



## Solving Unsheltered Homelessness in Portland

We need to move quickly to provide practical solutions for thousands of people

living in unsheltered, inhumane conditions here in Portland. Despite record funding, local government has been overwhelmed and ineffective in providing enough affordable housing and a humane bridge between unsheltered survival on the streets and permanent housing. Portlanders can change that narrative. Tri-County government recently expanded its list of nonprofits who provide shelter or transitional housing to people currently living in tents in city parks, on sidewalks, or in business doorways. Alternative shelter gets these people off the street faster and at a lower cost than traditional shelter.

### Portland's Homelessness Crisis

The most recent count of people experiencing homelessness in Portland was taken by more than one hundred volunteers during the 2022 Multnomah County Point in Time count. They counted 5,228 people in our County; around 40% of those were staying in emergency or transitional housing but 3,057 people counted were entirely unsheltered. Multnomah County reported their results are "an undercount."<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, the Ninth Circuit Court established in *Martin v. Boise* that unsheltered persons cannot be punished by law enforcement for sleeping outside on public property in the absence of adequate alternatives. HB 3115, passed in June 2021, acknowledged the Ninth Circuit ruling by allowing homeless camps on public property and public rights of way throughout Oregon.<sup>2</sup> Today, Oregon is one of only four states where more than half of the homeless population is living unsheltered.<sup>3</sup>

The highly visible presence of unsanctioned encampments without access to basic hygiene, sanitation, health, and security services has immense impacts on all Portland residents. These include human waste, trash, discarded drug paraphernalia, rat infestations, people exhibiting troubling behavior due to untreated mental illness and addiction, criminal activity, threatening speech and gestures, and fires.

Many people are particularly disturbed by unsanctioned campsite fires getting out of control. Campers build fires to keep warm, cook, or get rid of trash. Their tents and clothing are highly flammable. Recent Portland campsite fires have spread to nearby buildings and homes. According to Portland Fire and Rescue, service calls regarding unsanctioned homeless-related fires have doubled three years in a row, totaling 1,235 incidents in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Allowing unauthorized and unsupported homeless encampments to continue is neither compassionate nor in anyone's best interest. Campers are vulnerable to predatory crime such as theft, drug dealing, prostitution, and human trafficking.<sup>5</sup> Campers are also subject to destructive city-sponsored clean-up sweeps, which tear apart their informal communities and take away their personal property, setting people back in their struggle for security and dignity.<sup>6</sup>

Less visible and more insidious are the preventable deaths, heightened arrests, and prevailing negative stigma that unsheltered people experience.<sup>7,8</sup>

Extensive public resources have been dedicated to addressing the Portland homeless crisis, with too many funds spent on costly, repetitive activities that are ineffective, such as encampment cleanups, fighting the establishment of self-generated villages such as Right to Dream Too and Hazelnut Grove, and relocating city-sponsored villages from one site to another.

## Why So Many People are Unsheltered Here

The City of Portland and Multnomah County Joint Office of Homeless Services has over 1,700 available shelter beds with plans to open several hundred more in 2022 and 2023.<sup>9</sup> These will be in addition to the City's planned Safe Rest Villages. Many of these shelter beds will be in congregate settings where individuals sleep on cots or bunks in group quarters.

Because of concerns about their personal safety, fear of theft, noise, and various rules and restrictions, many unsheltered people prefer camping to staying in congregate shelters. If they have a job that requires them to work nights, a lack of access to shelter beds during the day is especially problematic. In the last couple of years, the Joint Office has worked to create alternative shelters in motel units and to make congregate shelter spaces more flexible and welcoming to couples and people with pets.<sup>10</sup>

*Oregonian* reporter Anna Griffin wrote in a 2015 special report on our homeless crisis:

"The root causes of homelessness—societal problems such as mental illness, addiction, and domestic violence—have always existed in the United States. Widespread homelessness has not. The current crisis stems from decisions made over a generation: the flood of returning Vietnam-era vets in the 1970s coincided with a national push to de-institutionalize mental hospitals. In the 1980s and '90s, under both Republican and Democratic presidents, the federal government got out of the business of building public housing and pushed direct responsibility for caring for poor and vulnerable people to state, county and city governments."<sup>11</sup>

### 1. Lack of Affordable Housing

When a city becomes unaffordable to the people who live there, rising housing prices push people into homelessness and make it harder to help those who have lost housing.<sup>12</sup> It is essential for Portland to preserve existing affordable housing, develop more subsidized and affordable

housing, and ensure the development of market rate housing that is reasonable and proportional to the needs of the neighborhood.<sup>13</sup>

According to *Salary.com*, the cost of living in Portland is 17.7% higher than the national average.<sup>14</sup> Since early 2015, rents in our community have risen 20 times faster than the median income, to more than \$1,680 a month for the average Portland apartment.<sup>15</sup> A more recent survey by Redfin found that rents for Portland residents have climbed close to 40% since the spring of 2021. Nearly 20,000 people in Multnomah County rely on disability checks that are capped at \$841 a month per eligible individual or \$1,261 per couple.<sup>16</sup>

Local communities of color face even higher rates of rent burden due to lower median income when compared to White counterparts. For example, the median salary for Black households in the Portland area is half that of the overall median<sup>17</sup>—a significant disparity, and a sign of the current and historic systemic racism faced by this population in the region. Portland's high rents often force low-income residents, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, to city boundaries, far from job opportunities, public transportation, and other important services. A study by Blumenthal et al. found when rent costs rise quickly, minorities are more likely to face eviction compared to White households.<sup>18</sup>

Cost-burdened households, struggling with unaffordable rent, underemployment, childcare, or healthcare costs, often do not have savings to cope with unexpected hardships. For those living paycheck-to-paycheck, with no healthcare benefits or sick time, missing work due to the flu or taking a child to be seen for an ear infection can become a crisis that leads to eviction.

### 2. Mental Health & Addiction

In 2019, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that 36% of the chronically homeless population suffered from a chronic substance abuse problem, a severe

mental illness, or both.<sup>19</sup> The Institute of Medicine stated that “not only can homelessness be a consequence of mental illness, but a homeless life may cause and perpetuate emotional problems.”<sup>20</sup> Accessing and maintaining mental health or addiction treatment services can be nearly impossible for individuals who are unsheltered and struggling to survive, especially without essentials like a cell phone and personal identification.

### 3. Methamphetamine (Meth)

Meth and opiates increase homelessness in our community. Meth began flooding into Portland around 2013. By January 2020, the City of Portland closed its downtown sobering station, finding that it was unequipped to help people addicted to the new forms of meth.<sup>21, 22</sup>

In 2021, Rachel Solotaroff, recent CEO of Central City Concern in Portland, reported:

“The degree of mental-health disturbance; the wave of psychosis; the profound disorganization [is something] I’ve never seen before...If they’re not raging and agitated, they can be completely noncommunicative. Treating addiction [relies] on your ability to have a connection with someone. But I’ve never experienced something like this — where there’s no way in to that person.”

Susan Partovi, a physician for unsheltered people in Los Angeles since 2003, recently agreed:

“Now almost everyone we see when we do homeless outreach on the streets is on meth. Meth may now be causing long-term psychosis, similar to schizophrenia, that lasts even after they’re not using anymore.”<sup>23</sup>

There is no available medication that subdues meth cravings sufficiently for addicts to stop using the drug and repair their lives.<sup>24</sup> The most effective treatments for meth addiction available today are behavioral therapies that provide rewards for engaging in treatment and abstaining from taking meth.<sup>25</sup> Until recently, few homeless service providers have talked

about the impact of meth on the people they serve—perhaps out of fear of stigmatizing many homeless individuals unfairly as drug addicts. Policy makers and advocates have also preferred to talk only about the need for affordable housing, which is a big piece of the solution, but does not address the urgent need for publicly funded meth and opioid treatments.<sup>26</sup> In 2021, Mental Health America ranked Oregon in the middle of all states for access to treatment for alcohol and illicit drugs.<sup>27</sup>

### 4. Chronic Illness, Aging, and Disabilities

It is important to recognize the extent to which aging, chronic illness, unmet acute health needs, and other disabilities also play a role in our unsheltered population.

Common health issues affecting unsheltered people include wounds and skin infections, malnutrition, dental and periodontal diseases, venereal diseases, hepatic cirrhosis secondary to alcoholism, infectious hepatitis related to intravenous (IV) drug abuse, and traumatic injuries such as contusions, lacerations, sprains, bruises, and superficial burns, as well as injuries due to assault or rape.<sup>28</sup>

Experiencing homelessness is stressful and makes it difficult to get treatment and rest to recuperate. It also makes it almost impossible to cope with aging, chronic illnesses, and disabilities. Examples of the difficulties our unsheltered neighbors face include:

- limited access to healthcare
- problems getting enough food
- trouble staying safe
- unsanitary living conditions
- exposure to severe weather.<sup>29</sup>

Managing chronic diseases that require routine doctor visits and medicine, such as hypertension, diabetes, and various mental disorders, often takes a back seat to more acute concerns such as injuries, infections, pneumonia, or simply surviving. Even when an unsheltered person gets medication, it may be stolen, lost, or thrown out during sweeps of homeless encampments.<sup>30</sup>

## Who Is Unsheltered in Portland?

The unsheltered population in Multnomah County is more likely to suffer from addiction disorders and mental illness, or have been homeless for longer periods than those found in shelters or transitional housing.<sup>31</sup> People of Color make up an increasing percentage of our unsheltered population, with a particularly large increase in Black and Native Americans. Although people of color make up only 29% of the Multnomah County population, they comprise 63% of our homeless population in 2019.<sup>32</sup>

The percentage of unsheltered people who reported one or more disabling conditions — including physical disabilities, mental illnesses, and substance use disorders — was 78% in 2019.<sup>33</sup>

Oregon's biggest cities hold most of the unsheltered population. Less than a quarter of the statewide homeless population resides in the suburbs and only 9% of homeless individuals live in rural areas of Oregon.<sup>34</sup>

Simply having an income is not sufficient to prevent homelessness. 25-60% of Portland residents experiencing homelessness are employed.<sup>35</sup> Many others have a disability income or pension, such as from the Veterans Administration. However, full-time employment in Portland at minimum wage means paying about 64% of one's income for rent. Allocating funds to other essentials such as food, medical needs, and transportation can mean missing rent payments and subsequent eviction.

Example: A Portland two-paycheck family of three—working full-time for minimum wage—will struggle to pay an average two-bedroom apartment rent of \$2,315 per month. Social Security or disability income is also too meager to pay for most available rental housing.<sup>36</sup>

Example: Successful *Street Roots* newspaper vendors sell about 50 papers per day<sup>37</sup> and at that rate, might find a studio apartment to rent

but would have little money left for food, utilities, and other necessities.<sup>38</sup>

However, the problem is not only economic. Although most unsheltered Portland residents are men, the number of women experiencing homelessness has been growing here. For homeless adults, the highest reported rates of domestic violence are among women (59%) and those who identify as transgender (66%) and gender non-conforming (69%).<sup>39</sup> Approximately 32% of homeless youth in Portland identify as sexual/gender minorities.<sup>40</sup> Women, and in particular women of color, are frequently exposed to additional violence once they become homeless.<sup>41</sup>

In Multnomah County, the number of our street and shelter population over the age of 55 increased by 23% between 2013 and 2019.<sup>42</sup>

The 2019 Point in Time count documented that about 70% of those who are experiencing homelessness in Portland have lived in the area for more than two years.<sup>43</sup> Fewer than 10% of the current homeless population came to Portland in the last two years to seek services. Most people moved to the area due to family needs or job opportunities.<sup>44</sup> Other studies have shown that unsheltered neighbors tend to gather in encampments near the local area with which they have the most ties, through past relationships, associations, and/or jobs.

## Solutions to Portland Homelessness

Portlanders have been helping our unsheltered neighbors by bringing food, first aid and personal care supplies, water, ice, clothing, tents, and sleeping bags.

Volunteers have stepped up to form clean-up programs to address accumulated trash, human waste, and needles. These include SOLVE's encampment clean-ups, Adopt a Block, Ground Score, Neighbors Helping Neighbors PDX, Tuesdays for Trash, and Clean Camp PDX.

Local government efforts to address homelessness have tended to focus on the following types of services:

**Emergency shelters:** People who have experienced economic shock turn to emergency shelters, often in a congregate setting, for short-term nighttime stays and assistance with a wide range of services. In recent years, the concept of shelter has evolved to include:

- severe weather shelters;
- temporary or transitional shelters;
- enhanced overnight shelters;
- navigation centers;
- motel units;
- youth shelters; and
- alternative shelters including tiny houses, tents, sleeping pods, and safe parking encampments.

**Transitional Housing:** Temporary residence for up to 24 months, usually in leased apartments, motel rooms, or single room occupancy units; programs include wrap-around services to help people stabilize their lives.

**Rapid Re-housing:** Supports newly homeless individuals and families to find and rent an apartment quickly and receive temporary community support services such as case management and financial assistance.

**Permanent Supportive Housing:** Provides chronically homeless individuals with long-term apartment housing and includes additional voluntary supports and services.

### **The Housing First Model**

As its name suggests, the priority is to house people first, then later address the issues that caused their homelessness. Housing provides the stability needed to treat pre-existing psychiatric, substance abuse, and chronic disease issues, resulting in a higher success rate.<sup>45</sup> The Housing First model offers flexibility and considers everyone's unique circumstances to help them get back on their feet. Housing First works—with only two months of rapid re-housing rent and

other assistance, 75-91% of local recipients stayed housed a year later.<sup>46</sup>

A 2016 study by the National Alliance to End Homelessness found that helping a person through a Housing First program saves \$31,545 compared to that person remaining homeless. Over a two-year period, housed individuals use fewer emergency services such as hospitals, jails, and emergency shelters than those who remained unhoused.<sup>47</sup>

### **More Affordable Housing is Needed**

Affordable housing benefits everyone in the community. It is not only about compassion for the few. The National Low Income Housing Coalition in Washington DC reports that building 100 affordable rental homes generates \$11.7 million in local income and 161 local jobs in the first year alone.<sup>48</sup>

Calgary, Canada has been one of the top five most livable cities in the world for nearly a decade. Safe, affordable housing is available to residents at all income levels. To accomplish this, Calgary sold surplus city-owned land to nonprofits at low prices. To further reduce costs, the city created a full-time affordable housing coordinator position to expedite applications for building permits. Calgary also funded a grant program to rebate planning and development fees. These strategies created thousands of additional affordable units.<sup>49</sup>

Local governments can incentivize developers to create affordable housing. They can reform zoning, provide public lands for affordable housing or shelters, minimize red tape and development costs, and simplify permitting. Some cities tax unoccupied units to encourage owners to lower rental rates.<sup>50</sup> In recent years, the City of Portland has taken some of these steps. For example, Menon et al. found that in 2010, when Portland waived development charges on construction of accessory dwelling units, applications quadrupled.<sup>51</sup>

In 2014, a program called A Home for Everyone united the City of Portland, Multnomah County, Home Forward, and the City of Gresham to use a Housing First approach aiming for a functional zero level of homelessness. A functional zero homeless community is like a good healthcare system—when people get sick, they receive rapid care and quickly recover. Since its inception, A Home for Everyone has doubled the number of people helped into permanent housing or through preventative programs and has more than tripled the number of emergency shelter beds.<sup>52</sup> However, to provide for the people currently in need, we now need to develop 3,000 additional shelter beds.

Although A Home for Everyone has had considerable success, the City of Portland has gained only 1,532 new affordable rental units in 2019 and 2020.<sup>53</sup> However, this is a faster rate of development than we have seen in prior years. Many thousands more Portlanders have been assisted to avoid eviction. However, it takes three to five years to bring each affordable housing project to completion. Most nonprofits attribute the lengthy development process to the layers of financing and grants required as well as the complex bureaucratic processes.

Several Portland faith communities have committed to building affordable housing on their land. An inventory by the City of Portland counted 609 acres of buildable land in Portland that are owned by 335 congregations.<sup>54</sup> One such congregation we talked with found that the City of Portland required extra infrastructure development for its project. This included installing street lighting and sidewalks, and upgrading transit stops. These extra costs have slowed nonprofit and faith-community affordable housing development here.<sup>55</sup>

At the current local rate of development, it will take at least three to five more years to meet local government's goal to provide 5,000 new units of affordable housing. Portland State University's Homeless Research Collaborative has estimated

that the actual level of need is for 19,324 more affordable units in Portland.<sup>56</sup>

### **Alternative Shelter Now**

Building affordable housing and congregate shelters or renting or purchasing motels are expensive and slow.<sup>57</sup> In the interim, local emergency rooms and jails have become a catch-all for unsheltered people in crisis who are then discharged back to the streets without proper services, ensuring the cycle will continue. Camp sweeps are another costly non-solution for unsheltered persons. For example, cleaning one unsanctioned encampment a dozen times over a two-year period cost \$18,347.<sup>58</sup> Our unsheltered neighbors need places to stay that are welcoming, stable, and hygienic and that provide support services until the goal of permanent affordable housing becomes a reality.

Over half of Portland's unsheltered population could be quickly sheltered in various alternative shelters with support services. Multnomah County Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) has defined alternative shelters as:

“... outdoor sites with tiny houses/pods that offer increased safety, security, community, and basic human needs to people who are living unhoused. A wide range of services can be provided in these alternative shelter sites, including on-site case management, physical and mental health services, and housing placement. Alternative Shelters are different from ‘traditional’ shelters, which are generally thought of as congregate shelters. ..Alternative shelters are also an alternative to motel sheltering, which is an option that has been made available to families, those with Covid-19 and other vulnerable populations during the pandemic. The goal for alternative shelters is to provide unique, low-barrier shelter options to serve those who may not feel comfortable accessing other shelter options.”<sup>59</sup>

The concept of alternative shelter is further evolving from the JOHS definition to include additional options such as Portland's Safe Rest Villages, vehicle-based managed campsites, use of

faith-community-owned buildings as shelters, and culturally-specific shelters.

Compared to traditional congregate shelters and motels, alternative shelters are inexpensive and can be both built and disassembled quickly when they are no longer needed. They represent a scalable and effective response to our unsheltered crisis. This is complimentary to other local advocacy efforts such as the “3000 challenge” working to make vacant apartments available to unsheltered people with City and County rent assistance.<sup>60</sup>

However, to date, only a minimal amount of public funding has been made available for alternative shelter through the Joint Office of Homeless Services, which draws its funding primarily from the Metro’s Supportive Housing Services Measure and local bond funding. Portland’s Safe Rest Villages, in contrast, are being built by federal dollars through the American Rescue Plan Act.<sup>61</sup> Many of the smaller alternative shelters are at least partially constructed or assembled by volunteers. They offer sleeping pods that are stronger and more permanent than tents.

Weatherproof and lockable, sleeping pods have 64-100 square feet of interior space with a heater, light fixtures, and an electrical outlet. Most alternative shelter sites offer showers, toilets, a shared kitchenette, and a group gathering space. Most are supported by a diverse cadre of volunteers. Many empower the guests to have a voice in governance of the shelter. Most also offer support services such as case management, peer support, a day center, or service coordination.

Portland can end unauthorized and unsupported homeless encampments now. Private property owners throughout Portland can lease or donate their land for micro-villages and other alternative shelter models. A directory of

nonprofit organizations that stand ready to build, manage, or support alternative shelter options is included at the end of this report.

To sum up, alternative shelter programs are an underfunded and less known option for unsheltered people than more expensive, traditional congregate shelters or motels. Crowded, noisy, and over-stimulating large villages and congregate shelters can trigger fear, anxiety, and antisocial behavior among those who have a history of trauma or other mental health challenges.

Smaller alternative shelter options are better able to provide the personalized attention and support many individuals while they await access to permanent housing.

Smaller alternative shelter programs are easier to manage and have less impact on surrounding community. Consequently, neighbors are more likely to be welcoming and accepting. It is easier to find available space for a smaller alternative shelter. This can be on an under-utilized parking lot, or in collaboration with housing developers, faith communities, or individual land owners.

The creation of one hundred small-scale shelter alternatives dispersed through Portland neighborhoods, serving 10-15 people per village, would quickly shelter up to 1,500 of our currently unsheltered and unsupported neighbors.



## **Nonprofits approved as vendors of alternative shelter in Multnomah County through JOHS**

AllGood

<https://allgoodnw.org/>

Beacon PDX

<https://beaconvillagepdx.org/>

Bridges to Change

<https://bridgestochange.com/>

Catholic Charities of Oregon

[www.catholiccharitiesoregon.org/](http://www.catholiccharitiesoregon.org/)

Cultivate Initiatives

[www.cultivateinitiatives.org/](http://www.cultivateinitiatives.org/)

Dignity Village

<https://dignityvillage.org/>

Greater Good NW

[www.greatergoodnorthwest.org](http://www.greatergoodnorthwest.org)

Helping Hands Reentry Outreach Services

<https://helpinghandsreentry.org/>

Hazelnut Grove

[www.facebook.com/HazelnutGrovePDX](http://www.facebook.com/HazelnutGrovePDX)

Human Solutions

<https://humansolutions.org>

Oregon Trail of Hope

<https://oregonharborofhope.org/>

Right to Dream Too

<http://right2dreamtoo.blogspot.com/>

Straightway Services

<https://straightwayservices.webs.com/>

Volunteers of America

<https://www.voa.org/>

WeShine Initiatives

<https://weshinepdx.org/>

## **Nonprofits that provide services for unsheltered people and support the development of alternative shelter**

Afro Village

[www.afrovillagepdx.org](http://www.afrovillagepdx.org)

Cascadia Behavioral Health

<https://cascadiabhc.org/>

Easter Seals

<https://www.easterseals.com/oregon>

Equi Institute

<https://www.equi-institute.org>

Family Promise

<https://familypromise.org/>

Gather Make Shelter

<https://gathermakeshelter.org/>

Historic Parkrose

<https://historicparkrose.com/>

Hygiene4All

[www.h4apdx.org/](http://www.h4apdx.org/)

Native Wellness Institute

[www.nativewellness.com/](http://www.nativewellness.com/)

Parkrose Community UCC

[www.parkroseucc.org/](http://www.parkroseucc.org/)

PDX Shelter Forum

<https://groups.io/g/pdxshelterforum/>

Pride NW

[www.pridenw.org/](http://www.pridenw.org/)

Rahab's Sisters

<https://rahabs-sisters.org/>

SE Uplift Houselessness Action Committee

[www.seuplift.org/se-uplift-houselessness-action-committee/](http://www.seuplift.org/se-uplift-houselessness-action-committee/)

Shelter Now

[www.shelternow.org](http://www.shelternow.org)

Street Books

<http://streetbooks.org>

Trans PDX

[athen.oshea@gmail.com](mailto:athen.oshea@gmail.com)



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