# 1. Institute a system-wide theory of change.

## Summary

In our work with the region we found that there was no unifying theory of change that governed all of the resources being deployed to prevent an end homelessness. Theories of change, while they may feel arcane, are essential to the effective performance of a system. A theory of change gives system stakeholders a clear goalpost that everyone agrees they are moving toward and provides an axiomatic way of evaluating investments: "does this move us towards our long term goal or not?"

While, some programs (King County's Equity and Social Justice Initiative) or populations (for example work funded the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project) have theories of change attached to them there was no evidence that the entirety of the system was governed by a uniform approach. This is in part due to severe system fragmentation (addressed in Action 2). However, a theory of change requires ratification beyond system administrators. The community must believe that the goal outlined is correct in order to appropriately allocate resources.

This action outlines a suggested theory of change based on work that was done with system administrators and people experiencing homelessness.

## Background

In order to arrive at a shared theory of change, we convened a group of system administrators, philanthropic and business community representatives, and representatives from the broader region. Together they participated in a half-day workshop designed to identify what people felt like the most important outcomes of their work were.

Throughout the day, the following two repeatedly surfaced: Equity, which is explicitly about re-designing structures to enable those most affected to drive the design and delivery of the system. This should result in reduced disproportionality for historically marginalized communities (particularly people who identify as black, Native, LGBTQ, or living with a disability) and increased agency for customers, those with the most direct knowledge of what the needs and implications of the system are.

Ending homelessness, which means for all populations, an assurance of housing when they need it.

The group proposed that if they:

- enable choice for customers
- right-size resources
- embrace agile change responsive to customer need

Then they be able to:

- create customer-centered services
- create coordination that promotes public commitment across the region and is responsive in real time to the needs of its constituents
- restore public trust that the city and regional governments are in service to its constituents

The group also acknowledged some key weaknesses of the conversation:

- The room did not contain a diverse set of voices, particularly those who are most impacted by the crisis
- There needed to be greater attention on what it would take to "build the muscle" required to really engage in centering customer voice (e.g. what does a new continuous quality improvement framework look like?)
- We are in a crisis and are obligated to move as quickly as possible to design and implement something that works for the community

In response to those weaknesses our team engaged customers and lived experience advocates in helping to refine the theory of change. In some instances, this was done through interviews that simply asked people to identify what they felt was important about the work. In others, particularly with lived experience advocates, we asked them specifically to refine the theory of change possibilities that had emerged.

The final theory of change that emerged from the group was:

*If we* **create a homelessness response system that centers customer voice,** *then we will* **be able to focus on responding to needs and eliminating inequities,** *in order to* **end homelessness for all.**

Our team suggests this theory of change be ratified.

# Strategies

## 1. Ratify the Theory of Change

In order to move forward with the suggested theory of change, it will need to be adopted by the community. This will involve ensuring the there is alignment across the system which includes, people who are experiencing homelessness, providers, and administrators across King County.

## 2. Analysis

Policy, programs, and investments must be analyzed against a newly adopted theory of change to ensure alignment. Investments that are not inline with the community's theory of change should repurposed to support activities that are. The policy implications of this work are substantial. Investments can be quickly and axiomatically engaged against the criteria laid out in the theory of change. This theory of change also allows for alignment with federal policy around ending homelessness and functional zero and so a number of guidance documents that are federally ratified can be used to steer this analysis.