



## State of the County, 2018

Chair Deborah Kafoury  
Prepared remarks  
March 16, 2018  
Reynolds High School  
Troutdale, OR

It is so good to be here at Reynolds High School, which has a special place in my heart. But in order to explain why, I need to back up four years.

On June 9, 2014 I signed the oath of office as Multnomah County Chair.

For nearly six years before, I'd been the Multnomah County Commissioner for District 1. That's the western edge of Multnomah County, from downtown Portland to Sauvie Island, to my neighborhood near the Sellwood Bridge.

But as the Chair, I have a responsibility to serve every corner of this county, from Sylvan Hill to the Bonneville Dam. On my first full day as Chair, I learned exactly what that meant.

I was getting ready for work, getting my own three kids out the door, when the Sheriff called me just a few minutes after receiving a 911 call from Reynolds.

About five minutes after 8, a student had fired shots inside the boys locker room at this school. Later I learned the shooter wounded Todd Rispler, a PE teacher. Through his sheer determination, Mr. Rispler managed to make it to the Main Office to put the school on lockdown.

But the shooter shot — and killed — Emilio Hoffman. Emilio was 14. A freshman at this high school. Just a year older than my son, Alexander.

I got off the phone with the Sheriff, my mind racing and my heart aching.

I didn't even have the Chair's official email account set up yet, but I emailed all county staff saying that anyone connected to Reynolds High who needed to go, should just go.

And then, in my first formal act, I sent county crisis counselors to the Wood Village parking lot where parents were reuniting with their kids. Within hours, our counselors and our incredible partners, opened a crisis drop-in center at the Mount Hood Community College gym.

That evening, I went to Emilio's vigil.

Walking into a roomful of strangers is on my best day, difficult. Walking in on the worst day of those strangers' lives?

That is even harder.

I didn't know many of the faces that I know now. It was hard not to feel self-conscious, like an intruder.

But I knew that when a crisis hits, Multnomah County has to be there. For Emilio and his family, for his classmates, his teachers, and his neighbors.

Because, through that oath of office, this community became my family.

And it was clear to everyone at the Baptist church that night — the first responders, the sheriff, the teachers and every one of the mayors gathered — that our community has a tremendous power when we work together.

I vowed then to focus on expanding mental health services in schools and to advocate for common sense gun laws.

And every day that I see another headline like Parkland, Florida, or Roseburg, Oregon, it brings me back to that day in June. And it makes me mad that we aren't doing more.

I try to be hopeful, and that's hard when Congress is MIA and the President will promise a room full of survivors that he will take action, and then turn around and promise the NRA that they have nothing to worry about.

But while the president is tweeting, Oregon is acting. Two weeks ago, Governor Kate Brown signed a bill I championed, closing a loophole which will protect survivors of domestic violence from guns.

But I know that we are not doing enough. It is fitting that we are here at Reynolds High School because it is the students, and not the adults, who are leading the fight for a better future. Thank you to all the students here today.

You understand: No matter how tough it is, we have to take care of one another.

This morning, I'm looking forward to talking about the work that Multnomah County is doing, including here in East County where our strong partnerships have led to new investments and collaborations.

Gresham Mayor Shane Bemis, Fairview Mayor Ted Tosterud, Troutdale Mayor Casey Ryan and Wood Village Mayor Timothy Clark thank you all for your partnership. Thank you to my friends in the state legislature. And I want to thank Reynolds School Superintendent Linda Florence and Principal Wade Bakley for this beautiful space. Would all the elected officials here please stand up?

**Six months ago**, we faced a challenge we'd never seen before. In the middle of Labor Day weekend, in the middle of the night, the Sheriff called to say that a wildfire was roaring down the Columbia Gorge.

A teenager, playing with fireworks started a fire that closed Interstate 84, jumped the Columbia River, and forced families in Dodson, Warrendale, Larch Mountain, East Corbett, Latourell and Bridal Veil to run for their lives.

Smoke and ash settled over our entire community.

The emergency response was swift. And I could not be more proud because from the first 911 call, Multnomah County pulled our community together like the safety net we are.

Sheriff Mike Reese's deputies and young volunteers went door-to-door to safely evacuate every single household. We set up an Emergency Operations Center in Troutdale. Animal Services worked with Sound Equine Options to load up hundreds of horses, llamas and goats.

County Human Services and the Red Cross opened shelters. Our Health Department advised us on air quality and managing our stress. We informed the press, hosted members of Congress and held community meetings.

And, we somehow managed the flood of support that poured in from people who love, love, love the Columbia Gorge.

After the fire spread 12 miles overnight, I drove with Governor Kate Brown to Multnomah Falls. I still get a lump in my throat remembering how relieved I was to see Gresham and Portland firefighters, who had worked through the night to save our historic, beloved lodge.

Of course, there was one person who pulled in just ahead of me: Commissioner Lori Stegmann.

For those of you who know Lori, this will come as no surprise as her passion for East Multnomah County has driven policy, debate and dollars to this district.

The Eagle Creek fire has left scars. We remain on high alert for landslides in burned areas. The tourism season was cut short. And Gorge residents are worried sick about the impact of crowds coming back into this now fragile environment.

But through strong partnerships and smart investments, we will recover.

And Multnomah County will be there. Showing up on the toughest days is what this job is all about. And the County stays, from crisis through recovery to stability.

**Driving to work**, I'm always struck by the construction cranes dotting the skyline. You can literally feel Portland booming. And yet, thousands of people are being left behind. A third of the households in Multnomah County struggle to meet their basic needs.

Families living on the edge never know if a sudden rent increase, or illness, or car accident will cost them their job or be the last domino that actually pushes them from their home into the street.

Last year, 30,000 people stood on that edge. Thirty thousand. That's a city the size of Redmond. But through the Joint Office of Homeless Services, they got the help they needed to stay in their housing, get back into housing from homelessness, or access basic shelter.

Unfortunately, decades of federal disinvestment in affordable housing have left local governments feeling like we are in this alone.

But working together, the city of Portland and Multnomah County have invested \$100 million over the last two years to respond to this housing crisis — and I want to thank Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler for standing so solidly with me on this.

And last month, we asked our state leaders to earmark \$5 million in emergency support to provide basic shelter and housing for families across Oregon. And the legislature came through - thank you!

But ending this housing crisis requires more than just emergency shelter. We need to find new money to invest in supportive housing.

We have learned that supportive housing is the handhold that can help someone stabilize. Sometimes that means housing with addiction treatment. Sometimes it means housing with counseling support for people with persistent mental illness.

We know this strategy works. So, in October, Commissioner Nick Fish, Mayor Wheeler and I led a broad coalition of partners in charting the course that will get us there. We committed to creating 2,000 supportive housing units over the next 10 years.

This year, we will also establish a dedicated Supportive Housing Investment fund, for people on our streets who need more than just the keys to an apartment. They need housing that is connected to the services that will save their lives.

I am also working with Mayor Wheeler and Metro President Tom Hughes to identify unallocated resources flowing from our local tourism taxes to invest not just in key infrastructure, and tourism, but getting people off the streets.

We're always working with our partners to find new, creative solutions, which brings me to Bobby Weinstock.

For more than 28 years, and as long as I've known him, Bobby's been helping seniors stay in their homes through his job with Northwest Pilot Project.

But over the past few years, Bobby's seen more and more seniors standing on the edge. Their monthly Social Security checks used to cover the rent — when the rent was \$350.

Now, the cheapest place they can find is \$700.

In the past, we would expect the federal government to step up. Instead, Congress has CUT budgets, making the waiting list for help even longer.

Bobby believed a local voucher program could cover the gap. Bobby was right.

Last month, Sharon Newell became one of the first seniors to receive one of our local long-term rent vouchers. Sharon has MS, chemical sensitivities and autoimmune issues that can give her seizures. After a landlady moved into a care home, she struggled to find a place that didn't make her symptoms worse.

And yet her Social Security check was never going to stretch far enough to pay for the healthy apartment she needed for herself and her beloved therapy dog, Gracie.

Sharon was ready to give up. Thanks to Bobby and the voucher, today she has an apartment all to herself, and she's getting her health back — free from the stress of having to choose between rent or pet food or medicine.

"This," Sharon says, "was a lifesaver."

And thanks to fresh funding, this voucher program may one day save hundreds more lives. I am pleased to announce Meyer Memorial Trust has matched the County's \$350,000 investment with \$150,000 of its own to improve and grow this program.

**After the shooting** at this school, we sent more mental health professionals into the field and today, we're serving 1,600 kids in six school districts. We just began providing support for teachers and case management to kids in kindergarten to third grade. We'll spend \$1.3 million for mental health in schools this year.

Few problems are tougher for individuals and families than a mental health crisis.

Last year, Multnomah County's 24-hour crisis services received more than 80,000 contacts through our call center, mobile outreach team and urgent walk-in clinic. 80,000 contacts.

With all that we're doing, it's so important to know what's working. To learn what are we doing right and find the gaps. I want to thank Commissioner Sharon Meieran for spearheading an analysis of our mental health system, and I'm looking forward to the recommendations from our nationally recognized contractor.

As an emergency room doctor, Sharon brings a passion for quality improvement and practical solutions. Thank you Sharon.

The more we understand what people need, the faster they can stabilize and get their lives back on track.

Take the LEAD@ program, or Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion. Instead of sending someone with a low-level drug offense straight to jail - the most expensive option - police can redirect that person to a case manager to provide the treatment and mental health care they need.

The results are promising: 70 percent of the 77 people enrolled are active in the program. Many have resolved outstanding warrants and citations. And, more than half have not been rearrested.

Changing how we think and use jails CAN CHANGE LIVES. In October, we were named one of eight counties nationally to receive a \$2 million MacArthur Safety and Justice Challenge grant. With our partners, we are working to develop transitional housing for African American justice-involved women to get the connection and stability they need. And, reduce over-incarceration and racial disparities we know exist in our system.

We could never do this kind of work alone. Multnomah County relies on this community. We partner formally with more than 650 non-profit agencies. And to all, I say: Thank You, Thank You, Thank You.

Without your passion, compassion, and expertise, we could not do our jobs.

Another lesson for me is how important peer support can be. When Brittany Picardo was 14, she sprained her back and was prescribed opioids. Was treating a young, healthy person with such powerful drugs ever a good idea? NO!

We now know, that like millions of others who were sold a bottle of opioids, Brittany's life spiraled from the experience. She became addicted, dropped out of school, grew estranged from her family.

But then, she connected. To the sponsor she could call at 3 a.m. just to talk. To a community of people in recovery. And to her mom. Today, at 21, Brittany is four years clean, working fulltime and planning on returning to school. Congratulations Brittany!

When corporations recklessly promote a highly addictive product that destroys lives, we need to hold them accountable. Last year Multnomah County filed a lawsuit against the manufacturers of the prescription drugs that have fueled this crisis.

And we've been aggressively trying to limit the damage.

We changed how we prescribe opioids in our own clinics and in the last two years, our dental clinics have cut the number of opioids 50 percent just by working with their patients.

We changed how our partners prescribe: Our Tri-County Health Officer, Dr. Paul Lewis, worked with Kaiser Permanente, Oregon Health & Science University, Providence Health & Services, Legacy Health and Adventist Health and insurance companies to sign onto new prescribing guidelines.

And we changed how community can respond. Multnomah County led the Legislative effort to make the life-saving drug Naloxone available to the general public. Since July 2013, our Health Department and Outside In have distributed more than ten thousand doses.

To date, 2,536 people have been rescued by Naloxone in Multnomah County. Many of them literally brought back to life.

That moment, between life and death, changes everything. It opens a door to help: people are often ready to enter treatment, to talk to a peer in recovery, to believe their life is worth fighting for. We need to make sure that door is open.

That's why I'm pleased to announce that on April 13, we are partnering with Lines for Life for the first- of-its kind Opioids and Addictions summit. This summit will bring together the three sheriffs, three DAs and the three boards of Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington Counties to hammer out solutions we can adopt now.

Multnomah County's first job is to be there in a crisis. But the county also provides the essential infrastructure to assure that those services are available.

Since I've taken office, we have led a surge in infrastructure investment. We built a brand new East County Courthouse in Rockwood. We built a new Sellwood Bridge. We are now building the new Central Courthouse and Health Department Headquarters.

We are making unprecedented investments in East County roads to make neighborhoods safer, more livable, and support Fairview, Troutdale and Wood Village businesses.

And just last month, Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson led a push in Salem to secure new funding to begin retrofitting the Burnside Bridge. Commissioner Vega Pederson is leading our efforts to ensure the Burnside survives a major earthquake and provides a lifeline between the east and west side of Multnomah County.

Altogether, these capital projects represent more than three-quarters of a billion dollars in new infrastructure. And, along the way, we put workers at the center of our efforts because these projects are also a pathway to a long-lasting career in the building trades. In other words, a pathway to a sustainable life.

In all of our major construction projects, we set goals to ensure that we have a strong workforce and that the small businesses hired reflect our diverse community. But the industry has not always welcomed women and people of color.

So, to help bridge these communities to family-wage jobs, our first step was a partnership with Construction Apprenticeship and Workforce Solutions (or CAWS) to grow pre-apprenticeship training programs. These programs give entry-level workers the skills and equipment needed to be an apprentice. They also connect them directly with contractors.

Echo Dahl, a single mother, found the pre-apprenticeship program at Oregon Tradeswomen, and started work.

But she wanted more for her family, and through the CAWS program, was hired by General Sheet Metal at a County Hiring Event.

Since then, she has nearly doubled her salary, was able to buy a house and stabilize her family.

I'm very pleased to announce that the Board of Commissioners took a second important step yesterday. We voted to set aside 1 percent of county construction funding to a new Construction Diversity and Equity Fund.

This fund will support the development of pre-apprenticeship and workforce retention programs for low income community members, women and people of color.

Commissioner Loretta Smith has long championed jobs for youth through SummerWorks, a program that gives young people their first paycheck, and the work skills and connections that lead to internships and college.

**I love almost everything** about this job. Even on the toughest days, I get to work with the best people : Multnomah County employees who every day, do quietly amazing things.

Daniela Schlechter-Keenan is one of them. Most of her patients at Multnomah County's North Portland Health Clinic don't know this physician assistant's amazing life story.

All her patients know is that Daniela takes remarkable care of THEM. She sees entire families to make the most of appointments, she delivers groceries, and she advocates tirelessly for them.

In January, Daniela was named one of Portland's best healthcare providers in a survey of her peers by Portland Monthly Magazine. And more importantly, in part because of her advocacy, OHSU reversed its 30-year policy and will no longer consider immigration status for transplant lists.

Today, a young mother of four is on a liver transplant list because of Daniela and her Multnomah County team. Thank you Daniela for your service.

Having a workforce with diverse voices and experiences makes it possible for Multnomah County to truly reach and represent our community. It's just as important that our employees feel they're supported and in a place where they are safe and can thrive.

We know we have a lot of work to do. And I want to thank all the employees who have shared their stories and are working alongside us to build a Workforce Equity Strategy that can make Multnomah County better, rooting out racism and making us the fair and just place we want to be.

I know that nationally, things feel deeply troubling, like we are coming apart.

But in Multnomah County, we're better than that. We value each other's perspectives. We listen to different points of view and we find solutions.

I'm excited for this next year and I'm thankful that we're in this together.

Thank you for allowing me to join you on this amazing journey.