronic homelessness as “among people experiencing homelessness, there is a subset of individuals with disabling health and behavioral health conditions who experience homelessness for long periods and/or in repeated episodes over many years.”**

area effectively create zones of exclusion from public areas. Homeless individuals may have nowhere to go during the day when many shelters are closed. **This creates an impossibility of existence, where simply living and being may be criminalized.**

To understand the criminalization of chronic homelessness, we must unpack why people become chronically homeless in the first place. Many links exist between decreased funding for mental health services and the prevalence of chronic homelessness. The closure of mental health institutions across the country in the 1980s led to a significant increase in visible homelessness as new faces appeared on the streets, often lacking access to treatment. According to the 2015 Point in Time Count, 2,749 homeless individuals in Washington are severely mentally ill. People with mental health needs and/or crises may be arrested, especially if they are living on the streets and their mental health needs are seen publically, instead of experienced privately. Prolonged time in jail or on the streets can exacerbate mental health disabilities. Even if a person is able to get help at a hospital or treatment center, if they are released with no home to go

to, their health outcomes can quickly deteriorate as they lack the stability and safety of housing.

Criminalization of homelessness is also connected to lack of access to treatment services for substance use disorders. Due to underfunding, wait periods are often required to enter treatment facilities, making it harder to access help getting sober. Additionally, drug use and addiction is often treated as a crime (instead of a disease in need of treatment), so homeless individuals who lack a private place to use drugs or alcohol may be arrested and charged simply for use. For many, the combination of substance use disorders and mental health challenges are extremely difficult to overcome when living on the streets or in less than stable housing.

**Each year, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires a county-by-county count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals on a single night in January, called the “Point in Time Count.”**



## CRIMINALIZATION POLICIES IN WASHINGTON STATE

Researchers with Seattle University School of Law's Homeless Rights Advocacy Project (HRAP) looked at the municipal codes of 72 cities across Washington to identify ordinances that criminalize homelessness. The researchers found that many life-sustaining activities were being outlawed, such as sitting or lying on public sidewalks (found in 72% of surveyed municipalities), camping in certain public places (63%), urination/defecation in public (75%), rummaging through trash receptacles (28%), and storing personal property in public places (22%).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, ordinances like aggressive panhandling prohibitions (present in 63% of surveyed cities) specifically target people who are homeless and hold them to a higher standard with potentially harsher punishment than existing assault or harassment laws, which often already prohibit the same conduct.<sup>3</sup> This raises equal protection concerns, because cities can essentially make a choice about which law to charge people with.

While sometimes heralded as a less-severe option than criminal penalties, civil infractions can also result in serious problems. There is no right to an attorney for civil infractions in Washington state,

and nonpayment of a fine can result in driver's license suspensions or even the issuance of a bench warrant for a person's arrest. (This can vary between municipalities.) Before assuming that civil consequences are less harsh for people who are homeless than criminal consequences, these variances should be examined.

**What all these laws have in common is they criminally punish people who are homeless for just existing in public, even when they have no alternatives.** Criminal charges can have lifelong impacts on individuals, particularly in terms of applying for housing and employment, long after time has been served and restitution has been made.

For more about the consequences of civil infractions, see the HRAP report *Washington's War on the Visibly Poor*.<sup>4</sup> The Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP) is another organization that has researched and taken action against criminalization of homelessness. Their research provides stark insights on the impact of criminalization ordinances that will be useful when meeting with and educating decision-makers. More information about both HRAP and WRAP and their research of criminalization ordinances is available in the Appendix.

## CRIMINALIZATION PERPETUATES RACIAL DISPARITIES AND DISPARATE IMPACTS ON OTHER MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Criminalization policies also perpetuate existing racial disparities in homelessness and incarceration, as well as disparate impacts on other marginalized groups.<sup>5</sup> The Seattle University report *Discrimination at the Margins: The Intersectionality of Homelessness & Other Marginalized Groups* finds that “...marginalized groups are disproportionately represented in the homeless population, and are therefore, disproportionately targeted by the ordinances that criminalize homelessness.” People of color, LGBTQ people (particularly LGBTQ youth and young adults), people with mental illness, people with disabilities, and veterans are some of the people discriminatorily impacted by the criminalization of homelessness.

- In King County, 67% of the homeless population are people of color (compared to 35% of the general population). In Pierce County, 35% of the homeless population are African American (compared to 6.8% of the general population).<sup>6</sup>
- In Washington state, approximately 20-40% of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, compared to only 5-10% of the overall youth population.<sup>7</sup>
- In Washington state, at least 13% of the homeless population has a mental illness. In some counties, over 50% of the homeless population has a mental illness.<sup>8</sup>
- Nationally, 40% of homeless men are veterans. In Washington State the majority of homeless veterans are people of color and disabled, and veterans are more likely to be chronically homeless than non-veterans.<sup>9</sup>

### Homelessness Disproportionately Impacts People of Color

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders

**3** TIMES MORE LIKELY  
THAN THEIR WHITE  
COUNTERPARTS



African Americans

**5** TIMES MORE LIKELY  
THAN THEIR WHITE  
COUNTERPARTS



Native Americans/Alaskan Natives

**7** TIMES MORE LIKELY  
THAN THEIR WHITE  
COUNTERPARTS



Organizations like WRAP and HRAP have also drawn connections between exclusionary laws that have occurred in U.S. history and the current climate of criminalization of the homeless. Examples of previous exclusionary laws include “Anti-Okie” laws from the 1930s (laws attempting to exclude agricultural worker migrants from Oklahoma and other states affected by the dust bowl and the Great Depression) and Sundown Town laws that existed before the Civil Rights Act of 1968. (These towns excluded people considered “minorities” after sunset—they could work in these towns but not live there.) This comparison may help those challenging criminalization in their communities by asking enactors to articulate the purpose of such ordinances. Asking what the goal of a particular ordinance is can reveal problematic policy overlap, direct the conversation toward more effective alternatives to criminalization, and create opportunities to address underlying assumptions.

For example, if the goal is to save money, spending money to incarcerate people will not likely result in savings. Similarly, a belief that homeless individuals aren’t from a given community can be a justification used to enact citywide banishments. This reasoning effectively says that a community does not have to support people who are not originally “from” there and that they have the right to determine who belongs. More on responding to this and other common

myths about homelessness can be found in the [Myths and Facts About Homelessness in Washington](#) factsheet in the Appendix.

## **CRIMINALIZATION TACTICS DO NOT END HOMELESSNESS**

The graphic on the following page (also available as a [full-size handout](#) in the Appendix) shows the cycle of the criminalization of homelessness, which entangles people in a web of incarceration/institutionalization, life on the streets or in other unsafe and unstable places, and the continual struggle to meet basic needs due to lack of access to affordable housing and support services. This includes lack of access to health care and employment.

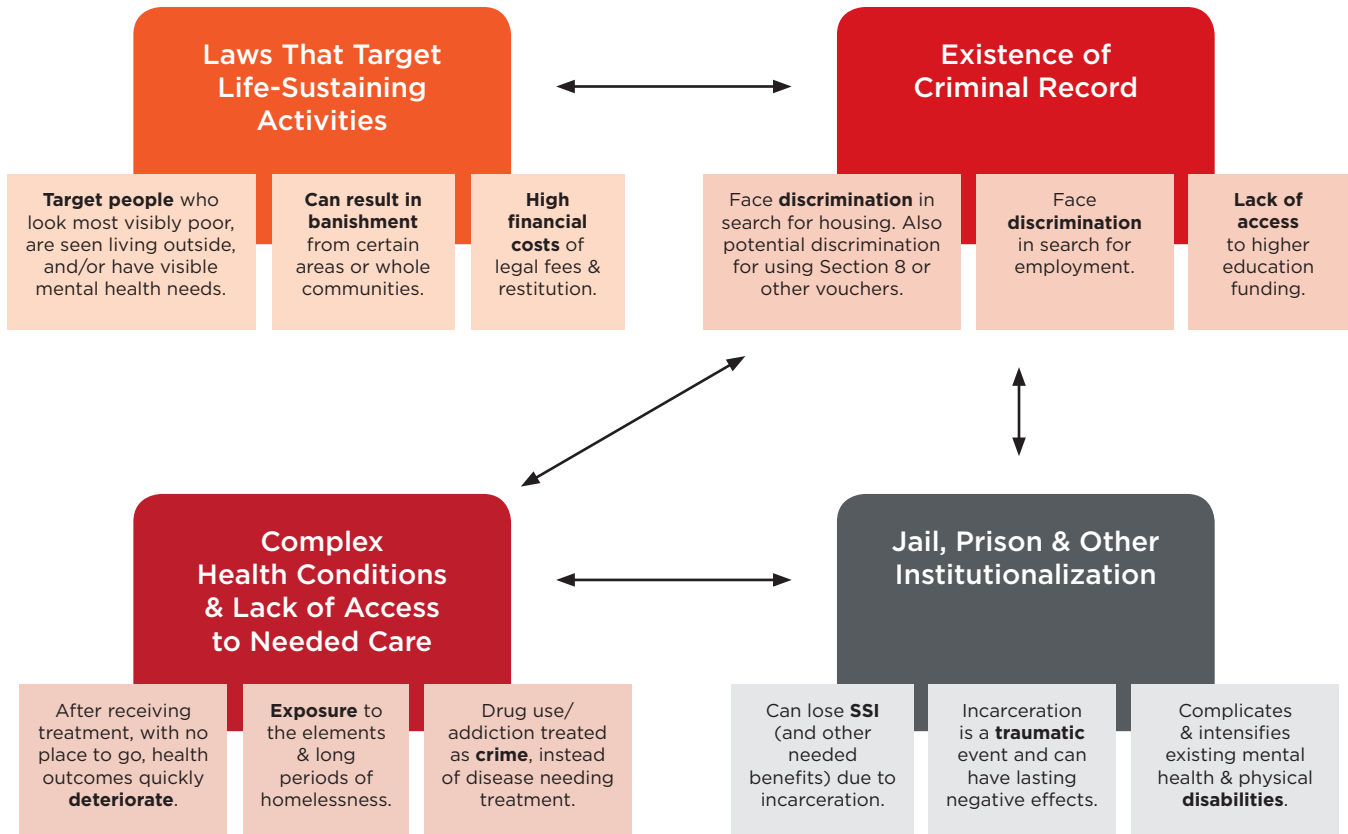
Communities and organizations nationwide have worked to articulate the harm these policies cause and to expose that many ordinances do not accomplish what cities and municipalities hope they will. Criminalization tactics are expensive for cities and small communities. Incarceration, additional law enforcement officer pay, emergency resource use by those without affordable housing, and other governmental expenses are all more costly than providing housing. None of these strategies help to interrupt the cycle of homelessness and often only exacerbate them, as well as further perpetuate racial disparities in homelessness and incarceration.

Additionally, once individuals have criminal records, finding a job or housing is often much more difficult or even impossible. The National Law Center of Homelessness & Poverty gives much more detail about the effects of criminalization on homeless individuals, pointing out the myriad ways people who have been arrested and/or incarcerated are harmed, such as the loss of disability benefits, access to affordable housing and more.<sup>10</sup> The main takeaway of their work is that criminalization tactics, regardless of their breadth or scope, do not end homelessness.

WRAP has also articulated the problems of these types of laws and reframed the problems of criminalization by promoting a Homeless Bill of Rights, which articulates the rights that all people, including people who are homeless, *should* have. These include the right to sleep, pray, and rest in public; the right to share and eat food in public; and the right to occupy a legally parked vehicle (some people who are homeless reside in their cars, often as protection from the elements).<sup>11</sup>

Many cities and towns would like to combat homelessness in effective ways,

### The Cycle of the Criminalization of Homelessness





but often aren't sure where to begin. When speaking with decision makers, it is important to name interventions that we know have worked in addressing chronic homelessness, such as Permanent Supportive Housing<sup>12</sup> and models like Housing-First with services connected to housing. See the Appendix for resources that provide more examples of alternatives to criminalization and proven solutions to ending chronic homelessness.

### ENGAGING COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS IN ADDRESSING CRIMINALIZATION

For community alternatives to the criminalization of homelessness to succeed, they require strong relationships between direct service providers, law enforcement, local lawmakers, business leaders, and other stakeholders. Across Washington state, communities have advanced alternatives to criminalization by engaging these stakeholder groups in strategies to prevent criminalization.

In Whatcom County, advocates knew better communication between local businesses, service providers and law enforcement could help prevent the criminalization of homelessness. In 2015, the Opportunity Council opened an outreach hotline, available to merchants and community members as an alternative to calling the police if they are concerned about someone who appears to be in crisis.

### Per night cost of incarceration vs. housing



Source: Washington State Department of Corrections

Source: Downtown Emergency Service Center

“Relationships with local businesses, City Council, the Mayor’s office, City staff, and the police department have all been critical in advancing this effort. Local officials know that if a service provider can reach a person first, there will oftentimes be no need for action from law enforcement. My advice to advocates is simple: have open dialogue with business leaders and local lawmakers. Sit down and talk to people. Those communication channels will become the infrastructure that supports whatever solutions your community creates.”

—GREG WINTER, Executive Director, Opportunity Council, Bellingham, WA

Housing-First is a proven approach to ending chronic homelessness. It prioritizes stable housing as a person's primary need, while also providing services to address behavioral health, addiction, or other issues people may be struggling with. In this model, housing is not a reward for good behavior, it is necessary for accessing treatment and getting better. Permanent Supportive Housing was developed in Washington state by Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC) and it's so successful that other states and countries have adopted it, including Utah where chronic homelessness has declined 91% as a result.

In addition to creating alternatives to criminalization in our communities, ultimately advocates can challenge criminalization efforts by taking action to end homelessness. We must work to educate decision makers and the public about the root causes of homelessness, and actively address and dispel the myths and stereotypes that criminalization policies are built on. We must oppose and repeal ordinances and any other local attempts to criminalize homelessness. Finally, we must invest in policies that fund solutions. You can see current policy priorities and analysis by visiting the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance online at [wliha.org](http://wliha.org).



### 3. EDUCATING DECISION MAKERS

Educating decision makers, including organizations, businesses, and local lawmakers, is a central component to generating the public will needed to prevent and end homelessness. This toolkit focuses on this tactic, in part because this work is often seen as daunting or inaccessible. This is especially true for those who may see themselves lacking certain types of power or knowledge, or who may themselves experience injustices caused by homelessness or housing insecurity.

Meeting with decision makers can fit into many different parts of your work and movement building. Some questions to think about as you incorporate educating decision makers into your overall goals:

- What are you hoping to accomplish?
- Are you looking to begin to build a relationship by introducing your work and sharing the issues you see?
- Do you have a specific goal for the decision maker to accomplish?
- What materials do you need to educate the decision maker if they are unfamiliar with the issue? What if they are a strong supporter?

The [Midwest Academy's Strategy Development Chart](#) and the [Steps to Develop a Strategic Political Landscape Power Analysis](#) by SCOPE, which can both

be found in the Appendix as handouts, may be helpful in determining who you need to target in these conversations, and understanding the stake other players may have in the larger issue.

One helpful way to frame public engagement comes from the Miami Workers Center, whose organizers have developed a model called the Four Pillars of Social Justice Infrastructure, including Pillars of Policy, Consciousness, Service, and Power.<sup>13</sup> In most movements or campaigns, organizers and stakeholders touch upon more than one of these pillars in their work. The “Pillar of Consciousness” involves getting a message to a broader audience, sometimes through social media or other public education work. The “Pillar of Service” revolves around doing direct service work and making sure that individuals in a given community have their basic needs met. The “Pillar of Power” is about base building and developing leadership. The “Pillar of Policy” is utilized in this toolkit, as it provides examples on creating change through educating decision-making bodies. Many other resources exist that can help your community develop a framework or campaign that is situated more within one of the other Pillars of Power, some of which appear in the Appendix of this toolkit.

## KNOW WHAT YOU WANT

Within the broad goal of ensuring everyone in Washington has access to a safe, healthy, affordable home, more long-term goals and big-picture questions exist. Some examples of questions you might ask yourself and your community include:

- What are the most pressing issues your community faces?
- How do we talk about homelessness?
- Who is included when we talk about homelessness?
- What do we want to accomplish in the next month? The next year?

Identifying your organization's or community's understanding of the challenges it faces can be a helpful first step in articulating these needs to decision makers. As homelessness and affordable housing advocates, you have a powerful perspective about your local community's affordable housing needs.

Using stories and anecdotes from people you work with or your own experience is one of the most powerful ways to demonstrate the problems being faced.

When framing a given need, including statistics may be helpful, especially if you name, for example, how many people are experiencing a certain problem. However, using a specific example can help to paint a picture and personalize the challenge being faced.

Decision makers rely on information from knowledgeable constituents. For example, even if you don't have statistics about how many people are affected or the number of people arrested by laws that criminalize homelessness, being able to articulate a growing trend, or even an incident may clarify for a decision maker why there is a problem. Has something particularly unfair or egregious occurred? Has someone been particularly impacted by a certain instance of criminalization? One way to gather stories is to ask your community or coworkers to share their experiences.



**Tip**  
Create a collection of stories in a saved document with your personal experiences or the experiences of people you work with. When you are meeting with a decision maker or putting together information, you have clear examples ready to go.



## FRAMING YOUR MESSAGE

When talking about your issue(s) with decision makers, it's important to be aware of how you are delivering your issue statement or articulating the challenge being faced. Try asking yourself, or asking within your organization or community, questions that speak to the “frame” or scope of your work.

Consider, for example, how this statement sounds: “Government doesn’t understand homelessness.”

Compare it to this statement: “Service providers in our community know what works. We have the tools and experience to successfully house people instead of criminalizing them.”

## ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS OF HOMELESSNESS

It's important to keep in mind that decision makers, like all of us, can be stressed, frustrated, or overwhelmed with a given problem. Responding to a negative statement or a myth about homelessness can be difficult. It may be helpful to go back to values-based talking points or a reframe that is action-oriented and says what can be accomplished versus statements that say what cannot be accomplished. Section 5 ([Putting It Into Practice: Myths and Facts of Homelessness](#)) addresses ways to respond when a decision maker or community member says something negative you don't believe is accurate.

## QUICK GUIDE TO SHARING YOUR PERSONAL STORY

It has a lasting impact on decision makers when people who have experienced homelessness and criminalization share their personal stories. Here are the basic elements of a personal story that moves others into action.

- Share brief background information about your experiences that provides decision makers with the relevant **context** to understand the issue you are facing.
- Describe the **problem** you are facing and how it is affecting your life.
- Describe the specific **solutions** that would address the problem you are facing.
- Ask those hearing your story to commit to specific **action** that moves your community toward the solutions that are needed.

One of the most important jobs of an advocate is developing a relationship with a decision maker whom you don't always, or even rarely, agree with. If you develop a respectful relationship with someone whom you don't agree with, you lay the necessary groundwork to modify or outright change a decision maker's perspective or their voting. A key part of developing a relationship is respectfully addressing myths and stigmas stated during meetings. Ignoring a misinformed statement doesn't allow for honest dialogue. But the fundamental rule is to be respectful and to work toward ensuring future opportunities for education and dialogue.

### **RESIST ATTEMPTS TO PIT ISSUES AGAINST ONE ANOTHER**

Occasionally, decision makers will ask tough questions that try to pit important issues against one another. For example, "We can only fund housing if we don't fund parks." Or, "what would you like us to cut in order to fund your program?" Instead of responding in a way that minimizes another issue (you never know, the one you pick could be that decision maker's pet program), continue to speak in favor of your issue and why it's so important.

### **ALWAYS HAVE AN ASK**

It is important to have some kind of request or ask. It can be as soft as asking for the decision maker to attend a board

meeting of your organization or to tour an affordable housing complex. It could more directly relate to a position on an issue they will be asked to vote on or if they will work to protect or fund a program. It isn't enough for a decision maker to agree to meet, although a first meeting to introduce a complex issue may be warranted. Just ensure that the ask is to meet again soon to follow up on the possible solutions.

### **EDUCATING STATE LAWMAKERS**

While this toolkit can apply to working with different types of decision makers, the following section will address the nuts and bolts of educating state lawmakers since they have a central decision making role over the policies and program funding that have profound impacts on homelessness.

There are 147 state lawmakers in the Washington State Legislature, including 49 members in the State Senate and 98 members in the State House of Representatives. One senator and two house members serve each of the 49 legislative districts. [Find your legislators](#)

#### **TIP**

**Make sure your message and any asks of the lawmaker fit within the broader goals of your work. Does your advocacy help move your organization to where it wants to be?**

[here](#). You can reach out to any legislator that you want—you are not limited to your district. However lawmakers are often most interested in meeting with people who live, work, or serve people in their home legislative districts. Even so, lawmakers are assigned to serve on legislative policy committees and are often interested in meeting with organizations or stakeholders who are knowledgeable on their policy focus. For example, if you are targeting decision makers on the state budget, you may seek out members of the [Senate Ways and Means Committee](#).

Additionally, be open to meeting with decision makers who are champions of the issues you are working on, as well as those who are new to the issues or have not been supporters in the past. Understanding your work as part of a movement requires long-term relationship building, which can require tough conversations.

See the Appendix for more information on researching the committee system and researching your state lawmaker.

Once you've decided to meet with a legislator, you'll need to make a meeting request. A request can be sent to your lawmaker's office. Although state lawmakers are generally very accessible to constituents, you should plan on requesting a meeting or sending an event

invitation four to six weeks in advance.

To schedule a meeting contact the lawmaker's legislative aid to coordinate.

[You can find their contact info here](#).

Generally, either an email or phone call (whichever is listed) will suffice. (See the Appendix for a sample email.) Don't get discouraged if you don't hear back right away. There are times, especially during the legislative session, when lawmakers are inundated with calls, emails, and meeting requests. Wait a couple days and then call or email back.

You should be prepared to tell the legislative aid what the meeting topic will be, who will be attending the meeting, and when and where you are able to meet the legislator. (For example, you could schedule a meeting in their home district or in Olympia.) Another option is to invite the lawmaker to an organizational event, such as an open house, member meeting, board meeting, groundbreaking for new affordable housing building, or another type of community event that showcases your work. Some decision makers may be less familiar with what affordable housing or other similar projects look like. Seeing these projects in their communities may be a helpful point of entry for talking about these issues, may allow for a longer meeting, and can be a great opportunity to leverage social media. See Section 4 ([Using Media to Elevate Your Message](#)) for ideas about using social media.

## MATERIALS TO BRING TO YOUR MEETING

- ☐ A handout with your contact information or a business card.
- ☐ Meeting agenda, especially if this will be a large meeting.
- ☐ Policy background information, especially a one-pager that gives a clear and plain overview of your issue(s). Bringing the chart on the Cycle of Criminalization (pg. 13) may be a helpful way to give an overview of this issue. Also, the Housing Alliance has many helpful materials on our website: [wliha.org](http://wliha.org).
- ☐ Information about your organization, such as a brochure.
- ☐ Data and local statistics. See the accompanying [County-by-County Fact Sheets on Housing Affordability in Washington State](#) in that will help you frame local need. Data on criminalization for your county or city can be helpful if available, as well.
- ☐ Success stories from those directly affected by criminalization or other issues.

### TIP

Site visits where services are delivered can be a great place to bring decision makers who may be unfamiliar with what this looks like in action.

- ☐ For housing especially, materials that can help educate the decision maker about the intersections of federal, state, and local funding (see the Homeless Response System information in the Appendix for more information).
- ☐ Be sure to bring extra copies for the legislative assistant, another very important person to educate.

Meeting with a decision maker is very much worth your time! The Housing Alliance has heard from lawmakers over and over again how important it is to hear from those doing the work and from those who are directly affected by the policies and funding options before them. Strengthening relationships with elected officials at all levels of government is important. Even if you haven't done so before, we encourage you to try!



## WHO SHOULD ATTEND A MEETING WITH A DECISION MAKER?

### **People who have direct experience**

with homelessness and criminalization have unique and critical expertise to share with decision makers. Sharing your personal story about homelessness and experiences with criminalization can be incredibly effective.

**Service providers** and those working at all levels of an organization have valuable insight to share with decision makers. Naming the needs of clients and identifying the gaps that you see can be invaluable. Have you seen the effects that the criminalization of homelessness has had on those you work with? Are there local trends or emerging needs that you see? Sharing your insights can go a long way in educating decision makers.

**Nonprofit board members** can draw a direct line from public policy choices to the impact they have on your organization, the people you serve, and your ability to accomplish your mission.

**TIP**  
The Housing Alliance is a great resource for help with planning a meeting with a lawmaker, especially if you have not done so before. Check out [wliha.org](http://wliha.org).

**Local elected officials** representing city and county governments can be very effective messengers and can help increase the profile of your issue. In particular, local elected officials can speak to how homelessness and housing instability impacts other systems and resources in your community.

**Community leaders** can be great at speaking about the macro impact of homelessness and housing insecurity and larger cyclical problems criminalization can cause in communities.

**Allies and unexpected messengers** from outside of homelessness and affordable housing sectors can help make connections between these and

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*“Your knowledge and insight are so valuable to me, and truly help me be an effective advocate for the programs that are so important for residents across our state...The stories you tell put a face to the issues of affordable housing and homelessness.*

*They serve as an important reminder that the programs for which you advocate represent a lifeline for members of our communities—our neighbors or friends in need.”*

—WASHINGTON SENATOR PATTY MURRAY<sup>14</sup>

other issues. Think about bringing health care workers, teachers, those who work in emergency services or public safety, etc. Who might be able to speak to the effects of criminalization, for example? Unexpected messengers can help decision makers make connections and better understand the scope of the problem. (For example, an emergency worker who can speak to the long term effects of a person sleeping on the street and the cost of providing them with emergency services as opposed to providing housing.)

See the Appendix for more information on all the ways nonprofit organizations can connect with lawmakers.

## ENSURE EVERYONE AGREES ON THE SAME MESSAGE AND THE SAME ASK

Once you have identified who will attend your meeting, it is critical to coordinate with each other prior to the meeting with the decision maker. You will want to make sure that everyone is on the same page regarding the goal of the meeting, everyone understands what their role is during the meeting (what they will speak about), how much time they have, and that everyone has all of the background materials they need. We highly encourage you to meet beforehand to prepare, coordinate, and practice what you will say. Consider writing out and practicing your talking points so you feel confident and cover everything you want to during the meeting.

See the Appendix for a [Checklist for Planning a Lawmaker Meeting](#).

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*It is really important to share what you know about affordable housing and homelessness with decision-makers in your state. Unless we hear from people with first-hand knowledge, we end up making decisions with the best information available, but without the voice of people who really understand the day-to-day struggle of homelessness. Your voice, over and over again, is necessary to help us understand the best direction for policy. Don't give up. Keep telling your story to every decision maker you can. It will make a difference.”* —**REPRESENTATIVE JUNE ROBINSON, 38th Legislative District**<sup>15</sup>

## 4. USING MEDIA TO ELEVATE YOUR MESSAGE

Media can be a very powerful tool for challenging the myths and stereotypes of chronic homelessness and advancing a new public narrative that supports real solutions. Every single person you know is influenced by media one way or another. The key is knowing when and how to use it.

Media is many things – television, radio, newspapers, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. We need to change our thinking around “traditional” vs “social” media and treat them as equally valuable tools for telling stories. Every one of these media platforms serves a different purpose, reaches a different audience, and can effectively carry your message to whomever you’re trying to reach.

### WHO IS MY AUDIENCE?

The most important thing to identify is “who is my audience?” Your audience will determine which media platform(s) to use. For instance, are you trying to influence a legislator? Then, newspapers or radio are good platforms. Are you trying to engage like-minded people in your movement? Then social media is a good tool. Are you trying to change public opinion? Then your message needs to be on every media platform possible.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

Do not ignore the power of social media! It can be the most effective and versatile tool you have to change public opinion and build a movement. Virtually everyone is on social media in one way or another – lawmakers, their staff, reporters, news outlets, organizations, and like minded people. You can use social media (mainly Facebook and Twitter) for just about anything: telling your personal story, recruiting people to your movement, promoting news stories about your issues, starting conversations with news outlets and other organizations, or producing your own content.

#### TIP

Use your own media consumption habits, as well as those of your friends, family, and especially, people who consume media differently than you, to help guide your decision about how to best reach your intended audience. Once you’ve decided who you want to reach, then you can decide how you want to reach them.

Twitter is a great tool for quickly sharing information such as an article published with your message in it, or a bill that just got passed. It can be organized using hashtags, so that all tweets that fall in a certain category can be seen together. “Live tweeting” can be a helpful tool during an event, so that the message can spread to people who are not in attendance. Think of Twitter as a way to share “breaking news”. Follow the Housing Alliance Twitter account [@WLIHA](#).

Facebook is better for “bulletin board” type message sharing. Your messages can be longer, contain more detailed information, and it will show up in your followers news feeds over the course of hours or sometimes days, so there is opportunity for more people to see it and share it. Many people use both Facebook and Twitter, but there is also a large contingent who only monitor one or the other.

For more on using social media for advocacy, visit the [Housing Alliance’s social media advocacy resource center](#) online.

## NEWS MEDIA

News reporting outlets are famously understaffed these days, so getting the attention of a reporter to cover your story can be difficult if you don’t already have a relationship. One of the best ways to reach reporters working in TV,

**Paying for facebook ads to promote your content or organize your membership doesn’t have to be expensive and is a great way to boost your overall visibility and to keep people engaged.**

**TIP**

radio, newspapers and blogs is to write a press release advertising your event, positioning statement, a new report or whatever “news hook” you have to pique their interest. Do your homework and target your press release to a specific reporter who you know covers housing and homelessness issues. Personalize it so it doesn’t look like a blast that went out to the masses. Then, follow up the next day with a phone call, message on Facebook, or tweet at them to start a dialogue. Reporters get dozens of press releases a day, you have to work hard to make yours stand out.

**Remember: Reporters are people too. Your pitch has to be interesting, multilayered (for example, it includes a personal story to accompany data) and most importantly, it must be timely. If you don’t give them a reason why your story should be printed *right now*, they’ll find another story to write.**

**TIP**



For more on how to write a press release, [see our guide online](#).

If you can't get a reporter to cover your story for the audience you're targeting, try writing an op-ed or letter to the editor for a newspaper or blog in your area.

Opinion editorials are typically 600-700 words (depending on the publication) and are an opportunity to talk in detail about the issue you are trying to educate your audience about. It must be thoughtful and informative, and written by a figure of authority, like the executive director or board chair of a nonprofit organization, or an elected official.

Letters to the Editor can also be effective depending on the audience you're trying to reach. LTEs are typically 200 words (depending on the paper) and are written in response to a published article, or lack of coverage on an issue. Like op-eds, LTEs need to be thoughtful and well written in order to get published, and work best when they are making the case for a point of view that hasn't already been published in that paper. LTEs and op-eds are often how papers achieve a "fair and balanced" perspective.

## TIP

Though this is a dying form of actually moving public opinion, lawmakers still read LTEs from their constituents. Effort should only be put in to LTEs if you're trying to move a particular lawmaker, and you must get it published in the paper of record *in their district*.

For more on how to write an LTE or op-ed, [see our guide online](#).

The key is to know your audience and have a presence wherever they are. There is so much information flying around, and so many places to get it, it's hard to cut through all that noise. Remember, people don't dig deep to seek out information anymore. Your message has to show up where they are already looking. For any media campaign, you must adapt your message frame for a variety of platforms to be sure you are reaching everyone you can. Be simple, clear, and concise, and then repeat. See the Appendix for a specific guide on which media platforms to use to reach your target audience.

## 5. PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: MYTHS AND FACTS OF HOMELESSNESS

Always be prepared to respond to statements that are actually myths or stereotypes about homelessness. Even people sympathetic to the problem may harbor questions or opinions stemming from stereotypes and misunderstandings. Practicing how to respond is key, both in terms of fostering a lasting relationship with the decision maker and in making sure they have a full understanding of the issue at hand.

Values-based talking points are especially helpful. These are short, succinct statements that open a door to a longer talking point with statistical evidence or further explanation. For example, many of us have heard a person in power say, “Homelessness is a choice.” A useful short response could be: “Everyone deserves the opportunity to live in a safe, healthy, and affordable home.” Then,

follow this up with, “Nobody wants to be homeless. Individuals and families do not choose a life without stable housing. But sometimes there are barriers to housing and services that are hard for us who are not experiencing homelessness to see.”

The Myths and Facts of Homelessness in Washington State factsheet provides more examples of possible responses to stereotypes and myths. You can add to the sample answers or personalize them in a way that feels comfortable for you. We highly recommend practicing with a friend or coworker. It is very helpful in preparing for a meeting with a decision maker. The criminalization of those who are homeless is often based on myths and stereotypes that we know are not accurate. Having tough conversations is part of shifting our responses to these issues as a community.

## 6. CLOSING

Chronic homelessness is a very visible issue facing communities across Washington, and brings with it a complex set of challenges: complex health conditions are often exacerbated by a lack of access to preventative care, prolonged time living on the street with exposure to weather and dangerous situations, and spending time in and out of institutional settings like jails, psychiatric centers, and detox facilities. Mental and physical disabilities are often central factors in causing chronic homelessness and are often exasperated or complicated with new conditions caused by exposure and lack of access to housing and health services.

Responding to a systemic condition by criminalizing the behaviors of individuals is not only an ineffective solution to curbing homelessness, it is harmful—negatively impacting physical and mental health outcomes, perpetuating existing disparities in homelessness and incarceration among people of color,

LGBTQ people, veterans, people with disabilities, and others, and increasing the likelihood that an individual will remain trapped in the cycle of chronic homelessness. We must look at the broader systems at play, especially the policies and laws that specifically affect homeless and low-income people in a given community or across the state.

Everyone has a role to play in the movement to end homelessness in Washington. Regardless of your specific experience, you can help educate decision makers about homelessness. Decision makers greatly benefit from hearing from people from all walks of life, including service providers who work directly with those experiencing homelessness, caring community members, and people who are experiencing homelessness themselves. Many resources are available in the Appendix, and the Housing Alliance is available to support your advocacy efforts.

A photograph of two young women with short hair and glasses, smiling and holding a white sign. The sign has text about homelessness in Washington. The photo is overlaid on an orange background with faint logos of the Housing Alliance and Freetest. A diagonal orange line runs across the bottom right of the page.

# APPENDIX

More than 7,000 people  
sleep on the street each  
night in Washington.  
It's time for #WAhomes.

## ADVOCACY

For more advocacy resources, including a list of state legislative priorities and issue factsheets, visit the [Washington Low Income Housing Alliance](#) online or call 206-442-9455 to talk with an organizer.

Stand for Your Mission has resources on the importance of nonprofit board members' role in advocacy. Visit [standforyourmission.org](#).

## CRIMINALIZATION AND CONSTRUCTIVE ALTERNATIVES

For an overview of local ordinances in Washington state that criminalize homelessness, see *Washington's War on the Visibly Poor: A Survey of Criminalizing Ordinances and Their Enforcement* by Seattle University. More publications about the criminalization of homelessness are available online through the [SAMHSA Library](#).

For examples of alternatives to criminalization and various policy approaches, see *Searching Out Solutions: Constructive Alternatives to the Criminalization of Homelessness* by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, and *No Safe Place: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities* by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty.

## FACTSHEETS

### Department of Commerce County-by-County Profiles on Housing Affordability:

[Clark County Factsheet](#)

[King County Factsheet](#)

[Kitsap County Factsheet](#)

[Pierce County Factsheet](#)

[Snohomish County Factsheet](#)

[Spokane County Factsheet](#)

[Thurston County Factsheet](#)

[Whatcom County Factsheet](#)

[Yakima County Factsheet](#)

[All other county profiles](#)

### Community Organizing Resources:

[Strategy Development Chart](#) from Midwest Academy

[Steps to Develop a Strategic Political Landscape Power Analysis](#) from SCOPE

### Media & Messaging:

[Reaching Your Audience: A Media Guide](#)

[Myths and Facts of Homelessness in Washington State](#)

### Moving Your Lawmakers:

[Cycle of the Criminalization of Homelessness](#)

[Checklist for Planning a Lawmaker Meeting](#)



## HOUSING AFFORDABILITY AND HOMELESSNESS IN WASHINGTON

For local information on housing affordability see the [County-by-County profiles](#) from the Department of Commerce. Here you can find:

- Local statistics and information that can be used to help educate the community and local officials, including information about need.
- Local investments made via the Housing Trust Fund and other important programs.

For an overview of the homeless response system in Washington state, see *Housing for Homeless Individuals With Mental Illnesses and Co-Occurring Substance Use Disorders* by DSHS and the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance.

## LEGISLATIVE RESOURCES

You can leave a toll-free message for your state elected officials via the State's Legislative Hotline at 800-562-6000.

The [Legislative Information Center](#) provides information about the Legislature and the legislative process, including free trainings, tours of the capitol campus and resources to help navigate how a bill becomes law. You can also call their office with questions at 360-786-7573.

More resources can be found at the [Washington State Legislature](#) online.

## MEDIA AND MESSAGING RESOURCES

See the [Myths and Facts of Homelessness in Washington](#) factsheet to help advocates reframe the narrative on homelessness.

Follow the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#), and don't forget to check out our [blog](#) for regular policy updates and analysis.

## NONPROFITS AND LOBBYING RULES

For information on lobbying rules for nonprofit organizations, see the Alliance for Justice's [Bolder Advocacy Initiative](#), which include resources such as:

- *Being a Player: A Guide to IRS Lobbying Regulations for Advocacy Charities*
- *Public Charities Can Lobby*

## RESEARCHING A STATE LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE

Below is an example what you can see on each State Legislative Committee's webpage, including members, staff, operating procedures, meeting notes and materials, reports from the committee, and notice of upcoming committee meetings. (Note that many local governments also have helpful information on their websites including committee members, meeting agenda and materials, vote counts, and more.)

### Senate Ways & Means Committee

[Legislature Home](#) > [Senate](#) > [Committees](#) > Ways & Means

311 J.A. Cherberg Bldg., P.O. Box 40466, Olympia, WA 98504-0466

Committee Hearings & Bill Information: (360) 786-7715

Legislative Hotline Operators: 1-800-562-6000

The Senate Ways and Means Committee considers the operating and capital budget bills and related legislation, including the authorization of state debt. The Committee also deals with tax policy and other fiscal issues such as pension policy and compensation in addition to bills with operating budget fiscal impacts.

Senate Ways and Means Committee staff are part of Senate Committee Services, the organization which provides nonpartisan staff services for all standing committees of the Washington State Senate.

*(Please note: This general description should not be considered the definitive listing of issues considered by this committee.)*

**Copies of draft bills, proposed substitute bills, or striking amendments scheduled for public hearings:**

#### Committee Meeting Documents/Electronic Bill Book (EBB)

##### Highlights

##### Proposed Final 2016 Supplemental Operating Budget (ESHB 2376)

[Overview](#)

[Summary and Agency Detail Reports](#)

##### 2016 Operating Budget Briefing Book

[Overview of Governor Inslee's 2016 Supplemental Operating and Capital Budget Proposals](#)

[Governor's Proposed 2016 Supplemental Operating Budget](#)

[Governor's Proposed 2016 Supplemental Capital Budget](#)

To see who comprises a committee, go to [leg.wa.gov](http://leg.wa.gov). Click on "Committees" on the right side of the page where you will be able to link to all the committees. During the legislative session (usually January - March or April each year) any committees that have meetings that day will be listed on the legislative home page. You can see the agenda for each meeting by clicking on the accompanying agenda link.

## RESEARCHING YOUR STATE LAWMAKER

You can learn about legislators by browsing the [Member Roster](#) for their webpage. Here you can read their biographies, learn what committees they serve on, their voting record, and what bills they are sponsoring. Having some background information about the person you are meeting with can help you plan and refine your meeting goals. This is true for any decision maker you are meeting with, not only state lawmakers.

	<b>Representative June Robinson (D)</b> 38th Legislative District	<b>Olympia Office</b> 332 John L. O'Brien Building PO Box 40600 Olympia, WA 98504 (360) 786 - 7864
<a href="#">Home Page</a>	<a href="#">Email Details</a>	
<b>District Office</b> 2930 Wetmore Ave Suite 9C-2 Everett, WA 98201 (425) 258 - 4215		<b>Committees</b> <a href="#">Community Development, Housing &amp; Tribal Affairs</a> (Vice Chair) <a href="#">Finance</a> (Vice Chair) <a href="#">Appropriations</a> <a href="#">Health Care &amp; Wellness</a>

Click on the “Details” button to reveal the legislator’s voting record by session year and bill sponsorship.

<b>Voting Record</b> (Will open a new tab) <a href="#">2015</a> <a href="#">2014</a>	<a href="#">Bill Sponsorship</a> <a href="#">Print Quality Photo</a>
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Using Representative June Robinson’s listing, we can see the following:

- Legislative District: 38th.
- Committee Assignments: Community Development; Housing & Tribal Affairs (of which she is the Vice Chair); Finance; and Health Care & Wellness.
- She has an office location both in Olympia and in her home district. (A legislator’s home district can be a great place for meetings between legislative sessions, either in their office or at an affordable housing site.)
- Her voting record and bill sponsorship.
- Website, biography, and email contact.

## RESOURCES FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS OR IN NEED OF SERVICES

[2-1-1](#) is a free and confidential service that helps people find local resources they need, including housing and utility assistance, food assistance, health care, crisis and emergency services, and veterans services, among others. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Visit [Washington Law Help](#) to find many helpful resources on your rights, including tenants rights, rights to public benefits, consumer and debt relief, and more.

The [Tenants Union of Washington](#) provides extensive resources on tenants rights, including rental agreements, local laws, housing repairs, utilities, eviction and foreclosure, as well as low income housing resources and more. Resources are available on their website in English, Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese.

[Solid Ground's Housing Counseling Services for Tenants](#) helps families and individuals maintain permanent and reliable rental housing, providing tenants with the resources and tools they need to prevent eviction and ensure housing stability. While Solid Ground does not have attorneys on staff and cannot provide legal advice, they can help you understand your rights and responsibilities as a renter.

Veterans specific resources can be accessed at:

- [NW Justice Project's Veterans Project](#): provides free legal services to financially eligible low income and homeless veterans for civil (not criminal) legal problems that are barriers to housing, employment, and self-sufficiency
- [Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs](#)
- [Washington State Attorney General](#)

Voting rights in Washington State:

- For information on registering to vote while homeless, see the [Homeless Voters Information Guide](#) by the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness.
- For information on voting rights restoration for felons, see the ACLU's [Frequently Asked Questions About Voting Rights Restoration in Washington](#).

## SCHEDULING A MEETING WITH YOUR LAWMAKER

You can request a meeting with your state or local lawmaker by phone or email. If you make an email request, send it your lawmaker's legislative aide or staff. For state lawmakers, you can locate the legislative aide's contact information in the State Legislature's [Member Roster](#).

Sample email:

To: [firstname.lastname@leg.wa.gov]

Subject: Meeting request from [your name or organization]

Hello,

I'd like to request a meeting with [Senator or Representative's name] to talk about [bill or community issue]. I have [#] other people interested in joining me. We are able to travel to your district office and the best time for us would be [time of day]. Does [Senator or Representative's name] have any time to meet with us in the coming weeks?

I can be reached at [your phone number].

Thank you for your assistance,

[Your name]



# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> “No Safe Place Advocacy Manual,” National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2014), [http://www.nlchp.org/documents/No\\_Safe\\_Place\\_Advocacy\\_Manual](http://www.nlchp.org/documents/No_Safe_Place_Advocacy_Manual)

<sup>2</sup> Justin Olson, Scott MacDonald, and Sara Rankin, “Washington’s War on the Visibly Poor: A Survey of Criminalizing Ordinances & Their Enforcement” (2015), Seattle University School of Law, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2602318>, pg. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Id. Pg. 4

<sup>4</sup> Id. Pg. 12-13

<sup>5</sup> Kaya Lurie, Breanne Schuster, and Sara Rankin, “Discrimination at the Margins: The Intersectionality of Homelessness & Other Marginalized Groups,” Seattle University School of Law (2015), [bit.ly/marginsreport](http://bit.ly/marginsreport)

<sup>6</sup> Id.

<sup>7</sup> Id.

<sup>8</sup> Id.

<sup>9</sup> Id.

<sup>10</sup> “No Safe Place Advocacy Manual,” National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2014), [http://www.nlchp.org/documents/No\\_Safe\\_Place\\_Advocacy\\_Manual](http://www.nlchp.org/documents/No_Safe_Place_Advocacy_Manual), pg 32-33

<sup>11</sup> See the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP)’s Homeless Bill of Rights Campaign: <http://wraphome.org/civil-rights-campaign/>

<sup>12</sup> Permanent Supportive Housing is an “effective means of reintegrating chronically homeless and other highly vulnerable homeless families and individuals with psychiatric disabilities or chronic health challenges into the community by addressing their basic needs for housing and providing ongoing support.” For more information and explanation of different types of supportive housing, see: <https://www.usich.gov/solutions/housing/supportive-housing>

<sup>13</sup> Rickke Mananzala and Dean Spade, “The Nonprofit Industrial Complex and Trans Resistance,” San Francisco State University (2008), <http://srhp.org/files/NPICtransresistance.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Senator Murray provided permission to use this quote.

<sup>15</sup> Representative Robinson provided permission to use this quote.

# MORE WAYS TO GET INVOLVED WITH THE HOUSING ALLIANCE

The **EMERGING ADVOCATES PROGRAM** provides training and ongoing support for individuals with direct experience of housing instability and homelessness to develop as advocates and community leaders. Participants in EAP learn from experienced advocates, professionals, and each other about advocacy, storytelling, the legislative process, media relations, and more. EAP is offered yearly in Seattle and when possible in other communities around Washington, often in conjunction with the Conference on Ending Homelessness. To learn more visit [wliha.org/EAP](http://wliha.org/EAP).

The **RESIDENT ACTION PROJECT** is building a statewide base of resident power. We fight for public policy to expand affordable homes and to end homelessness by organizing with folks currently living in or seeking affordable housing, frontline staff, and community organizers. We are educating ourselves on housing, the electoral process, and the legislative process in order to take strategic action that will make a difference in our communities and our state. As the movement advances to make housing more affordable in Washington state, we will be at the forefront. To join us or to learn more, visit [bit.ly/residentaction](http://bit.ly/residentaction).

**STAND FOR YOUR MISSION** is a board advocacy program that was created because nonprofit board members are an enormous untapped resource who can, and must, play a pivotal role in the movement to end homelessness. It starts with capacity-building tools for integrating advocacy into your organization. Then we connect this with the most important legislative issues impacting our state today. Whether you're an individual board member looking to get involved in advocacy by yourself, the chair of an advocacy committee working to maximize your organization's impact, or an executive director trying to determine best practices for your organization's board, Stand For Your Mission is here to help. To get involved or to learn more, visit [wliha.org/stand-for-your-mission](http://wliha.org/stand-for-your-mission).