

# 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, April-May 2019.

### Project Updates

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**HOAC Planning:** Planning efforts continue for the new Benton County advisory council to replace HOAC, but at a somewhat slower pace, to allow for more community input. Feedback at recent HOAC meetings, as well as City Council and Board of Commissioners meetings, suggested that especially for those in the downtown business and residential community, there is concern that the new structure doesn't adequately address their interests. Efforts are underway to provide more opportunity for community engagement, with a meeting to be hosted by the City and County in June. Details on this meeting will be communicated through City/County channels when available.

**Report of the Project Manager:** In support of the creation of the new advisory council, a report was recently shared with Joe Kerby, Benton County Administrator, and Dawn Emerick, Benton County Health Department Director to bring them up to date on the work of HOAC, and efforts adjacent to HOAC to which I serve as a liaison. The report is available as "Attachment #1" for the May 2019 meeting on the HOAC website: <http://bentonhoac.com/monthly-meetings/>. This report should serve as source material for the new council, and a "close out" view of the work of the Housing Opportunities Action Council. As such, it represents the work of many across the community. Any omissions or errors are mine, as are the opinions included about future efforts that are needed to address remaining issues.

**Linn-Benton Vulnerable Populations:** The Linn-Benton Vulnerable Populations workgroup, headed by Loren Emang of Benton County Environmental Health, has been put on "pause" while they work with the state to restructure and improve the group. Regular meetings should resume in September.

**Emergency Operations Debrief:** At the end of the April HOAC meeting, I made a quick exit to attend the remainder of a meeting called to debrief emergency operations during the recent flooding. The discussions made it clear that while there were a number of very well executed responses across multiple agencies in Corvallis, as well as Benton and Linn Counties, communication and coordination of efforts was challenged. This was particularly true in the area of providing emergency shelter and other services to those experiencing homelessness. Efforts to strengthen the connection of local social service agencies to those responsible for emergency services should be a focus for the new advisory council, and each social service agency. It was clear from the discussion that as a community, we were lucky – and we should take that luck as an opportunity to learn and develop stronger response networks and resources.

**Franklin student projects:** I was recently asked by Jaime Luke, a teacher at Franklin K-8 School, to meet with a group of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students about a class project, and then to return a few days later to see the student presentations of their projects. The team I met with was focused on homelessness in Corvallis, and what they, as 8<sup>th</sup> graders could do to help. It was quite an experience to sit with this group, and hear their thoughts on what challenges are faced by the homeless in our community, and how they may be able to help. While the team I met with was unable to present their project due to the absence of a team member, the presentations I saw were quite thoughtful, and far beyond anything I was asked to do as an 8<sup>th</sup> grader. To any who worry about the future, I would encourage a visit with the students at Franklin – I think we're probably in pretty good hands. And my hat is off to Ms. Luke, for encouraging her students to think big and work hard, and for what I can only imagine is a super-human bit of something that makes it possible to keep a group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders on task!

## Perspective

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With the close of the City/County fiscal year at the end of June, comes the end of the Lead Administrator contract supporting this position, and the end of my role as Program Manager. This coincides with the transformation of HOAC to a new organization, with a new structure designed to provide greater focus, clearer lines of authority, and the community support needed to effect positive change. Working with HOAC has been one of the more challenging and fulfilling experiences of my career. I was interested in this role in part due to the complexity of the problems HOAC was intended to address – I like working on big problems – and it has never failed to keep that interest. It has had its share of frustrations, and more than its share of controversy – but I think as a whole HOAC comprises one of the more committed groups of agencies and individuals you could hope to have in a community, and I feel fortunate to have worked with you all.

I want to thank my colleagues at the United Ways serving Linn, Benton and Lincoln Counties for their wisdom, support and good humor. The network and connections that United Way fosters have been invaluable, and their perspective on the importance of systems-level change should not be overlooked going forward. I also want to thank the City of Corvallis and Benton County staff, elected officials, and the citizens whose tax dollars have supported this position, and the work of HOAC. As HOAC moves into a new future, their continued support will be critical to addressing some of the most challenging issues we face as a community.

And finally, I want to thank the members of HOAC, and the broad network of community agencies and individuals with whom I've worked over the last 3 years. Corvallis and Benton County are fortunate to have committed and passionate people, willing to invest their time and effort to make this a better place to live, for all. Keep up the good work, and let me know if I can help.

As the new organization takes shape, below are a few suggestions of items that I believe need to be addressed:

**Health and Safety:** Corvallis, Benton County, and our region lack adequate capacity in the emergency shelter system, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, and affordable housing. Without adequate capacity for some form of shelter, and a growing population experiencing homelessness, it is inevitable that there will be people “living rough” – camping in tents, vehicles, or simply finding a modestly protected space to huddle for the night. This compromises the health and safety of all, the housed and unhoused, and until additional housing solutions are developed, actions should be taken to improve the conditions of those without housing, focused on ensuring that basic needs are met.

- Water for drinking and hygiene: improve access to existing facilities year-round and/or provide additional supports to heavily camped areas
- Showers: Improved access to existing shower facilities and/or addition of “mobile” shower facilities to provide access in camped areas
- Laundry: Improved access to existing laundry facilities and/or addition of “mobile” laundry facilities to provide access in camped areas
  - o Alternate approach: support providing laundry vouchers/cards for distribution through SORT or Benton County Health Department Harm Reduction staff
- Strengthen engagement and coordination with Samaritan Health Services to address vulnerable patient needs on release and support for diversion to housing to support positive health outcomes for those experiencing homelessness
- Explore stronger integration of the social services delivery network with the emergency response network (COAD, CERT, etc) to ensure vulnerable populations are included in planning and

response in times of community disaster and emergency

- Actively pursue the development of legal transitional housing/camping solutions

**Operations support:** The HOAC has had a limited budget to support the Adult Services Team (AST) and a homeless resource fair, which has at times been supplemented by donations from the community. Going forward, support for the operations of AST, SORT, and funding to meet short term emergency needs would strengthen the effectiveness of these services. Providing support for funded internships could add “research horsepower” to the new advisory council, and build stronger ties to OSU’s Public Health and related programs.

- Flexible funds to address short term emergency needs – distribute through AST, Homeless Vulnerable Patients team or other appropriate channel
- New MOU for Adult Services Team (revisit practice for referrals, reporting, outcomes and expectations)
- Formalize relationship to the Street Outreach and Response Team (SORT), provide modest budget support for training, supplies
- Funded internships and stronger linkage to OSU Public Health programs

**Communications and Education:** While HOAC members, and many who work for or volunteer with agencies in the community may have a strong understanding of the drivers, impacts, and potential solutions related to housing and homelessness, broad community understanding is needed to build support for solutions, and reduce the stigma and animosity surrounding homelessness. Developing a clearer understanding of the costs we pay as a community now, may build support for redirecting some of the costs paid for mitigation, to upstream solutions that support prevention and return to housing.

- Cost study to understand current system costs involved in serving the homeless community, assess frequent users of services for housing intervention
  - o Leadership from County to develop study, commitment to seek diversion strategies and leverage savings across system for solutions development
- Research/education from Benton County Health Department about impact to vulnerable communities and broader community of housing status – part of education and awareness

**Community/Organization Development:** To see systems-level change and improved efficiency and effectiveness of the social services/support network, improvements are needed at many levels. From shifting approaches to the ways we hold meetings, to taking steps to ensure key services have the resilience and support needed to meet changing needs, and connecting our community level efforts more effectively to regional, state and federal organizations and funding – there’s good work to be done that will enhance the effectiveness of our community efforts.

- Support community engagement by scheduling meetings at times when more community members can attend; consider support for those who may have special needs (childcare, transportation, etc); and use technology more effectively to provide online options for meeting attendance and participation
- Explore organizational resilience of key agencies/services, and opportunities for stronger coordination/collaboration and/or organizational streamlining
- Focus support for collaborative funding and programs development aligned to the Ten Year Plan and Update
- Clarify and enhance engagement with Rural Oregon Continuum of Care