

Homeless Services Department Community Budget Advisory Committee FY26 Supplemental Budget Recommendations Letter

On behalf of the Community Budget Advisory Committee for the Homeless Services Department, thank you for your thoughtful consideration of our committee's feedback on the department's budget and this year's budget process.

We are a ten-person committee, with diverse members who include people with experience with homelessness, people from communities of color, people who work for nonprofit organizations that provide services to people who are unhoused, and people who care deeply about our unhoused neighbors in Portland and Multnomah County.

The committee has reviewed the department's program offers and the Chair's proposed budget for next fiscal year. We want to highlight the following recommendations and areas of concern:

Culturally Specific Services and Equitable Outcomes: We want to emphasize the continued need to fully and robustly fund and provide technical assistance to organizations that are providing culturally specific services. We know that culturally specific services work and are more effective at supporting individuals from communities that have been historically under-resourced, including communities of color, the LGBTQIA2S+ community, veterans, and people with disabilities - including those with mental health and substance use disorders. We urge the County to dedicate additional funding that is received to support culturally specific service providers, including providing technical assistance and capacity building resources. We also urge the HSD to ensure that non-culturally specific service providers are relentlessly striving to achieve their established equity-related metrics.

Lack of New Permanent Supportive Housing Units: While we commend the County for continuing to support existing PSH units, we are concerned and disappointed about the lack of funding for new PSH units next fiscal year. Our community has a deep need for additional PSH. There are people living unhoused in our community who require PSH to successfully transition from living on the streets to being housed. They require the supportive services and the continual

rental assistance that accompany PSH units. As a community, we have recognized this need, as evidenced by the establishment of the goal of adding 2,235 new PSH housing units by 2030 in the SHS Local Implementation Plan. If additional funding becomes available, we strongly urge the County to dedicate funding to the addition of new PSH units in the coming year.

Placement Out of Shelter: There is earnest disagreement within our committee regarding the balance of resources for increased shelter beds versus placement out of shelter. However, we do all agree that our community's long-term strategy should emphasize permanent housing. That being said, we acknowledge the continued need for shelter beds in our region, and want to strongly recommend the need for safe, trauma-informed shelter environments with a defined pathway to permanent housing. Shelter is only one part of the system for addressing homelessness, and it is never the end result we are striving for. Shelter is indeed, shelter, but it is not housing and it is not the same as being permanently housed. It is temporary. It is not accessible by all of our neighbors (for instance, partnered individuals, people with pets, people with mental health and substance use disorders, transgender and gender expansive individuals, people with children, people with disabilities all experience barriers to accessing shelter in our community). It is not an appropriate option for all of our neighbors (not everyone feels safe or receives the services and care they need in a shelter environment). And it does not align with our community's overarching goals of housing for everyone.

While the County has prioritized adding new shelter beds, these new beds are not the only strategy to ensure there are enough beds for the people who need and want them. Another strategy is to invest in the successful transition of people from shelter into permanent housing. As an example, this can include robust funding for employment services. Every time a person transitions from a shelter bed into housing - it frees up a bed for another person who needs it. We strongly urge the County to place less emphasis on adding new shelter beds, which quite frankly feels like more of a political strategy and not a human-centered strategy, and instead dedicate resources to the placement of individuals into permanent housing.

Wage Equity and Staff Training: As we all know, the Homeless Services Department is not a direct service provider, and instead issues contracts to

numerous community-based service providers to implement the department's - and County's - goals. It is vital that the HSD, and the County, prioritize ensuring that the employees of contracted service providers are paid a living wage for this work and receive the comprehensive training and support they need to provide high quality services. Not only is this the right thing to do - we should absolutely be paying people a living wage - but also, it leads to better outcomes for people who are unhoused and accessing services. When staff turnover decreases, when staff vacancies are minimal - service providers provide better care. It means that relationships between clients and case managers are not disrupted when a case manager moves to a new organization. It means that service providers can maintain full caseloads of clients. It means that more people remain housed. We urge the County to require service providers to pay a living wage - which means that the County contracts need to fund service providers at a rate that allows them to pay their employees a living wage. Additionally, if funds become available, we encourage the County to add back the third year of Workforce Stabilization Grants, which for many service providers, resulted in less turnover, less vacancies, and improved staff wellbeing.

Final Budget Thoughts: As one of our committee members recently stated - the County's budget should be a tool for justice and not merely survival. As we make the hard decisions regarding which programs to 'save' and which to deprioritize or eliminate, we need to remember that it is not about saving programs, it is about saving lives. Additionally, we want to offer an observation that the historic and current politicalization of the HSD is a barrier to doing the actual work of eliminating homelessness in our community. The political posturing is not honest and it is not helpful to helping our community understand the actual work of supporting our unhoused neighbors. Our community's service providers are experts in their work. Our unhoused neighbors are the experts of their own lives and know what that need. Service providers work directly with individuals who are unhoused, listening to what they need and how best to meet those needs. We encourage our elected officials to spend time with service providers, unhoused neighbors, and advisory bodies - including the CBACs - to inform their understanding of community needs and the best practices that work.

A Note on Process: Our CBAC was disappointed with this year's budget process. The committee is composed of unpaid volunteers who are contributing their time,

expertise, and experience to evaluating the HSD budget and providing recommendations that reflect our desire for a budget that prioritizes equity, justice, and community thriving. The expectations that this committee could thoughtfully and intentionally complete this work in a three-week time period are unrealistic and suggests county leadership considers our feedback perfunctory at best. It did not help that there were multiple mistakes in the uploading of budget information that made it impossible for the committee to understand and evaluate the proposed budget. We encourage the HSD and the County more broadly to provide a minimum of eight weeks to CBACs to do their work and to be very clear about how their recommendations will be used. Additionally, the County needs to prioritize the release of accurate information to the public. We understand that mistakes happen. However, it took two weeks to correct the errors in the budget information provided to the public (which is the only budget information that CBACs have access to), reducing the committee's time to ONE WEEK of access to accurate budget information prior to the deadline to submit our recommendation letter. This is completely unacceptable, and the County needs to prioritize identifying the systemic issues that caused this error to occur and ensure that it is fixed prior to the next budget cycle.

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FY26 HSD CBAC Committee Members: Anisa Ali, Nicki Dardinger, Daniel DeMelo, Lisa Drennan, Cameron Foster, Amanda Garren, Christine Hermann, Wendy Lear, Darius Mani Yaw, and Nathan Williams