



Disability Rights

WASHINGTON

Washington's protection and advocacy system

April 9, 2019

Eric Johnson
KOMO News
140 4th Ave. N., Suite 370
Seattle, WA 98109
Sent via mail and email

Re: Disability Rights Washington's Response to "Seattle is Dying"

Dear Eric Johnson and KOMO News,

Disability Rights Washington has appreciated previous efforts by KOMO to report thoughtfully and fairly about certain injustices faced by people with disabilities in our region. This is why we are deeply discouraged and perplexed by KOMO's choice to produce and air its sensationalized, inaccurate, and exploitative special report about Seattle's opioid and homelessness crises, "Seattle is Dying." In [response](#) to heaps of criticism about "Seattle is Dying," Eric Johnson claims that the show should be viewed in the context of his two previous specials, "There But For the Grace of God..." and "Demon at the Door." Because of our previous positive experience with KOMO, we gave you the benefit of the doubt and watched the other two specials to see if "Seattle is Dying" is somehow less offensive in context.

Upon review, "There But For the Grace of God..." and "Demon at the Door" generally treated individuals experiencing homelessness and addiction with humanity and dignity, in stark contrast to "Seattle is Dying." Those specials also featured different viewpoints, including an expert in addiction, and possible roads to solutions like Snohomish County's practice of sending social workers out with police and Vancouver's use of safe injection sites. "Seattle is Dying," on the other hand, is rife with voyeuristic footage of Seattleites struggling on city streets, shoddy data analysis, and hastily proposed solutions to the opioid crisis. It appears that KOMO had the ability to produce a more balanced and informative piece, but chose not to do so with "Seattle is Dying" – effectively undoing any work it had started with the first two specials.

Based on Disability Rights Washington's decades of working with people with disabilities, including those with substance use disorders, the "solutions" to Seattle's opioid crisis that are laid out in "Seattle is Dying" are untenable and ill-informed. We ask KOMO to engage in real journalism. Talk to local experts and find out what is happening in Seattle to fight the opioid epidemic, why so many people with disabilities are living on the street, what the barriers are to accessing healthcare and housing, and what real steps we, as a community, can take to help our neighbors in need.

Disability Rights Washington's Amplifying Voices of Inmates with Disabilities (AVID) Program works extensively with people confined in Washington's jails and prisons. As the Protection and Advocacy System for the State of Washington, we have the federal authority to go into prisons and jails to observe the conditions of people with disabilities where they live and receive services. Using this authority, AVID has visited every county jail and prison in this state. During these visits, we talk to people about their struggles. Many of the individuals who access AVID's services enter jail homeless and then leave jail homeless. AVID also regularly hears from housed individuals who become at risk of losing their housing by the time they are released because they missed a month's rent, a few too many days of work, or a crucial social services appointment while inside. We also talk to staff and administrators about barriers to improving these systems. When we see problems, we take action – from informal negotiations to litigation.

In "Seattle is Dying," Johnson's main solutions to the opioid crisis appear to be "enforcement" and "intervention." In terms of enforcement, Johnson laments the lack of power police officers have and suggests that being tougher on crime will help end the opioid epidemic. However, this country has already tried the "lock 'em up" approach and it failed miserably. Disability Rights Washington recently convened multiple stakeholder meetings and talked to over 300 people with personal or professional experience with the criminal legal system, including law enforcement officers and agencies, jail administrators and staff, judges, prosecutors, public defenders, advocates, housing providers, mental health professionals, and individuals who enter the jail health systems and their families. In the dozens of meetings we held in Seattle and across the state, the unanimous push from every individual person and professional group represented was that we need more housing and community treatment, not more arrests.

Not only does "Seattle is Dying" blatantly ignore the broad consensus of all of the informed professionals we met with who stated that housing and early, intensive, community-based treatment is the answer, the special report also does not even mention the significant role institutional racism, classism, sanism, and other forms of discrimination play in the disparate impact on people with less privilege in our community. King County's homeless population is [disproportionately black and brown, disabled, military veterans, queer, and trans](#). Many of them are or were foster youth. Our prison system's population already over represents these groups, and KOMO's special report promotes incarcerating those groups even more. [Even the architects of tough-on-crime laws are regretting their involvement in creating mass incarceration in this country](#). This is not the time to move backwards.

The "intervention" Johnson proposes appears to be forced inpatient drug treatment, followed by connection to community resources upon release. As support for this proposal, Johnson travels all the way to Rhode Island to look at that state's Department of Corrections Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) program. In his coverage of the Rhode Island program, Johnson presents MAT as if it is a novel idea from the east coast. He spends no time talking to

some of the jails and [prisons](#) in Washington that already provide MAT. Although Washington still has a ways to go to [improve](#) access to MAT in prisons and jails, there is local work being done and good journalism would have explored that work. Few would disagree that a well-funded and thoughtfully integrated behavioral health system, including access to MAT, is necessary. However, Rhode Island still has a [homelessness problem](#) despite their MAT program. Housing advocates in Providence are recommending better protections for the poor and community-based social programs to deal with their rising rates of people living on the streets.

Johnson also does not appear to recognize that prisons and jails, even when providing treatment, are not therapeutic spaces by design. Johnson irresponsibly proposes we use the abandoned prison on McNeil Island as a site for this forced treatment, but fails to mention that the prison was closed eight years ago because it was too expensive to operate. Not only is incarcerating people to access treatment inhumane, the McNeil prison has been closed for so long, it is not fit for people to be there. We are very concerned that an uninformed general public could think this preposterous proposal and location is a good idea.

In Johnson's response to critics, he at moments empathetically shares stories of the people he has met while reporting on homelessness, but he also says that they are "ruining our city." We are concerned that the suggestion here is that Seattle only belongs to people with a certain amount of money. This may sound like semantics to some, but as journalists, KOMO, you must understand the weight language has on shaping how we think and feel about an issue. This divisive framing is dangerous and does nothing to help our city move forward. [Law enforcement in neighboring Pierce County has expressed their concerns about frustrated residents harassing and targeting homeless people](#) on the streets. Further marginalizing a class of people who already have little power does nothing but fan the flames.

"Seattle is Dying" claims that the homelessness and opioid crises in King County are "not about dollars." This couldn't be further from the truth. Seattle is a city of immense wealth yet people die from exposure on our streets. Money is among the major structural factors contributing to Seattle's problems. The Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy recently ranked Washington as the [number one worst state for poor residents](#) due to its regressive tax structure. Because of the state's reliance on sales tax, Washington's poor pay 17.8 percent of their income on taxes, while the wealthiest households spend only about 3 percent. Moreover, prioritizing [corporate](#) welfare over human life and dignity means that we have never seen the effects of a robust and holistic investment in our communities—from education to housing to healthcare. When we say those are our values but never fund social programs properly, it undermines progress and gives fuel to those who say that these policies and programs do not work. [Ninety-eight percent of homeless people in King County say they would move into safe and affordable housing today if it were offered](#), but there are waiting lists for both public housing and voucher programs for the few units that exist. We need real change and real money to do it.

KOMO, we implore you to talk to the folks on the ground and engage in real journalism. Talk again to those who are experiencing addiction and homelessness and ask them what they think might help. Ask the service providers what the barriers are. Is it access to healthcare? Do we need more funding for Housing First initiatives? How can more people access MAT if they want it? Are there other novel options? You have a lot of power – “Seattle is Dying” has been viewed over 2,000,000 times. Stop misleading the public with ridiculous and simplistic proposed solutions. This is a complex matter with complicated solutions and we need as many brains and hearts working on fixing this problem as possible. We hope KOMO can add to the effort.

Please contact Heather McKimmie, Director of Disability Rights Washington’s AVID Program, at 206-324-1521 if you would like to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather McKimmie". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Heather McKimmie
Director of AVID Program
Disability Rights Washington

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Helen Gebreamlak". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Helen Gebreamlak
AVID Program Investigator
Disability Rights Washington