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Dear Multnomah County community members,

In a very short amount of time, our lives have been rapidly upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March, once the severity of the pandemic became clear, I suspended an audit on access to housing and homeless services, so county employees could focus fully on serving Multnomah County's vulnerable communities. My office appreciates the critical work of the Joint Office of Homeless Services, Department of County Human Services, and contracted service providers during this challenging time.

This is not a standard audit report. Typically, we would issue a report after narrowing our objectives and conducting more interviews, complex data analysis, and additional documentation review. We would provide findings and recommendations. But this is not a typical time. The unprecedented circumstances we are living through require my office to adapt as we strive to continue serving the public interest.

One way we are adapting is by providing this informational report, which shares themes we heard as the audit team conducted around 40 interviews. While the report reflects pre-pandemic conditions, it is unlikely that the issues the audit team learned about are going to go away as we move forward. Some issues, such as access to hygiene services for the unhoused community and the need for housing resources for domestic violence survivors, have become even more important since Governor Brown issued the stay-home-save-lives executive order in March.

The audit team learned a great deal from county employees, community providers, and people with lived experiences of houselessness, and we are honored to convey their knowledge as an offering to the public discourse.

Thank you,

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Accessing Housing and Homeless Services

Informational report

May 2020



Office of Multnomah County Auditor Jennifer McGuirk

In order to avoid distracting from the county's response to the COVID 19 pandemic, the Auditor's Office suspended an audit on accessing housing and homeless services in March 2020. This report covers the information we heard and learned during early audit work, before suspending the audit. It is based primarily on interviews.

This report reflects a snapshot in time, prior to the pandemic. We are sharing the perspectives and lived experiences we learned about because they will continue to be important as the County moves forward.

What we heard



The Joint Office oversees homeless services and the Department of County Human Services focuses on prevention



Services are limited for vulnerable families



Services are in high demand due to a lack of housing that is affordable



Domestic violence survivors have unique housing needs



Coordinated access process intends to prioritize the most vulnerable people



Eviction prevention assistance is hard to obtain



Demand for adult shelter exceeds capacity



Adults from the unhoused community expressed concerns about a lack of basic services and frustration with providers



Street outreach is a key access point for youth



Staff at nonprofit providers are paid low wages leading to turnover



Joint Office oversees homeless services

Joint Office programs and services are designed to help meet the needs of unhoused populations

Created in 2016, the Joint Office of Homeless Services (Joint Office) consolidated Multnomah County and City of Portland governance, policy implementation, and funding to address homelessness.

Primary Programs	Additional Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emergency shelter• Housing placement and retention• Supportive housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outreach• Coordinated entry• Case management• Benefit acquisition• Employment programs

The Joint Office contracts with local agencies to deliver services

Contracted agencies provide the services for thousands of homeless singles, youth, families, and survivors of domestic violence in Portland and Multnomah County.

It takes a tremendous amount of work to do intake for those in need, staff facilities, secure housing, and complete documentation.

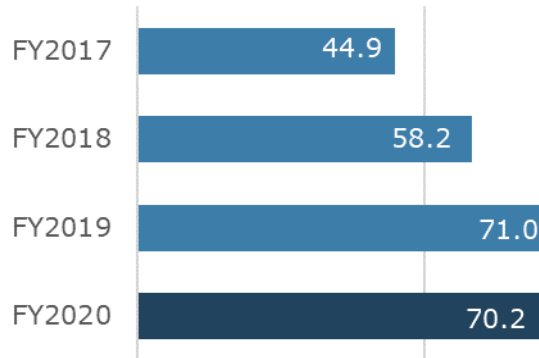
Programs and services are designed to provide:

- Coordinated access into the system – coordinates entry to housing resources; matches people experiencing homelessness to programs.
- Emergency shelters and day centers – aim to provide a safe place to sleep, meals, showers and other basic needs, and connections to other resources.
- Outreach and community resources – intends to connect with people experiencing homelessness and offer an access point for the coordinated access system.
- Rapid rehousing – intends to help individuals and families obtain housing.
- Prevention – intends to help households who are about to lose their housing to remain housed.
- Permanent supportive housing – intends to help individuals and families with disabilities maintain permanent housing through long-term subsidies and other services.
- Case management and advocacy – aims to provide support; may help with housing search and placement, and rental subsidy, with the goal of permanent housing.



The FY 2020 Adopted Budget for the Joint Office of Homeless Services was \$70.2 million

The Joint Office budget has grown from \$44.9 million in FY2017 to \$70.2 million in FY2020



Source: FY2020 Adopted Budget, Auditor's Office

Funding sources include:

- \$30.5 million from County funds
- \$32.1 million from the City of Portland General Fund
- State and federal funds

About half of the Joint Office budget is spent on housing placement, retention, and supportive housing and 30% is spent on shelter operations. Per budget documents, the Joint Office prioritizes shelter for homeless adults, including women, disabled adults, and people who are chronically homeless. The funding for sheltering homeless adults without children is much larger than the combined funding for sheltering families, domestic violence survivors, and youth. As budget documents note, A Home for Everyone, a community-wide initiative to respond to homelessness in the county, has prioritized the expansion of emergency shelter for all populations and the largest unmet need is for adult households without children.



Department of County Human Services programs include rent assistance for families

We learned that the Department of County Human Services programs focus on housing stabilization and preventing homelessness. The Housing Stabilization program provides rent assistance to vulnerable households experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The Multnomah Stability Initiative helps low-income families with short-term rent assistance, flexible funds to help stabilize households, and case management services. The department also has a role with services for youth at risk of leaving their home as well as domestic violence services. The City of Portland also provides funds to support domestic violence programs and system coordination.



Services are in high demand due to a lack of housing that is affordable

Private market rent can be out of reach for very low income households

Example	Monthly Income	Average market rent in Portland	Difference
<i>For a studio</i>			
Individual receiving SSI	\$783	\$1,168	-\$385
<i>For a 2-bedroom</i>			
Family of 3 receiving TANF	\$503	\$1,645	-\$1,142
Single parent earning full-time minimum wage	\$2,167	\$1,645	\$522

Sources: Social Security Administration, State of Oregon, Portland Housing Bureau.

Notes: TANF is financial assistance for families with little or no other income, SSI is supplemental security income for people with disabilities or 65+, with little or no other income. Average rents are for City of Portland, as of 2018.

Many of the people we interviewed said the housing market is one of the biggest challenges they face. Market rentals are not affordable for many households and can be hard to obtain since the vacancy rate is low. Options with long-term rent subsidies, like permanent supportive housing or housing choice vouchers, are in short supply.

Providers reported that the increasing cost of rent has increased demand for services and affected service delivery. Providing rent assistance is more expensive than in the past, since rents are higher and people need assistance longer.

We also heard that because there is a lack of long-term options, providers are enrolling households who would be better served with long-term subsidies into short-term programs. We heard that program participants sometimes end up houseless or evicted after their short-term subsidy ends.

Ultimately, people want housing, but there is not enough.

There is nothing affordable in the housing market.



The Louisa Flowers, a recently built affordable apartment building, MultCo Communications



Coordinated access process intends to prioritize the most vulnerable people

The federal government requires coordinated access processes for homeless services it funds. The county's local coordinated access is set up to allocate resources for rapid rehousing, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing. The Joint Office applies the coordinated access processes a little differently across the different systems - adult, family, youth, and domestic violence.

In coordinated access, providers use an assessment tool, or series of questions, to measure a household's vulnerability. The assessment results in a score. For some systems, providers then meet to discuss the households with the highest scores and decide who to prioritize for available housing assistance, based on the score and other information. Providers told us they value the opportunities for coordinating with other providers in this process.

We heard that while the concept of coordinated access is good, it can also be complicated, especially when there is not enough housing. When households do not score high on the assessment, it may take a long time, if ever, for them to receive assistance. This can be frustrating for community members who do not understand why they are not getting help.

Coordinated access is the gateway to permanent supportive housing. This type of housing receives substantial funding from the Joint Office. While most permanent supportive housing is for adults, we heard there is not enough in any system.

One challenge with coordinated access is that the vulnerability score disadvantages people of color.

We also heard concerns that the assessment process may disadvantage people of color, speakers of languages other than English, and households from immigrant and refugee communities.

We heard concerns that the questions on the assessment do a poor job of accounting for vulnerabilities within communities of color. Language and cultural barriers can affect how people respond to questions and lead to lower scores.

For example, the assessment asks about history of homelessness, but some communities of color are more likely to experience homelessness by being doubled up and may not identify as homeless. Also, some people may not be forthcoming in their responses due to cultural stigma or not having a trusted relationship with the assessor. Joint Office representatives told us that they have modified questions on the assessment to try to better account for vulnerabilities within communities of color and culturally specific communities.



Demand for adult shelter exceeds capacity

Adult System

The shelter system provides emergency night and day shelter services, including shelter for specific populations. Day centers aim to provide safe spaces to be during the day and may offer showers and laundry facilities.

We heard that maintaining flow through shelter requires housing placements, which are limited. We heard that the demand for shelter exceeds the capacity and there is not enough space at low barrier shelters for men. We also learned that to get on the adult shelter waitlist, people call in or may sign up at the day center in Bud Clark Commons.

The shelter system prioritizes the aging population. However, we heard that some of the aging population may not be able to get into shelter as quickly as they need to, putting people at risk.

Shelters work for some people, but not for everyone—it's a Band-Aid.



Laurelwood Shelter, Multco Communications



Street outreach is a key access point for youth

Youth System

We heard that volunteer teams engage in street outreach to homeless youth in an effort to build trust and encourage youth to come in for help. Having people on the ground building relationships and providing support is essential and outreach needs to be consistent.

We also heard that shelter seems to be available for youth, but youth may have to wait several months for a case manager.

The Street outreach program operates every night of the year.

Youth may have to wait for a case manager.



Services are limited for vulnerable families

Family System

Through interviews we learned that the primary path for families seeking shelter and/or housing placement is through contact with 211info. 211 staff refer families to shelter when available or pre-screen families and add them to the queue for shelter and/or referred to coordinated access.

We heard that outreach workers look for unsheltered families living in tents, cars, and other places with the aim of connecting them to housing and other resources.

Shelter is mostly first come, first served. Due to limited capacity, families may have to wait several months for shelter availability, which can be very frustrating for families.

We also heard that when the system has resources to take on new people, the Mobile Housing Team checks the queue looking for families with high vulnerability or those who would benefit from placement with culturally specific services.

We heard that people are unclear on how households are selected for placement into available housing and some may feel the system is unfair. We learned that many more families seek housing assistance than available resources are able to provide.

Unhoused Children are particularly vulnerable. Studies show that homeless children are more likely to miss and fall behind in school, develop obesity, asthma and other health conditions, and suffer emotional distress.

The wait time for family shelter could be six months or more.



Family Village shelter, Multco Communications



Family Village shelter, Multco Communications



Domestic violence survivors have unique housing needs

Domestic violence system

The Joint Office and the Department of County Human Services both have roles in domestic violence services.

During interviews we heard that survivors not only need housing and support services, they have the added layer of safety concerns. Survivors may be escaping life-threatening abuse and bringing children with them. Because of the threat to personal safety, shelter locations and housing placements are confidential.

We also heard that case manager advocates work with survivors to develop safety plans, provide legal support, empower victims, and help identify resources. If no shelter is available, advocates provide safety planning to help them navigate their situation.

Domestic violence shelters are almost always full and housing is the biggest need among survivors.

We heard that culturally appropriate practices are a priority and that there are a number of providers serving culturally specific populations. We learned that language and cultural barriers can be major obstacles for domestic violence survivors. Some survivors may not be aware that services exist to help them, and others may prefer not to disclose domestic violence within their community. Further, survivors may not feel safe staying in a shelter where their language isn't spoken.



Eviction prevention assistance is hard to obtain

Rent payment assistance has historically been the top request at 211info, and continues to be a frequent request during the pandemic. However, we heard that assistance for eviction prevention (people needing assistance to stay in their current housing) is hard to obtain for the general public. Getting assistance may require luck with timing or a previous relationship with a provider.

Eviction prevention funds are often prioritized for people already enrolled in other programs, so it is not readily available for those looking for help for the first time.

Gone are the days when you can walk into a nonprofit and ask for help.



Adults from the unhoused community expressed concerns about a lack of basic services and frustration with service providers

We held two listening sessions with adults with lived experience of houselessness. We heard immediate concerns about a lack of basic hygiene and survival services, including bathrooms, showers, laundry, storage for belongings, and safe places to sleep outside.

There is a day center downtown that provides some of these services, but we heard concerns about this environment. It is crowded with long waits for services like showers. People told us that they feel unsafe and at times not treated fairly at service locations. People also expressed frustration about case managers not providing enough help. Because there are few contractors, people do not have choices about where to access services.

Some people would rather spend their limited money at a private laundromat than go to county-funded laundry services, because of the negative environment.



Staff at contracted providers are paid low wages, leading to turnover

Providing direct services is a difficult and stressful job. We heard from nonprofit managers who are concerned about the low wages their staff receive, which has led to turnover. Turnover disrupts relationships participants have with staff and is costly for organizations.

We heard that low wages do not go far in the expensive housing market and some staff at contracted providers are housing insecure themselves.

Employees in these systems are not paid sufficient wages to afford housing in the communities they are serving.

Work Done

When we started the audit, the intention was to provide information about what community members experience as they access housing and homeless services, and about the root causes of issues affecting access. At the time the audit was suspended, due to the pandemic, the audit team had not yet determined specific audit objectives.

The work in this report reflects the work done by the audit team before putting the audit on hold. Prior to April 2020 the team had:

- Conducted about 40 interviews, including:
 - Interviews with Joint Office and Department of County Human Services staff and management, as well as county leadership
 - Interviews with representatives from twelve contracted service providers, including culturally specific providers
 - Interviews with representatives from other involved and interested groups such as Home Forward, Sisters of the Road, and the Rosewood Initiative
- Conducted two listening sessions with adults with lived experience of houselessness
- Attended community gatherings and hearings
- Reviewed and analyzed budgets, contracts, and financial data
- Reviewed strategic plans and other program documentation
- Researched best practices, applicable laws, and relevant literature

We are very grateful to the time and knowledge that county staff, service providers, and others offered during this process. Since changes in the work environment happened so quickly, there were organizations that we were not yet able to interview. The audit team was also planning to do additional engagement with individuals and families with lived experience, to learn more about their experiences, later in the audit process.

This informational report is not a traditional, comprehensive audit. The report primarily represents what people told us in interviews, and therefore reflects the perspectives of those we interviewed. We were also not always able to confirm information against other sources such as documents or data. This report did go through our standard quality review process. The “quotes” in this report are not direct quotes, but are paraphrased comments reflecting what we heard.

Team

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