Mayor Wilson Remarks

Thank you for having me here today. Thanks to Jon [Scholes] for that gracious introduction.

Before I get into my remarks, I want to offer my appreciation to Community Solutions' President Rosanne Haggerty. Ms. Haggerty is credited with ending unsheltered homelessness in Times Square in the late 90s, winning a MacArthur award for this historic accomplishment and the strategy behind it. We are still learning from that success today.

Thank you to Community Solutions for this event and for inviting me to speak. I also want to thank members of the Seattle City Council and the Downtown Seattle Association for their partnership in the efforts I'm going to discuss today. These remarks are informed by a highly effective partnership that has formed in recent years between the Downtown Seattle Association and their ambassadors, business associations in other neighborhoods, and several key community organizations – you know who you are - who are committed to change.

It's the fall.

The leaves are changing color, to bright hues of red and orange. In some of the mountains around Puget Sound, whole forests are turning from green to yellow. Seasons change.

Today, I want to share with you some major changes that we're making in the City of Seattle, in collaboration with many of the people in this room today.

For years, mayors and their teams have come and gone. But the moral outrage of homelessness in one of the wealthiest cities in the richest country in the world has only worsened. In the four years before I took office, unsheltered homelessness increased by over 50%.

This is unacceptable.

On any given night, thousands of men, women, and children in this city have no place to call home. Well over half don't even have the benefit of a shelter roof. They sleep in cars, in tents beneath overpasses, or on the cold concrete of downtown streets. And let us be clear: homelessness is not a natural occurrence. It is a policy failure.

We see evidence of this across our city, but especially in vulnerable neighborhoods like Little Saigon, where Vietnamese refugees began settling in 1970s.

We see it in our Chinatown/International District, where Donnie Chin was born and led community patrols to look out for his neighbors. We see it in our historic downtown. We see this on our sidewalks and in our parks - where our kids should be playing - throughout Ballard, Ravenna, Greenlake, Capitol Hill, Beacon Hill, Rainier Valley, West Seattle, and more.

This isn't just a problem for the 800,000 people who call Seattle home – it also matters to people who want to visit our city.

"Seattle is Dying," a propagandistic 2019 documentary about homelessness, has been viewed more than 20 million times. More recently, a YouTuber teamed up with one of our local social media personalities to showcase the drug use and street disorder in Little Saigon. In just the past two months, 10 million people have watched that video.

Across America and beyond our borders, Seattle and some peer cities are perceived by millions of people to be frightening and chaotic places.

Those of us who live here know that the actual picture is more nuanced. Crime is down across almost every metric, and many of our neighborhoods bustle with activity.

But there is also a painful reality that is captured in these videos. And we can decry the bad-faith sensationalism and voyeurism, and the motivations of those who amplify and bend these images to their own purposes, while also recognizing that this is a problem. And it's not just a problem for tourism. It is a much bigger problem.

It's a problem for all of us who care about progress and democracy and humanity. Because if we let progressive cities be painted as bastions of disorder and unaddressed human suffering, if we can't effectively combat this both narratively and in fact, then we're driving people into the arms of the extreme right. We're driving them toward reactionary and hate-fueled politics, and toward punitive solutions that don't actually work.

Last year, shortly before I decided to run for mayor, I wrote an article called "Where the Left Went Wrong on Homelessness." I wrote about how progressives get it wrong when we trivialize what people see and experience every day when they walk around our city. I wrote about a "habit of deflection on the left" that makes it sound like we are in denial.

Instead, I argued, we need to acknowledge what people see with their own eyes, and offer real solutions. I pointed to local examples: The JustCARE program that was pioneered in Seattle during the pandemic, and our state's Encampment Resolution Program, which had both demonstrated remarkable success navigating chronically homeless individuals from

encampments into shelter with services. This approach will be familiar to many in this room, because it is essentially the Community Solutions/Built to Zero framework. We know what works. We simply need the political will to bring the solution to scale.

That belief is a significant part of what motivated my run for office last year. Seattle declared homelessness a state of emergency back in 2015; the crisis has only deepened. My predecessor's administration moved extraordinary numbers of people from place to place without meaningful offers of shelter and services. Those poor outcomes fostered cynicism. I believed we had to do better.

That's why, when I stepped into the mayor's office, my first priority was to build a lot more shelter, fast. And not just any shelter, but shelter that can accommodate people who need intense support to get back on their feet. I brought together our city departments and tasked them with figuring out how to accelerate the process of identifying and standing up new sites. And they did. I'm proud that by the end of this year we will have opened over 400 new units of shelter, with a total of nearly 1000 coming online by the end of next year, pending council's approval of the funds in my proposed budget.

We know that shelter and services are only step one. People need pathways from shelter into permanent housing. More broadly, we must tackle the ever-rising housing costs that driving homelessness in the first place – as well as punishing renters and would-be homeowners.

I'm all-in on affordable and abundant housing. We're hard at work on zoning and permit reform, and working with our Office of Housing and new Social Housing Developer to stabilize and expand our affordable housing sector.

We all know it's a challenging time, as so many macroeconomic forces and the actions of the federal government are making it very expensive and difficult to build housing. And, like other communities around the country, we are grappling with the very real possibility of losing federal funding for permanent supportive housing.

Precisely because of these headwinds, we have a duty to use our resources carefully and efficiently to achieve maximum impact. I'm not interested in making excuses or kicking the can down the road.

So let me put in plain terms what we will do: We are scaling up our success from this summer's World Cup in one downtown neighborhood, to other parts of Seattle. We are doing this within existing resources, by marrying my shelter acceleration initiative with this focused, proven strategy informed by Community Solutions.

Here's what we've accomplished already with this approach: In June, weeks before the first World Cup match when Belgium drew 1-1 with Egypt at Lumen Field in front of 66,000 fans, the "Streets to Housing" pilot program was launched in Pioneer Square with the City's support. This was an effort led by DSA and a coalition of service organizations, using the Community Solutions framework. The partners shared data, followed individuals from outreach to successful placement in shelter or housing, and monitored what happened thereafter. It was a success that our city can be proud of: 70 out of 80 people were placed into shelter and housing – a nearly 90 percent placement success rate. Only three people declined all services. 47 percent of those individuals had been homeless for more than 3 years, 77 percent suffered from addiction or mental illness, and 16 percent were seniors.

The partners used a By-Name list, identifying every individual living unsheltered in that area and offering wrap-around support. Instead of repeatedly referring people between disconnected parts of the homelessness response system, this program was efficient and highly centralized – zeroing in on specific barriers that specific people faced and connecting them to the appropriate resource. And it was successful in part because of space available at Bayside, the first major new site in my shelter acceleration initiative, which opened in June.

This same framework was also used successfully by the Washington State Department of Transportation to resolve more than 40 large encampments in Seattle from 2022-2025, with *a 95% placement rate* into shelter and housing. That was the Encampment Resolution Program I mentioned earlier.

Now, we will scale this success. That means working with more neighborhoods across Seattle to proactively develop By-Name lists that can be used in real time by the City and our partners. It means prioritizing shelter placements for those individuals who are having the greatest impact on public space. And it means smart service-matching so that we are prepared to meet complicated needs and set people up for stability and success.

The bottom line is this. Our public parks and public sidewalks belong to the public: they should be kept open and usable for their intended purposes. Scaling up this approach is how we can meet this reasonable expectation, without merely sweeping human beings around our city from one block to the next.

Helping the people currently living in those spaces will help us, in turn, re-activate those spaces for the public and local businesses.

We will go as fast as we can and I want to see steady, visible improvements. The $37 million for shelter expansion in my budget proposal – a budget that, I am proud to say, closes the $175 million deficit I inherited - will be crucial to this effort.

While this approach is not entirely new to Seattle, what is new is the depth of the partnerships now being brought to bear, and the commitment to scaling up. It is inspiring to me to know that the Community Solutions framework underpinning this model has been shown to work in so many of your communities, in cities across the country such as Atlanta, Charlotte, Anchorage, Kansas City, Houston, and Denver. In Denver, a New York Times analysis published last week showed their unsheltered population is down *64% in three years*.

Make no mistake: That is the kind of striking progress that we are going to make here in the Emerald City.

Change is in the air - let's enjoy the changing seasons.

Thank you.