

Housing Opportunities Action Council

Lead Administrator: Summary Report

Benton County and the City of Corvallis have contracted with United Way of Benton & Lincoln Counties to serve as the backbone organization, and host the position of Lead Administrator (aka, Program Manager) for HOAC from November 1, 2016 through June 30, 2018. Shawn Collins began serving in this role November 1, 2016.

Following is a summary report of the activities of the Program Manager, March 2018 – April 2018.

Project Updates

Workgroups: On April 6th, Andrea Myhre (SMART Team lead) and Shawn Collins met with the co-chairs of each of the workgroups to discuss challenges and next steps for each of the workgroups. Each group has made progress in recent months, but there is still work to complete related to review and revision of their workplans, setting short term goals, and establishing a more consistent report format for future HOAC meetings. Specific issues related to each workgroup are listed below.

- **Care Coordination:** There is some concern about overlap and coordination across this workgroup, and the Universal Care Coordination workgroup from IHN-CCO. There is membership shared across both, but more focused effort to align these two efforts is needed, and is being taken up by the co-chairs.
- **Mental and Behavioral Health:** Efforts to plan a summit are shifting to align with meetings planned by the Corvallis School District. Some work is needed to flesh out membership of the group, and ensure that issues identified in the meetings are addressed promptly.
- **Housing Supply and Messaging:** Priority policy items have been identified and brought forward to the Governing Board for review. A motion to amend/approve is expected in the April meeting. Housing Advocacy training opportunities for HOAC and community members are planned, with the first scheduled for May 23 at the Tunison Community Room.

Cold Weather Shelter: Operations at the Corvallis Men's Shelter closed on April 2, with all equipment stored and final housekeeping completed by April 15. A big thank you is due to the staff who assisted with close-out, and to DEVCO for allowing storage in a portion of the building while the search continues for a new location for the Shelter. A final budget report will be shared with the City and County in the coming weeks, outlining actual expenses and revenues beyond those provided by the City and County, per the funding agreements reached for the 2017-2018 season. Budget proposals for the 2018-2019 season will be shared with the Corvallis Budget Commission, and the Benton County Board of Commissioners, in early May.

Homeless Outreach efforts: April has been a busy month for outreach efforts. With the close of the Shelter season, men and women who had been housed at the Shelters have had to identify locations to camp, or seek Shelter from COI or in other communities as available. Collaboration with the Corvallis Police, and Parks & Recreation, has continued as all seek better solutions to the challenges of homeless camping. Outreach to areas scheduled for posting or cleanup has provided opportunities for some to begin the process of clean up or moving, as well as opportunities to discuss available services, and make connections. Accompanying CPD when they have posted camps, and working ahead of the ODOT crews who recently spent two days cleaning camps around Corvallis to give campers a heads up, has provided some perspective on how these processes work, and allowed campers a chance to prepare. As recently highlighted in the Gazette-Times (see <http://bentonhoac.com/news-noteworthy/>), conditions in the camps vary widely, but are generally poor. Without proper hygiene and sanitation, regular connections to available services, and a "lockable door," those living "rough" in our community are at risk. Outreach aims to improve this to some degree – providing trash bags and some basic supplies where possible, building relationships and helping make connections to services – but the fact remains that there are many in our community who live in conditions that are fundamentally unsafe, unhealthy, and illegal.

Adult Services Team: The Adult Services Team continues to deliver a sound, team-based approach to case management to help clients retain or return to stable housing. Unfortunately, we will be losing Jeffrey Burns as the

coordinator of that team at the end of April, as he will be moving to Tucson. Jeffrey has been a tireless advocate for clients, and for the model of AST, working to ensure consistency of approach, and develop infrastructure to help the team function. His leadership, ability to connect with clients, and sense of humor will be missed, and we wish Jeffrey the best of luck!

Community Connections: April has also been a busy month for making connections in the community. My activities have included events for National Public Health Week, and an event marking the 50th anniversary of the Fair Housing Act (see <http://bentonhoac.com/news-noteworthy/>). In addition to these events, I had the good fortune to be interviewed by a group of students from Corvallis High School on the topic of poverty and housing/homelessness. It's been many years since I stepped foot in a high school, and I wasn't sure what to expect from a panel of 9th grade students. Let me assure you, if the students I met with are representative of their generation, our future is in good hands! They had done their homework, had clear and well researched questions, and never settled for an easy answer. Thanks to their teacher, Charlyn Ellis (also Councilor for Ward 5) for connecting me with these students, and for challenging them to think big about how they can contribute to positive change in our community. I came away impressed and humbled, and look forward to seeing their final project.

Perspective

In my role, I hear many opinions about housing and homelessness – and I try to learn something from all of them. One view I've heard many times, is that those in our community who experience homelessness, and are camping, have chosen that "lifestyle." While this is most often heard from those who are not homeless, it is clear that there are choices involved for those camping as well. However, the nature of those choices, the impact those choices have, and the life experiences that somehow make those choices "make sense" for those camping, are complicated to say the least. To say that someone experiencing mental illness, who has been a victim of domestic or sexual abuse, or who is in the grips of a relentless addiction, is making a rational and independent choice to live in conditions that put their lives and future at risk, is challenging. To hear someone living in a tent in the woods describe how they don't want to live in a shelter or other housing because "everything bad they've experienced, happened behind a closed door," suggests that the picture is a bit more complicated than simple choice. We all share basic needs – food, shelter, warmth, and safety. To build a credible path to safe, stable housing for someone whose trust and sense of safety is so degraded that they see their best option as living rough, is no simple task. The availability of affordable housing, and permanent supported housing with appropriate wrap-around services is key – but to reach those who have made the "choice" to continue to camp, outreach may be our best hope. Building relationships and trust must be a priority, but it must be accompanied by delivery of services "outside the box" of our existing service points. The efforts of Benton County Health are to be applauded here, as their efforts to reach those living rough are mentioned often by campers as a critical link to the mental and physical health services they need. We need to support and expand those efforts, and couple them with creative solutions to bridge the gap between illegal camping, and the transitional or permanent supported housing so desperately needed.

For anyone interested in discussing affordable housing and homelessness, and approaches we might take going forward, I can be reached at shawn@unitedwayblc.org, 541-757-7717, or through contact@bentonhoac.com.