

CITY OF BELLEVUE
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

November 17, 2025
6:00 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chair Singh, Commissioners Gonzalez, Hays, Perelman, Phan

COMMISSIONERS REMOTE: Commissioner Rashid

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Vice Chair White

STAFF PRESENT: Christy Stangland, Toni Esparza, Donna Adair, Ruth Blaw, Andrew Ndayambaje, Gysel Galaviz, Department of Parks & Community Services

COUNCIL LIAISON: Not Present

POLICE LIAISON: Major Ellen Inman

GUEST SPEAKERS: Dietra Clayton, Sophia Way; Paul Lwali, Friends of Youth; Troy Christiansen, Porchlight; Veronica Roas-Valdez, Archdiocesan Housing Authority

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:01 p.m. by Chair Singh who presided.

2. ROLL CALL

At the roll of the call, all Commissioners were present with the exception of Vice Chair White.

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A. November 3, 2025

A motion to approve the minutes was made by Commissioner Perelman. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Phan and the motion carried unanimously.

4. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

Chair Singh took a moment to note that under Ordinance 6752, the topics about which the public may speak during a meeting are limited to subject matters related to the city of Bellevue government and within the powers and duties of the Human Services Commission. Additional information about the new rules of decorum governing conduct of the public during meetings can

be found in Ordinance 6752.

Phoenica Zhang, policy specialist with Solid Ground, described the organization as a nonprofit providing a broad range of services to low-income individuals throughout King County, including affordable housing, housing stabilization, food security support, and transportation services. Solid Ground's housing stability program has partnered with Bellevue through the Combined Cities grant to provide emergency rental assistance and to support the prevention of homelessness. The organization served 32 Bellevue households in 2024 and also supported eight partner providers across the county in distributing rental assistance. Rising rent costs, accumulated rental arrears, and reduced access to lifeline benefits such as SNAP and WIC are creating mounting financial strain for families. The Commission was urged to consider the realities and to recommend maximizing allocations for financial assistance in the next funding cycle.

Alex Tsimerman called the Commissioners primitive Nazi Gestapo animals and delivered remarks that were highly critical of city leadership. Inflammatory language was used and references were made to ongoing legal matters. Tsimerman alleged being repeatedly trespassed from meetings and claimed political retaliation and characterizing various city actions as unjust.

After Tsimerman referred to election-related content, Chair Singh issued a warning that discussions regarding campaigning was not permitted. Tsimerman asserted that the election had concluded and then continued speaking with the same line of inflammatory language.

Meredith Meyer, Resident Services Manager for Imagine Housing, reported that the agency operates 146 affordable or deeply affordable units in Bellevue, housing 293 residents, nearly half of whom are families exiting homelessness. The latest residents survey highlighted significant food insecurity among residents, with 46 percent reporting some level of insecurity and more than 60 percent requesting additional food aid. Many residents are non-English speakers. Uncertainties surrounding SNAP benefits have heightened the need for consistent access to food. The organization has traditionally provided community meals and food during the holidays, the need is even greater this year for daily household meals.

Philip Peters, Renewal Food Bank Executive Director, said the organization has partnered with Imagine Housing to launch a pilot food-delivery box program serving one or two of the Imagine Housing communities located in Bellevue, about 50 households per week. The boxes will contain shelf-stable goods, frozen proteins, fresh produce, bread, and eggs, with the ability to include diapers and pet food as needed. The program will require added staffing for both organizations and will build on Renewal Food Bank's previous delivery experience serving refugee families. Over time, both organizations hope to expand the service into a mobile market model tailoring offerings to households' cultural and dietary needs. A request for \$110,000 has been submitted from the city to fund the four-month pilot, to support the staffing and transportation costs, and to address the immediate food-security challenges that are linked to reduced SNAP benefits.

5. COMMUNICATION FROM CITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

Major Inman noted that for the last couple of years the Bellevue Police Department has participated in the drive through holiday lights event in Renton called “Battle of the Badges.” Agencies from around the area decorate to the annual theme. The upcoming iteration of the event will be on December 6. The Commissioners were encouraged to attend the family-friendly event that allows for both driving and walking participation. The event is supported by Renton Parks and includes refreshments. The Bellevue Police Department typically fields more than 30 participants from among its volunteers, student officers, Commissioned officers, and professional staff.

Major Inman highlighted the police department’s annual “Stop the Lift” retail-theft prevention campaign and noted that the initiative places additional officers at local malls and is conducted in partnership with major shopping areas such as Crossroads, Factoria, and downtown Bellevue. The campaign will be publicized in the media and is intended both to deter shoplifting and to encourage community members to report suspicious behavior. Everyone should be reminded to avoid leaving newly purchased items in vehicles during the holiday shopping period.

6. STAFF AND COMMISSIONER REPORTS

Senior Administrative Assistant Gysel Galaviz summarized the recently concluded Essentials for All Drive, a city-run effort that collected food and hygiene items from October 1 through November 15. Donations were initially slow but increased significantly in the final two weeks, resulting in full bins at all eight original collection locations, with two additional locations added after staff requested further participation. An apartment community had also organized donations after seeing promotional materials. Overall the program was successful.

Human Services Manager Ruth Blaw noted that all twenty-one participating agencies collected items from their designated pickup locations and each will receive approximately \$4,000 in Safeway grocery cards to distribute to Bellevue residents experiencing food insecurity. The logistics are being finalized with the goal of distributing the cards before Thanksgiving. As the drive concludes, staff will compile estimates of the total collected goods based on weekly reports and photographs submitted by agencies.

Ruth Blaw stated that the final Commission meeting of the year would occur on December 1. The 2026 calendar of meeting dates was provided to the Commissioners.

Chair Singh confirmed that the parliamentary training session is slated for December 8.

Department of Parks and Community Services assistant director Toni Esparza reported on additional city efforts to address emerging community needs. The city manager has authorized \$150,000 in operational funds to address food insecurity, and those funds will be distributed evenly among the contracted food providers. At the Council’s most recent meeting the Council debated how much of its annual \$1 million contingency fund should be allocated to immediate human service needs. The Council dedicated a full \$1 million during the 2024 budget process for 2025-2026 to human services. After discussing the economic uncertainties and the need to balance future flexibility with the present need, the Council voted to allocate \$600,000 of its 2026 contingency, dividing it equally among immigrant and refugee legal assistance, food

support, and financial assistance. Staff are now contacting the contracted agencies identified by the Commission to determine whether they are prepared to receive and immediately deploy the new funding. Contract amendments will follow as needed. The agencies can choose to subcontract with partners to expand their service reach.

Commissioner Perelman asked if the dollars will only be available for direct services. Toni Esparza responded that contracts generally allow for 20 percent of funds to be used for overhead, with most remaining food or financial-assistance funds dedicated to direct services. Legal-assistance allocations are likely to be driven by staff costs. The allocation represents significant support for the community.

7. INFORMATION FOR THE COMMISSION

Doug Rayford, DEI Program Administrator for the Department of Parks and Community Services, thanked the Commission for its attentiveness and engagement, noting prior positive impressions from both in-person and virtual meetings. The speaker noted originally being from Miami, having a family history of nonprofit service, and having personally worked in international programs for the State Department as well as in higher education, international advising, and community college recruitment. Introduction to equity and inclusion work came through a prior supervisor before ultimately transitioning fully into DEI roles, most recently as an equity, inclusion, and justice advisor for the City of Lynnwood.

Doug Rayford described Bellevue's organizational structure by noting that the citywide Diversity Advantage Team handles the broader DEI initiatives. The speaker's new role focuses specifically on supporting and strengthening DEI efforts within the Parks and Community Services Department. Bellevue's model of empowering the Commission with meaningful decision-making authority is uncommon and should be recognized as a significant responsibility. There is an upcoming annual staff training on equity, and interest was expressed in hearing from the Commissioners about what content would best support their work.

Commissioner Phan said the desire to serve on the Commission was tied to a strong commitment to supporting community-based organizations. There is privilege inherent in serving in such a role. Deep appreciation was voiced for the implicit bias training that previously was offered, which revealed unrecognized assumptions, particularly around language. Similar training should be offered again, preferably in a more interactive format. Also emphasized was the need for periodic updates on evolving language norms and the terminology used within equity work.

Commissioner Hays noted having grown up in Bellevue and facing navigating various barriers as a person with a disability. That lived experience brings with it a unique perspective on obstacles faced by the disabled community. Joining the Commission was done to support nonprofits, the city, and the youth. Emphasized was the importance of understanding how various types of barriers, both physical and systemic, affect the ability of residents to access resources.

Chair Singh spoke about immigrating to the United States in pursuit of equality and noted feeling fortunate to have lived in Bellevue now for many years after having endured a prolonged immigration process that required eighteen years on an H-1B visa, something that shaped a

desire to contribute to the city with humility and gratitude. Interest was expressed in receiving data-driven examples of the challenges faced by Bellevue communities, including insights from schools and neighborhoods, to help identify areas for improvement and encourage civic involvement. What is needed is real-time, tangible examples of issues experienced by specific communities within Bellevue.

Commissioner Gonzalez stated that a long-standing commitment to volunteering and nonprofit work led to applying for a seat on the Commission. A particular interest was expressed in advocating effectively for the Latino community, noting that although the city offers many resources, community members often remain unaware of them or feel hesitant to access them due to concerns such as potential public charge implications. Training is needed to help them understand the limits and responsibilities of advocacy and how to best support residents who may feel fearful or uninformed.

Commissioner Perelman agreed with the need for training, such as improving communication, understanding one another, and learning appropriate language, and with the need for external information that provides data and context about community needs. Joining the Commission was done out of a desire to remain involved in the community and to continue learning about the city.

Commissioner Rashid said the decision to serve on the Commission stemmed from a desire to support the Zanzibar community in Bellevue, many of whom have limited English skills and need assistance in navigating city resources. As specific needs are identified, the Commission will be kept informed.

Commissioner Hays made the suggestion that future training should include a focus on structural and institutional barriers that impede the ability of certain communities to access resources or achieve long-term stability.

Commissioner Phan remarked that Best Start for Kids offers online training in regard to systemic inequalities and racism that plays out for those looking at grants.

Commissioner Hays asked if any additional training will occur before the Commission makes funding decisions. Ruth Blaw said training is always scheduled before the Commissioner begins reviewing applications, typically in March, April, or May. Based on that clarification, Commissioner Hays stressed the need for training focused on systemic barriers faced by organizations and community members.

Doug Rayford agreed to review the application materials to determine whether any additional elements might be warranted, and committed to reporting back at a future meeting.

8. OLD BUSINESS – None

9. NEW BUSINESS

A. Review Draft 2027-2028 Funding Contingency

Chair Singh asked the Commissioners to review the revised draft of the contingency plan, specifically the highlighted section about seeking to align funding awards with the two priority category targets, with 23 percent for culturally and linguistically specific services, and 26 percent for youth program.

A motion to approve the draft 2027-2028 Human Services Contingency Plan was made by Commissioner Phan. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Hays and the motion carried unanimously.

B. Shelter Services Panel

Human Services Planner Andrew Ndayambaje explained that “emergency shelters” are facilities whose primary purpose is to provide temporary shelter to people experiencing homelessness without requiring the signing of a lease. “Congregate shelters,” on the other hand, provide communal spaces such as large rooms with multiple cots or mats. “Non-congregate shelters are those shelters in which each person has a separate space, such as a room with walls or a unit in a tiny house village. “Low-barrier” in the context of services and programs is an approach that minimizes or removes obstacles to entry and participation, such as extensive paperwork, long waiting lists, strict eligibility criteria, or other requirements that can hinder access to meals, shelter, showers, clothing, and other essential needs. A “low-barrier shelter” is an emergency shelter that does not require credit checks, income verification, proof of sobriety, criminal-background screening, program participation commitments, or formal identification as conditions for entry.

The panelists introduced themselves as Troy Christensen with Porchlight, formerly known as Congregations for the Homeless; Veronica Rojas-Valdez with Catholic Housing Services, the Archdiocesan Housing Authority and operator of the New Bethlehem Family Shelter located in Kirkland; Paul Lwali, president and CEO of Friends of Youth; and Dietra Clayton, executive director of Sophia Way.

Dietrich Clayton explained that Sophia Way is in its fifteenth year. It was founded as a direct response to community need and began with eight mats on the floor. It expanded rapidly during the COVID-19 epidemic as the need for 24-hour services became evident. The organization now operates two 24-hour low-barrier shelters, one in Kirkland offering emergency-focused services and another in Bellevue providing longer-term stays of up to six months. In addition to shelter operations, Sophia Way provides permanent housing with supportive services, rental assistance, vehicle outreach, and a broad range of stabilization support for individuals previously housed through the program. In 2024 the organization provided more than \$270,000 in direct client support that was not otherwise covered by funding sources. Appreciation was expressed for the city’s support and said the services provided to community members who are often overlooked or marginalized. Sophia Way also operates a day center, designated as a resource center for funding purposes, where individuals can drop in for case management without needing to enroll in the full program. That allows the organization to serve people at every stage of the homelessness experience, from first-time crisis to long-term stabilization and housing retention.

Paul Lwali said Friends of Youth’s continuum of services includes youth homelessness, which is

attributable to multiple circumstances that prevent young people from remaining in their natural home environments. The Friends of Youth shelter is one component of a broader suite of support services that includes transitional living programs, clinical services, case management, behavioral health care, and assistance for young people involved in the child welfare system. Friends of Youth serves individuals ages seven to twenty-four and works to support youth across diverse needs and pathways, helping them move from emergency shelter to increasing levels of stability and independence or toward family reunification when appropriate.

Veronica Rojas-Valdez said the New Bethlehem Family Shelter program focuses on supporting families in securing stable, sustainable housing and building budgets that prepare them for permanent housing. The shelter also assists children through McKinney-Vento services to ensure school stability, attendance, and access to individualized education plans when needed. Additional supports include transportation assistance, clothing, and access to a visiting nurse who serves both adults and children. The shelter is working to form partnerships with community organizations to expand legal and immigration support for families preparing to apply for green cards or in transitioning away from day-labor work.

Troy Christiansen said the mission of Porchlight is to partner with men and those who identify as men to create a pathway from homelessness to stable living. Porchlight provides up to 150 shelter beds nightly on the Eastside and housing for up to 95 individuals in a range of residential settings. The organization also operates a day center offering meals, showers, laundry, behavioral health staff, and access to employment and housing navigation. Porchlight actively advocates for additional affordable and supportive housing for people with disabilities on the Eastside.

Answering a question regarding the most significant human services needs and barriers affecting access to shelter, Troy Christensen identified economic factors as the primary barrier for the men served by Porchlight. Many clients are working, including full-time workers, yet still cannot afford housing in King County and must rely on shelter to save money toward rental costs. Beyond affordability, uncertainty surrounding federal benefits such as SNAP, Medicaid, and housing vouchers has placed many individuals at risk of falling into homelessness. Until roughly three years ago, few permanent supportive housing options existed beyond shelter environments, and although recent initiatives such as Health Through Housing and developments by Plymouth Housing represent progress, the overall supply remains insufficient.

Veronica Rojas-Valdez added that for families the most critical barrier is the scarcity of family-appropriate shelter and housing opportunities on the Eastside. As a result, many families remain in shelter or hotel placements for extended periods, sometimes approaching a year, because no affordable next steps are available.

Paul Lwali underscored the importance of acknowledging the structural causes of homelessness. Homelessness among youth and adults is driven significantly by systemic issues such as racism, classism, ageism, the cost of housing, and the lack of accessible mental-health services. While providers frequently discuss system gaps when presenting to public bodies, structural inequities represent approximately half of the root causes of homelessness. Challenges related to individual behavior represent a smaller portion of the problem, one that service providers have a lot of experience addressing, but structural barriers require a broader recognition and policy attention.

Dietra Clayton agreed with the previous comments and emphasized the compounding effects of fear and economic instability on both shelter clients and shelter staff. Many staff members live paycheck to paycheck and face pressures similar to those experienced by the individuals they serve. The proximity to crisis has strained the capacity to maintain trauma-informed practices as staff must manage their own precarity while supporting others. Concerns were also raised about the future of emergency housing vouchers and their potential discontinuation. The organization is attempting to plan proactively rather than respond from a posture of fear. Operational impacts include the need to expand services such as adding a food pantry to the existing day center, relying heavily on volunteers to meet the growing demand. More than 40 percent of the women served earn under \$50,000 annually, and more than 40 percent have disabilities intensified by their homelessness. Without private, stable living environments, clients have no outlet to decompress after difficult days, making community interactions more challenging. The most critical unmet need remains permanent supportive housing. The lack of available housing forces some clients to cycle between shelters to comply with term limits, leaving them without appropriate long-term options.

Andrew Ndayambaje asked the panelists to share success stories or examples of effective practices. Dietra Clayton described three recent successes, with the first being a collaborative Homeless Remembrance Day event held in Bellevue Downtown Park which brought together multiple organizations despite inclement weather; the event served as a powerful demonstration of unity, staff visibility and community acknowledgment. The second was a Black hair-care drive addressing the lack of culturally appropriate personal-care items in many shelters, an effort that was both meaningful and necessary. The third was the continuation of community brunches, which brings together former clients, current program participants and community members. The events provide participants with needed supplies and highlight resilience by allowing long-term housed clients to mentor and encourage women currently in the program.

Paul Lwali noted that resilience itself is a core success; service providers remain steadfast despite decades of shifting political and economic conditions, and they continue to support individuals who ask only for assistance in stabilizing their lives. There have been significant organizational milestones achieved in the past several years, including the opening of a new 35-bed youth shelter designed to meet the needs directly identified by young people. The organization prioritized client feedback on basic living necessities such as access to multiple showers, laundry facilities, and full meals rather than minimal or repetitive food options. Listening to clients and centering their voices has led to improved facilities and services that better reflect the dignity and needs of youth experiencing homelessness. Also highlighted was the organization's expansion into youth and young-adult affordable housing in Kirkland, which has resulted in a full facility with a waiting list. Friends of Youth recently opened Bridgepoint, a voluntary transitional space designed to support individuals leaving inpatient treatment by offering stability before they return to the community. The developments reflect a collective culture of persistence among service providers, driven by the belief that every person deserves housing. Solutions emerge when organizations remain deeply responsive to client needs.

Veronica Rojas Valdez shared accomplishments from the New Bethlehem Family Shelter, which successfully placed nineteen families into permanent housing during the year and which

continues to provide aftercare, encouraging families to return for pantry items, laundry access, or other supports that reduce financial strain. There is ongoing engagement with volunteers, donors, and funders that includes inviting them into the shelter space to maintain awareness of community needs and demonstrate how contributions are used. The shelter benefits from volunteers who assist children with homework. When children are not present, the volunteers offer the parents resume coaching, mock interviews, and other skill-building support aimed at strengthening confidence and visibility. Also highlighted were the partnerships with local agencies, including Kinderling and Friends of Youth, that provide a collaborative activity for toddlers and infants.

Troy Christensen shared that Porchlight has numerous success stories from the past year. In 2024, the agency assisted 130 men in securing permanent housing and supported 116 in obtaining employment. An example was shared about a client who had moved to Seattle where there was stable housing and employment, but who became unhoused after the rented home was sold. The client continued working while living in a personal car at a park-and-ride until the vehicle broke down, triggering the loss of employment. An outreach worker from Porchlight encouraged the client to enter the shelter, where the client received medical attention and stability. That person then began assisting others by volunteering in the kitchen and serving as a translator for Latino clients. Within nine months the client transitioned to permanent housing and recovered the personal vehicle, all of which exemplifies Porchlight's capacity to support individuals from first outreach to long-term stability.

Commissioner Phan acknowledged being aware of the economic and structural challenges described by the panelists and asked what resource, particularly in terms of funding, would allow their organizations to stabilize and advance their work. Dietra Clayton said Sophia Way has had to identify more than \$650,000 in budget cuts simply to reduce its projected deficit to \$29,000. The organization had previously approved a deficit budget in part due to necessary increases in staff wages, which had historically been far below industry standards. Raising wages from approximately \$17.00 per hour to \$23.50 per hour for direct services staff still left the organization behind peer agencies, and the increase resulted in a deficit exceeding \$140,000 that grew over the year to more than \$300,000 due to rising costs and unfunded needs. The staff are experiencing severe strains, including vicarious trauma and economic precarity. Adequate wages are essential to sustaining trauma-informed care. The organization's budget is already extremely lean, with limited administrative overhead and the burden of covering client assistance costs such as move-in payments or arrears stabilization, expenses that can range from \$2,500 to \$5,000 per client. The nonprofit business model does not allow for the creation of meaningful reserves, especially during periods of inflation and increasing need. For those reasons, substantial and sustained funding increases are necessary simply to maintain basic operations.

Troy Christensen said Porchlight faces similar financial pressures. The organization began the fiscal year with a deficit of approximately \$550,000 but managed to reduce it to around \$25,000 only through attrition and eliminating staff positions without backfilling them. That has resulted in increased workloads for the remaining staff. Porchlight is also losing roughly half a million dollars in federal funding in 2025, including the complete elimination of housing-navigation funding. Without housing navigators, shelters cannot transition individuals into permanent housing, which results in bed stagnation and an ever-expanding need for shelter capacity.

Porchlight estimates that approximately \$100,000 would be required to maintain a dedicated navigation position with benefits. Regional partners such as the King County Regional Homelessness Authority are experiencing their own financial shortfalls and layoffs, making it unlikely that external rescue funding will materialize. Local government support, therefore, is increasingly critical.

Paul Lwali broadened the discussion to the philosophical and structural level, arguing that the region must wake up from a corporate mindset that frames homelessness investments as optional or secondary. Homelessness has been the central social issue in King County for decades, yet funding decisions still reflect a deprioritization of the problem. Approximately \$36 million in federal homelessness funding is being eliminated due to federal Housing and Urban Development decisions, losses that will have immediate and profound impacts across all service providers. For youth and young-adult programs, the loss means fewer beds for individuals 18 and under, reduced capacity for rapid rehousing, and the disappearance of some permanent supportive housing pathways. The reductions increase the risk of trafficking and exploitation among unsheltered youth. Homelessness is a regional issue without borders, yet jurisdictions continue to limit funding eligibility based on the last permanent address, a practice misaligned with the realities of mobility among unhoused individuals. What is needed is a collective, region-wide commitment to addressing homelessness rather than leaving the burden to service providers and small groups of advocates.

Veronica Rojas Valdez underscored the urgent need for additional funding. The New Bethlehem program is striving to maintain capacity for twenty families at a time by operating both a shelter and a hotel program, each serving ten families. Sustaining the dual model requires stable funding not only for families already in shelter but also for families using the day center who are on the brink of homelessness. Many of the households report that they are just holding on to their current apartments and are asking how the program can help them retain housing. Some families lack transportation and occasionally attempt to camp outside the shelter when no immediate options are available. The response of the staff is to seek alternative placements, sometimes arranging cab rides to safer locations. The staffing situation is bare bones at best. In one situation a service manager who had just completed a shift at 11:00 p.m. after starting at 6:00 a.m. planned to return for an overnight shift after a brief rest. To maintain operations, staff regularly work overtime, making it necessary to borrow staff from other sites, offering transportation and meals to encourage coverage. The program needs additional, qualified personnel who are committed to working with families toward housing stability.

Commissioner Hays thanked the panelists for illuminating the depth of the regional homelessness challenges and expressed regret that recent progress now appears threatened by funding reductions. The question asked was which communities are currently underserved, why they face those gaps, and how the Commission might help to support more equitable service delivery. Dietra Clayton identified the LGBTQ community, particularly trans individuals, as being significantly underserved. While shelters can declare themselves to be safe spaces, the reality can be more complicated when clients share space with others who may hold prejudicial views, such as older residents. On the Eastside, shelter systems are structured primarily around single adults identified as women or men, which supports inclusivity in some ways but does not fully address the needs of LGBTQ clients, especially couples and trans women who face high

rates of violence. There is a data gap due to intrusive or inadequate demographic questions, and a service gap, given that the existing data does not fully capture the need for specialized LGBTQ shelter services. While there had been pre-pandemic discussions among providers about developing such spaces, current political pressures and organizational survival concerns have pushed that work down the priority list, even though the need remains acute.

Paul Lwali highlighted minors with children as an especially overlooked group, noting that there are no dedicated shelters for minors who are themselves parents. Additionally, shelter beds for youth under eighteen are extremely limited. Friends of Youth operates the only under-eighteen beds on the Eastside, with ten beds serving seven cities. The gaps arise from a combination of data limitations, service constraints, chronic underfunding, and difficult prioritization decisions.

Veronica Rojas Valdez added that language access constitutes another critical area of under-service. Many families speak languages such as Tigrinya, Portuguese, or Spanish, and staff must frequently translate forms and materials to ensure comprehension. Families learning English need time and support in completing applications correctly and confidently, without fear that errors will render their submissions incomplete. Families with fathers as heads of household was identified as facing additional barriers in accessing appropriate services and resources.

Troy Christensen reinforced the statements made by Dietra Clayton regarding LGBTQ clients, particularly trans women. The Commissioners were asked to imagine a trans woman entering a men's shelter with nearly one hundred other residents. Despite staff efforts to ensure safety, it is impossible to control every interaction. Porchlight prioritizes trans clients by offering private rooms rather than congregate placements whenever possible, but even those measures often fall short. Many LGBTQ individuals choose to remain unsheltered or in unsafe situations rather than risk harassment or abuse in a shelter. It is deeply distressing that more suitable options do not exist.

Chair Singh reflected on the tension between operating within what was described as a corporate jungle of budget constraints and the Commission's responsibility to steward taxpayer funds. There is an emotional toll associated with hearing the stories. Chair Singh expressed a personal commitment to ensuring that limited funds are directed to the most effective services. The Commission and staff will continue working with the Council and partner agencies to allocate resources wisely.

Commissioner Gonzalez asked if all of the represented organizations provide legal services, Paul Lwali replied that Friends of Youth has historically provided legal services to clients involved in the child welfare system, particularly unaccompanied minors and undocumented youth, for more than thirty years. The organization has worked with attorneys to support young people as their immigration and dependency cases proceed. However, recent federal executive orders and funding conditions have forced the organization to return certain federal dollars, and that has resulted in the loss of its dedicated legal-services capacity.

Commissioner Gonzalez asked if partnerships with external legal providers such as the Eastside Legal Assistance Program might fill the gap. Paul Lwali responded that all four organizations on the panel pursue partnerships extensively and collaborate with any entity willing to help.

Homelessness and its related legal and social needs are long-term issues, not short-term crises easily resolved by partnerships alone. Structural factors, including insufficient housing, classism, racism, ageism, ableism, and other systemic inequities, continue to drive homelessness. If the structural issues were meaningfully addressed, many of the problems being discussed would be significantly reduced or eliminated. Accepting that reality remains difficult for the broader community.

Dietra Clayton affirming that Sophia Way maintains an active partnership with the Eastside Legal Assistance Program and has also established a developing relationship with the Department of Justice. Many legal issues faced by clients, such as theft, trespassing due to sleeping in vehicles, or other poverty-related offenses, require advocacy that extends beyond what ELAP alone can provide. To address the issues, the organization has engaged the Department of Justice in discussions about trauma-informed practices and the need for basic mental-health education among partners. Case managers have become increasingly adept at navigating legal systems on behalf of clients, including assisting individuals through divorce proceedings, which can significantly affect access to benefits. Although such legal navigation is beyond the ideal scope of staff responsibilities, it has become a practical necessity given current service gaps.

Veronica Rojas Valdez explained that the Archdiocesan Housing Authority houses internal legal and immigration departments, but that those teams sometimes lack adequate capacity. In certain cases, the staff seek assistance from external partners throughout King County to ensure that families receive needed legal support.

Troy Christensen reiterated that Porchlight similarly relies on partnerships because the organization cannot afford to operate its own internal legal navigation team, particularly amid the current financial constraints.

Commissioner Hays asked about tiered housing. While acknowledging that more housing is needed at all levels, the panelists were asked to identify the single category most urgently in need of being addressed in order to close gaps between transitional and permanent housing. Dietra Clayton stated unequivocally that permanent housing with supportive services is the largest unmet need. The scarcity of the housing type forces individuals to remain in shelters for extended periods, sometimes for entire two-year program cycles, because there is no next step for them. Transitional housing, while valuable, lost significant funding in part because it lacked a permanent housing system robust enough to complete the transition. Many clients earn under \$50,000 per year and live with disabilities, making supportive services essential for long-term stability. The unmet need continues to grow as economic pressures intensify.

Troy Christensen agreed and commented that expanded permanent supportive housing would drastically shorten shelter stays and eliminate waiting lists. Affordable housing in general is also urgently needed, particularly for those who do not require intensive services but cannot compete in the current rental market.

Paul Lwali echoed both views and identified permanent supportive housing and affordable housing as the two most critical needs. Other jurisdictions have successfully reduced

homelessness by investing heavily in those housing types. The city of Houston placed 25,000 people into housing. The Built for Zero model being piloted in King County is also worthy of mention having met with success in places such as Denver. The evidence demonstrates that the strategies work when sufficiently funded.

Veronica Rojas Valdez added that permanent supportive housing is essential, but it must be paired with adequate staffing, particularly case management or engagement support available after 3:00 p.m. when many services currently taper off.

Andrew Ndayambaje thanked the panelists for their participation.

10. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Singh reminded Commissioners that the final Commission meeting of the year would be held on Monday, December 1.

Chair Singh adjourned the meeting at 7:57 p.m.