

Good evening, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Shawn Collins, and I'm the Program Manager for the Housing Opportunities Action Council, working out of United Way.

As you know, my role is to facilitate and encourage collaborative solutions development and alignment across the network of providers and partnerships represented in the Housing Opportunities Action Council. HOAC is committed to the belief that housing is fundamental to community health, well-being, and safety. Safe, affordable housing is an essential community asset. Having an adequate supply of safe, affordable housing, supports community health goals, aligns with values outlined in our City and County visions, and respects a need we all share – to have a safe place to call our home.

I'm here to share the update to the Benton County Ten-Year Plan to Address Issues Surrounding Housing and Homelessness, also known as Community Strategies to Overcome Homelessness and Barriers to Housing. My presentation today is not intended to be comprehensive. There are efforts worthy of mention which I will miss – my apologies to any who feel they were not adequately represented here. My intent is to highlight efforts and issues that reflect the keystone priorities outlined in the update, and offer some perspective on what's needed to improve the conditions of many in our community who struggle with housing insecurity, and related challenges. I'd like to go through my slides and comments, and then take questions.

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I want to root this conversation in a shared community vision – one I believe you're all familiar with.

In "[Imagine Corvallis 2040: Our Community Vision in Action](#)," Corvallis is described as a "compact, well-planned, livable city..." with a vibrant downtown, stable, healthy neighborhoods, and a diverse mix of affordable housing. The Corvallis described in this document, supports diversity, and advances the "well-being of all of its residents, especially those with fewer resources, by addressing basic needs for food, shelter, safety, and health care."

For many who are homeless in our community today, or who sleep with the threat of eviction, and loss of all means of support tonight, this vision seems far beyond reach. For them, the insecurity of everyday existence wreaks a terrible toll. Their participation in intervention services and crisis support systems is high, whether delivered through medical, law enforcement, mental health, or addiction services. Their health is often poor, the inevitable outcome of chronic malnutrition, inadequate access to appropriate hygiene facilities, sleep deprivation, and for many, the ravages of addictions and untreated mental health conditions -- themselves a known byproduct of housing insecurity, poor nutrition and lack of sleep. It can be a spiral difficult to recover from, a tangled knot of conditions and maladies, which may be long in unraveling, and reweaving into a more stable and healthy life in the community.

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Housing instability and homelessness represent a complex web of issues, and making substantial progress against them, while not impossible, is difficult. There are few quick wins that don't require a related long game of sustained engagement and supports to ensure that progress made is not undone by the next crisis or mis-step. Understanding the intersections across the nodes of housing affordability, mental and physical health, financial literacy, employment opportunity, and law enforcement, can be complicated, and is compounded by a dynamic landscape of state and federal supports, local policy, education and cultural issues. Meeting clients across the continuum of need, with appropriate and

effective supports and interventions, requires diverse skill sets and resources, which are often in short supply.

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To meet those in need, “where they are,” requires a level of flexibility and a willing commitment to work in conditions not all would find acceptable. The fact that we have such a rich diversity of community responses to the needs of those struggling to retain, or who have lost housing, suggests heart, great compassion, and community will we can all be proud of, and should be – even if that diversity presents some significant challenges to coordination of effort. We have staff, and fleets of volunteers, across our community that make miracles happen every day for those in need.

And yet, gaps remain which leave those least fortunate in our community cold, hungry, and uncertain about their future. As a community, we have many whose needs go unmet – who can’t get into housing or keep it, who don’t have enough to put food on the table and go to the doctor or dentist, or who cannot shake a chemical demon or find a path to mental health.

This is the reality which the HOAC, in initiating an update to the Ten-Year Plan, has been intent on changing.

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The Keystone Strategies outlined in the update, are focused on areas the members of HOAC believe offer the greatest impact, and have the greatest feasibility for our collective efforts to achieve that impact. As outlined in the memo in your packet accompanying the update, these Keystone Strategies are not intended to outline the only areas of productive effort. The challenges our community faces regarding affordable housing and homelessness are many, and both the specifics of those challenges, and best-practices to address them, will continue to evolve over time. The framework created here is intended to support innovation within agency programs, while defining specific areas for strategic alignment of efforts across multiple agencies.

So, you might ask, how are we doing?

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For the top three strategic priorities, HOAC has formed workgroups with broader membership than just HOAC members. The model of bringing together empowered and knowledgeable partners from across the service continuum and community, to problem solve collectively, design new system models, and identify changes in policy and procedure that will have greatest impact, is showing progress in untangling complexity, and stitching together points in our community safety net which have become frayed or are often non-existent. Going forward, these three areas, Mental and Behavioral Health, Care Coordination, and Housing Supply, will be the focus of reporting and metrics, and will have Program Management support.

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Emergency shelter services continue to be a high priority in the community, with capacity barely keeping up with demand. Integrating case management with shelter, to identify barriers and connect eligible clients with services, reveals that housing is only one of a matrix of challenges for many of those seeking

shelter. You'll see some details on this in the background slides at the end of the handout. While there has been movement along the path from shelter to housing for many shelter clients, the supply of affordable housing, even for those with disability or other earned income, constrains that movement. Expanding that supply, and the capacity to provide wrap-around and supportive services to retain housing for this population, is critical if we are to avoid the trap of building "ever larger" warehouses for our homeless community.

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The lack of year-round shelter and transitional housing across all categories of need (men/women/families, and those who need enhanced physical, mental, or behavioral services) continues to be a factor in the prevalence of illegal camping in our community. Many suggest that creating solutions like managed camping is a surrender, a loss of ground in the battle to end homelessness. However, to those who don't want to accept anything less than "true" housing as a solution, community leaders in places like San Diego remind us that it will take years for supply to catch up with demand under the best conditions, and continuing to deny basic sanitation, hygiene and safety to the homeless generates more cost, human suffering, and risk to public health, than we should be willing to allow. Managed camping, whether for tents, conestoga huts, or vehicles can be an effective part of our community's approach to homelessness, and help mitigate the worst problems associated with homeless campsites.

Services that enable and sustain community integration are rarely given the credit they deserve. Providing basic daytime shelter, information, connections to services, and nutritious meals, the Corvallis Daytime Drop-in Center and Stone Soup create points of positive community engagement for all. Through creative partnerships, shared flexible space is provided for community meals, health screening, immunization, education, and socialization. Yet neither of these organizations have a permanent location, and are actively seeking co-location in a permanent facility. A permanent, shared space could drive efficiencies, and offer opportunities for new partnerships and service delivery in a safe, inclusive environment, and ensure a strong future for these critical functions.

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The goal of all of this work, is getting people into housing. Affordable, safe, stable housing is something we all need, and we all benefit from. It is the reason so many work so hard to make home a reality for all in our community. We have seen success – some is documented here, and there's more not yet integrated into a single view – but to see more success, more development of affordable housing, and enhancement of supportive wrap-around services is needed.

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As we build a stronger community response to what many locally and across the West are calling a crisis, we have to work on areas that can make a real difference, right now. Outreach, to develop positive engagement with those who are unsheltered and need help. Case management and care coordination among service providers, to make sure we're connecting clients to the right services, at the right time, and manage costs. And development of affordable housing solutions – transitional, permanent, and supportive – that meet needs across a wide range of incomes, and address the needs of special populations.

Across these efforts, and many more, a community of caring and concern wages a ground war against the scourge of homelessness. We all seem to agree – it's not something we want to see. It's not good for anybody. And yet it persists. Is there something we can do better? Can we agree to make homelessness, if not end, at least become a rare, brief, and infrequently reoccurring event?

I believe we can.

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A year ago, I drew this sketch while trying to explain what I thought we needed. We needed a system, that built out a clear and defined pathway from homeless to housing, with all the supporting resources to make that system function well. We still need this, but I believe we are making progress on it daily.

What we've been trying to build, through the model of the workgroups, and in alignment with our approved Community Strategies, are integrated systems, designed to reflect the values and aims of our community. Integrated systems development - using dedicated teams, representing multiple delivery pathways, engaged in coordinated planning, budget management and shared accountability – to address our highest needs. This may be our best hope for progress.

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I began in this role a little over a year ago, and have spoken with many of you, and others in that time, about the focus and importance of the work it represents. The creation and sustained funding of this role, and your support for initiatives that come from continued delivery against its intent, is a testament to the commitment members of this body, and the wards and interests you represent, have to the development and implementation of effective housing solutions in the community.

Thank you, for that commitment, and your support for HOAC. I continue to believe it is a key element in fulfilling the promise of our community vision, and truly providing safe affordable housing for all.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the Benton County Healthy Communities team, without whom we would not have an update to the Ten-Year Plan. They did a tremendous amount of work – interviewing service providers and those with lived experience, researching best practices, and leading the efforts to prioritize and clarify the community strategies – and that work will continue to bring benefits for a long time.