

Joint Office of Homeless Services CBAC

To: Chair Jessica Vega Pederson and Board of County Commissioners

From: Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) Community Budget Advisory Committee (CBAC)

Date: April 27, 2023

Subject: JOHS CBAC Report & Recommendations

Executive Summary

In the face of an escalating homelessness crisis, the Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) Community Budget Advisory Committee (CBAC) is deeply concerned about not only the ongoing challenges our communities face but an additional scarcity of data and analysis in how JOHS money is being spent necessary to make informed recommendations and decisions. As public funding for JOHS has surged, so too have concerns about its effective allocation and utilization to maximize impact.

In this report, the CBAC outlines the key issues and recommendations that emerged during our review of the JOHS FY2024 budget:

- Establishing a clear CBAC process, including sharing of department projected expenses and outcomes, more thorough training on budget & spending analysis, and providing a modest stipend for committee work.
- Addressing workforce challenges within JOHS and its contracted service providers, as sufficient staff resources and capacity are crucial for timely and efficient support coordination.

- Maintaining funding for permanent rehousing resources and immediate shelter for homeless community members, continuing to fund hygiene access, and exploring a pilot program for direct cash transfers to homeless individuals.

Additionally, we recommend the county auditor perform a thorough audit of JOHS. We urge the county to scrutinize JOHS spending and prioritize the responsible use of funds.

By promoting transparency, equity, and effective resource allocation in addressing the homelessness crisis, we aim to restore public faith in our institutions and work towards ending homelessness and extreme poverty in Multnomah county.

Process

In our inaugural year, the Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) Community Budget Advisory Committee (CBAC) faced a series of challenges that impacted our ability to review and provide recommendations. Despite these setbacks, our committee remained steadfast in our commitment to deliver well-informed recommendations while navigating the complexities of public meeting regulations and fostering a collaborative and culturally responsive approach.

Our committee initially engaged with JOHS in September 2022, with our first meeting occurring on December 14, 2022. From December 2022 through April 2023, we convened roughly monthly, receiving briefings from JOHS staff, participating in equity lens training, and reviewing the JOHS FY2024 budget and budget process. Each member elected to review approximately 30 Program Offers independently and remotely, and we compiled our recommendations into this report.

The CBAC faced significant hurdles, such as delays in obtaining crucial information from JOHS, lack of assistance from the county, difficulties in engaging with other advisory committees, and obstacles in adhering to Oregon open public meeting law and county code requirements. Moreover, our committee has not yet been formally created by the Board of Commissioners. We were not provided the full statutorily-set roster of seven members. A lack of training on budget matters combined with time constraints hindered our ability to have in-depth discussions on important issues. The lack of assistance from the county led the only committee member with previous CBAC experience to resign rather than attempt to continue her volunteer work without support from the county.

Despite these issues, we managed to establish a timeline for submitting questions to JOHS staff, reviewing budget presentations, and producing our final committee report. However, ongoing delays in receiving responses necessitated multiple deadline extensions for our committee members.

To improve future interactions with JOHS, we recommend having a clear timeline in place for receiving program offers and budget transmittal letters, submitting questions, and obtaining answers from JOHS staff. We recommend this committee continue to meet on a 9-12 month cycle, at least for the foreseeable future. We also suggest providing a better understanding of projected current year expenses and outcomes for each program offer. Additionally, offering a modest stipend for committee work could help foster more sustained engagement among committee members, while also promoting equity by removing potential financial barriers to participation.

In accordance with county code, our committee is mandated to "actively participate in county budget development and review, provide insights on policy considerations, and engage in operational and strategic planning." Unfortunately, we have faced obstacles in fulfilling these duties, as the county has advised us to limit our involvement to reviewing the budget data they provide. Despite multiple requests, we have not received vital provider contract expenditure information and concrete outcome data — a matter of public record — essential for executing our responsibilities as outlined in the county code. Providing this information to our committee and the public must be a priority for the county.

As the inaugural JOHS CBAC, we acknowledge the challenges in establishing new processes. Nevertheless, we remain committed to our objectives and look forward to enhancing collaboration and transparency within the budget review process for the benefit of our community.

Emerging Issues & Changes

The role of our committee is to think critically and provide recommendations about how public funding is applied to support people experiencing homelessness in our region, a task that has proven difficult due to the organization's lack of transparency and cooperation. As funding for JOHS has surged in recent years, the people of Multnomah County have intensified their concerns about the effective allocation and utilization of these resources. In order to restore public faith in our institutions, we must confront these challenges head-on and demand greater accountability from JOHS.

The continued increase in homelessness in Multnomah County has concerned our committee and our communities. While the influx of resources from various public investments and the Supportive Housing Services measure has been encouraging, it is vital that we ensure the continuation of successful programs as ARP funding winds down.

As our communities grapple with historic and continued discrimination, ongoing economic challenges and the lingering effects of previous crises, the need for a crisis-centered approach to homelessness becomes even more pressing. This urgency is underscored by the heartbreaking reality that, despite years of institutional effort and a substantial 350% growth in the JOHS budget, our unsheltered homeless population has risen by an alarming 50% in the last three years.¹

Workforce challenges within JOHS and its contracted service providers also warrant attention. It is imperative that JOHS has the staff resources and capacity to coordinate support with nonprofit agencies in a timely and efficient manner. JOHS needs to work with their funded partners to ensure that the amount of money provided is sufficient to complete requested work.

In light of these ongoing issues, it is evident that a more forceful, crisis-centered approach to addressing homelessness and related social issues is not only necessary but urgent. By confronting these challenges head-on and demanding greater accountability from JOHS, we can begin to restore public faith in the Joint Office's response to this crisis and work towards a more equitable and inclusive future for all in our communities.

¹ [2022 Point in Time Report](#).

Budget Feedback & Program Offer Recommendations

Our committee has come together to provide crucial feedback on the JOHS budget, with an emphasis on transparency, equity, and the effective allocation of resources. We acknowledge that without sufficient information, our ability to offer thorough public review and create meaningful advice is limited.

It is of utmost importance that the JOHS share program expenditure and outcome data for the sake of accountability and informed decision-making.

Given the challenges we faced as a committee, we cannot confidently offer a thorough evaluation of each program offer or the budget at large. However, we have outlined specific recommendations to address the homelessness crisis:

- Conduct a thorough audit of JOHS by the Multnomah County Auditor, as the last audit occurred in 2017.
- We recommend that Multnomah County not reduce funding for Program Offer #30906, which focuses on permanent rehousing resources for individuals in emergency shelters. This is in line with the City of Portland's public messaging and commitment to providing stable housing for those in need.
- Prioritize and not reduce funding for immediate shelter for homeless community members, with a focus on Out of Target programs like #30905. We believe these programs to be important and, as far as we know, successful. It is crucial that investments in infrastructure are maintained, as they play a key role in the program's effectiveness. However, we have not been provided enough information about why the cost per bed has increased.

- We are concerned about a reduction in funding for emergency shelter capacity (30206) given that we anticipate a continuing increase in extreme weather events.
- Continue to fund hygiene access (30902) for both homeless individuals and the larger community, given reduced access to public restrooms due to Covid-19 and budget restrictions.

Additionally, we encourage the county to improve communication with the public on homelessness-related issues and to work with the state to explore a pilot program for direct cash transfers to homeless individuals.

Lastly, we recognize the importance of American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds in supporting vital programs and services for people experiencing homelessness. We believe that these programs should be funded in FY24 and beyond, but we would like to see additional information about the efficacy of these programs.

Given the lack of specific spending & usage data, it becomes vital that we examine the true impact of our financial commitments. As an instructive example, offer 30902 proposes a \$750,000 allocation for hygiene access points, at a cost of \$75 per use. It is crucial to verify that our resources are making as large a difference as possible in the lives of our most vulnerable citizens. Nevertheless, we support the *goals* of this program offer wholeheartedly, recognizing its obvious benefits. However, we feel insufficiently empowered to advocate for it *confidently* without additional data to validate its effectiveness. We highlight this program offer only because its costs and outcomes are easier to quickly describe; our committee shares the same sentiments across all of the FY2024 JOHS program offers.

Through these recommendations, we aim to encourage a closer examination of the JOHS budget and promote transparency, equity, and effective resource allocation in addressing the homelessness crisis in Multnomah County.

We urge the county to more closely scrutinize JOHS spending and to prioritize the responsible & equitable use of funds.

Acknowledgements

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