A small group of concerned individuals\(^1\) met over the fall and winter to craft the invitation for the first Olympia Leadership Summit on Homelessness. The opening lines of the invitation read,

*It’s time to have a different conversation about homelessness in Olympia, one that acknowledges the complex nature of the issues and seeks to build an atmosphere of mutual understanding, learning and innovation. One that helps us work better together as we address these challenges in our community. One that shapes next steps in a powerful way.*

In clarifying the need and purpose of the summit, this group recognized that our community has a lot to be proud of with respect to our response to the homelessness issue. They understood that we have a strong contingency of leaders and people who care — from business, philanthropy, social service, and faith communities. We have good strategies, good work, and good intentions, yet it seems we’re often at odds, spinning our wheels or lost in the messiness of the issue.

During the day and a half long summit over 40 people representing service providers, law enforcement, downtown business owners, developers, elected officials, funders and individuals formerly experiencing homelessness engaged deeply around the question,

*“How can our community respond to the homelessness issue in a healthy, compassionate way that will transform the status quo and lead to wise actions?”*

**Evening 1: Mapping the Landscape and What’s Possible.**

During the first evening of the summit, participants met in a series of small group table conversations using The World Café process. The table groups focused on the following questions:

1. What’s happening in our community around the issue of homelessness that captures your attention and where are the spaces of greatest possibility or innovation?
2. What’s going on that’s important (the key insights) and especially focusing on the places of possibility? What’s important in the background?
3. Where do we as a community get stuck that need a different kind of leadership or innovation?

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Circle: Principles of being and working together that help!

One of our goals was to have a different kind of conversation, one that invites innovation, learning, transformative action. On the second, full day of the summit, participants identified the following principles of how we want to work together today and going forward. These will be edited into principles we could read at the start of future meetings.

- **Listen to understand, not to respond**
- **Be willing to ask courageous questions** without fear of being shut down or fear of retribution. Be willing to be wrong!
- **Stay present and accept what “is”**
- **Show respect even when it’s hard**
- **Acknowledge when our fears are paper tigers**
- **Work together**: We have duplication of services and different sandboxes in the same playground
- **Acknowledge the personal as well as the professional and political**
- **Keep storytelling/info sharing relevant and succinct**
- **Create safe comfort zone – a welcoming culture**
- **Respect the speaker and the listener**
- **“Allowing” honesty, trust and authenticity – try to temper our “agendas”**
• Assume Best intentions
• Share your truth
• Everyone belongs
• “Yes AND” verses “Yeah, but”
• Honest appraisal of the problem
• Find common points of agreement
• Find where you agree
• Confront differences – honestly and openly
• Avoid passive aggressive end runs
• Avoid Scapegoating

Additions: From morning conversations:
• Acceptance and understanding is a two-way street – create bridges and reciprocity.
• We recognize scarcity can breed contempt – and choose to step back from that dynamic
• **Really imagine the community we want to live in** – be proud of who we are
• We want success for our businesses and positive solutions that build a vibrant downtown culture.

**Working with the Complexity of Homelessness - Group Exercise: The Cynefin Framework**

Next the group learned about a model called the *Cynefin Framework*. The framework is helpful in clarifying the difference between simple, complicated, complex and chaotic challenges and that offers new approaches to communication, leadership, decision-making, and policy-making, in complex social environments such as the homelessness issue.

Cynefin framework outlines five domains of decision making based on the type of problem you are confronting. Simple and Complicated problems are ordered and knowable, and with knowledge and analysis, these can be solved. Typically some level of simple planning doing or more expert engineering will solve these problems. Complex and Chaotic problems are characterized by high levels of unknown and emergent factors and require a more emergent approach to addressing them, using prototypes, experiments or novel ideas. Finally, Disordered problems seem to defy our ability to define and understand them and simply need a set of agreements on what they are.

During a highly engaging exercise participants were asked to identify two things that are already happening now in community on BLUE slips of paper, and one thing that is needed on RED slips of paper and then to place them into one of four quadrants pertaining to simple, complicated, complex and chaotic contexts.

Responses in the *Cynefin* exercise were transcribed by quadrant (see appendix). Responses were then classified across 16 distinct Keywords or Themes (identified and defined below). There were a total of 120 classifications made.

For purposes of analysis, responses placed on the boundaries between Complicated/Complex and Complex/Chaotic were counted as Complex. Two responses located in the “Chaotic” area were, for this analysis, included in the “Complex” category.

Results below are based on frequency of themes among BLUE and RED responses, and then broken out across the Simple, Complicated, and Complex dimensions.
FINDINGS

Based on frequency, greatest attention and awareness overall was focused on shelter, the range of housing solutions and coordination.

Recognition of “things happening now in community” (BLUE) revolved around shelter, housing and related homeless services.

Identification of “Things Needed” in the community (RED) revolved around coordination, addressing relationships, personal responsibility & self-improvement, and enhanced shelter and housing solutions.

There was a strong tendency to locate current efforts and initiatives (BLUE) in the Simple and Complicated dimensions, while locating “Things Needed” (RED) in the Complex area. This showed how some things that were originally complex are now assets in the community and can grow.

The distribution of key terms and themes followed a similar pattern. In the Simple and Complicated quadrants, participants located a wide range of entries in line with perceived existing services, housing and shelter resources for the range of populations experiencing homelessness. In the Complex quadrant, themes were more strongly aligned with perceived or desired need for coordination, development of community relationships, a focus on personal responsibility, and mental health resources, along with expanded or improved direct services for shelter and housing.

There was a notable lack of direct reference to downtown (Olympia), government roles, or funding systems, perhaps because these areas are already widely recognized as central to any solution. On the other hand, the lack of direct reference may also suggest the need to encourage deeper discussion on these topics.

FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES by Keyword or Theme
Creating a Culture of Innovation and Collaboration

Our afternoon session began with an innovation exercise called Trokia Consulting (see http://liberatingstructures.com). Each person worked on a solution—within their own power and resources—to in someway transform our response to homelessness. After a few minutes to work individually on their solutions—trails joined for swift 5 minute consulting sessions. The individual working on their idea presented for 1 minute then turned their back and their consulting team—“talked behind their back”—to imagine what is possible and how to move forward.

Small Group Working Session

The majority of the second half of the day was spend in small group working sessions using Open Space process to set up the sessions. We focused on questions, challenges or issues that were named as important to move the homelessness conversation forward. The following is a summary of the different topics discussed.

**Pro Social Activities (Social Enterprise – Micro cottage industry):** We would like to create a social enterprise, a cottage industry to connect and support individuals in the community seeking services to individuals seeking a path to work. This could take the form of a non-profit service role or a volunteer path. It would include mentoring and opportunities in the community based on an individual’s desire/abilities to contribute and willingness to make a path forward.

Potential partnerships could include SPSCC, Evergreen, SMU, Pacific Mountain Workforce Development, Reid Bates/Express Personnel, Work Source, Social Services, E4E, Arbutus, and the EDC.

Some models identified include the Millionaire’s Club, Labor Ready, Xerox call center, Art Therapy/open studio concept. The group wants to find existing models.
Aligning Funding and Planning in the County in a Better Way: Right now we are in competition with each other for scarce funds without an integrated plane. There is some existing infrastructure such as our community wide effort of Thurston Thrives. Housing is one of the hubs. We want to align with funding with community priorities – County-wide, government, foundations. We need to learn how to sit together around the table to leverage $ around community priorities and community health. Who is the holder of our community indicators & the map for making it live?

First Steps for Homeless Living with Mental Health Challenges: Some challenges are 1) how to get someone to take their meds, 2) policing (touch points with people with mental health issues) – criminalization of a medical condition, 3) people resistant to services, 4) landlords unwilling to rent, 5) our normal moral codes and values get in our way of understanding life with mental illness 6) How do we measure success (data, HMIS, human response)? Opportunities include: 1) 1-1 relationships are important, 2) design social services programs based on the realities of the environment and with input from affected individuals, 3) create expectations based on reality of their environment, 4) availability of Crisis Clinic type training to a broader group who are in contact with individuals with mental health issues – gain a better understanding of mental health challenges, 5) develop relationship with landlords, 6) value successes as defined by the person we are working with, 7) challenge police mentality around mental illness. Next steps: CYS – Q/A with police department, talk with frequent homeless person, housing first/Shelter First.

Strategies to Connect Business Community and Street Culture (Faith and Meg): Convene facilitated conversations downtown to include street folks and people experiencing homelessness that would be authentic, provide lasting benefits, and ultimately create a new culture. These would begin as a pilot, but be ongoing so would need staff and training. The scale would include 1-on-1, small groups, and larger forums such as picnics (mass communication). Here we would encourage people to talk, share, create music as neighbors – foster a new culture downtown, and build sensitivity. Love and hope would be at the root of it. Build off of the United Way Day of Caring in September intentionally create diverse service teams – neighbor to neighbor (Paul Knox as the lead).

Kiss Principle, “Think Small” (proof of concept): Do it lighter, quicker, cheaper. Make it so failure is not too expensive. Do small prototypes as proof of concept and to create buy-in. See failure as an opportunity to build support, to educate and inform, and to remove fear. Focus on small incremental improvements. This could be a chance to pilot test with less impact (e.g. business mentorships or paid opportunity to learn skills and thrive in that structure; people earning services such as meals, shelter/housing, health care, which leads to self-esteem). “Get your card punched”. This becomes a habit.

Powerful Data: Build stronger HMIS & Data system to map data flow and get a sense of what is going on. Know pressure points: is it due to new people or bottlenecks in the system? Look at performance and help see what is cost effective and what is working. Do multiyear financial planning – allocating a % by stream – look for biggest impact. Make sure we know what people in the street need and survey that actively.

Addressing Root Causes: There are big issues, including power imbalances and income inequality. But it’s not enough to say “it’s too big”. It’s challenging to connect what feeds into the river called homelessness. There are things we are already doing like working to reduce ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and protect and address violence against women. If we want for these upstream issues to go away we need to vividly imagine the world we want to live in – then identify what we can do (create a map) and figure out bold strategies to get there. Take time to know what individuals need.
More $$$ Please: Dig deeper. Work to get the backing of local businesses – if we have business backing it will give it heart and soul needed in public. Find out how Bellingham and Whatcom have done their housing levies. Figure out what is the package that we could sell to voters such as REVITALIZE DOWNTOWN – we need credibility behind it! Incentivize downtown.

Closing circle

During the closing circle of the summit participants had an opportunity to share what they learned, what shifted for them, what they appreciated, or any personal commitments regarding the issue of homelessness. Some of this is captured below.

- We know we want to do a better job (addressing the issue of homelessness). It’s great to have not the usual voices in the room. There is a lot here! As we move forward to what’s next ask for what you need!
- This gathering displays what is needed.
- I feel personal satisfaction – Tired from our work well done, and leaving on a peaceful, neighborly note.
- The spirit of the work is to improve downtown – to live there, work there, come there. Everyone having the basics and sharing the space.
- The summit was valuable in a number of ways: there was a constructive process going on here, we were able to de-polarize the issue, the process started the dialog and shared problem solving.
- I wanted & Paul wanted to show how community conversations could be! Let’s continue! This was helpful and we can do more!
- I didn’t expect to have a personal transformation in the process (and I did)!

What’s next?

Stewardship Circle Followup meeting

The first tangible action that emerged from conversations that took place during the summit is an initiative to begin an honest conversation among the business community and street community. This will be a meeting of 4-5 downtown business owners and 4-5 individuals that are either experiencing homelessness or are potentially on the brink of being homeless who Meg will invite. The meeting will be casual and will be facilitated around a purposeful question along the lines of “how can we encourage healthy economic activity downtown and embrace human diversity at the same time?”

The original callers of the summit met to discuss next steps. This stewardship group reaffirmed their committed to continue to work towards shifting the nature of the conversation around homelessness, creating greater mutual understanding, supporting a laboratory of learning and action that is about responding to homelessness in a way that leads to a more health economy and a more healthy community.

This may take the form of regularly scheduled gatherings focused around key themes that emerged from the summit or any places in the community that need a new kind of leadership. Other ideas that were discusses include another follow-up leadership 6 months hence to focused on the next important conversations that need to happen in the community.
APPENDIX

Full transcripts of the responses from the Cynefin Exercise

BLUE = “Things happening now in community”
RED = “Things Needed in Community”

“SIMPLE” QUADRANT
“Work – accountability supportive”
Many organizations working together on helping but may not be coordinating with each other (Blue/Red)
Basic services – meals, showers, laundry, counseling, clothing, toiletries
Participating now
Attending this summit
Looking at problem
Accounting for $ to contractors – low-income housing of all types
$ from City housing program
Fostering lasting, meaningful relationships w/ street community
Talking to people on street
Addressing safety, Mental health & social development of people who are homeless, at risk and victims of crime
Ambassador program rocks!
Ambassador & youth overnight shelter
Operate low barrier clothing bank
Availability of warm meals
My first involvement – trying to come to grips
Street outreach – organizing to fill gaps
Youth overnight shelter
Building seven affordable supportive housing units for families in downtown Olympia
Help one person change

Boundary Between Simple & Complicated
Furthering the mission of Salvation Army helping those needing a hand up

“COMPLICATED” QUADRANT
Help people to be part of the solution – data and systems analysis understand policies/best practices we can apply here
Providing a program shelter for single men/women (Salv. Army)
Providing social service support to help prevent homelessness (Salv. Army)
Providing compassionate, individualized direct services to students and families experiencing homelessness (FSC)
Help prepare people to be part of the solution
RRH/PSH
Coordinated homeless services (in process)
Engaged with RRH (need more)
Deep sophisticated data analysis (demographics & volume, performance, cost-impact, financial)
Permanent Supportive Housing (need more)
Youth Shelter / Youth services
Providing age-appropriate, gender-inclusive shelter for youth/young adults
"Emergency” and year-round shelter for single adults
Larger-scale Transitional Housing
Studying issues to build relationships
“Contract millions to provide housing, TX, support housing/supervision for chemically ill people”
Street outreach – opening the People’s House
How to pool resources to alleviate competition
Parenting education
Sheltering some #s of individuals and families (need more)
Smith Building
Home projects (Drexel II)
Street outreach / triage & opening The People’s House
Serving on issue-related committees & boards and engaging the cause

Boundary Between Complicated & Complex
Shelter/Housing & services for mentally ill persons
Salvation Army: expand services to current population, improve service delivery, coordinate better with others
Experimenting to goal-oriented non-institutional shelter for single men & women
“Addressing root causes of violence, bias and homelessness-- advocacy, education and engagement”

“COMPLEX” QUADRANT
Supportive housing for chronically homeless (need multi-services)
Tunheim/Roberts group (Law & Social Services & Economic)
PSH with mental health & recovery services
$ for mental health / develop PSH
Help support integration of comprehensive efforts to improved community health / Thurston Thrives
Enough Resources
Improve downtown atmosphere
Work harder & smarter to align shelter with housing
Deepen our focus/understanding on prevention related to root causes = attitudes, values norms
Drug & Alcohol recovery
Thurston Thrives
Shelter beds & funds for permanent housing
Mental health care for people who are homeless
Aggressive outreach to engage homeless people toward positive steps
The People’s House
The People’s House / Holly Motel / Drexel II
No coordination between providers, duplication of services
Coordination of all services
Focused resources
Consolidating and maximizing our resources
How to foster community responsibility which will cut across homeless vs. simple bad behavior
Evaluate needs thru lens of intersectionality, not just thru lens of privilege
Put energy into rethinking structures or systems, government/governance
Provide progressive on-the-street outreach to understand/engage homeless people toward positive steps

Boundary Between Complex & Chaotic
Recovery focus for entire community
Acceptance of truly diverse community
Talk to people (engaging deeply) with credibility about what they need and hope for
Bring affected people to table
Conversation/agreement between business owners and those hanging out on streets (homeless or not)
Talk to people we are talking about about what they need & hope for
Establish a comprehensive working plan to go forward in Olympia and County as a whole

“CHAODIC”
Transform mental health system
Humans helping humans, not politics, not money, not fears, not Data
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