Dear Seattle City Councilmembers and Mayor Durkan:

This spring, our city has an opportunity to make great strides in combatting the housing and homelessness emergency.

The 2017 Point in Time Count found 11,643 people experiencing homelessness, with 5,485 sleeping unsheltered. Past counts suggest that homelessness rose by 30% in the previous five years, with the unsheltered population more than doubling. This crisis disproportionately impacts marginalized communities; for example, 29% of people experiencing homelessness in King County identified as Black or African American, compared with only 6% of the general population; and 28% of unaccompanied homeless youth and young adults identified as LGBTQ.

Amidst all the complexity of the homelessness crisis lies one incontrovertible fact: homes affordable to people and families with low incomes are in severely short supply.

HUD estimates that, conservatively, 22,800 Seattle renter households making 0-30% of Area Median Income are *severely cost-burdened*, paying over half their income in rent and utilities. In 2016 the Housing Development Consortium estimated that Seattle’s ‘affordable housing gap’ for this lowest income bracket was 17,161 units, with 27,481 units needed by 2030. Only 6,000 of these units are on the horizon in the next ten years. With such a shortage, it is unsurprising that people are entering homelessness faster than those experiencing homelessness are able to find stable, permanent, affordable housing.

Over the past ten years, King County lost around 35,000 units of housing affordable to households below median income. The Puget Sound Regional Council projects that by 2050 our region’s population will grow by another 1.8 million people, many of them higher-paid tech sector workers. This does not bode well for closing the affordable housing gap without public investment at a grand scale.

Add to this a homeless shelter and services system that is underfunded and overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis, with thousands more people sleeping unsheltered than there are beds available. In Seattle alone it will take new revenue of many hundreds of millions of dollars per year to close the housing gap, and to fund the shelter and services that are needed to keep people safe and stable until they are able to access housing.

We ask that you not let the magnitude of this problem deter you from facing it squarely, or lead you to search for silver bullets that promise a cheap solution. Instead, let it be a spur for bold action that gets as close to the scale of the crisis as possible.

It is the function and responsibility of government to step up and respond to crises produced by the larger economic and social forces that shape our world, even and especially when that challenge seems daunting and overwhelming. Although we can and must continue to push for action at the state and federal levels, we cannot wait or rely on this. The quality of life in our City ten years from now depends what the adequacy of our response today.

Homelessness is a regional issue, and we look forward to seeing what proposals emerge from “One Table”. Given the scale of the problem, however, it is inevitable that this regional effort will still leave much to be done. Seattle’s especially severe affordable housing gap calls for large-scale action and investment at the city level.

We, the undersigned, urge you to make 2018 a turning point, the year that homelessness in our city and region began to diminish. We thank the City Council for its unanimous commitment, expressed in Resolution 31782, to finding new *progressive* revenue to tackle this crisis.

We urge you to find $150 million per year in new progressive revenue, including an Employee Hours Tax or similar tax on Seattle’s largest businesses. We recommend the following priorities for the use of this funding:

* Housing, housing, housing. The great bulk of this revenue should be bonded against to build thousands of new units of deeply affordable housing as rapidly as possible. Deep rental subsidies and other approaches that make use of existing housing stock should also be used; however, it should be kept in mind that there is also a housing shortage at higher income ranges, so relying too much on such strategies risks simply shifting the problem.
* Restore funding for hygiene centers, day centers, women’s shelters and services, low-cost shelters operated in partnership with faith communities, and transitional housing programs that lost funding through last year’s Homeless Investments RFP. Re-examine the metrics that led to these cuts, and recognize that a wide range of shelter types and services is required to accommodate the diverse needs and situations of people experiencing homelessness.
* Address the need for safe parking and services for people living in vehicles. Over 40% of Seattle’s unsheltered homeless population sleeps in vehicles, yet there are almost no programs designed with their needs in mind; instead vehicles are routinely ticketed and towed, leaving their occupants even more vulnerable.
* Fund strategies that address the additional barriers to housing faced by people with criminal records and active drug users. Support community-based alternatives to prosecution and incarceration and safe-consumption sites, which improve outcomes for individuals who are at high risk of homelessness.
* Make provision for adequate wages and benefits for the workers who provide homelessness services, to recruit and retain the skilled workforce to do this crucial work. Low wages lead to high stress and rapid turnover that make it difficult to establish trusting relationships with clients.

Thank you for your commitment to our city and the well-being of all of its residents, especially those who have been excluded by poverty and oppression from reaping the advantages of the growing wealth that surrounds us.

Sincerely,