

Homelessness Response System



Memo

To: Dan Field, Director, Homeless Services Department, Multnomah County; Skye Bocker-Knapp, Director, Portland Solutions, City of Portland; Jillian Schoene, Director, Homelessness Response System

From: Robyn Johnson, Policy Advisor, Homelessness Response System

Re: Homelessness Response Action Plan, Measure 2

Date: May 7, 2025

CC: Homelessness Response System Community Advisory Committee, Implementation Committee, and Steering and Oversight Committee; contributing community participants; Chris Neal, Chief Operations Officer, Multnomah County; Michael Jordan, City Manager, City of Portland

Summary

At the direction of the Steering and Oversight Committee, through vocal leadership from Mayor of Gresham Travis Stovall, the Homelessness Response System (HRS) team was asked to surface drivers of the disparity in shelter utilization among Black, African American and African community members. The HRS team partnered with the Homeless Services Department (HSD) to have conversations with culturally specific and culturally responsive service providers along the homeless services to housing continuum and community partners serving Black, African American and African community members experiencing domestic violence, returning to the community after incarceration, seeking family reunification, seeking clean, sober, and supportive post-detox transitional housing and those awaiting treatment for substance use and addictions treatment, among others.

These engagements surfaced themes that led to the preliminary recommendations outlined in this memo. The recommendations are considered preliminary because additional engagement will be led in continued partnership with HSD with the community, culturally specific service providers that serve the Black, African American, African and immigrant people, and community leaders.

The following would most directly impact the existing Homelessness Response Action Plan (HRAP) measure to reduce unsheltered homelessness for priority populations:

- To address the disparate treatment and experience of Black, African American and African community members in shelter, there needs to be increased and shared accountability from providers across all shelters in the system, and should include training to increase anti-racist leadership and address anti-Blackness and implicit bias.
- Black and African American community members who have had negative experiences in shelter and with shelter providers that serve them have noted that expanded access to motel vouchers coupled with housing placement resources through culturally specific services for Black, African American and African community members could lead to improved sheltering.
- Increased system understanding of what is culturally appropriate for Black, African American and African community members.
- Expanded culturally specific shelter options, especially for Black, African American, and African families and single women.

Other recommendations focused more broadly on upstream interventions to strengthen household and community-level resilience, including providing stabilization/flexible support funds to cover costs associated with doubling up or “couch surfing” to remain stably housed with family and friends, and piloting other short-term financial support to prevent homelessness.

Report

During our engagement process, we heard the following needs and themes in our conversations:

Needs that were explicitly stated

- Need for provider staff that reflects the population of people experiencing disparities in services
- Need for provider accountability and training to address implicit bias and anti-Blackness
- Need for more motel vouchers
- Need for more family shelter
- Need for supports for people who are doubling up

Theme 1.) Implicit bias, anti-Blackness and racism are driving the disparity in utilization of the current shelter system for Black, African American, and African people.

- The behavior of Black and Brown people is policed in shelter and while seeking services.
- Behavior is interpreted, because they are Black, as too loud or aggressive. Behavior is often related to self-advocacy, but leads to exclusion from shelter or a delay in the process to access needed services, including housing placement.
- The lack of Black and Brown staff in shelter settings was noted by culturally specific providers, and that they were often asked by dominant culture organizations to help them serve Black and African American people.
- Shelters of all types need to employ more Black, African American and African people.
- The current shelter system isn't designed or contracted to serve people equitably.
- Culturally Responsive/White-led shelter providers need to be held accountable for disparate treatment.
- Most of the contracted Culturally Specific organizations, who are the experts on serving the Black, African American, and African communities, do not operate shelters.

Theme 2.) Black, African American and African people and the Culturally Specific organizations serving them – regardless of size – should be included in planning and activities to foster necessary transformations in our homelessness to housing continuum.

- More family shelter is needed, including culturally specific family shelter.
- There is little interest in a shelter-only conversation or intervention.
- Community specific shelter and more family shelter designed and run by and for the Black and African American community.
- Shelter should be a path to permanent housing, but only one in five people exiting shelter do so to permanent housing.

Theme 3.) Focusing on culturally appropriate sheltering options for Black, African American and African people:

- Historically Black and African American communities don't go to shelter, they double up, meaning they stay with family and friends.
 - When people fall to shelter, it means that community support is exhausted. This could mean that they are unable to stay with family or friends due to visitor limits in leases and/or preventative rules in federally subsidized housing on explicit household size and prior criminal history.
- Given people's experience in congregate shelters, motel shelter is a preferred sheltering method.

Recommendations

1. To better serve Black, African American and African People experiencing housing instability and unsheltered homelessness prioritize funding for what is working or what is culturally appropriate for the community, including the following:

- Increase rent assistance and housing placement dollars distributed through Culturally Specific organizations via new and existing contracts.

- Invest in upstream stabilization/flexible support funds to cover costs associated with doubling up or “couch surfing” to remain stably housed with family and friends.
- Pilot providing short-term (6-12 months) financial support to households \$400-\$700 requesting rent assistance from Culturally Specific organizations via new and existing contracts.

2. To increase sheltering and shelter utilization by Black, African American, and African communities

- Expand motel voucher funding for Black, African American and African community members.
- Increase the shared accountability we have with current shelter providers to address the disparate treatment of Black, African American and African people in shelter.
- Explore community specific shelter for single women, families and individuals designed and run by and for Black and African American organizations.
- Continue engagement, planning and design work with the Black, African American and African community to expand the perspectives and input, refine and implement recommendations, and improve access to shelter and sheltering strategies.

Background

The Homelessness Response Action Plan (HRAP) sets a goal to shelter or house an additional 2,700 people beyond pre-HRAP baselines, as well as an express goal to “Reduce unsheltered homelessness for priority populations listed below at a rate equal to or greater than that population's proportion of the overall population in the baseline number:

- Black, African American or African
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

- American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Indigenous
- Latina/Latino/Latinx/Latine
- Asian, Asian American
- Adults over the age of 55
- LGBTQIA2S+”

This goal, known as Measure 2, intends to address the impact of systemic and structural racism that exacerbates housing instability resulting in unsheltered homeless for members of the prioritized populations.

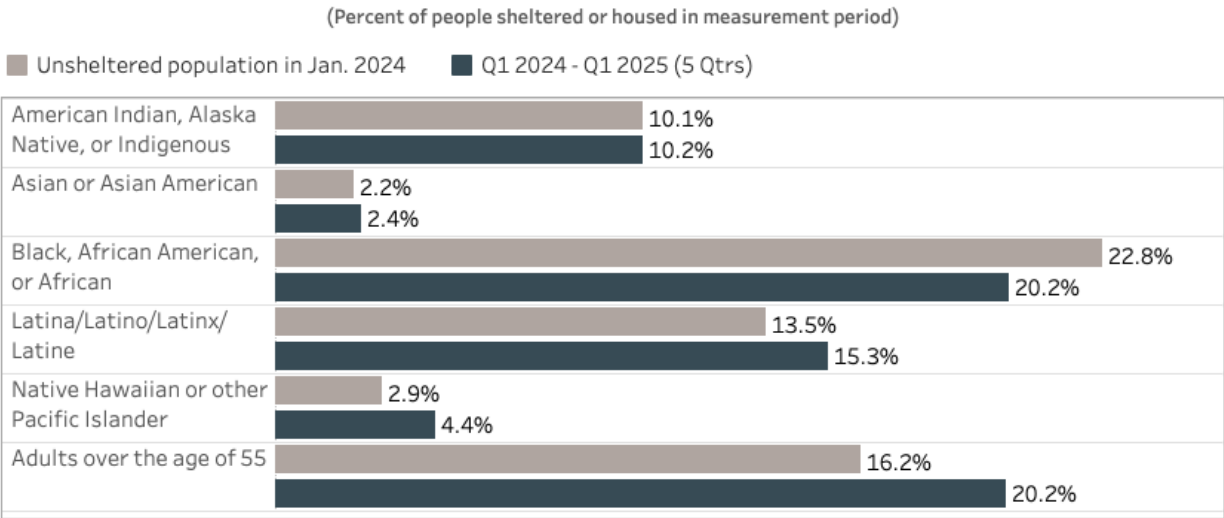
The Homelessness Response System [reports quarterly](#) on the progress toward its goals and measures. In all recent quarterly reports, the data show a disparity in the utilization of shelter among Black, African American and African people living in Multnomah County. The following charts show that Black, African American and African people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are accessing housing at a slightly higher rate than the baseline population estimate of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, however these community members are accessing shelter at a lower rate compared to the baseline population estimate.

This represents an approximately 380-person gap among Black, African American, or African people who are sheltered or housed compared to their portion of those experiencing unsheltered homelessness, though the overall percentage difference is relatively small (currently 2.6 percentage points).

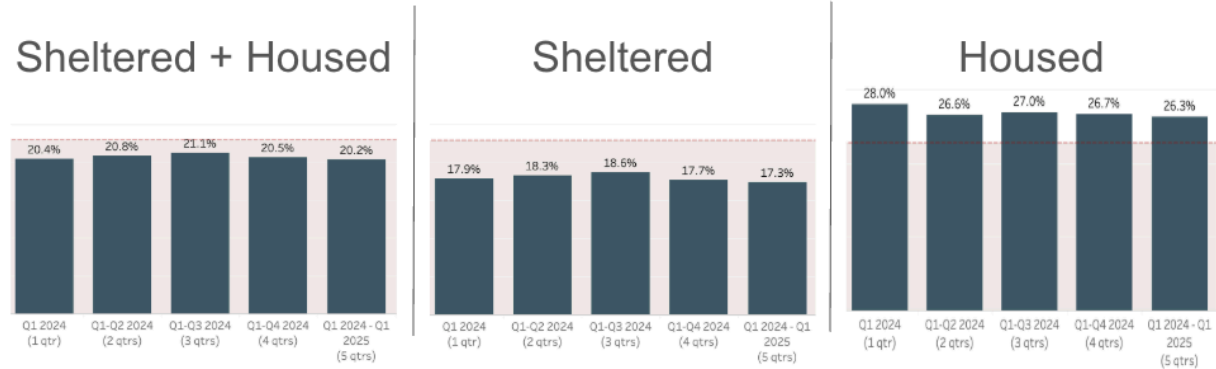
The following tables are from forthcoming updates to the Homelessness Response System data Dashboard (May 2025) available at url: <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/homelessness.response/viz/HRAPDashboard/LandingPage>

HRAP Measure 2: Reduce Unsheltered Homelessness for Priority Populations

Visualization 1: Percentage of people with an entry into shelter or housing between Q1 2024 and Q1 2025 (Jan 1 2024 - March 30 2025) by racialized identity compared to baseline population of unhoused people in January 2024



Visualization 2: Percentage of people with an entry into shelter, housing, or both shelter and housing in Q1 2024 - Q1 2025 (Jan 1 2024 - March 30 2025) by racialized identity compared to baseline population of unhoused people in January 2024 - Black/African American/African detail



Engagement Approach

To inform recommendations to decrease this disparity, the Homelessness Response System (HRS) Team worked with the Homeless Services Department (HSD) to design the engagement approach and conversation guide in partnership with members of the HRS Community Advisory Committee. This work builds off the past and current engagement work the Homeless Services Department has conducted with their advisory bodies, current contracted providers, and community partners.

The process included reviewing themes from 10 previous engagements, the earliest taking place in 2020, the most recent taking place in early March 2025. These engagements have focused on culturally specific needs/concerns for the Black and African American community and the culturally specific providers who serve them. This ensured that we were not replicating previous engagements. From the themes, we found that while there were general comments about housing services, there was little that focused specifically on the experiences in shelter and potential barriers to accessing shelter.

The HRS team met with advisory bodies, contracted and non-contracted culturally specific and culturally responsive service providers, and community partners for input specifically on experiences in and barriers to accessing shelter.

Time and capacity needs at the provider and community levels impacted engagement. Continued engagement is necessary for both a deeper and broader understanding. It is also important to note that despite their data being reported together, we have heard from the community that the barriers and needs experienced by Black and African American communities are distinct from those experienced by African communities and vice versa, therefore continued engagement will include engaging these communities specifically and incorporating any differences into recommendations.

Highlights of current Homeless Services Department (HSD) engagement work:

- The HSD is in ongoing communication with our culturally specific providers and works to center their expertise in what is needed for the communities they serve.

- HSD will continue this engagement with Black, African American and African community leaders, providers and individuals to seek both a deeper and broader understanding from culturally specific providers and partners.
- The advisory structure of HSD includes an Equity Advisory Committee and a Lived Experience Advisory Committee.
- HSD is strengthening its monitoring of provider equity work and accountability for culturally responsive services with all providers.
 - All HSD contracts include a requirement for providers to have and monitor an equity work plan. Part of the implementation of these recommendations will include aligning the data on who is served reflected in the dashboards with the provider's equity goals as well as training and technical assistance needs.
- HSD will monitor provider dashboards around who is served in shelter and support providers with technical assistance and training to address areas for improvement.