

Opinion

Public safety is getting short shrift in city's response to homelessness

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A series of attacks has put Ballard residents on edge. Seattle needs a coordinated response to the problems of homelessness, addiction and public safety.

LAST May, instead of attending Ballard's beloved annual Syttende Mai parade, as my family has for the past 20 years, we waited for the police. The abandoned house next door to us, one of many in the neighborhood slated to be replaced with a multifamily structure, had become a base for heroin users. It took multiple efforts to get the police and the developer of the property to agree to board up the building.

I didn't realize then that by parade day 2016, Ballard would be gripped by crime and homelessness.

A few weeks ago, I was one of three women accosted by a young man in downtown Ballard. After attacking a woman in a Market Street office building, he entered the parking garage of the Ballard public library, where he harassed a mother and her two young children on the way to story time and then harassed and groped me.

Two days later, I watched as Ballardites restrained a man who had broken a window at La Isla restaurant and tried to cut nearby passers-by with a shard of glass.

A few days after that, I saw police in the alley across the street. I later learned that a body had been recovered near a dumpster there. It was a homeless person who had succumbed to pneumonia.

There was more. An elderly school-crossing guard was attacked at the Holman Road Northwest QFC and later died from his injuries. One sunny Saturday, while walking my dog, I was verbally abused by a man on a stairwell above Golden Gardens.

I admit that, apart from noticing the surge of homeless people in Ballard Commons Park and the proliferation of RVs near the Ballard Bridge, I hadn't given much thought to our city government's responses to the challenges Seattle currently faces.

But I found myself shaken to the core after I was attacked and began to educate myself about these challenges. Here are a few things I've learned: In the past year:

Seattle has seen a 20 percent increase in its homeless population. As neighborhoods, like the University District, are "cleaned up," those who have been kicked out seek somewhere else to go. We have homeless shelters, but they typically close by 6:30 a.m., forcing people back onto the streets. If you're not sober, you can be denied entry.

The most shocking thing I've learned so far is that, rather than rally together to figure out solutions, there is a small cohort of critics who say that my neighbors and I suffer from NIMBY (not in my backyard) syndrome because we worry that the influx of homeless people and drug users in Ballard has not been matched with an influx of social services and that overall public safety is being ignored.

If you had been present the day of the La Isla attack, you would have heard bystanders express hope that the attacker, who we later learned was high on PCP and methamphetamine, would be offered help. People were dismayed that the man found dead near the dumpster had died of pneumonia, surely a preventable fate. Had anyone reached out to help him?

Seattle needs a coordinated plan to deal with the epidemic of homelessness and addiction that plagues our city, and this requires everyone working together. This is no time for petty divisiveness.

Perhaps we can learn from San Francisco, where news organizations are coordinating coverage on that city's homeless crisis to raise public awareness. Or Boston, which has special outreach services for "rough sleepers" who avoid shelters, offering them continuous medical and behavioral health care from roving street teams of professional caregivers.

Perhaps we need to have serious discussions about a state income tax so we have the funds necessary to provide mental-health services. Perhaps we need to tax developers more so that the city has the financial resources needed to fund support measures.

Apparently, the man who groped me is back on the streets of Ballard. I wonder what will happen to him. But I also wonder what will happen to anyone who encounters him. All of the women I've spoken to are avoiding Ballard Commons and the library parking garage, just in case.

Alison Krupnick is a writer living in Ballard.