



Community Involvement Committee

To: Chair Jessica Vega Pederson and Board of County Commissioners (6 pages)

From: Community Involvement Committee

Date: May 12, 2023

Subject: Homelessness & Emergency Management Subcommittee Recommendations

Background and Process

Background:

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have seen a remarkable increase in the number of people who are unhoused in our communities in Multnomah County. The 2022 Point in Time (PIT) count estimated 5,228 people living outside in Multnomah County — a 24% increase since the previous PIT was administered in 2019. In spite of an unprecedented amount of public funds made available during the pandemic through programs like the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and the local Metro SHS bond, many of our neighbors are still without housing. Distrust of government and partners, confusion about policies and programs, and inaccessibility of feedback and dialogue with programs for unhoused and housed residents is heightening stress, trauma, and tensions. We acknowledge that the housing crisis is a complex issue that extends far beyond Multnomah County, and that it originated before the pandemic. However, our community members continue to question how our local governments are responding to the multi-crisis scenarios of homelessness, the pandemic and severe weather; and what funding, training, tools and wisdom we have at our disposal going forward. As the Community Involvement Committee of Multnomah County, we also consider how the County can and should meaningfully engage unhoused, unstably housed, and housed community members in addressing these intertwined crises.

We have heard from multiple experts that permanent housing should be a pillar of Emergency Management but there is not a one-size-fits-all approach that will work. We would like to amplify the message that we have heard from subject matter experts that we must support a wide range of sheltering options, but hope that Multnomah County and the Joint Office of Homelessness Services will prioritize the kind of housing needed by people with lived

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experience with homelessness. We also support the existing direct cash transfer program that the Multnomah Idea Lab is piloting and would love to see more direct cash transfer programs at the County level.

We know that ARPA funds will soon sunset, but would like to encourage Multnomah County to think about housing as a human right and a hedge ahead of the next emergency — whether that is an earthquake, a severe storm, a heat wave, or a hazardous materials spill.

Why This Issue was Chosen by Community Involvement Committee (CIC):

Each year the CIC makes recommendations on Community Engagement policies and practices for Multnomah County. The community volunteer members of the CIC chose a topic, area, or subset of our community, to focus on learning how the County engages on the issue and/or with the group, and recommends practices, policies, or other recommendations to improve meaningful community involvement. For the CIC, Community Engagement and Involvement encompasses any processes and opportunities, where members of the community, defined as anyone living, working, and playing in the County, with a focus on underrepresented groups and those directly impacted by County programs and policies, are included in County decision making. (See Multnomah County Code § 3.251 and Resolution No. 2021-036).

As members of the Subcommittee on Homelessness and Emergency Management we bring our personal, academic, volunteer, and professional experience to our work on these issues. As community members with personal and family experiences of homelessness, and advocates for unhoused people, we chose to expand upon last year's 2021 Extreme Weather CIC Recommendations, especially relating to recommendation 3 "Continue to assess the efficacy and accessibility of warming and cooling shelters for our most vulnerable community members" and 4 "Increase collaboration with other jurisdictions to support long term solutions for community resilience." We also are building on the 2020 Housing CIC recommendations related to improving homeless services.

Our Subcommittee met nine times between October 2022 and May 2023. To better understand the relationship between homelessness, human services, and emergency management at the County, as well as methods of community engagement at these intersections, we spoke with the following County employees and outside researchers:

Subcommittee members: Sasha Burchuck (chair), Richard Barker, Patrick Nolen, Angel Brophy
Staff: KellyAnn Cameron

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We consulted with:

- Anna Marie Allen, Interim Director of the Office of Community Involvement, Policy and Engagement Advisor to former Chair Kafoury
- Mary Li, Director, Multnomah Idea Lab
- Raquel Barajas, Economic Justice Project Coordinator, Multnomah Idea Lab
- Capt Douglas Asboe, Patrol Operations and Air Support. City of Troutdale Chief of Police, Multnomah County Sheriff's Office; spoke on the HOPE team
- Alice Busch, Emergency Management Analyst Sr, Multnomah County Emergency Management
- Calvin Hoff, Emergency Management Planner, Multnomah County Emergency Management
- Dr. Marisa Zapata, Director, PSU's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative
- Denis Theriault, Deputy Communications Director, Multnomah County
- Joshua Bates, Interim Director, Joint Office of Homeless Services

Recommendations

1. Prioritize honesty and transparency when it comes to communicating about the state of housing programs and progress, and ensure that information is broadly accessible to as many audiences as possible.

We would like to see the County use a different communications strategy that honestly assesses access to housing and how its distribution is prioritized. If housing for all isn't a possibility soon, we need more honest messaging regarding what to expect and by when. We would also appreciate more information on what work Multnomah County Public Relations is doing to secure State and Federal funds. We recommend the Chair, County Commissioners, and Communications Department lead these efforts to increase and clarify housing policies and programs across County Departments, and make them accessible to the public in diverse formats.

2. Support accountability and take action.

Our recommendation is to explicitly and publicly identify organizational and program structures in regard to Emergency Management, homelessness, and human services, and which public officials are responsible for duties. We would like to see clearer public information on what types of housing, human services, and Emergency Management services

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the County offers, how these programs are structured, who has decision-making power, and how decisions are made. We would also like to see an empowered decision-maker appointed as the County's "Homelessness Czar" and request this person not be an elected Official. This role would be a point person to whom the public can contact and the County hold accountable for housing and homeless policies and programs. Having heard that there is no process for feedback from homeless/houseless persons on their experiences with County run emergency shelters or services, we have concerns that their needs and interests are not being acknowledged or addressed. We recommend that Multnomah County find a way to engage people and assess whether or not they feel they have been treated with dignity when they are receiving these services. Finally, we would like to see a "Lessons Learned" page to the County's website that discusses what housing/homelessness and emergency management programs have been implemented, what measures of success have been taken and what feedback has been collected from participants, volunteers, and staff, what changes have been made, and whether or not they've been successful. Within that we recommend updating the JOHS Tableau to share data related to specific programs as well as emergency warming and cooling shelters.

3. Work experience for County employees who work with vulnerable populations needs to be grounded in reality.

Several members of our committee have volunteered in Disaster Resource Centers and observed staffing and training issues in these settings. To address these problems, we would like to see Multnomah County staff receive more cultural sensitivity, anti-racism, and DEI training that help people understand that homelessness is racialized, stigmatized, and rooted in poverty and marginalization— not bad personal choices. Further, we recommend the County follow up on the recommendations related to trans housing services in the CIC 2020 Housing Recommendations, including Program Offer #10052J- Safety Off The Street- Trans Specific Services. Based on experiences of limited first aid trained volunteers and staff, we recommend mandatory CPR and First Aid training, which would help make DRCs (and other workplaces within the County) safer for everyone in general. We know that Multnomah County employees are offered hazard pay to work in the DRCs, but we have also heard that employees who take these assignments may be penalized in performance reviews for the time they spend away from their normal duties. We would encourage Multnomah County to remove barriers to working in the DRCs for everyone by *requiring* in-service days for employees who work in homelessness and human services departments and programs. Not only will this help address staffing shortages, it will also provide deep levels of insight that will hopefully lead to better representation and advocacy on the part of County employees when

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speaking about the subject and available shelter services to members of the community.

4. Increase interdepartmental and interagency collaboration of Housing, Human Services, and Emergency Management.

We would like to see more collaboration and integration between Emergency Management, Department of County Human Services, and the Joint Office of Homelessness Services at Multnomah County. We would like more information available to the public regarding how these departments are strategizing to plan together where their fields of practice meet, as well as opportunities for the community to contribute to and provide feedback on programs and policies. We would also like to see a new role for an interdepartmental “Liaison” who works between these departments. This liaison could facilitate communication between departments, partners, and the community, while working to identify gaps and improve outcomes for those who are most impacted by disasters, poverty or homelessness. Perhaps the County should also consider re-homing Disaster Resource Centers under the umbrella of the Joint Office of Homelessness Services to allow Multnomah County Emergency Management more bandwidth for scenario planning and incorporating the suggested changes from the after-actions, prioritizing the feedback received by clients, community volunteers and staff.

5. Other jurisdictions within and around Multnomah County should be represented and included in planning with the Joint Office of Homelessness Services, as some of the City of Portland’s policies are encouraging migration to other parts of the County.

Nearby cities and counties should also be involved in regional planning when it comes to homelessness, human services, and emergency management. Since cities within Multnomah County have differing policies and practices around homelessness, we recommend the County make clear and public the position of the County, what collaboration (or lack thereof) looks like with different jurisdictions, and the County’s position on criminalization of homelessness and defunding of housing services and/or emergency services.

Backgrounds and life experiences of subcommittee members:

Sasha Burchuk (*she/her*) is the Chair of this Subcommittee and is a M.S. in Geography candidate at Portland State University, where her research focuses on how natural disasters

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exacerbate inequality and how the pandemic has impacted homelessness in Multnomah County. Her father passed away in 2015 while experiencing homelessness.

Richard Barker (*he/him*) has been an advocate for providing solutions to the houseless/homeless population over the past 7 years. Mainly focusing on working through/with the NE and N Portland Neighborhood Associations. He has continued advocating for the emigrant/refugee communities as they work to become an integral part of the County's population

Patrick Nolen (*he/him*) was born in Portland. He has many years experience of living homeless. Patrick has, since being housed, become an advocate and organizer for the mental health community, nonviolence and people living outside.

Angel Brophy (*she/her*) is a Program Coordinator/Data System Specialist with Human Solutions. Angel also volunteers her time to be a Community Health Worker for her Filipino Community to provide wrap-around services with the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns, as well as with the Pacific Coast Coalition for Seafarers.

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