

Joint Office of Homeless Services Community Budget Advisory Committee

To: Chair Jessica Vega Pederson and the Multnomah County Board of County Commissioners

From: Multnomah County JOHS Community Budget Advisory Committee (CBAC)

Date: April 25, 2024

Subject: JOHS CBAC Report & Recommendations

Executive Summary

The Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) Community Budget Advisory Committee (CBAC) has encountered significant challenges in its ability to review and provide recommendations due to a lack of support and collaboration from County administration. Despite these obstacles, the committee remains committed to delivering well-informed recommendations and ensuring accountability in the County's homelessness response efforts.

Key findings and recommendations:

- County administration has insufficiently provided timely support to the CBAC, hindering the committee's ability to effectively review and advise on budget matters.
- The proposed Homelessness Response Action Plan (HRAP) seeks to abolish the CBAC without addressing the underlying issues or providing clear objectives for the proposed replacement Advisory Committee.
- The committee recommends several adjustments to the proposed Advisory Committee structure to ensure continuity, representation, and effectiveness.
- The County should prioritize transparency by sharing program expenditure and outcome data, design and facilitate a direct cash pilot program for homeless individuals, and develop a comprehensive plan to support the influx of migrants and asylum seekers.
- JOHS must commit to reducing the size of our unsheltered homeless population by at least one individual by the end of 2025 to maintain public trust and secure the necessary resources to address the issue effectively.

The CBAC urges the County to closely scrutinize JOHS spending, prioritize the responsible use of funds, and address the identified procedural and oversight issues to foster genuine collaboration and work towards a more effective and transparent approach to addressing the homelessness crisis.

Process

As the Board of Commissioners is aware from our previous report, the Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) Community Budget Advisory Committee (CBAC) encountered several challenges during our inaugural year that hindered our ability to review and provide recommendations. Despite these obstacles, our committee remained committed to delivering well-informed recommendations while navigating the complexities of public meeting regulations and fostering a collaborative and culturally responsive approach.

Unfortunately, these procedural issues persisted into the current fiscal year. Acting on guidance from the County Chair, JOHS and OCI did not engage with our committee for an extended six-month period from June 2023 to January 2024, despite Multnomah County Code mandating that "Each department director will be responsible to assign technical and clerical support for Community Budget Advisory Committees" (§ 3.305). On October 6, 2023, JOHS staff confirmed to our Chair via email correspondence that no technical or clerical support had been assigned at that time. During a private meeting with JOHS Director Dan Field on November 13, 2023, our Chair referred Director Field to the relevant section of Multnomah County Code requiring the provision of technical and clerical support and invited him or his staff to attend the upcoming November 27, 2023 meeting of the JOHS CBAC. However, no JOHS or County staff attended this meeting, and only began meeting with us again in January 2024.

Despite the lack of County support, our meetings during this period attracted notable attendees, including County Commissioner Sharon Meieran, County Auditor Jennifer McGuirk, City of Portland Auditor Simone Rede, as well as representatives from the office of County Commissioner Julia Brim Edwards and the leadership of the Bybee Lakes Hope Center.

Shortly after our committee sent an unanswered letter to JOHS Director Field asking for the re-establishment of a productive relationship, we learned from a County press release that the proposed JOHS IGA extension & Homelessness Response Action Plan (HRAP) would abolish our committee. Given our committee's critical stance regarding the capacity of JOHS to address the homelessness crisis, the proposed HRAP could be interpreted as a measure partially intended to mute a critical community body.

In January 2024, our committee resumed meetings with JOHS. We received an equity training from JOHS Equity Manager Emily Nelson and presentations on the JOHS Budget from JOHS Business & Operations Manager Antoinette Payne. We also met with JOHS Director Dan Field and former (interim) HRAP director Chris Fick to discuss the HRAP. During this period, the committee reviewed the JOHS program offers, submitted questions, and received timely answers to the majority of inquiries. The information that we received supported and informed the recommendations of the committee provided in this report.

Despite these challenges and the proposed dissolution of our committee in the HRAP, we remain steadfast in our commitment to providing informed recommendations and ensuring accountability in the County's homelessness response efforts. We strongly believe that the insights gained from our committee's work, as well as the lessons learned from the procedural

issues encountered, should be carefully considered and addressed in any future advisory structures. By doing so, the County can build upon the foundation we have laid, foster genuine collaboration between the administration and the community, and work towards a more effective and transparent approach to addressing the homelessness crisis. As we move forward, it is crucial that the County prioritizes open communication, adherence to established codes and procedures, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in shaping its homelessness response strategies. Only through such a commitment can we hope to make meaningful progress in addressing this complex and pressing issue.

Emerging Issues & Changes

Our committee's role is to carefully consider and suggest ways to improve the use of public funds for supporting people experiencing homelessness in our area. However, this has been challenging due to a lack of timely collaboration from JOHS. As JOHS has received increased funding recently, the residents of Multnomah County have growing concerns about how effectively these funds are being allocated and used. To rebuild public trust in our institutions, we must confront these challenges head-on and demand greater accountability from JOHS.

A prime example of this issue can be found in the budget documents provided to our committee, which present an overly simplistic YES/NO report on some matters of equity. Program Offer #30100, titled "System Access, Assessment, & Navigation," includes an outcome stating, "BIPOC assessed at a rate as high or higher than percent of HUD homeless population." While it is heartening to see that this program expects to maintain this outcome in the upcoming year, our committee has repeatedly sought access to the specific data used to arrive at this binary result. By obscuring these figures behind a YES/NO outcome, any potential fluctuations, whether positive or negative, in the rate of BIPOC assessment may be hidden from view. Our committee remains puzzled as to why JOHS has been unable to furnish this data or why it cannot be incorporated into the budget offer. A brief analysis conducted by our representative to the Central CBAC of program offers from other County departments reveals that few to no other outcomes are reported in such a boolean manner. This kind of opaqueness does a disservice not only to the work of our committee but to the community at large.

The impending expiration of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds presents a significant challenge for JOHS and the communities it serves. These funds have been crucial in supporting various programs and initiatives aimed at addressing homelessness in Multnomah County. As this source of funding expires, it is imperative that JOHS ensures the continuity of essential services and the smooth transition to alternative funding sources.

Furthermore, the issue of unspent Supportive Housing Services (SHS) funds – and the potential for Metro to clawback these funds to support affordable housing construction – raises serious questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of JOHS financial management. These unspent funds represent lost opportunities to provide much-needed support to individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Our committee strongly believes that JOHS must address its internal infrastructure and capacity issues to ensure that all available resources are utilized to

their fullest potential. This includes investing in additional capacity, streamlining processes, and fostering a culture of accountability and transparency.

The ongoing fentanyl crisis, which has prompted a 90-day emergency declaration, underscores the urgent need for a coordinated and comprehensive response to the intersecting challenges of homelessness and substance abuse. JOHS must work closely with public health officials, law enforcement, and community partners to develop innovative strategies that prioritize housing, harm reduction, treatment, and support services. Our committee recognizes the complexity of this issue and stands ready to provide input and recommendations to ensure that the needs of those most vulnerable are met with compassion and effectiveness.

As Multnomah County and the City of Portland welcome new leadership, including newly elected County Commissioners and a new City government structure, it is crucial that County leadership engages proactively with these incoming officials. The proposed HRAP, while well-intentioned, risks boxing in these new governments and limiting their ability to develop and implement fresh approaches to addressing homelessness. Our committee strongly encourages County leadership to work collaboratively with the new leadership to ensure that the HRAP remains flexible and responsive to evolving needs and priorities. By fostering open communication and genuine partnership, County leadership can help build a foundation for lasting progress in the fight against homelessness.

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

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

Do Not Abolish This Committee

After dedicating two years and countless hours of unpaid labor to serving our communities, our CBAC questions the necessity of dissolving our committee altogether.

In recent correspondence with former JOHS Homelessness Response System interim Director Chris Fick, our Chair asked Fick “Were there specific shortcomings identified in the current configuration of the JOHS CBAC that prompted the proposed restructuring?” Fick answered “No.”

Given that no deficiencies motivated the proposal to change our current CBAC structure, and the HRAP plan fails to provide any outcomes or objectives to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed Advisory Committee set to supersede ours, it becomes evident that there are few conceivable rationales driving the suggested dissolution of our committee.

Even more alarming is the apparent lack of awareness among County administration regarding the procedural ramifications of abolishing our committee. County staff seemed unaware that replacing our committee would necessitate an amendment to the County Code and that dissolving our committee would require removing us from our positions, despite our appointment by the Board of Commissioners to three-year terms. This concern is further compounded by the fact that on April 4, 2024, nearly five months after the Chair and Portland Mayor released their proposal to eliminate our committee, the Board of Commissioners appointed two new members to our committee for three-year terms. Moreover, it calls into question whether County administration is moving forward with the necessary diligence and attention to matters of greater consequence than mere compliance with Multnomah County Code, such as saving the lives of our neighbors on the streets and building sufficient capacity to achieve a meaningful reduction in homelessness.

Nevertheless, if the County and City choose to replace the current JOHS CBAC with the newly proposed Community Advisory Committee we recommend the following adjustments at a minimum:

1. To maintain continuity and leverage valuable experience, the new Advisory Committee should include at least two members from our current CBAC.
2. In addition to the proposed representative categories (business, labor, HRS service providers, philanthropy, crisis response, etc.), the new Advisory Committee should include at least three members from the general public who are not actively engaged in or have a professional stake in the work of JOHS.
3. To effectively manage the broader scope of oversight and advice, the new Advisory Committee should establish a dedicated Budget Advisory Subcommittee. This subcommittee can focus on the time-intensive work of budget review, even with a year-round meeting schedule.
4. To ensure accountability and measure success, the HRAP should establish clear goals and metrics for assessing the performance of the Advisory Committee.
5. To foster balance and representation, a portion of the seats on the Advisory Committee should be appointed and confirmed by the Portland City Council.

Direct Cash Pilot

Multnomah County should design and facilitate (or otherwise fund and authorize) at least one pilot program for direct cash transfers to homeless individuals. With hundreds of millions of dollars levied and spent, and consistent underspending in recent years, there is a moral imperative to at least try a method of directly offering cash support to individuals experiencing extreme poverty. It is simply no longer tenable to look homeless community members in the eye and say “We don’t trust you to spend money we could give you. You are better served by us spending tens of thousands of dollars per person on your behalf.”

Pilot programs in [Denver](#), Vancouver BC, and other communities have shown undeniable measurable benefit. Recipients of direct aid in these pilots experience lower rates of sleeping without shelter, higher employment, better health and fewer emergency room visits, and lower rates of food insecurity.

Plan For and Support Migrants & Asylum Seekers

We were disappointed to learn that JOHS and Multnomah County have no plans developed to support any potential or developing surge in asylum seekers and migrants.

The warning signs have been abundant. Since early 2022, cities like New York, Chicago, and Denver have witnessed the relocation of hundreds of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers to their communities. The failure to develop even a rudimentary plan despite a two-year forewarning is profoundly disheartening. This shortcoming not only reveals a lack of long-term strategic thinking but also does a grave disservice to the vulnerable individuals seeking a better life in our County. The absence of a comprehensive plan to address this unfolding crisis leaves these newcomers without the support and resources they desperately need.

The recent news about the potential eviction of 20 asylum-seeking families from an airport motel highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive plan to develop sufficient and efficient shelter capacity. It is imperative that we never find ourselves in a situation where distributing tarps and tents to homeless families is the only remaining option. Denver, a city-county of comparable size to Portland, has grappled with assisting 40,000 asylum seekers since 2022. Multnomah County has the ability and the moral obligation to prevent our much smaller number of asylum seekers, many of whom are children, from being forced to sleep on the streets. We must recognize that these individuals are navigating a foreign country, city, language, and legal system with which they are largely unfamiliar, and provide them with the support and resources they need to build a better life in our community.

Moreover, we firmly reject the unproven assumption that providing essential care, such as shelter, will serve as an incentive for a dramatically increased influx of asylum seekers. This rejection is based not only on the lack of merit in this claim but also on the fact that we have been presented with no data substantiating this alleged effect; it is crucial to make decisions based on evidence rather than unfounded speculations. If this purported effect were indeed genuine, it would call into question the very purpose and effectiveness of offering any homelessness services at all.

It is of utmost importance that Multnomah County provides a well-informed estimate of the number of asylum seekers and migrants expected to relocate to the County in FY2025. Our preliminary calculations based on threadbare data provided by the County suggest that the influx of these individuals could, on its own, overwhelm any additional shelter capacity developed during this fiscal year. Consequently, without a comprehensive plan and accurate projections, we may face a scenario where the County experiences a net increase in unsheltered homelessness, despite efforts to expand shelter resources. Failing to account for

this potential surge in demand could lead to a crisis where the County is unable to provide adequate support and services to both the existing homeless population and the incoming asylum seekers and migrants. To effectively address this challenge and ensure that no one is left without shelter, it is imperative that the County conducts thorough research, engages in proactive planning, and allocates resources based on realistic and data-driven projections.

Commit to Reducing Unsheltered Homelessness

Currently, the FY2025 budget and the HRAP do not provide any estimates or commitments regarding the reduction of unsheltered homelessness. Although the HRAP pledges to shelter half of the individuals currently unsheltered by the end of 2025, JOHS staff have informed our committee that we may observe little to no change in the overall size of the unsheltered population.

JOHS staff have explained to our committee that the rationale behind this projection is the relative ease of planning for increased capacity in the homelessness response system – such as shelters and permanent supportive housing – compared to the difficulty in planning for and estimating the influx of newly homeless individuals. While we acknowledge the challenges associated with producing such an estimate, we find it difficult to accept that it is entirely impossible. It stands to reason that the number of newly homeless people in a future year will bear some resemblance to the preceding year, even if not an exact match.

It is crucial that the County and JOHS commit themselves in FY2025 and in the HRAP to reducing the size of Multnomah County's unsheltered homeless population *by at least one individual*. The rationale behind this commitment is clear:

1. FY2025 marks the midpoint for the SHS measure; if we fail to initiate a reduction in the size of the unsheltered homeless population with the substantial funds currently available, it is highly probable that Metro voters will not support the continuation of the measure in 2030. Consequently, we may lack the necessary resources to achieve any meaningful reductions in the future.
2. The County allocates significant funds to programs aimed at preventing individuals from becoming homeless (e.g. by providing rental assistance to those temporarily unable to pay rent). In such cases, it can be argued that the funds directly prevented a specific person from becoming homeless. However, this approach only addresses the immediate effects. It is conceivable (but not proven) that, by subsidizing rents for hundreds of low-income Multnomah County residents, these rental assistance programs inadvertently send a price signal indicating that people can afford higher rents. This, in turn, could lead to an increase in rents, ultimately resulting in either a rise in homelessness or a greater number of residents relying on rental assistance. Regrettably, when we inquired with JOHS about whether they had investigated or studied the potential second-order effects of these programs, they confirmed that they had not considered this aspect (*to be clear, we support these rental assistance programs, and will continue to do so until presented with evidence showing ineffectiveness*). By reorienting overall outcomes to focus on reducing unsheltered homelessness, we incentivize the kind of research that

demonstrates the effectiveness of homelessness reduction programs in decreasing the actual number of homeless individuals, rather than merely reducing homelessness among the directly served population.

3. Out of our homeless populations, unsheltered homelessness is the most visible, directly measurable, and has the most profound impact on the people, neighborhoods, and businesses that materially support JOHS. Without a reduction in unsheltered homelessness, we may continue to witness disinvestment in our communities. This disinvestment will diminish the funding available to JOHS, making it essential that we maintain the community's confidence in the ability of JOHS to reduce unsheltered homelessness. This confidence is necessary to ensure that we have the material resources required to effectively address the issue. Making this commitment—and, of course, following through on it—is the first step towards ensuring that JOHS has the trust and support of the communities that fund its work.

While our strongest desire would be for JOHS to commit to ending unsheltered homelessness (or achieving a minimum 95% reduction) by a definitive date, we recognize the challenges associated with such long-term planning. However, at the very least, we demand that JOHS pledge to reduce unsheltered homelessness by at least one person by the end of 2025.

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 Multnomah County to more closely scrutinize JOHS spending and to prioritize the responsible use of funds.

Acknowledgements

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