



Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness

<https://pchomeless.org/> - info@pchomeless.org

April 16, 2021

To: Sheriff Ed Troyer
Members of the Pierce County Council

Considering the vulnerability of persons of color as well as those experiencing homelessness, the actions of Sheriff Troyer on January 27, 2021 are of great concern to the Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness. The nighttime delivery of newspapers by Mr. Altheimer did not require any intervention. Creating an incident where none existed unnecessarily escalated the situation to a substantial police response, which put lives in danger. More training and oversight are needed.

When the 911 dispatcher asked if the individual was armed, Sheriff Troyer responded that he did not know, but the driver “looked homeless.” In describing the vehicle, Sheriff Troyer characterized it as “old homeless-looking.” This type of profiling is disappointing and harmful. Research does not show a clear relationship between homelessness and violent crime¹. Having the highest-ranking law enforcement officer in the County contribute to this misconception will end poorly for our unhoused neighbors. Incidents such as this one created by Sheriff Troyer can easily end in injury or death – especially when deputies arrive with weapons drawn, as Mr. Altheimer reported.

Living unsheltered in Pierce County is dangerous enough. This winter, two individuals experiencing homelessness were killed by their housed neighbors. Harassment, theft, physical and sexual assault are a constant threat, particularly at night. To stay safe, people experiencing homelessness often remain awake and travel during the night. It is also important to note that simply being a person of color is far too often a contributing factor in being identified by law enforcement as a “suspicious person” leading to unnecessary interventions.

People experiencing homelessness in Pierce County need compassion and all the protections our community can muster, including police and sheriff responses that do not bias their actions when someone is assumed to be homeless.

Sheriff Troyer, please reflect on your lapse of judgement that escalated a night on the job into a potentially life-threatening encounter. It is your responsibility to ensure you and the deputies you oversee deescalate encounters, not create them. Please recognize the opportunity for further training.

Pierce County Councilmembers, we support your investigation of this incident and hope that recommendations coming from it will be implemented as new policy.

¹ Fischer, Sean N, et al. “Homelessness, Mental Illness, and Criminal Activity: Examining Patterns Over Time.” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 42, 2008, pp. 251–265., doi:10.1007/s10464-008-9210-z.



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For the Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness,

Gerrit Nyland

Director of Operations

Tacoma Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness

gnyland@pchomeless.org

253-304-5105

CC Pierce County Executive
 Pierce County Human Services
 City of Tacoma Mayor
 Tacoma City Council
 City of Tacoma Neighborhood and Community Services