

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, 2019. Shawn Collins began serving in this role November 1, 2016.

Following is a summary report of the activities of the Program Manager, January-February 2019.

Project Updates

HOAC Planning: In mid-February, the HOAC Leadership Committee, Corvallis City Manager Mark Shepard, and Benton County Administrator Joe Kerby met to review the proposed organizational model, and discuss next steps toward drafting an Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) to charter a new organization and establish its authority. If all parties agree, the target for the IGA to take effect is the beginning of the new fiscal year for the City and County, July 1, 2019.

Point In Time count: The annual homeless census, or “Point in Time” Count, is conducted nationally in the last week of January. Coordinated locally by CSC, the effort to count “unsheltered” homeless this year was probably the most comprehensive done in our area. Teams walked designated areas across the Corvallis area to survey campers and those living on the street, who may not be engaged at local service points where the count is also being conducted. Thanks are due to Scott McKee and the team at CSC, participating agencies and the many volunteers who joined this effort. When numbers are released, it will be important to communicate to the community the increased effort that went into counting the unsheltered, to put any changes in context.

Corvallis Area Resource Event (CARE): The CARE event is in its second year, and is being planned in cooperation with Corvallis Police Department and a team of local service providers. The event is scheduled for March 19 at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library. If any service providers have not yet been contacted about participation, and are interested, please reach out to Sergeant Joel Goodwin (Joel.Goodwin@corvallisoregon.gov). This event replaced Project Homeless Connect in 2018, and funding from the Lead Administrator contract supports this event. Thanks to CPD, the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, and all those involved in planning and delivering this event connecting low-income and homeless community members with needed services.

Homelessness in Philomath: A group has been pulled together by Van Hunsaker (Philomath Community Services) and Melissa Goff (Superintendent, Philomath School District) to explore ways to better serve homeless families in the Philomath area. I’ve been attending as a liaison to HOAC. There’s a need for some “Social Services 101” type training in Philomath, to raise awareness of local resources, and how best to connect folks with Corvallis resources when gaps exist. The group has targeted the creation of a “flexible fund” to address immediate needs of families with children in the Philomath Schools, to remove barriers to return to housing, or prevent homelessness. Efforts are also underway to pilot placing a Benton County Health Navigator in the Philomath Schools, a program already established in the Corvallis 509J School District.

Camp Clearings and Outreach: I continue to work with CPD on camp postings/clearings, serving as a “witness” to the clearings, and to offer connections to local services where appropriate. This effort aligns with the efforts of the Street Outreach and Response Team (SORT) which is sending teams out to connect with homeless campers weekly in the Corvallis area.

Car/RV Camping programs: A sub-group of the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition’s Housing Action Team is seeking to enhance the City’s car camping program, which allows permitted camping in participating church parking lots, and expand it to County churches. Some regulatory issues have been clarified, and efforts are now focused on program design, and making sure that any campers in the programs are well

connected to case management and services. A plan for a pilot project is in development.

HOAC Intern: Thanks to some HOAC designated donations to United Way, a funded internship has been created for the Winter 2019 term. Kyle “Finn” Sporrer began work in January, and will work through the Winter 2019 term on research related to water quality, hygiene and sanitation issues for homeless campers. Finn has also been involved in outreach efforts, and the recent Point in Time count. Many thanks to the generous donors who made this possible.

Cold Weather Shelter: The Corvallis Men’s Shelter continues to operate at or near its nightly capacity of 50. The new owner of the Hanson Tire Factory, now the location of the Corvallis Men’s Shelter, is interested in expanding the services available at the site. Discussions with several local agencies have been facilitated by Chris Quaka of Benton Community Foundation. No resolution has been achieved, but it has brought to the owner and his partners’ attention that the building needs further modifications if the Shelter is to continue to operate in that space, and remain compliant with code. This is especially true if there are other tenants in the building, or if the Shelter is ever to shift to year-round operations. Existing building code requires more “water closets” than are available in the building. Current operations rely on portable-toilets to close the gap. Ideally, permanent facilities will be added, and will include additional showers. Installation of fire-suppression sprinklers will likely be required to support long-term use and a possible move to year-round shelter service. Some work is also needed to improve laundry and food handling areas, improve storage capacity for supplies, and better utilize space which was not designed for use as a Shelter, but rather as an office space.

Perspective

The Linn/Benton/Lincoln County region, like much of the US West Coast, is experiencing unprecedented challenges related to affordable housing and homelessness. Across many income levels, in communities large and small, the availability of affordable housing is limited at best. This is driven by many factors – policy, economic conditions, challenges balancing the need for housing against environmental concerns and the value of green space – but at its worst it often means that substantial numbers of people are unhoused, and living in unsafe conditions. The personal and social costs for this can be devastating, and are often compounded by inadequate or poorly coordinated services to address the physical, mental and behavioral health needs of those impacted.

Our capacity to develop and deliver collaborative, coordinated responses to crisis conditions must evolve if sustainable progress is to be made. Developing a more inclusive vision of community that respects the realities of the unhoused, and the needs all share for safe, affordable housing, will require a significant communication and education effort. Frank discussion of the health impact of being without stable housing, the costs to the broader community related to having a large homeless population, and the opportunities for change is needed. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that our cultural biases against the unhoused are deeply rooted, and can be difficult to disrupt. Impoverished and homeless people in Colonial America faced some of the same bias and stigma seen today, and worse – but change is possible, and whatever form HOAC takes going forward, education and communication must be part of its charge.

I would encourage those in HOAC, and the broader community, to consider work in the following areas:

- **Flexible Funding to address emergent needs:** The group looking at homelessness in Philomath has identified a need for flexible “family support funds” to address needs that may not be covered by existing funding programs. These kinds of funds can address short-term financial gaps for individuals or families, helping them retain housing or overcome barriers to returning to housing that are beyond their immediate means. Creation of a sustainable fund of this kind, accessible to AST, the Homeless Vulnerable Patients Group, Health/Housing Navigators, and other clear channels, should be explored.
- **Street Outreach and Response Team:** The development of SORT in the past year has provided a strong mechanism to coordinate outreach to many who are otherwise rarely engaged with services, building trust and rapport, and providing a better “real-time” view of conditions for those who are unsheltered in our community. Thanks here to Andrea Myhre of Corvallis Housing First, who has taken a “good idea” that aligns with the TYP Update and recommended best practices from the US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), and built it into a functional team

which regularly visits camps across Corvallis. As good as it has been, there is more work to be done, strengthening coordination with CPD, the Courts, Samaritan and Benton County Health, and developing tools to make the work of this group a more integrated part of the service network, such as standard intake forms that can be administered in the field, and a true “by name list” of those needing shelter and housing.

- **Acknowledge the Costs of Homelessness:** The costs of homelessness begin with the physical and mental health impact on those experiencing it, and the lost potential of those experiencing homelessness to contribute to our community, and make positive progress in their lives. They continue through law enforcement, health-care costs, costs of clean-up. As a community, we should begin to identify and acknowledge these costs, and seek ways to redirect resources from clean up, enforcement, and crisis management to provide more comprehensive shelter solutions, and more transitional and permanent supportive housing. We can reduce the harm caused to those experiencing homelessness and the broader community, and build greater collaboration, safety and resilience in the community, and manage costs, but it gets more costly the longer we delay.
- **Build the Future Organization, and commit to making it effective:** The HOAC has provided a framework for communication and collaboration, but it has suffered since its inception from limits to its scope and authority to drive change. While member organizations and others in the community have had success in many ways, as an organization HOAC has a mixed record. It has had limited influence on policy, and public perceptions of the organization have been confused at best. The reset proposed may not be perfect – but if endorsed by the membership and elected bodies it may also offer the best opportunity to have influence on policy, and the potential to build new alliances and bring resources to the table. If it’s to work, a sustained commitment to change has to come from many quarters. I’m reminded here of the motto on the OSU Women’s Basketball warmup shirts: All In – Every Day. To live into that requires commitment to principles beyond simple organizational or personal self-interest. HOAC, or whatever organization is to follow, must be committed to what has been in its charter from the beginning – the idea that “everyone in Benton County” should have “the opportunity to live in decent, safe, and affordable housing.”