



Dear Friends and Neighbors,

Recently, the Council took a vote on a measure to study the behavioral health system (formerly called "mental health") in Pierce County. The appropriate term is behavioral health, because it encompasses both mental health issues as well as chemical dependency. More and more evidence shows that substance abuse is often a symptom of a mental illness.

Over the past several years I've been meeting with folks involved with behavioral health in our community to educate myself about what we're doing and – perhaps more importantly – what we're not doing. One thing I learned is that the system is enormous and often convoluted, and if you're not involved with it on a day-to-day basis it becomes easy to misunderstand and dismiss. However, even after endless hours of conversation with stakeholders, I still don't fully grasp the extent of the needs and resources of our community.

That's one of the main reasons why Councilmember Derek Young and I proposed R2015-91. It's clear that we need to conduct a comprehensive and thorough evaluation of where service gaps exist, what their impact on county services are, where investments should be made, and what success should look like.

Throughout the process, we've heard testimony from the public, from the Sheriff's Department, from the Pierce County Jail, from judges, and from the health care providers who are doing their best to handle the crisis. They note that, in addition to the impact on health care resources, our citizens with unserved behavioral health issues are also causing a financial drain on our jail and social services as well.

Much has been made of the question: Whose responsibility is it to care for the mentally ill? Is it the state's? The county's? The fact is that it is all of our responsibility to provide for these individuals. We should be taking on this task with open arms rather than debating about who is or isn't doing their job.

Our proposal doesn't even go so far as to suggest solutions to these problems or how to pay for them. It is merely a study, meant to frame the conversation so all sides know the full scope and dimensions of the issue. Even if the cost factor were a part of the conversation, Performance Audit Committee staff have advised me that a study like this would cost somewhere around \$50,000...certainly a reasonable sum for the county without requiring new revenue.

\$50,000 is all it would cost to do a countywide needs assessment, gap analysis and program review so we can better serve those in our community who are least able to take care of themselves. Who but government should be doing that?

Unfortunately, the measure was defeated by the council majority.

As Councilmember Young stated in a release shortly after the vote, I'm disappointed that we continue to fail the citizens we represent, who want us to do something to prevent people from further suffering. This is an unfortunate turn of events, but I refuse to accept 'no' as the final answer. We'll just have to find another way.

One of those ways could be a proposal that includes language more directly addressing the Council's intent. For example, rather than specifying which committee would oversee the study perhaps the measure could simply state that the Council intends to initiate the process or begin preliminary work. I'm examining this and other options, because this issue is too important to simply let go.

As I continue to try and find bipartisan solutions, I'd like to hear your thoughts and opinions on the subject as well. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions, comments or concerns regarding this or any other County issue. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,



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