SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL
CENTRAL STAFF

December 11, 2020

M E M O R A N D U M

To: Select Committee on Homelessness Strategies and Investments

From: Jeff Simms, Analyst

Subject: Background Information on Chronic Homelessness and Permanent Supportive Housing in the Seattle Area

On December 15, 2020. the Select Committee on Homelessness Strategies and Investments will consider and discuss Council Bill (CB) 119975, which would amend the Land Use Code to remove barriers to the development of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). This memo provides background information on chronic homelessness in King County and the estimated need for more PSH to support the Committee's consideration of this legislation.
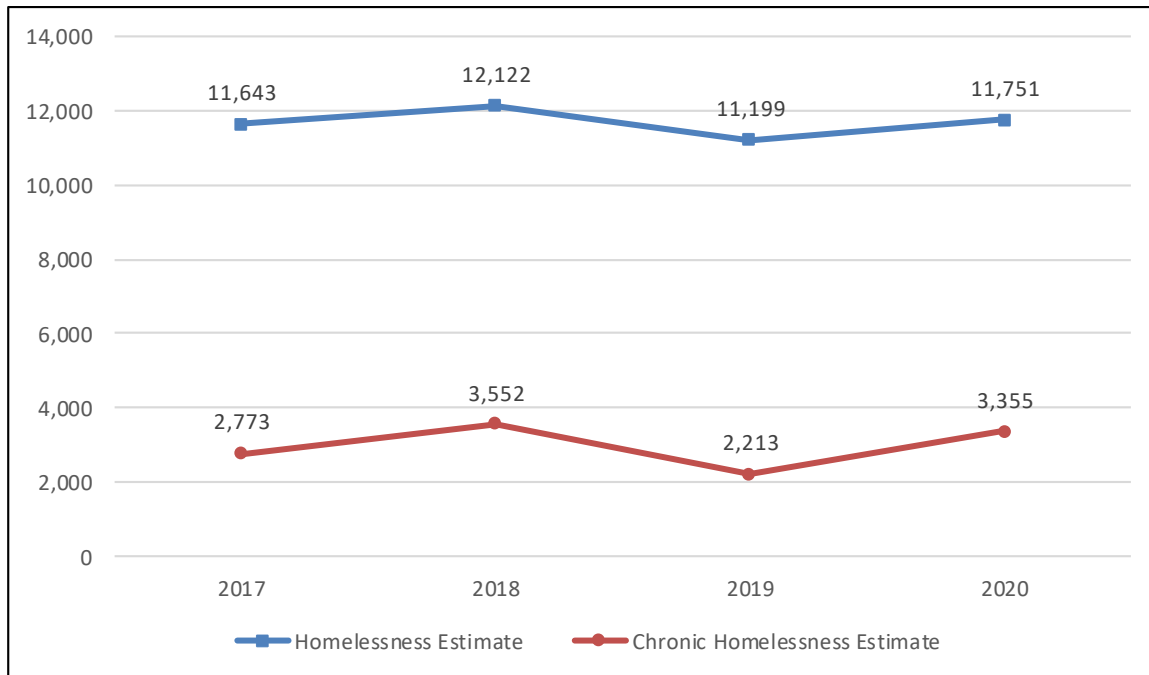
Background

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines chronic homelessness as an individual or family who is homeless and resides in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter, and who has been homeless and residing in such a place for at least 1 year or on at least four separate occasions in the last 3 years. To qualify as chronically homeless, the individual must also have a disabling condition, such as serious mental illness, substance use disorder, or physical disability. Research has documented the effectiveness of PSH, which consists of affordable housing combined with access to flexible and individualizes services (full definition available in the Growth Management Act), for people experiencing chronic homelessness.

Population Estimates

HUD requires jurisdictions across the country to report the number of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness over the last ten days of January each year. This includes a street count of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and is referred to as the point-in-time (PIT) count. The latest PIT count for King County estimates 11,751 people experienced homelessness across King County in late January 2020, though all PIT counts are widely regarded as underestimates. Using a follow-up survey, additional information is obtained from a representative sample to estimate the characteristics of the people identified in the PIT count. This resulted in an estimate of 3,355 people experiencing chronic homelessness in King County in 2020 (see Chart 1). This was an increase from the 2019 estimate but in line with estimates from prior years.

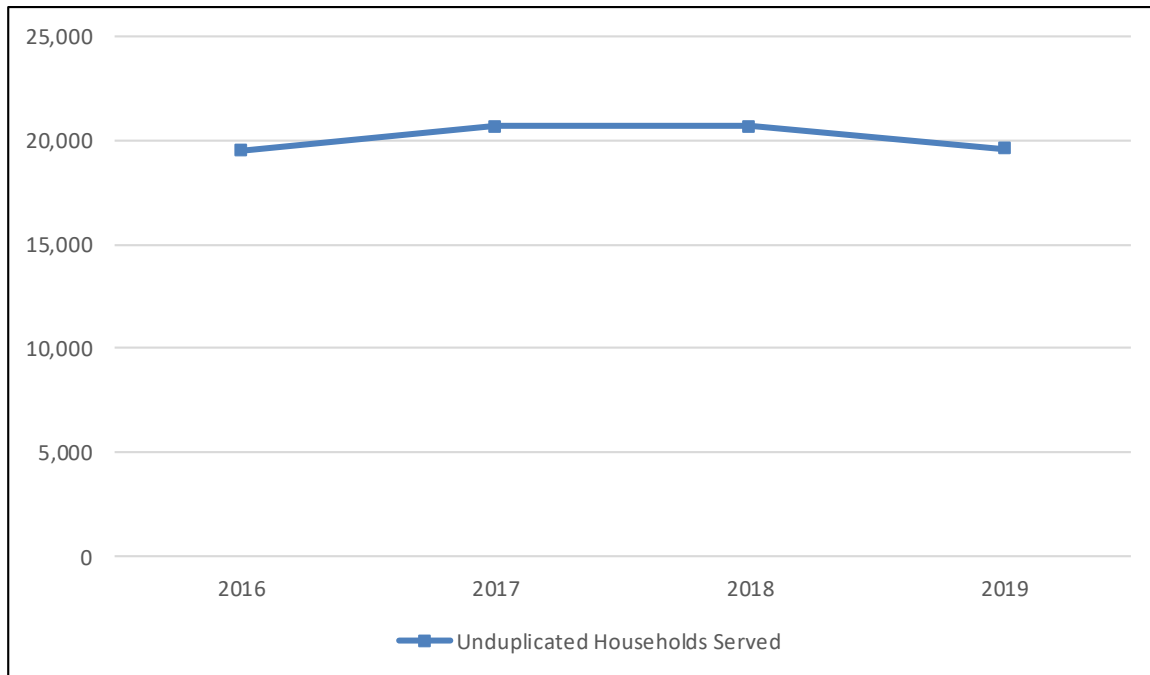*Chart 1: Point in Time Estimates of Homelessness in King County*

As noted above, the estimate of 3,355 people experiencing chronic homelessness is considered an underestimate, but no other data is available to estimate the size of this population. Over the course of a year, the homelessness response system interacts with approximately 20,000 people (see Chart 2), many experiencing homelessness for the first time, but full data on all the people served, including health conditions, is not available. However, other data can inform the potential scale of chronic homelessness in King County (see Table 1). For example, the PIT count estimates that 7,520 individuals have experienced homelessness for a year or more, which is one consideration in determining when a person experiences chronic homelessness.

Table 1: Estimates of Homelessness and Related Services in King County

Estimated Amount	Latest Estimate
Chronic Homelessness, Point in Time Estimate (2020)	3,355 individuals
Permanent Supportive Housing in King County (June 30, 2020)	5,475 units
Homeless for One Year or More, Point in Time Estimate (2020)	7,520 individuals
Homelessness in King County, Point in Time Estimate (2020)	11,751 individuals
People Served by System During Year, Unduplicated (2019)	19,600 households

Chart 2: Entries into the Homeless Response System in King County

Need for Additional PSH

Seattle and King County currently support 5,475 units of PSH, and Seattle has an additional 1,027 units under development. Any vacancies in these units are typically only for a short period of time while a new resident is identified from the coordinated entry system. Assuming that PSH is the best service intervention for people experiencing chronic homelessness, King County requires at least 2,328 additional units of PSH.

It is likely that 2,328 units is an underestimate of the shortfall in PSH. Over the course of a year, the homelessness system serves many more people than are captured at any point in time. In addition, in the most recent PIT count, 7,520 individuals (64 percent of people experiencing homelessness) report they have experienced homelessness for at least one year. If the rate that disabling conditions, including serious mental illness and substance use disorder, are underreported by that group, then the estimated number of people experiencing chronic homelessness, and potentially requiring PSH, would be larger. However, the 29 percent of people experiencing homelessness in King County who experience chronic homelessness is already substantially higher than the national average of 17 percent (based on the nationwide 2019 PIT count data). As such, the scale of under reporting of disabling conditions may be limited.

Next Steps

Opportunities to examine the unmet need for PSH and consider estimates from outside groups will continue. For example, updates are anticipated in 2021 from the Office of Housing and the Human Services Department on their investments and operations. The Third Door Coalition, a group of business leaders, service providers, and researchers that advocates for investing in PSH, provided the policy recommendations that underpin CB 119975, which will be discussed at the Select Committee's meeting on December 15. Third Door estimates 6,500 additional units are necessary, though their methodology for that estimate has not been shared. The Committee could engage with Third Door or other stakeholders to understand their estimates for unmet need. Finally, the King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) is expected to commence operations in 2021, and the five-year plan for the KCRHA is expected to recommend investments and services to respond to homelessness in King County.

cc: Dan Eder, Interim Executive Director
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