

Statement of Position Regarding the Importance of Shelter Services for People Who Are Experiencing Homelessness

Housing Opportunities Action Council August 2016

For several years our community has been debating how to best respond to the challenge of homelessness, especially the provision of shelter services to the chronically homeless.¹ More recently, the Housing Opportunities Action Council (HOAC) was formed to plan for and support services that address those experiencing homelessness in an effective and coordinated way. Given this role, we believe it's important that we issue this statement on the role of shelter services in addressing this critical issue.

The Housing Opportunities Action Committee believes a comprehensive approach to addressing homelessness requires a continuum of services that includes shelter, permanent housing, and supportive services. Shelters are not a solution to homelessness – only permanent housing and housing stability can be considered a “solution” – but shelters are an important part of an effective continuum of services. Even an emphasis on “Housing First²” does not eliminate the need for shelters because:

- shelters provide an important point of intake into the service system and an opportunity to evaluate the person's needs; and
- individuals and families experiencing homelessness need a temporary place to stay while waiting for permanent housing.

As with all of us, people experiencing homeless respond best to being treated with dignity and respect. Shelters provide a starting point for establishing such a positive relationship. HOAC recognizes that some homeless people are not interested in or capable of civil behavior, and that our community has the right to expect and enforce appropriate limits on behavior. We also recognize and that shelters should be located where off-site impacts are minimized while still being readily accessible to those in need of services. For these reasons, it's important for Corvallis to do the hard work of locating and supporting the operation of homeless shelters.

Shelters keep people experiencing homelessness safer from harm. Weather is an obvious challenge during the winter, but illness and even death from exposure to the elements can happen any time of year. Those experiencing homelessness are also extremely vulnerable to predation and exploitation by others. Shelters will never be a complete solution to these risks,

but a safe place to sleep means a lot when a person or family has no home. For this reason, shelter services should be available all year long and not only when the weather is bad.

Because homelessness has many causes, shelters, permanent housing, and supportive services should be designed and operated with different needs in mind:

Individuals and families experiencing temporary homeless due to job loss, financial crises, eviction, foreclosure, domestic violence, and other crises, and who are not considered chronically homeless, require:

- shelters designed to provide short-term, temporary housing for families with children;
- a “rapid re-housing” system that minimizes time in the shelter and provides permanent housing along with temporary or long-term rent assistance (as needed); and
- services that include case management, income supports, job-related services, child care, and financial literacy training; and for survivors of domestic violence, additional housing and supportive services that address personal safety and other supports required to make the transition to a new and stable life.

Those experiencing chronic homelessness require:

- short-term, temporary shelter services for adults without children, staffed by people experienced in recognizing and dealing with challenging behaviors; and
- permanent supportive housing³ that is affordable and rent-assisted (i.e., the tenant pays no more than 30% of income toward rent); offers a flexible and comprehensive array of supportive services; and coordinates services among key partners to foster housing stability and address issues resulting from substance use, mental illness, and other chronic health conditions.

Veterans experiencing homelessness require:

- shelters that address basic needs;
- peer support; and
- intensive one on one support with Veteran’s Administration officials to help veterans access the benefits they have earned.

Youth experiencing homelessness require highly specialized services, including:

- shelters that address basic needs, contacts with trusted adults, protective services, and mediation services for families; and
- longer term services such as transitional housing, training in independent living skills, and alternative education services.

Housing First policies and practices depend on an adequate supply of affordable housing and supportive services. Our community is a long way from having enough of either. As a result, shelters are needed while we work on long-term housing solutions.

Some progress towards expanding the supply of housing and supportive services has been made by local nonprofit housing organizations,⁴ supportive private sector landlords, and by organizations providing rent voucher assistance not requiring long waiting periods.⁵ However, our community is far from having the number of housing units needed to meet demand for housing homeless individuals and families. Moreover, a key federal program intended to produce more units of affordable housing, the HOME Investment Partnership Program, has been reduced 52% since 2010.⁶ But, there are opportunities for making progress: the State of Oregon has developed new sources of housing development capital (the document recording fee, general obligation bonds, lottery backed bonds); local governments now have the option of generating local funds for housing (a construction excise tax, expected to be considered by the City of Corvallis later in 2016); the Linn Benton Housing Authority is considering using “project-based vouchers” to expand the supply of rent-assisted housing; and the State of Oregon has applied for federal waivers that will allow for Medicaid reimbursement for certain supportive services. However, it will take time to secure and put these resources to work, and in the meantime, temporary shelters are the only form of housing available to most people experiencing homelessness.

It is a myth that our community offers such a wealth of services that it has become a magnet to the chronically homeless. That doesn’t mean people experiencing homelessness don’t come to Corvallis from elsewhere. For instance, Community Outreach is the only family shelter between Salem and Eugene so their clients sometimes come from other communities; and by definition, those experiencing chronic homelessness haven’t had a home for a long time so moving around is common. But does the existence of shelter services provide a lure unique to Corvallis? Does Corvallis experience more homelessness than other communities because of our service system? An examination of the data suggests the answers to both questions is no:

- Corvallis is not special or unique in our provision of shelter services. Many other communities do the same. According to the “HUD 2015 Point-in-Time” count of homeless people in Oregon⁷, conducted in January when the Corvallis cold weather shelter was open, a relatively high 58% percent of the homeless in Benton County were sheltered by local organizations. This ranks Benton County third highest among the 17 counties in western Oregon in the percent of homeless that were sheltered. However, Benton County was hardly alone in providing shelter services to a significant percentage of the homeless population. Anywhere from 50% to 78% of the homeless were

sheltered in ten of the 17 counties in western Oregon, including neighboring Marion County (78%), Linn County (69%), and Lane County (51%).

- Benton County actually has a low rate of those experiencing homelessness – the opposite from what would be predicted if sheltering a high percentage of the homeless population actually had a “magnet effect.” During the 2015 Point in Time count, the rate of homelessness in Benton County was 1.5 people per 1,000 of population.⁸ This makes Benton County’s rate of homelessness one of the lowest in western Oregon, ranking 13th out of the 17 counties in the region. Closer to home, the rate of homelessness in Benton County was fourth lowest among the five mid- and south-Willamette Valley counties (Marion, Polk, Benton, Linn, and Lane). Only rural Polk County had a rate of homelessness lower than Benton County’s.

Summary statement: The Housing Opportunities Action Council believes that shelters for those experiencing homelessness play a critical role in keeping people safe; providing a point of intake into the service system; and offering a temporary place to stay while waiting for permanent housing. Shelters are especially important at this time because our community lacks the housing supply and supportive services needed to more fully implement a “housing first” model of service delivery. We also recognize that our community has the right to expect and enforce appropriate limits on behavior, and that shelters should be located where off-site impacts are minimized while still being readily accessible to those in need of services. For all of these reasons, it’s important for Corvallis to do the hard work of locating and supporting the operation of homeless shelters.

¹ “A ‘chronically homeless’ individual is defined to mean a homeless individual with a disability who lives either in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter, or in an institutional care facility if the individual has been living in the facility for fewer than 90 days and had been living in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter immediately before entering the institutional care facility. In order to meet the “chronically homeless” definition, the individual also must have been living as described above continuously for at least 12 months, or on at least four separate occasions in the last 3 years, where the combined occasions total a length of time of at least 12 months. Each period separating the occasions must include at least 7 nights of living in a situation other than a place not meant for human habitation, in an emergency shelter, or in a safe haven. Chronically homeless families are families with adult heads of household who meet the definition of a chronically homeless individual. If there is no adult in the family, the family would still be considered chronically homeless if a minor head of household meets all the criteria of a chronically homeless individual. A chronically homeless family includes those whose composition has fluctuated

while the head of household has been homeless.” -- Federal Register, Vol. 80, No. 233, Friday, December 4, 2015, 75792.

² “Housing First is a homeless assistance approach that prioritizes providing people experiencing homelessness with permanent housing as quickly as possible – and then providing voluntary supportive services as needed. This approach prioritizes client choice in both housing selection and in service participation. Housing First programs share critical elements:

- A focus on helping individuals and families access and sustain permanent rental housing as quickly as possible;
- A variety of services delivered to promote housing stability and individual well-being on an as-needed and entirely voluntary basis; and
- A standard lease agreement to housing – as opposed to mandated therapy or services compliance.

While all Housing First programs share these elements, program models vary significantly depending upon the population served. For people who have experienced chronic homelessness, long-term services and support may be needed. For most people experiencing homelessness, however, such long-term services are not necessary. The vast majority of homeless individuals and families fall into homelessness after a housing or personal crisis. For these households, the Housing First approach provides them with short-term assistance to find permanent housing quickly and without conditions. In turn, such households often require only brief, if any, support or assistance to achieve housing stability and individual well-being.” -- National Alliance to End Homelessness, http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/housing_first

³ “Supportive housing is a combination of affordable housing and supportive services designed to help vulnerable individuals and families use stable housing as a platform for health, recovery and personal growth. It focuses on balancing three distinct components of the model — housing, supportive services, and property and housing management. These three components can be viewed as a ‘three-legged stool,’ in which each part must bear equal weight to have a balanced project. Supportive housing, however, should not be isolated from the larger community. A project’s relationship to the community adds a vital fourth leg, turning the stool into a community table at which supportive housing providers must have a seat. Quality supportive housing projects are as diverse as the communities in which they are located. Despite these differences, all supportive housing:

- Targets households whose heads of household are experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness, or are inappropriately staying in an institution. They may be facing multiple barriers to employment and housing stability, including mental illness, substance use, and/or other disabling or chronic health conditions
- Is affordable, meaning the tenant household ideally pays no more than 30% of its income toward rent.
- Provides tenant households with a lease or sublease identical to non-supportive housing — with no limits on length of tenancy, as long as lease terms and conditions are met.

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- Proactively engages members of the tenant household in a flexible and comprehensive array of supportive services, without requiring participation in services as a condition of ongoing tenancy.
 - Effectively coordinates with key partners to address issues resulting from substance use, mental health and other crises, with a focus on fostering housing stability.
 - Supports tenants in connecting with community-based resources and activities, interacting with diverse individuals including those without disabilities, and building strong social support networks.”

Dimensions of Quality Supportive Housing, Second Edition, Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2013.

www.csh.org

⁴ Corvallis Housing First developed and operates Partners’ Place (18 units), and Willamette Neighborhood Housing Services has set-aside up to 20 units of existing housing for homeless individuals and families.

⁵ Rent voucher assistance is provided by Community Services Consortium, HUD-VASH, and Benton County Behavioral Health Services.

⁶ “Chart Book: Cuts in Federal Assistance Have Exacerbated Families’ Struggles to Afford Housing,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, April 2016.

⁷ Homelessness in Oregon: 2015 Point in Time Count, Oregon Housing and Community Services Department, September 30, 2015.

⁸ Rate of homelessness calculations completed by Jim Moorefield, Willamette Neighborhood Housing Services, based on data from Homelessness in Oregon: 2015 Point in Time Count and 2014 estimated county population from the U.S. Census.