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Harrell's Activation Plan Seeks to Combat Drug Use and Revive Downtown

Chloe Platt, Managing Editor

In 2022 alone, fentanyl overdoses were responsible for over 700 deaths in King County. The growing distribution and use of synthetic drugs has led to a significant public health crisis in Seattle, leaving city residents desperate for a solution to the epidemic.

On April 17, Mayor Bruce Harrel introduced his Downtown Activation Plan, an executive order aimed at combating the fentanyl epidemic and reinvigorating downtown in response to the burgeoning public concerns about the state of Seattle's core.

Zachary Wood, assistant professor of public affairs at Seattle University, discussed the impact that the image of a struggling downtown has on elected officials.

"In public service and particularly for major elected officials, symbolism matters immensely. The visibility of the state of downtown is embarrassing for leaders, especially in a wealthy city like Seattle," Wood said.

Harrell's activation plan is being offered to the public as the mayor's vision for "the downtown of the future." The pitch from the city government is a downtown that is safe, welcoming, healthy and sustainable—with a booming residential neighborhood and diversified worker ecosystem. Jon Scholes, president of the Downtown Seattle Association, has been quoted in support of Harrell's executive order.



Jordie Simpson

View of Pioneer Square and Downtown Seattle.

“The Mayor is focused on the right issues. It is critical that we address the fentanyl crisis and its impacts. We cannot recover as a community until we make substantial progress and treat this crisis like the emergency it has become,” Scholes said to Northwest News Radio.

The activation plan consists of numerous changes directed at the fentanyl crisis: focusing the Seattle Police Department's (SPD) efforts on intervening in the sale of illicit drugs, creating post-overdose facilities, providing monetary incentives for drug-rehabilitation programs and working with public health officials to analyze and improve existing programs.

Wood offered his perspective on the core tenants of Harrell's plans and his hopes for this order.

“I hope that the humane approaches laid out in this plan can be done well: not over-policing users, providing services and opportunities and medications and perhaps other wrap-around programs to guide folks into different pathways. If these plans are functionally only cease-and-desist programs or opportunities to sweep away something ‘undesirable,’ then I would be disappointed,” Wood said.

With one of Harrell's key strategies relying on increased policing of drug-related offenses, some Seattleites see this as contradicting Harrell's campaign promise to attain “a Seattle police department that is responsive to community needs, that protects all people and neighborhoods without bias.” One such resident is Ethan Lawrence, a third-year sociology major at Seattle U, who shared his perspective on Harrell's plan.

“[Policing] being the primary focus was problematic. But beyond that, there was a lot of mention of increased funding for rehabilitation,” Lawrence said.

In recent years, the relationship between SPD and city residents has grown more tumultuous as citizens argue that SPD has continually upheld discriminatory practices and failed to build trust with community members. Wood elaborated on the ambiguous nature of the policing tactics outlined in Harrell's activation plan and what the impact of different strategies may mean for the community.

“The devil is in the details because how policing approaches this effort to curb drug trafficking is not clearly stated. Are we targeting users, low-level dealers or the networks of drug trafficking? All of the above? The exact policing tactics and mandates are what will determine the effectiveness and the social impacts of this increased effort,” Wood said.

In light of unease surrounding the implementation of policing tactics, the introduction of any strategic movement is seen as progress by Seattleites who have been witness to the continued displacement of homeless populations downtown. Lawrence hopes the new strategy will make a true change.

“Downtown homelessness in Seattle has just been ‘where do we put them next’ for years,” Lawrence said. “That is not an effective solution. Seeing anything different than that is an improvement.”

While the executive order is in its infancy and has yet to produce visible results, there is hope that the order will be effective in curbing synthetic drug use and assisting users in obtaining comprehensive drug use. Whether or not increased policing and other tenants of the executive order are the manner in which to achieve these results remains debated.