

Good morning,

My name is Sonja Bingham. I am a native Californian who moved to PA, when my ex-husband's music career called for him to move here after producing for Patti Labelle. When I first moved to Philly, we lived in Center City and then moved to Fishtown/New Kensington at a time when the area was the next "it" neighborhood. After living and thriving in that community for 15 years, I had an opportunity to sell the home my children grew up in and move one mile away to purchase a home, eliminate my mortgage and give my children an opportunity to go to college with zero college debt. An opportunity I had and did not appreciate the gravity of it until adulthood. I mean a single mother raising three kids on her own, no support can now own her home mortgage free, pay for her children's college cash and only move 1 mile from their neighborhood they consider home. How different could it be? Vastly different indeed I soon came to find out.

Let me preface this by saying that while waiting to move into our new home and having the entire house gutted to our hearts desire, I would make it a point to walk the mile daily to meet contractors as to get acclimated to the new neighborhood. And there was an immediate contrast once crossing over Lehigh Avenue which is what separates New Kensington to Kensington/Harrowgate. I did notice that the level of quality-of-life issues increased as I got closer to my new area. But at the time, maybe I was more focused on the new chapter in my life I just didn't pay close enough attention to the gravity of what was happening in the one-mile walk.

Needless to say, Over the last 3 years I have been forced to become involved with everything opioid addiction related, simply because of the one-mile change in my address. I think it important to note that the color of the community has drastically changed as well and the fact this is my first time living in a community of color. What my experience has led me to conclude is that Black and Brown lives truly don't matter. It is a fact that most of the addicts allowed to live in the Kensington area are white, most not from our community. I often ask our officials, if you had 700-800 Black people setting up "camps in center city or Roxborough, would their approach be the same. Of course, I never get an

answer, just a nod in solidarity with a knowing look of “of course that wouldn’t be allowed”

I am not here to advocate for addicts, my purpose today is to advocate for those who are truly unheard, the Black and Brown residents held captive in their homes because these people are allowed to live in our public spaces, sidewalk, parks, streets, surrounding our daycares, access to public transportation. The children who can’t use their parks and play and have to walk past users allowed to shoot up openly with needles sticking out of their necks, dealers harassing them or recruiting them to deal, the seniors who are held captive in their homes because they are fearful of dealers who are allowed to sit on their stoops, who have trouble walking and can’t navigate the sidewalks safely because of the needles, trash, urine, feces lining our sidewalks. The working mothers and fathers who every day must navigate the unsafe and unsanitary conditions on their way to work on buses, subways with more of the same. We are being held captive and when we voice our outrage we are vilified because we simply want what the other prioritized zip codes in Philadelphia have proactive initiatives that will make their every day navigating life easier. What we want is to not have to clean up every day, needles, feces, report graffiti and paint over the graffiti & being threatened by dealers for painting over their signage, that they use to identify new drug spots, call 911 for new corners being activated by the free sample day where we easily see 50-100 users coming to get their drugs. We ask that the laws already on the books be enforced in our neighborhood like they are elsewhere. No where else in the city are people allowed to camp and use freely drugs. No where else in the city will you get pulled over for missing a stop sign and the police officer literally step over a user with a needle sticking out of their neck to give you a traffic violation, with your 8-year child in the car and say nothing to the drug user. Nowhere else in the city do you have to have police come to your block so you can clean up trash, feces, needles because you are afraid of being shot.

We the tax paying, community members unfortunately do not have to imagine some of the horrors I just described for you because this is our reality. I have made some visuals to add to the context in which I just laid out. These pictures are not made up but show the disparity in which the rule of law governs our portion of the city of Philadelphia.

1 (pic here-parks, kids walking to school, public transportation & graffiti)

In September 2021, my house was firebombed, and we had been telling our officials that it is dangerous just to exist in our community, while I was not home. My son was there. Imagine you are out of town working and you get a call from your neighbor that your house is on fire and that no one will open the door and your child is in the house. Imagine screaming and running around the Marriot parking lot “my son is in the house; my son is in the house” and we cannot reach 911. Fortunately, through relationships I was able to call the inspector for the east police division and he answered my call at 6am on a Wednesday and was able to deploy police and fire department. Imagine. Just imagine you asking for reasonable safe & clean measures to be proactively implemented in your community and what you get for your troubles is your life threatened and not just yours but your children who are innocent. The children who are watching their parent work with their city officials, attending countless meeting, writing countless emails, even talking to the dealers and getting them jobs to get them out of “the life”, your children watch you call addicts’ family members who end up on their corner to try to help get them home, spend their money to give them fare to send them back to their respective communities just imagine. Imagine them hearing in these meeting from city officials that their parents’ efforts and voices are heard and important and at every turn, these same officials, not listening and implementing initiatives that will continue to perpetuate all that ails their community. Just imagine

2.(insert article (<https://www.audacy.com/kywnewsradio/news/local/civic-leaders-support-philly-activist-after-arson-attempt>))

Now, imagine what this next generation is being told at every turn is acceptable behavior. Imagine the seeds we are sowing and what is to come. Now, we have the impending safe injection (aka overdose prevention sites) coming to a neighborhood near you. This is our value system, that lawlessness, abuse, violence, open promiscuity is something that we should not only tolerate, but

invest the overwhelming majority of tax paying resources in. We do not invest in keeping parks clean and safe, we don't invest in better lighting, education, supporting our police officers, enforcing laws to keep violent offenders at bay from those of us who have no part in any criminal enterprise. We are telling them and showing them that what is right is wrong and what is wrong is right. Mind you these are the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of the crack addicts who were thrown in jail for this very same addiction. The crack babies who are watching white lives prioritized over theirs. Because when their parents, grandparent or great grandparents were struggling with crack addiction they were thrown in jail. This is why I say Black and Brown lives don't matter, because those prosecuted for this behavior only 30 years ago are watching in real time how the approach to addiction has changed to once again tilt the scales to threaten their very existence, because Kensington has been designated as the safe injection area, why? Because this is where you will find the majority of residents black and brown and the addicts white.

I spoke briefly about meetings, emails & partnering with the city officials. I personally have spent hundreds of hours in meetings with the mayor and the other members of the city agencies and organizations to discuss and strategize approaches needed to ensure the safety of residents in our neighborhood. We have asked that our public spaces be governed by the police and signage put in these spaces to notify users and others who continue to terrorize our community that they cannot occupy these spaces and that certain behaviors are not allowed. Yet, we are always met with reasons why basic rights of residents cannot be obliged. Which has left us in the precarious position to fight for these spaces ourselves. So, we created the "Old Lady Gang", a group of women who patrol and report users, dealers and other offenders who commit various offenses in our park. We have been cursed at, threatened, and items thrown at us. We had one of our block captains attacked last summer by the encampment that was allowed to grow to almost 200 people. Shawn McClain a father of an 8- & 5-year-old ended up being hospitalized and a steel plate put in his wrist. Shawn is a self-employed plumber who lost many months of work. So, an already stressed and financially unstable community rallied together and raised money to help him during his recovery to assist him in feeding his family.

These crimes will continue to happen as long as the concern is allowing users to use and die in our streets. Their lives are not being saved and they are not living humanely. They defecate in our alleys, stoops, sidewalks, in our parks, on playground equipment. They live in filth and are not allowed treatment when they have open wounds and forced to stay in the streets in our neighborhood. I often use this analogy when advocating for the removal of these “campers’ from our community of Starbucks. Starbucks when analyzing their next location will choose a town with 100,000 people over a town with a mere 10,000 people because of simple economics. If we continue to allow people the option of choosing to stay in our community and use, more lives will be lost, innocent lives who have nothing to do with drug abuse or sales. They will be lost because dealers flock to our community with violently aggressive tactics to take over corners to make millions of dollars supplying the industrial demand of narcotics. And let me be clear they are allowed to stay here. We do not have the systems in place to deter this behavior. Tens of millions of dollars are invested in ensuring this stays right here in the Kensington community. Hell, we’ve even had people sue our city government to keep them in our community in which the city folded (3.flyer here) We are the designated safe injection area. Our community has been designated the sanctioned encampment. Because there is no other meaningful investment to remove these people from our community, only investments are to continue to sustain it here. The city’s banner investment is Prevention Point, who supplies their needles, wound care, fraudulently gives users the necessary credentials to get food stamps, medical insurance and cash from Welfare-this is why they scour through our trash on trash day or trash day eve they need our information so PP will give them access to tax payers resources and we will never know our ID is being used because they allow them to use PP address, the only way we will find out is if we ever have the need for these services. We have other groups that will come feed them three squares a day, bring them water, tents, take care of their wounds, bring them clothes all day every day and leave their mess intentionally strewn on the ground. And we the residents who don’t want to live in filth, have clean ups weekly, the city has street cleaning programs to clean it as well. When at the end of the day, those millions of dollars could be redirected and invested in mandating treatment, mandating spaces and kept free and clear from open drug use. Invest in building the community instead, our officials continuously continue to investigate ways to further perpetuate the drug

industry and now they want to invest in another agency with little or no oversight with Safe House.

And for those of you who believe putting yet another institution that will further the drug community here is the right thing to do. Please know that your ideologies are going to continue to fuel the already thriving drug market that exists in Kensington. Daily, we have shootings by dealers fighting over corners. Even if/when they are arrested, we do not have a system in place that will keep them off the street and they are back out within hours of being arrested, many with outstanding warrants and caught with drugs and guns. In the extremely rare instances, they are kept in jail, they are immediately replaced by the next gang. There is no pause and no relief and wherever this injection goes, you can believe that area will be even more so inundated with dealer vying for the spot closest to where their clientele will be welcomes to shoot up their drugs. We are living in a virtual nightmare between users walking around like zombies, with needles sticking out of their arms neck and more, the violence with the dealers fighting and or using the addicts for sport and having them have "fight nights" where they have them fighting in the streets with one another for their next hit, attacking residents, or being accidentally hurt by stray bullets, or our homes and cars being broken into.

We have advocated for overdose prevention sites to be run by hospitals, after all medical facilities are designed to save lives. We believe that these facilities should be in healthcare facilities that have regulations mandated federally and locally. And they should be open 24/7, to allow someone to use drugs and send them back into the community to terrorize the local resident is irresponsible. They should be forced to stay in house if they insist on using. But everyone seems to think having operating hours and little to no oversight for these places is the right direction. Let's continue to perpetuate the renegade mentality and have institutions where people can "legally" use illegal drugs. We have seen what no oversight brings us through Prevention Point, and it has created more harm than their proposed reduction that they insist is their purpose.

I could continue to provide examples of what this has done to our community and the lack of thoroughly supported initiatives do, without input and often directly opposite what the residents have asked for has done. It has created more deaths, trauma, hopelessness, animosity, anxiety, and fear for those of us who want nothing more than what most thriving communities have and that is a safe and clean community.

Our ask is simple, when considering what initiatives should be rolled out, that you quite simply ask yourself this question, would this institution or initiative be something you would want happening next door to your home? Do you want users being allowed a haven to shoot up, people bringing clothes, tents, food, medical care assistance next door to your home or in your park where you children play? Would you want to see what we have been forced to witness every day of our lives? If the answer is no, if it is unacceptable for you, why on God's green earth would you think it is acceptable for us. And ask yourself, why, why would you do unto your neighbor as you would not do unto yourself?

Thank you

This is us 4.















'We're not going to stop': Civic leaders support Philly activist after arson attempt on her home

Council, police, activists bolster Harrowgate community leader Sonja Bingham

By [Shara Dae Howard](#), KYW Newsradio

September 24, 2021 9:18 pm

PHILADELPHIA (KYW Newsradio) — Neighbors from the Harrowgate community of Northeast Philadelphia, along with councilmembers and Philadelphia police, came out in support of a local activist who was recently the target of an alleged arson attempt.

"I think the message here today is how outraged everyone is here in Philadelphia when there's a targeted attack on a community leader," said Councilmember Mark Squilla. He was one of many officials, neighbors and friends who stood in solidarity with Sonja Bingham.

She is a block captain along Jasper Street and a member of the Harrowgate Civic Association who is known for her community activism. She has led the fight against drugs, organized street cleanups and led efforts to help the city resolve the decades-long housing and overdose crises in nearby Kensington.

Suspects targeted her house this past summer. Authorities say they threw a homemade Molotov cocktail into her home, almost setting her home on fire. No one was hurt.

"I'm here because Sonja Bingham is a good friend of mine and if you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us," Darlene, a fellow community member, said.

"I'm tired of it, tired of the lawlessness," Timothy, another friend, added.

"No community member that is fighting this hard deserves to experience what she experienced," G. Lamar Stewart added.

"All form of government are on the same page with this, from the mayor's office to the managing director's office to the District Attorney's office and police department, that this wont be tolerated, and that they will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law," said Squilla.

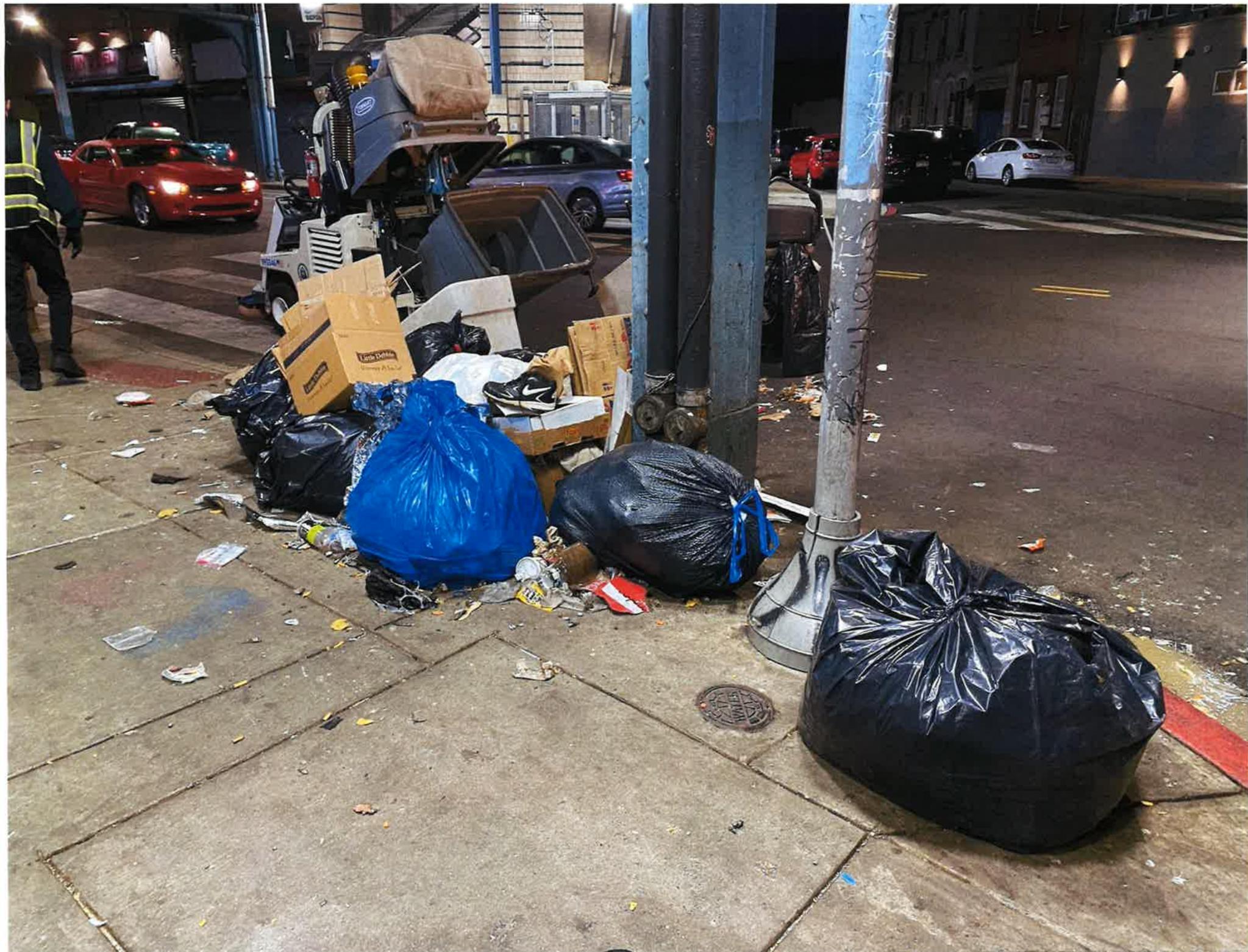
"It's overwhelming to see everyone come here because they attacked one of their own," said Bingham.

Bingham explained that the arson attempt was an effort to stop her from continuing her work in the community.

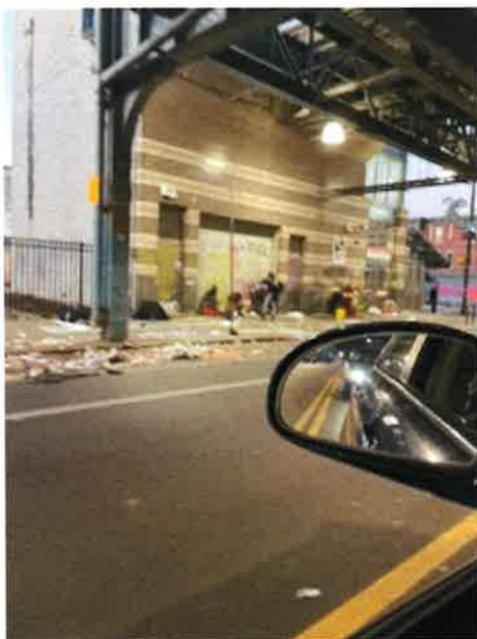
She said she won't stop, and she's more determined now than ever.

"We are the greater sum of me, and when you mess with one of us, you're going to suffer the wrath of all of us," said Bingham."

We just want a clean community, clean and safe, and we're not going to stop."















DEFEND AND SUPPORT KENSINGTON ENCAMPMENTS

The city has threatened to evict several encampment sites in Kensington. Bring donations!

(Safe use supplies, tents, blankets etc.)

Food will be served.

June 16th, 2021

Meet at 7am

@1800 E Allegheny Avenue

Support needed throughout morning/afternoon

**No more sweeps!
No more evictions!
Housing for all!**