



The Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness (SKCCH)

77 South Washington Street, Seattle, WA 98104
Phone 206.357.3148 Fax 206.357.3147
www.homelessinfo.org

Statement to the members of the Energy, Technology, and Civil Rights Committee
of the Seattle City Council
Regarding the shooting death of John T. Williams by a Seattle Police Department officer

I offer the following statement on behalf of the many members of our Coalition who shocked, angry, sorrowful, and committed to the safety and survival of people who are homeless and housed in our communities. I extend heartbroken and heartfelt condolences to the Williams family, and to all those who knew Mr. Williams and are affected by this tragedy, especially to the members of the Chief Seattle Club, and to residents and staff of 1811 Eastlake.

Mr. John T. Williams was one of hundreds, thousands of people in Seattle and around our region who has experienced homelessness. He was, at the time of his death, not homeless. He lived in one of the places our community has built to make real the goal of ending homelessness. The perception of Mr. Williams as homeless reminds us that we make assumptions and generalizations based on poverty, ethnicity, disability, and other factors all the time. What we should remember is this: everyone can be housed, and no one should be stigmatized or deprived of their rights because of where they sleep at night, or where someone thinks they sleep. Sadly, we also remember that many of our neighbors die homeless in our communities every year.

With sincere respect for the family, and for the pursuit of justice, I would like to suggest that in some fundamental ways the specific results of the legal and administrative investigations that will unfold in the coming weeks, months, and perhaps years do not matter. Not only will they not undo this tragedy, but whether Officer Birk is found guilty or innocent will not change what we can clearly understand already: the training, supervision, and protocols of the Seattle Police Department are not adequate to serve and protect the public.

We know that the SPD recently secured additional funding for specialized partnerships with mental health professionals to work with specific officers. That is indeed good news. It is nowhere near enough. The Department must thoroughly and openly review and dramatically improve its formal *and informal* training of all officers, both in the academy and through on-going professional development. The sworn duty of Seattle Police officers is to preserve life. To fulfill this obligation, officers must participate in intensified, substantive, and on-going training, and policies must be revised. Officers need to understand in a practical, everyday way, not theoretically, how to do their difficult jobs as part of this city. In this city, people have many experiences of life. Some experience poverty, homelessness, or disability. All are entitled to equal and genuine safety and protection.

The Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness (SKCCH) works collaboratively to ensure the safety and survival of people who are homeless, and to end the crisis of homelessness in our region.

Because the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness is specifically committed to advancing and protecting the civil and human rights of people who are poor and homeless, I would like to add one last comment. In no way is this meant to distract from the many issues related to Mr. Williams' death that require urgent action. Rather, it is one response, a lesson that may be learned or re-learned in this time of grief.

When local governments establish formal and informal policies and procedures that sweep people, their belongings, and their shelters, they contribute to a culture where people can be dehumanized, devalued and treated like garbage. When police and other public servants play a part in facilitating or implementing actions such as sweeps, or move people who are homeless out of public places, they do not absorb the message that all people have civil rights that they are responsible for protecting. This is why such policies are fundamentally wrong. They undermine true public safety and diminish the general welfare in our community.

Thank you,

Alison Eisinger
Executive Director

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