

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, April 2018 – May 2018.

Project Updates

Workgroup updates will be a regular part of HOAC meetings – no report here.

Cold Weather Shelter: The Corvallis Men's Shelter, Stone Soup, and Corvallis Daytime Drop-in Center announced a plan to co-locate at the CSC (formerly Ash) Building, at the corner of 2nd and Western, on May 7. These three services would occupy available portions of the 1st floor, recently vacated by the Department of Health Services as part of their move to new facilities on Research Way. In the time since the plan was announced, the move has generated community concerns about the impact on the surrounding area, management plans to mitigate the impact of people congregating in the area, and the transparency of the choice to site the Shelter in this location. Groups like the Downtown Advisory Board have protested that they were not consulted, though I am unaware of a regulatory framework that would require such a plan to receive DAB review or approval, and such a review was not required for the 2017-2018 Shelter location. While this is a legal and permitted use of the property, and continues historically permitted social service use by the former tenants, opponents argue there should have been a public review process for this use (shelter) in the CB-Central Business zone, though it is unclear if other business uses would not have been subject to such a review. Efforts are being made among those opposed to the planned use of part of the space for the Men's Shelter, to identify alternate locations. Although I was informed in a meeting on May 10, that my criteria for a site would not be considered, I remain committed to securing an effective long term location for this service, and maintaining productive communications with the community, and am happy to review alternatives as they may develop. My focus is currently on plan development for the 2nd Avenue location, until directed otherwise. This is required to hit the target of opening the Corvallis Men's Shelter season, November 1.

Funding requests for the 2018-2019 Men's Shelter season were submitted to the City of Corvallis, the United Way administered Basic Needs Grant cycle, which is funded through the City's Social Services Fund, and to the Benton County Board of Commissioners. The City of Corvallis Budget Commission recommended approval of the budget, which will be part of the package reviewed and voted on in the June 4 City Council Meeting, which includes a Budget Hearing. The request to the City is detailed in the Minutes of the May 3 Budget Commission hearing, which includes a summary of my comments, and a copy of provided materials (see Attachment E): <https://archives.corvallisoregon.gov/public/ElectronicFile.aspx?dbid=0&docid=1030208>

Homeless Outreach efforts: The Street Outreach and Response Team is a collaborative effort among multiple agencies in Corvallis to develop a defined practice of regular outreach to those experiencing homelessness who are camping or otherwise living on the streets. A core group of service providers and community members recently completed 12 hours of training on Adult Mental Health First Aid, biohazards, the drivers of homelessness in Benton County, crisis resources and general safety. Experienced leads have been identified to work specific areas around Corvallis, and accompany less experienced volunteers. Additional training and orientation will be planned to support additional team members, and to ensure a safe, effective outreach experience for all. Outreach teams (minimum 2 members) will travel with resources to share with campers, contacts for crisis support and connections to services, and forms required to apply for needed services.

Homeless Vulnerable Patients: A group convened by Samaritan Health Services has been meeting over several months to regularly review cases, and assess opportunities to address the housing needs of users of emergency and other services at Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center who are currently experiencing homelessness. This group represents an impressive effort by Samaritan to gather and report data, and discuss the challenges and possibilities of better managing resources, and changing health outcomes for this population. A big thank you to

Samaritan, and especially Miranda Miller and Tanya Grant, who have been key drivers for the formation of this group, and instrumental in its ongoing effectiveness.

Perspective

The conflict we are having in our community around housing and homelessness is not new, nor is it completely unexpected. The recent past is littered with argument, debate, lawsuits real and threatened, and claims both outlandish and at times, true. Conversation can be difficult, and communication at times breaks down rather spectacularly. Mike McNally's recall of the history of shelter location for Corvallis in a recent Gazette-Times editorial ([A breakthrough for homeless in Corvallis](#)) is correct, I think: it did not "display Corvallis in the most positive light." At the worst of that history, Corvallis was not so friendly, for anyone. And right now, it has been suggested, we're headed right back into it, at speed.

Housed or un-housed, the citizens of Corvallis and Benton County should understand choices made to invest public resources targeting the needs of those in poverty, and experiencing homelessness. There is no doubt that a level of transparency, and a shared awareness of the facts, supports more productive communication and decision making. In that spirit, I want to share some of my thinking about what we're experiencing, and why I believe we must continue to work through it, and work to expand and develop a conversation in the community that will support positive change in the way we deliver services and support for those at risk of, or currently experiencing homelessness.

Bringing together complementary services, to streamline, better link, and improve delivery, is something businesses do all the time, and is often a strategy deployed to better use scarce resources in the non-profit sector as well. As a veteran of multiple corporate reorganizations at HP, I've seen my share of consolidations, location strategies, and collaborative partnerships born from dramatic change. They are not all easy, or without controversy, and often come with their share of pain to go along with the possibility of transformation. Change often hurts a bit. It's a lesson hard to learn, and sometimes difficult to discuss. Winners and losers, give and take, trade-offs and cost allocations -- as organizations and functions evolve, it can be hard to understand the dynamics of all of these, and it can be hard to keep your wits about you, as the ground and the world around you seems to rapidly and utterly change. Sometimes, change is extremely hard, and it takes time for a community to digest the reality, and the necessity of that change, in a way that enables will and stimulates effective collective action to achieve shared, desired results. When change is hard, it often evokes deep feelings, and fears. It can be a volatile experience if those feelings and fears are not respected, and if the perceived risks and losses are not honestly confronted in a sustained dialogue.

Change of any kind can be especially hard, if part of that change requires acceptance, and even an embrace of things we don't understand, or hope to see continue. When confronted with something scary, strange, and undesirable, one of our most basic instincts is to reject it and turn away. It takes personal leadership, common objectives, and supportive systems to confront difficult problems and deliver great change. It takes courage and determination. And our will to make needed changes even under the best of conditions can be short circuited by fear, uncertainty, and doubt.

The loss of housing, and loss of the stability, health and opportunity that accompany healthy, safe, and affordable housing, can be devastating. The immediacy with which that loss can take place, and the challenges it presents beyond physical hardship, shatter confidence and identity, and undermine the hope that things can improve. Within a short period of time, those who become homeless will experience sleep deprivation, changes in diet, nutrition, and hygiene that will test their will, change their decision making processes, impact their immediate and often long-term health, and limit their confidence and effective presentation as a job applicant, or prospective tenant. If the loss of housing came despite continued employment, the loss of employment is often next to follow -- a worker's ability to concentrate, operate equipment safely, and interact with customers and management effectively will often collapse under the stress and sheer cognitive load of poverty, couch surfing, car camping, or sleeping rough, especially in areas where it is legally prohibited. Debilitating injuries, loss of source of income or change in family situation, auto accident or failure -- all can take those living at risk of housing loss, into eviction, loss of income and property, and poor prospects of re-employment or housing.

The scenario, of yourself and possibly your family, losing everything and sleeping rough on the street, is for many seemingly impossible to imagine. In reality, it is something never to be wished upon anyone, and it may be far closer than we can comfortably acknowledge. Our shared need for food, shelter, warmth and security are so primal, so essential, that the very prospect of losing them is nearly beyond comprehension. Our need for housing is so elemental, that facing those who have lost it can evoke a primal response, a rejection as "other" which seems to

place those who are homeless in their own unique category, nearly a species all their own -- not like us.

There is a troublesome history in this state, when it comes to treatment of those we don't understand. Whether the tribes whose land immigrants settled as their own, or African-Americans who were not allowed to own property, or emigrate to the state as citizens – there is a record of bad behavior to match some of the greatest stories in the history of the state. In our own little progressive town, we seem to have a level of bias and unacknowledged privilege which seems poised (again) to push away those who are "other," and who may most need our help. To reject efforts to not only help them, but do it better, seems beyond unfortunate - it is irresponsible. I trust our better angels will intervene on our behalf, and we will all work together for a civil, humane and effective solution.

Those who are homeless, are still human. They need to be safe, warm, in shelter, and to have the security of knowing that if they follow some basic rules, they can be safe and warm, and eat, every day. We all need this. The need for consistent and stable access to basic needs is something we all share -- whether it's knowing where we will sleep every day, the sureness of the next meal, or the warmth of a caring smile from another member of the community -- we all need to know that there can be a stable spot, when all around you seems insecure and unsure.

Safe, stable, affordable housing is key to the stability, safety, and reliability of "the basics" we all need to thrive. Positive progress rarely comes in a life disrupted daily by the need to find a safe place to sleep, a free or low cost meal, water and bathroom facilities. We all are safer, healthier, and more productive members of the community when we have an adequate supply of safe, affordable housing.

Community conversations are difficult things to control. It often takes very little for mis-communication, mis-representation, and mis-understanding to rule the day, and generate conflict difficult to unravel. An open, honest dialogue about shared community problems requires a shared respect for the experiences and opinions of all involved. Everyone's view of the situation may vary, and alignment around agreed points of common interest is often not built up front, but after things have broken down. I believe this is the situation we find ourselves in today, and apologize for whatever role I may have played in generating it.

If we are to have a respectful, productive dialogue about the shared challenge of caring for the homeless members of our community, be they men, women or children, we must find points of community agreement -- a shared vision of the problem we share, and the shared need for solutions that work. We cannot move forward in an environment of legal threat, accusation, and references to the harms of the past. We must agree to assume the best intent of all involved, and a common commitment to honest, productive, inclusive conversation, which respects the need of each to hold and express an opinion, and agrees on shared sets of facts upon which to base future decisions.

Long-term solutions to our shared problems are essential. Sustained engagement, and a commitment to ongoing dialogue, transparency, and trust is based on assumed best intent from all parties. We must remain focused on development of accountable and effective solutions, designed to meet the needs of all, and which support our community values of fairness, respect, equity and inclusion regardless of income and resources. We have to bring everyone to the table, if we're going to figure this out, and being open and inclusive is a choice. When faced with difference, particularly under stress and conditions of perceived inequity and limited access to power, humans tend to single out an "other," and scapegoat them as a class. We cannot allow this narrative of "the homeless as other" to continue to drive our community conversations, nor can we lightly dismiss the concerns of community members about safety and stability, if we ever wish to achieve the goal of safe, affordable housing for all in Benton County, which is so carefully defined in the HOAC Charter, and in our collective community visions. We all need safe, affordable housing – and we are better as a community when all have access to it.

I want to clear up some confusion that may exist regarding my position, and how my recent work fits into my role.

The Housing Opportunities Action Council is a group I help facilitate, but do not direct. The same is true of the Corvallis Men's Shelter. I am not an elected official, nor a City or County employee. I am a contract employee of United Way of Benton & Lincoln Counties, with a job description that includes finding solutions to defined problems such as finding a long-term location for the Men's Cold Weather Shelter, through partnership, project management, and constant communication with stakeholders and the community.

The intent of my position is to facilitate long-term changes in the delivery of services, as outlined in the original, and refined in the updated Ten Year Plan to Address Issues Surrounding Homelessness and Housing. The adopted update, Community Strategies to Address Homelessness and Barriers to Housing is clear that 1) a permanent location for a soup kitchen, drop-in center, and men's shelter is needed, 2) that emergency shelter services for men,

women, and families with children are a priority of the community, and 3) that stronger coordination of efforts among service providers is a top priority.

I believe I have lived into the terms of my contract in the actions I have taken to facilitate the co-location of Stone Soup, the Corvallis Daytime Drop-in Center, and the Corvallis Men's Shelter, but some may argue. I will leave my performance evaluation to others, and invite anyone who wishes, to share their input directly with Blake Pang (blake@unitedwayblc.org), the Executive Director of United Way of Benton & Lincoln Counties, or the HOAC Co-Chairs: Commissioner Anne Schuster (Anne.Schuster@co.benton.or.us), and Mayor Biff Traber (biff.traber@corvallisoregon.gov). I act with some degree of independence, but I am accountable to each, to the members of the HOAC Leadership Committee and Governing Board, and to the citizens of Corvallis and Benton County, whose taxes support my position. I remain committed to fulfill the terms of my contract and job description, unless directed otherwise.

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.