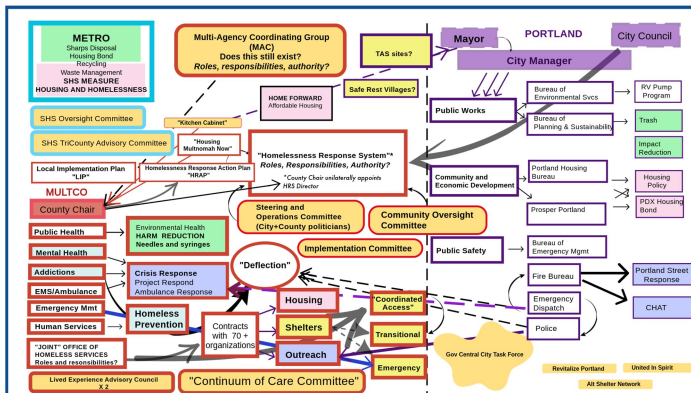


**Approach to Homelessness in Multnomah County -
Proposed Strategy, Recommendations, and Red Flags**
Former Multnomah County Commissioner Sharon Meieran, MD, JD
April 22, 2025

Executive Summary

The problem. Homelessness is the biggest crisis facing Multnomah County. However, despite constant headlines, billions of dollars, and immeasurable amounts of time and energy spent on plans to “end homelessness”, meaningful goals and ways to achieve them have never been established. Until problems with the County’s approach to ending homelessness are clearly identified and directly addressed, the system will not succeed in ending homelessness.

A picture speaks a thousand words. A Yiddish word, “far-potshket”, does a great job of encapsulating the problem. It refers to efforts to fix things that end up making them worse. The following diagram of Multnomah County’s “homelessness response system” shows why efforts to address homelessness to date have failed. We have a nonsystem better referred to as “chaos”.



The solution to homelessness is not as complicated as we’re making it. Though the problem of homelessness is seemingly intractable, the approach to ending it is actually straightforward. It is a matter of defining a comprehensive shared vision with meaningful goals, a clear chain of command, and an effective and accountable governance structure led by independent subject matter experts. To date Multnomah County has done none of these things, but they are eminently doable.

Money is not the problem. To effect meaningful change we need a plan, we need data and analytics, we need accountability, and we need to understand Multnomah County itself.

In order to create solutions for Multnomah County’s unique brand of homelessness, it is essential to bring policy, systems, and subject matter experts to the table. However, this alone is insufficient to achieve success. In order to build a system that will work, it is essential to understand Multnomah County itself, including its governance structure, its history, its funding and budgeting structures, the pivotal role it plays in regard to homeless services, and where it’s gone wrong.

Multnomah County plays a pivotal role in creating a comprehensive, holistic and effective homelessness-to-housing (H2H) continuum. Multnomah County is responsible for homeless services, public health, mental health and addictions including crisis care, and human services including Veterans services, disability services, aging services, and domestic violence services. Multnomah County directly receives and allocates Metro Supportive Housing Services Measure funding which is expected to bring in \$1 billion over the life of the measure to Multnomah County alone, in addition to the baseline billions of dollars in funding the County already receives for homelessness and human services.

Without understanding what has been happening in regard to the County's use of resources, and what Multnomah County's current governance, homeless services, and accountability structures are, no plan will be able to address the deficiencies that have led to our current state.

This document connects the dots. Having spent eight years as a Multnomah County Commissioner, and having worked on the front line as an ER doctor and street medicine volunteer, I bring a unique perspective, breadth, and depth of experience to the question of how to solve homelessness in Multnomah County.

This document describes the work I did as a commissioner to lay a foundation for transforming the way the County addresses homelessness. It includes a framework for building a successful H2H continuum. It focuses on particularly important components of the system, including data and analytics, a holistic shelter strategy, and moving people to the other side of the revolving door from homelessness to jails and ERs rather than just building a bigger door. It points to needed overhauls of the budget process and county contracting. It identifies what the barriers have been to getting things done. And it proposes ways to overcome them.

I did not create this approach alone. My perspective and recommendations have evolved over years and have been informed by extensive engagement with people with lived experience of homelessness, front line providers, business owners, neighborhood associations, community members, philanthropists, affordable housing providers, academics, and others. I've relied on my interactions with thousands of patients who have experienced homelessness, including those I have treated on the streets. And I had a front row seat learning about County homeless services practices and policies, having served on the A Home For Everyone executive committee and coordinating board, having been involved in the development of the SHS measure and the County's Local Improvement Plan, and having watched them play out in both the political arena and the real world.

Outline:

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I. **Establishing an Effective Homelessness to Housing Service Continuum, starting with a clear vision and meaningful goals.**

Homelessness is the biggest crisis facing Multnomah County. However, despite constant headlines, billions of dollars, and immeasurable amounts of time and energy spent on plans to “end homelessness”, meaningful goals and ways to achieve them have never been established. Rather than driving an end to homelessness, the County’s approach has fostered inertia and a downward spiral.

Every decade or so for the past 40 years a Portland-Multco plan has been introduced to address the homelessness crisis that has worsened since the last city-county plan. The plans include [Bud Clark’s 12-Point Plan for the Homeless](#) (1986); [Home Again - a Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness](#) (2005); [A Home For Everyone \(AHFE, 2015\)](#); and now the [Homelessness Response Action Plan \(HRAP\)](#).

Each successive plan to end homelessness has failed because no one ever took a step back to analyze why the prior plans didn’t work. Until the reasons for failure are identified, acknowledged, and dealt with, nothing will change.

Fortunately, the problems are not hard to identify, and the Multnomah County board can play a pivotal role in solving them. The problems include:

1. Lack of a holistic, comprehensive, goal-oriented, homelessness to housing (H2H) plan.
2. Lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities between Multnomah County and Portland, with no clearly defined chain of command related to homeless services planning, budgeting, implementation, or oversight.
3. Homeless services governance led by politicians, political strategists, and those with a vested interest in the system, rather than independent subject matter experts.
4. A lack of focus on meaningful results.
5. Reliance on an outdated approach to data and technology that is ill-equipped to address dynamic, multi-faceted, intersectional systems.
6. Lack of accountability and transparency, with a County budget and contracting structure that fosters fragmentation, siloing, and an inability to follow the money.

Once the problems have been accurately identified, the solutions follow naturally. They include:

1. Establish a clear vision and identify specific, measurable, meaningful goals for a comprehensive homelessness to housing plan.

2. Replace current homeless services governance with a core body of independent subject matter experts and ensure department directors have expertise in the departments they are leading.
3. Clearly identify roles and responsibilities of Portland and Multnomah County related to homelessness with a defined chain of command.
4. Institute an accurate By-Name List to measure and track the one number that can tell us if we're making progress in ending homelessness: The actual number of people living outside.
5. Create a robust, reliable, and efficient data collection, management and analytic structure that shares information effectively and uses it to define meaningful deliverables and track real outcomes.
6. Focus on connections and transitions getting people *through* a H2H continuum over the long term, rather than static, disconnected goals that can technically be met even as homelessness is worsening.
7. Overhaul County budget and contracting processes.

As a commissioner, I took the following steps to implement these solutions and build a foundation for an effective H2H continuum:

1. Identification of a clear vision and meaningful goals.

a. Vision:

A thriving Multnomah County where no one lives or dies unsheltered and there is a shared sense of community safety, wellbeing, and civic pride.

Accomplish this by building a person-centered system that collaboratively plans and invests collective resources most effectively to prevent homelessness, shelter people effectively if they do become homeless, and transition them effectively to housing, and support them in housing to foster long term stability.

b. Goals:

i. Reduce the actual number of people living unsheltered.

1. *Reduce inflow into homelessness, including from institutions.*
2. *Shelter people effectively with an intentional array of options that meet anticipated and actual needs.*
3. *Expand outflow from homelessness into housing.*

ii. Reduce the number of people dying unsheltered.

1. *Get people signed up for health insurance and other benefits.*

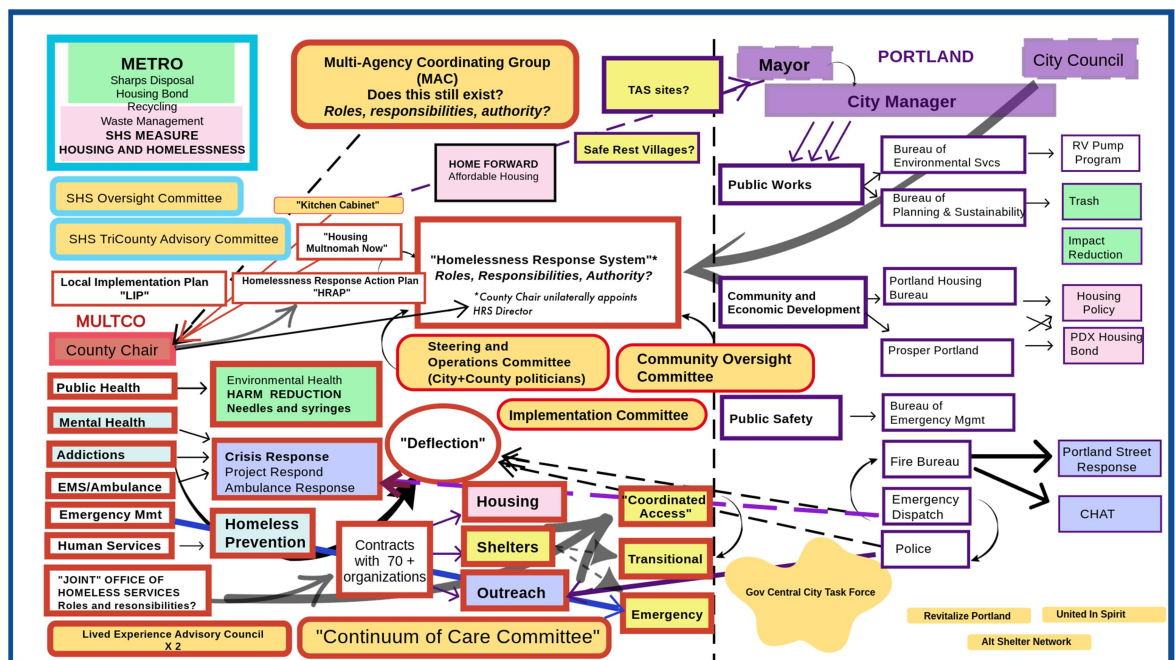
2. *Recognize that insurance does not equal access. Get people **access** to healthcare (including mental health and addictions treatment) while living unsheltered.*
- iii. **Reduce the number of people returning to homelessness once they have moved into shelter, treatment or housing.**
- iv. **Decrease the incidence of interpersonal violence and property damage involving people living unsheltered.**
- v. **Decrease the net amount of trash, environmental harm, and vectors of disease stemming from unsheltered camping.**

“Getting more people into shelter”, “Placing people into housing”, and “Building more residential treatment” are not meaningful goals in the context of ending homelessness. They can be met even as homelessness and death on the streets are worsening.

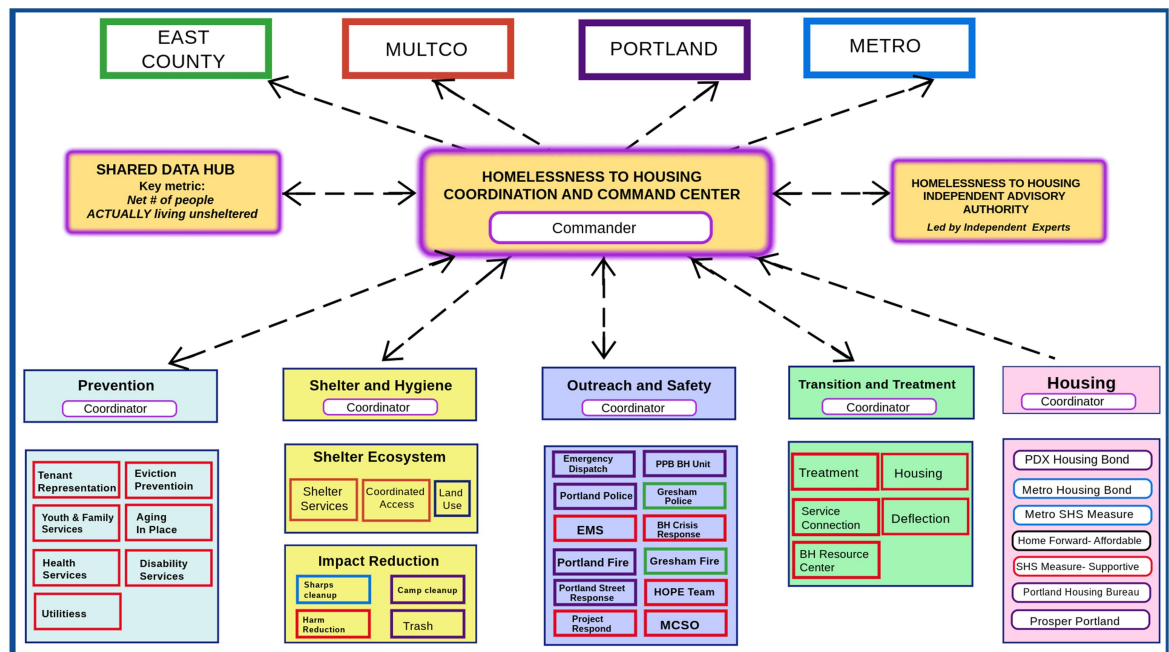
Meaningful goals reflect absolute improvements in individual and community health, safety, and dignity.

Making progress toward these will not only have demonstrably positive impacts on people’s health, dignity, safety, and transition into stable housing, but will also begin to restore public confidence and civic pride.

2. **Creation of a map depicting current roles, responsibilities and relationships in the homeless services system.** One glance shows the reasons for the dysfunction of the current H2H system - it is literal chaos.



3. **Creation of an alternative vision with a defined chain of command for homeless services planning, implementation, and oversight.** This diagram of a potential future state demonstrates that it is both possible and straightforward to bring order to chaos.



4. **Introduction of an alternative approach to homeless services governance and leadership led by independent subject matter experts rather than politicians.**

The HRS is governed by a steering committee of politicians and its leader is a career political strategist. The JOHS is led by a former health system lobbyist and his interim replacement will be a Multnomah County bureaucrat. There is a void of homeless services expertise leading the hundred-person County JOHS department and the additional HRS bureaucracy.

PR and politics have displaced the kind of critical thinking and sound policymaking that's needed to seriously address the root causes, crises, and ongoing impacts of homelessness.

I proposed replacing the politically dominated governance structure of the HRS with a durable independent body of experts that could withstand pendulum swings in political ideology under [ORS 190.010](#). This Oregon law would allow Multnomah County and the City of Portland to form an *independent* agency called an Intergovernmental Entity (IE) to address homelessness.

At the very least, a governance structure should be created that does not simply convene the same politicians and organizations beholden to them, but contains critical thinkers who have expertise in homeless services, data and analytics, continuous improvement, systems integration, and a demonstrated ability to get things done.

The current HRS governance structure is not equipped to address current problems holistically, expertly, or independently. The County board could work with the Portland City Council to restructure homeless services governance so as to be effective.

A core team of independent subject matter experts who fundamentally understand homeless services could do in weeks what prior politically-driven approaches have failed to do in decades: Develop a comprehensive, holistic plan for a H2H continuum that can be proficiently and effectively executed.

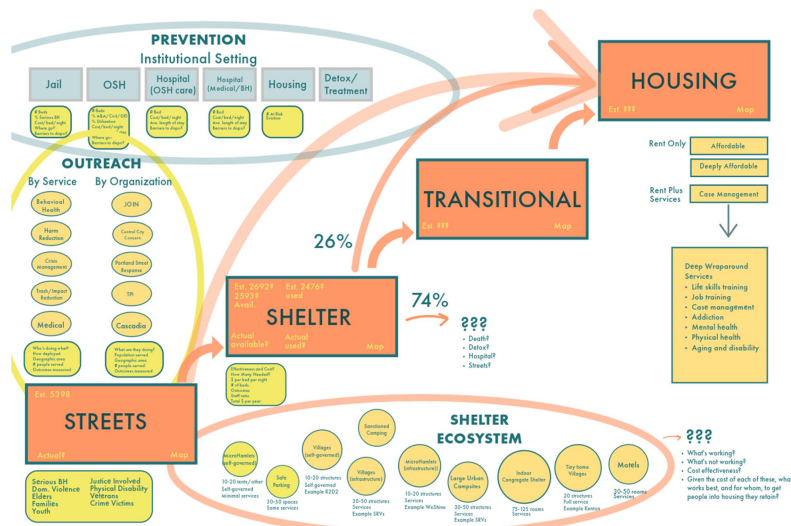
This approach would not prevent politicians from making decisions, but rather it would educate and advise them so they could make the most effective and informed decisions possible.

5. Creation of a holistic framework for a comprehensive H2H continuum.

Any plan that means to end homelessness must be constructed on a foundation of four independent but interconnected pillars:

- I. Homelessness Prevention (decreasing inflow)
- II. Safety and Shelter (protecting health and safety if/when people do become homeless)
- III. Transition (facilitating outflow)
- IV. Long Term Housing (retention and prevention of return to homelessness)

These four concepts do not appear to have been considered in the HRAP. The following is a framework I proposed in 2023 to holistically address the entire H2H continuum:



An approach to building the system represented in the framework is summarized in a manual I prepared entitled “Building a Homelessness to Housing Continuum - A Pictorial Guide”. The following is the Table of Contents:

Table of Contents:

1. A map of the current homelessness to housing system - CHAOS
2. An alternative vision of the homelessness to housing system - ORDER
3. A KEY to the maps of Chaos and Order
4. Basic framework for a holistic homelessness to housing system - PREVENTION, SHELTER, TRANSITION, and HOUSING
5. STREETS - COUNT THE ACTUAL PEOPLE LIVING OUTSIDE AND UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY NEED. Follow this one key number over time to see if what we're doing is working.
6. OUTREACH - Use data to effectively coordinate, centralize, optimize and deploy outreach services.
7. SHELTER - Use actual meaningful data to proactively identify need and establish an array of shelter options that optimize investment and are effective.
8. SHELTER ECOSYSTEM - use actual data to measure effectiveness and cost-effectiveness.
9. TRANSITIONS - Use data to identify needed transitional housing and services; deploy intensive care teams to transition people and help with housing retention.
10. HOUSING - Match people to the services and supports that meet their actual needs.
11. PREVENTION - It's a cycle. Stop people becoming homeless when discharged from institutional settings and once they are placed in housing.
12. A HOLISTIC, COMPREHENSIVE "HOMELESSNESS TO HOUSING" FRAMEWORK - Putting the pieces together.
13. GOVERNANCE: This diagram depicts an inclusive body that relies on extensive, organized and constructive engagement from the community advising independent experts who create a comprehensive, holistic homelessness plan. The plan requires approval by politicians, but they should not be creating it. We lack both independence or expertise in current decision-making and leadership around creation of a homelessness to housing continuum and this is the root of our problems.
14. CONTINUUM OF ADDICTION AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES superimposed onto the basic framework addressing homelessness.

6. Introduction of the concepts of Built For Zero and By Name Lists (BNLs) to the County, with proposal of a budget amendment to urgently create a BNL.

A BNL measures and tracks the one number that matters in ending homelessness: *The actual number of people living unsheltered*. I originally brought the BNL concept to the County with Portland City Commissioner Dan Ryan four years ago. The County does not have such a list, no matter how often or loudly they claim that they do.

I proposed a budget amendment that invested in a network of teams deployed in a coordinated way across the County to proactively build and maintain a complete and accurate BNL. The budget amendment was rejected by the former board. The current board could revisit and potentially implement this or a similar approach, resulting in a real BNL by the end of the calendar year.

7. Proposal to use meaningful deliverables to track and communicate real outcomes and stop letting money-spending count as “action” and box-checking count as “success”.

Too often the County describes success in terms of how many boxes it has checked (i.e., HRAP) and how fast it's spent hundreds of millions of dollars (i.e., SHS funds), as if these are goals in and of themselves. We are finally learning just how disconnected these “successes” are from reality, and what damage can be caused by relying on these types of measures.

To reflect success, the County must start pointing to population level changes reflecting improvements in real people's lives and actual public health and safety.

8. **Proposal to establish person-centered teams to directly support people's transitions from homelessness to housing, rather than just getting them into temporary situations that cycle them back to the streets.**

The current practice of short-term intervention without long-term planning only temporarily delays the return to homelessness for most people who are chronically unhoused. Using a "revolving door" analogy, the County has created processes that make the door bigger and increase the number of spins, rather than getting more people through the door to the other side.

For example, many people getting addiction treatment right now already end up being discharged back to homelessness. Investing in more treatment, without intentionally building a housing and support system for people to continue their recovery once they've completed treatment, only creates more pitstops for people to pause at before returning to the streets. It causes tremendous suffering, and wastes time and resources, in a process that is literally a doom loop.

People need help getting *through* the system, not just more fragmented hand-offs ultimately resulting in more homelessness.

A small investment in the creation of **intensive person-centered connection and care teams** would yield outsized return in terms of getting people through the H2H continuum and into stable housing. I proposed a budget amendment that would create these core intensive-care teams to not only improve people's lives, but make existing investments in short-term solutions much more effective. The budget amendment was rejected by the former board. The current board could revisit it.

9. **Proposal that IT be separated into its own department and that the County invest in an expert data and analytics team that would work across departments and jurisdictions.**

There is currently a void of accurate, complete and meaningful data measured by the County, resulting from an archaic and dysfunctional IT, data and analytic structure. This has led to an inability to use real information to drive change, assess progress, course-correct, or promote meaningful outcomes.

The County needs to move into the current century in terms of its approach to data systems, strategy, sharing, and management. This includes not only defining goals effectively and using data to measure them, but using dynamic modeling to **predict** meaningful outcomes in interconnected systems so the County can plan for the future.

A separate IT department, along with a dedicated analytic team that could operate cross-departmentally or even across jurisdictions, would represent a seismic shift in the County's ability to develop programs, monitor them, and get meaningful results. Two previous County chairs chose not to pursue this proactive strategy. The current board could make it happen.

10. Proposal of overhauls of County budgeting and contracting in order to streamline processes and increase transparency, oversight and accountability.

A virtually complete lack of transparency and accountability at the County has led to systems that are unmanageable and impenetrable. In addition to auditing past practices, the County must overhaul its systems to forge structures that prioritize accountability, transparency, and forward thinking.

Overhaul the budget. I urgently called this out every year as I watched giant tomes containing hundreds of disconnected program offers lacking metrics and accountability masquerade as a budget. Each year at budget time the Chair promised to have a new system in place by the next budget cycle, and all commissioners agreed the current system had to change, yet it never happened. The County's current approach to the budget is opaque, fosters errors, is wasteful, has no accountability, and urgently requires a complete overhaul.

The County must Budget holistically, allocating one-time and ongoing resources appropriately to achieve an overarching vision with clear demonstrable goals, with performance measures and accountability structures to track progress and measure success.

Restructure County contracting. The County does not have a standardized or centralized approach to entering into, monitoring, or overseeing its contracts with hundreds of community-based nonprofits. This is a key contributor to the County's profound lack of transparency and accountability, and is directly tied to questions of where all the money has gone.

Several years ago, I sponsored a budget amendment to begin a process of restructuring and centralizing County contracting. A clear set of recommendations resulted, but implementation was delayed for years by the Chair.

The current board could push for urgent implementation of recommendations to centralize and standardize County contracting to ensure appropriate oversight, accountability, and deliverables.

In summary:

Only by identifying and solving for the problems at the heart of previous failed homelessness plans, including the HRAP and the Local Improvement Plan (LIP), can the County begin to reverse its downward spiral and begin to save and improve lives.

The good news is that, although the issues around homelessness are complex, making a functional system doesn't have to be. The approach is actually straightforward.

As an individual commissioner, I established a foundation on which an effective H2H continuum could be built. It was supported by evidence and informed by subject matter experts and people on the front line of the systems being impacted. However, it was not entertained by the former Chair or board.

Given how much power is concentrated in the Chair by county charter, a single commissioner cannot change county policy or direction. With a majority of commissioners who do not simply go along to get along, however, the new board has a collective opportunity to change course and create effective, innovative, and streamlined systems that can save and improve lives in Multnomah County.

I hope that some of the foundation I laid as a commissioner can be helpful in the context of this new dynamic.

II. Pursuing reduction of the actual number of people living outside by understanding their needs and urgently creating a complete and accurate By-Name List (BNL).

- 1. A BNL is a comprehensive list of every person in a community experiencing homelessness, updated in real time.**

“Using information collected and shared with their consent, each person on the list has a file that includes their name, homeless history, health and housing needs. By maintaining a BNL, communities are able to track the ever changing size and composition of their homeless population. They know current and detailed information on every homeless person in a given subpopulation.” ([Built For Zero - Community Solutions - “What is a By Name List?”](#))

- 2. A BNL would enable the County to focus on what should be its primary goal: Reducing the actual number of people living outside.**

The actual number of people living outside reflects the entire H2H continuum, including the number of people becoming homeless (inflow) and those leaving homelessness (outflow) as well as those living on the streets and in shelters. The number allows the County to use real information to drive change, assess progress, course-correct, and promote meaningful outcomes.

If the number of people living outside is increasing, the County is failing at preventing homelessness, transitioning people into treatment or other needed services, and/or housing people. If the number is decreasing, the County is succeeding in its efforts.

This approach, coupled with the focus on each person’s unique needs and barriers, can provide a roadmap to both optimize individual pathways to housing and guide collective investment.

a. Other counts, including the Point In Time Count (PITC) and Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), are NOT BNLs.

The HUD-sponsored Point In Time Count (PITC) relies on volunteers and service providers who are deployed across the county on a couple of days each year to pose a set of standardized questions to people they encounter who appear unsheltered. There is no effort to seek people out who are off the beaten path, and people who are sleeping, having a behavioral health crisis, or otherwise are not able to engage do not get counted. Meanwhile, these are the people most in need of identification.

There is no way to track people to get them what they need. The questions are typically awkward, poorly phrased and do not get at vital information that will help people transition out of homelessness. If there are fewer volunteers, the numbers will be lower. The PITC is a fundamentally flawed process that wastes valuable time and resources that would be better spent on a BNL.

The HMIS process is discussed in more detail below.

The County has needed to consolidate and restructure its BNL, HMIS, and PITC processes for years. It has not done so.

3. A BNL uses a common-sense approach to achieve not only individual progress by getting people stably housed, but global progress by optimizing investment.

- **Using information to help individuals:** *Using individual information, intensive care teams can establish relationships, follow people through the H2H continuum, help with transitions, get people what they actually need, problem-solve in real time, and facilitate their flow along a pathway to housing.*
- **Using information to guide investment:** *Aggregated information can identify what's collectively needed to get people off the streets into the shelter/housing that meets their needs. It can inform an effective evidence-based plan to reduce the number of people living outside. This data is essential to guide responsible investment by the City and County in a Homelessness-to-Housing continuum.*

4. Despite years of spending, Multnomah County still does not have a BNL.

Having brought the concept of a BNL to the County four years ago with City Commissioner Dan Ryan, I directly observed the County's failure to build one and witnessed the reasons why. There was initially overt antipathy of County leadership toward implementing a BNL. Then, there was masked antipathy as the County began to implement the program but delayed and did not invest. Then, there was misunderstanding, further delay, and posting of information that was inaccurate.

Over the past year or two, the desire to create a BNL seemed more authentic than it had in the past. However, there never seemed to be an authentic understanding of what a BNL actually was, or its power as a tool to effect change.

Without an accurate and complete BNL, the County does not know how many people live unsheltered on its streets, what they need, or how to best invest resources to achieve the most good. Most importantly, the County will not be able to assess programs or track progress in terms of impact on real people and the community.

5. The County believes its Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) is a BNL. It isn't.

a. Brief summary of HMIS

HMIS is a federal database containing information about people who are homeless. Entry of certain information into this system is required by jurisdictions receiving HUD money to address homelessness. The County took over HMIS from the City after a protracted and opaque process.

The local HMIS was archaic even when it was first adopted over 20 years ago. Over the past two years the County has invested in updating its HMIS. However, because

investments were made through different departments and with different funding streams, it was virtually impossible to follow the money.

At the time I left the board, it was not possible to identify exactly how much had been spent on “updating” HMIS, what departments were involved, how the County engaged with its partners around use of HMIS data, where the County was in terms of implementation, what information was being collected by whom, or how effective its investments had been. The board has the power to demand this crucial information during the County budget process.

b. Even if the HMIS does what the County says it’s doing, it is still not a BNL.

Although an HMIS can potentially constitute a BNL, the County’s HMIS doesn’t.

The County’s HMIS offers a passive, retrospective, grossly incomplete, often inaccurate, list of people who are treated as numbers, in order to comply with HUD regulations. It is not used to guide investment in a functional H2H continuum.

In stark contrast, a BNL offers an intentional approach to identify all people living outside so as to understand their needs and get them stably housed. It is used to proactively guide collective investment in a functioning H2H system and treats the people it identifies as human beings.

c. Here is a specific breakdown of the fundamental differences between the County’s HMIS and a BNL:

i. Purpose: Compliance vs. People.

A BNL considers individuals as human beings to be supported, rather than numbers to be reported.

HMIS is a required compliance tool for HUD wherein people are treated as numbers.

A BNL provides information about real people in order to get them what they need to get and stay housed, and make sure this gets done.

ii. Engagement: Retrospective and passive vs. Real time and proactive.

County HMIS contains information passively obtained through different providers that is retrospective and static.

A BNL engages teams to proactively and intentionally engage with people in a structured way to identify their needs and barriers in order to directly address them.

iii. Accuracy: Limited vs. Full

County HMIS includes names of people who have died, variations on multiple names counted as separate individuals, and people who have moved away, gotten housed, gone to jail, or gone to the hospital.

A BNL identifies and actually follows people to know what is happening with them. Their information is updated in real time.

iv. **Completeness:** Limited vs. Full

County HMIS only contains information submitted by a subset of County service providers for people already engaged in County services. Numbers can be off by hundreds to thousands.

A BNL contains information about everyone living outside, because teams intentionally and directly reach out to people in a planful way to establish and build relationships and regularly update information.

v. **Collective impact:** None vs. Foundational

County HMIS is not used to identify how collective investments can be optimized to provide the most good for the most people.

A BNL considers driving effective investment to be a core purpose.

d. **The County's false reliance on the HMIS as a BNL has resulted in false promises of false deliverables leading to false claims of success.**

As a commissioner, I openly conveyed my concerns about the HRAP. These included: (1) Creation of a huge new bureaucracy on top of an already dysfunctional one with no clear chain of command or purpose; (2) Added cost and confusion with no clear benefit; (3) Governance that was not independent and lacked expertise; and (4) Metrics and deliverables that were severely flawed and would not lead to a decrease in homelessness. It flew under the radar with virtually no attention by County commissioners or the media.

I've attached a memo (detailed) and summary (less detailed) that explained my concerns to the Chair, the former Mayor, the former city council, and the former county board at the time the HRAP was being voted on. Many of these concerns have borne out.

One example shows how the County treating its HMIS as a BNL leads to false promises, misleading deliverables, and potentially absurd results.

The promise: The HRAP promised to decrease the number of people living unsheltered by 50% by the end of 2025 according to the County's "by name list".

The reality: The HRAP agreed to take the number of people listed in its HMIS as of January 25, 2024 (5000), divide that number by 2 (2500), and promised to shelter or house that number of people by the end of 2025. It did not promise to do anything about the actual people on the HMIS list, or to house half the number of people actually living unsheltered as of January 25, 2024.

The implication: Erroneously using the HMIS as a BNL allowed the County to start with an inaccurate baseline, count anyone they could find living on the street over the next two years, and claim success if they moved them somewhere, even transiently.

The absurdity: JOHS could claim success even if it did not help a single person on its original list; if the net number of people living unsheltered actually increased; or if people who moved into shelter or housing ended up back on the streets the next day.

If this was a BNL: People on the list would be individually followed, the list would be updated as people came and left, and the County would ensure that the number of actual people living unsheltered was going down.

The same problems exist with all of the HRAP's deliverables, such as the promise to eliminate discharges from hospitals to homelessness.

6. Conclusion - Multnomah County needs to urgently build a real BNL.

Last year I proposed a budget amendment that would have urgently established a meaningful BNL by the end of the calendar year. It invested in an incident command-style structure to deploy dedicated teams in a coordinated way to proactively and intentionally build a true BNL. The budget amendment was voted down by the board.

The investment itself was relatively small, but the return on investment in terms of finally understanding who the County is serving and what's needed to serve them would have been invaluable. **A BNL would not only answer basic questions about the County's homeless population and homeless services system, but allow the County to invest effectively in what's needed to actually reduce homelessness, assess the effectiveness of programs, and track progress in achieving one clear goal: Reducing the actual number of people living outside.**

As the number of people dying outside has skyrocketed, and a massive budget shortfall looms, it is even more urgent that the County invest its limited resources in a coordinated, data-driven, measurable, and cohesive way to save lives and help the most people.

III. Establishing an effective, holistic shelter ecosystem that achieves the dual purpose of shelter: (1) Lifesaving intervention and (2) Transition to stable long-term housing.

1. Background and grounding in the dual purpose of shelter.

On the board, I consistently advocated for investment in an effective and cost-effective array of shelters to support and save the lives of people living outside as we built the tens of thousands of housing units we knew were needed but would take years to build. This recognized the dual purpose of shelter: (1) Lifesaving intervention to promote health and safety, and (2) transition point allowing people to get the services and skills they needed to become successfully and stably housed.

2. The County's historical opposition to investing in shelter led to a predictable crisis.

For years, despite the increasingly desperate and obvious need, County leadership opposed investing in shelter. The former Chair, prior JOHS directors, and many advocates claimed that getting people into housing could happen as quickly as getting them into shelter and was no more expensive. Limited County resources were intentionally directed toward housing and away from shelter.

This argument failed to account for two crucial facts: (1) People with different needs require different approaches to housing. People who were chronically homeless with serious mental illness and/or addiction needed a range of services that the County did not understand, did not provide, and did not pay for; and (2) housing was not readily available for anyone, particularly people with serious mental illness and/or addiction

Trying to serve chronically unhoused individuals with approaches to housing meant for people with different challenges and needs led to catastrophic outcomes - destruction of property with tremendous financial loss to service organizations, homeowners, landlords, and businesses; people suffering in living situations they were not equipped to survive in and did not wish to be in; and loss of community, which was often the only stabilizing factor for people living chronically unsheltered.

The problem of conflating the multiple reasons for homelessness into a single oversimplified reality was compounded by an overt refusal to acknowledge that the majority of people who were *chronically* homeless had serious underlying mental illness and/or addiction, regardless of what initially led to their homelessness. Their needs, and the devastating impact of their conditions on themselves and the broader community, were ignored.

I had to fight to get the concepts of "behavioral health" and "alternative shelter" into the County's SHS measure Local Improvement Plan (LIP), and only supported the LIP because I was promised by County leadership that these issues would be directly addressed. They weren't. And, despite profound worsening of homelessness and death of people living unsheltered, the County has not revisited its LIP.

I was able to secure funding for an innovative and streamlined approach to pursuing alternative shelter, along with a learning collaborative to involve the community in sharing ideas, questions,

approaches and solutions and initiate research. The JOHS never actively implemented the strategies.

Homelessness has predictably worsened, with more people with severe behavioral health conditions living in squalor and dying unsheltered. This has had a devastating impact on people living outside, as well as the entire community, and directly led to the current unmitigated crisis at the intersection of homelessness, behavioral health, and public safety.

3. The County is finally investing in shelter, but still without a global plan or strategy. This wastes time and resources while failing to save lives and get people housed.

Over the past eight years, instead of using the tragic death of hundreds and the suffering of thousands to spark a global holistic shelter plan that connects to the broader H2H continuum and achieves higher goals of saving lives and getting people housed, the County simply followed the pendulum of public opinion to spend more money on shelter without focusing on effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, or accountability.

The “community sheltering strategy” touted by the County is not a holistic strategy or plan. It does not count how many people are living outside; it does not make an effort to understand what they need; it does not analyze effectiveness or cost-effectiveness of different shelter types for different populations so as to allocate resources most effectively; it does not tie in to the broader H2H continuum; and it does not seek to demonstrate effectiveness in the two overarching purposes of shelter - improvement in health and saving lives, and transition to stable housing.

The “community sheltering strategy” simply resulted in directing more money to certain shelters and shelter types in a disconnected and inefficient way that is still not tied to cost-effectiveness or outcomes.

4. People die on the streets while waiting for housing and waiting for shelter. The County doesn’t need to spend *more* on shelter; it needs to do shelter *differently*.

In developing a holistic and comprehensive shelter strategy, a few core premises must be universally accepted:

- a. There is not enough housing for everyone living unsheltered in Multnomah County by thousands of units.
- b. It will take years to build sufficient housing to meet existing demand, let alone predicted future demand, no matter how the County and region elect to do so (note: building new units is the most expensive and least effective approach to increasing housing at the scale necessary to address the current crisis).
- c. People will need shelter until they can be housed or they will live outside in squalor, they will suffer physically and mentally, and they will die.
- d. The County will always have a finite amount of resources to invest in shelter.

If we accept that these premises are true, and that letting people live in squalor and die on our streets is a morally unacceptable outcome, then there is only one viable solution: The County needs to do shelter *differently*. The County needs to build more shelter more quickly that meets the needs of more people at lower cost, while advancing the overarching purposes of shelter to save lives and transition people into stable long term housing.

5. How to do shelter differently - understand, analyze, and match.

a. Understand how many people are living unsheltered and what their different needs are.

There is not a one-size-fits-all shelter type that meets the vast array of needs of the diversity of people living outside. The County must quantify and understand the spectrum of needs in order to invest in the right array of different shelter types to meet those needs. This goes back to having a real By Name List accounting for all people living outside.

b. Analyze the cost, appropriateness, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness of different shelter types for different populations.

There is a wide range of costs for different shelter types, ranging from minimal (self-governed sites and sanctioned camping) to high (motels and tiny home villages). In addition, certain types of shelter best serve particular needs (for example motel shelters uniquely meet needs of women with children escaping domestic violence, or people with certain medical conditions). Finally, having the right allocation of shelter types is not sufficient for a well-functioning system; services must be provided in the most cost-effective manner possible.

Unless cost, effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, and outcomes are directly measured and analyzed, thousands of people will continue to lack shelter and, for those who do get into shelter, they will fail to transition into housing, even as tremendous resources are spent and more people die on the streets. The County has not even begun to engage in this analysis.

c. Proactively develop a shelter array that optimizes investment by matching the right shelter to the right people in the most cost-effective way.

Responsible investment demands that the County be aware of how much it's investing in which type of shelter, which shelters are most effective for which populations, and how it can optimize investments in shelter to meet the needs of the most people while focusing on special needs for certain individuals. The county doesn't need to spend *as much* as it currently does on shelter in order to serve more people more effectively. It needs to spend its resources *more wisely*. It needs a real shelter plan. (This is addressed in my *Pictorial Guide to Creating an Effective H2H Continuum*, referenced in Section I).

- 6. As the County builds out an effective shelter system, it should urgently and systematically pursue three effective, rapidly established, cost-effective shelter types that people actually want to live in. This will decompress the system and effectively help people in the short-term while longer-term strategies are being implemented.**

a. MicroVillage Expansion Project (MVEP)

One shelter option that deserves immediate attention and investment at scale are “microvillages”. Microvillages are very small village-type shelters on very small plots of land with basic amenities that can house 10-15 housing units, ranging from tents to RVs to pods to tiny homes. They can range from being self-governed to having full case managers and expanded amenities on site.

Microvillages have a small footprint and minimal impact on neighborhoods, they are easier to site than larger Safe rest Villages or TAS sites, they can be constructed relatively quickly, and, depending on governance type, can be very low cost. Examples include WeShine’s Avalon village, Beacon village, Dignity Village, Hazelnut Grove, Barbie’s Village and Right to Dream 2.

Most importantly, people living unsheltered have expressed that these are the kinds of places they would WANT to live in.

I sponsored a budget amendment allocating funding to a Micro Village Expansion Project (MVEP). The purpose was to engage with people directly impacted by unsheltered homelessness now living in a variety of different types of microvillages to develop a platform for support and continuous information-sharing, and recommend an approach to implementing a broad network of microvillages distributed throughout the County.

The final report was to include: (1) the philosophy, background and opportunity of microvillages; (2) benefits to people living unsheltered and their housed neighbors; (3) how the concept could be brought to scale and allow for replicability in order to achieve economy of scale and impact thousands of lives rather than the current inefficient and expensive one-off approach; (4) how a network could be established to create a sense of community and ensure oversight and communication; and (5) practical advice for individuals and organizations interested in establishing a microvillage in their neighborhood.

An incredible team knocked this project out of the park. They worked with and presented their findings directly to the JOHS and the board in one of the best board presentations I’ve ever seen. I highly recommend watching this team of front line providers, people living in microvillages, housed neighbors, and an architect, present their findings and recommendations to the board. Link to recorded presentation [here](#) (start at minute 43). Link to slide presentation [here](#).

The full MVEP report, Executive Summary, and one-pager are attached.

b. Safe Park sites.

Safe park sites are a uniquely efficient, effective, and cost-effective approach to addressing unsheltered homelessness, yet they're hardly used in Portland or Multnomah County. I emailed all the Portland city councilors about the City and JOHS plan to close the Sunderland Safe RV Park Site, asking them to reconsider. To their credit, they did! They extended time, allowing the park to continue, and sought additional information to guide planning. I am hopeful funding can be found not only to keep this site open, but expand on this type of shelter.

See article: [Hundreds of Portlanders Are Living in Their Cars. Here's How They Do It. Even as the numbers keep growing, Portland and Multnomah County officials have repeatedly failed to create a program or location where people living in vehicles can legally park overnight.](#) (By Thacher Schmid, Willamette Week, January 19, 2022).

c. Designated camping.

The County has never considered the use of designated campsites as a shelter option for people living outside. There has been an uncoordinated and opaque system of sweeping camps, but no identification of where people could go instead, and no way for people to transport themselves and their belongings to different sites.

Many people do not have an issue with moving their stuff. They do not want to be living on a sidewalk without a place to wash or go to the bathroom. But they usually have no other options, particularly options that feel safe.

A system should be created where, if the City and County are telling people where they can't camp, then they are telling them where they can. All while providing the transportation needed to get them there with their stuff.

Designated camping has been successful in a number of jurisdictions and it makes no sense that the County has so far refused to consider it.

7. As the County builds an effective shelter system, it must strategically invest in the places people can transition to for the longer term.

- a. Building new units is the most expensive and time-consuming option for creating long-term housing. Other options, such as refurbishing hotels, home sharing, and communal village models, must be pursued.
- b. An in-depth analysis goes beyond the shelter discussion here, but must be considered *in concert* with shelter as part of broader H2H planning. Otherwise, shelter will never be effective in achieving its dual purpose.
- c. A BNL is essential to ensure investments are optimized for people to flow through the system, rather than cycle back to homelessness.

IV. Pursuing urgent investigation of Multnomah County's Approach to Rent Assistance starting with Regional Long-term Rent Assistance.

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent by Multnomah County on RA with minimal clarity, oversight or accountability. Deep concerns have been raised by community members and providers that have never been addressed.

By all accounts, including from front line workers and people in desperate need of help trying to navigate the RA and affordable housing systems, the County's approach to RA is opaque, dysfunctional, terminally fragmented, grossly inefficient, confusing beyond measure, and causes tremendous harm. ***County RA should be investigated at the deepest levels with both forensic and performance audits. One discrete program - RLRA - offers a place to start.***

A. The County never had a plan for RA as part of a holistic H2H continuum, and failed to develop one even as tremendous amounts of money flooded the County due to COVID relief and passage of the SHS measure.

Starting in 2020, the County began receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in CARES, ARPA, and SHS measure funding. Much of this was spent on RA. But there was never an overarching plan, coordination, oversight, or accountability for how the funds should be used for RA or who should receive them. The Department of County Human Services (DCHS) and the JOHS presented board briefings each year, but the presentations were superficial, fragmented, and confounding, always raising more questions than they answered.

B. An individual's story about her experience seeking information about RLRA prompted me to look deeper and raised too many red flags to count.

I had always felt that the County's approach to RA was a void where millions of dollars went in and no clear impact or data emerged. As a commissioner I regularly voiced concerns and asked questions, but did not receive substantive answers.

Just before leaving the County, I was contacted by a woman I'll refer to as Ms. X. She is in her 60s, a domestic violence survivor, has a history of traumatic brain injury and other mental and physical health disabilities, and has been street homeless in the past. She was a poster child for one County program in particular - RLRA - which reportedly used SHS funds for long term RA to support those with disabilities who were either chronically homeless or at risk of chronic homelessness.

Despite repeated attempts to simply get basic information about RLRA from the JOHS, and attempts to get accommodation for her disabilities from the JOHS just to understand the program, all Ms. X appeared to receive was the runaround. She felt gaslit by the very department that was supposed to help her.

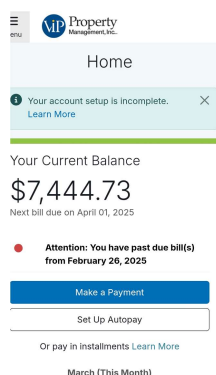
Ms. X was shunted from community organization to community organization and repeatedly told that, in order to get funds meant to **prevent** homelessness and eviction, she needed to actually

be chronically homeless. To avoid being on the streets as she tried to figure out how to access longer term assistance through RLRA and other means, she regularly tried to seek renewal of her short-term RA. But she was repeatedly told that renewal of her short term RA was not possible. So she regularly had to wait until her short-term RA ran out and she was threatened with actual eviction before she could finally access legal aid to get the eviction paused and gain access to yet a different RA funding stream for emergency assistance. She has done this for years and has been traumatized by the experience. The fact that she has been able to continue to push for understanding and access is a testament to her own grit and tenacity.

I have heard not only from Ms. X and other tenants about the harm caused by this process, but from affordable housing providers and landlords who have described the Catch-22 they've experienced.

Multiple landlords have described being unable to receive assistance from the County or the nonprofits they contract with to address issues with tenants until significant damage to people and/or property has occurred. Once they've reached a crisis point, they feel forced to file for eviction. The eviction process itself costs thousands of dollars and takes months, and they would rather avoid it if at all possible, but they feel they have no choice. Both landlords and tenants have said that much suffering could be avoided, and massive amounts of time and money could be saved, if there was a clear plan to help people rather than the current backwards and wasteful system perpetuated by the JOHS.

Meanwhile, rent payments that are supposed to be paid directly to landlords by County partners (particularly Home Forward) are regularly late. In one case involving Ms. X, rent payments from Home Forward were overdue by six months. She received an eviction notice for failure to pay rent, and late payments accrued. This was only addressed once eviction was pending and Ms. X was finally able to access legal aid, after untold and completely unnecessary suffering had occurred. Ms. X recently received notification that rent for the unit she was able to emergently secure at the beginning of this year has not yet been paid. Late payments are accruing.



To add insult to injury, eviction notices and late payments that are due entirely to the failures of County-contracted agencies to perform their responsibilities, go on the records of the tenants renting the units. The tenants have no recourse, and the JOHS provides no assistance or direction.

Ms. X has experienced, and been directly told by people on the front line, that RA processes are opaque, that they are dictated by the JOHS, and that other organizations have literally no idea how the processes actually work or how decisions are made. They report having difficulty paying rents or providing services because of uncertainty and delay from the JOHS. More than one provider I spoke with described the JOHS as a black hole. Every provider I spoke with said that they feared speaking publicly about their experiences with the JOHS because they were dependent on County funding and they were afraid of retaliation.

County RA processes waste tremendous time and resources for landlords and tenants. And, most egregiously, the RA system, structure and cycle inflict tremendous harm on individuals who are already suffering and vulnerable.

C. The RA intake system - “Coordinated Access” - is a dysfunctional, opaque, and universally despised process for determining people’s priority in accessing limited housing. It was horrible in the past; the new system is worse.

The system for measuring “vulnerability” and determining eligibility for long term RA and housing, the County’s “Coordinated Access” (CA) system, has always been biased, inaccurate and inefficient according to many people I have spoken with. The system that recently replaced it is reportedly worse. The JOHS alone is responsible for CA.

Originally, CA required applicants to respond to a vulnerability-based questionnaire. The number resulting from the applicants’ responses, their “vulnerability index”, was used to prioritize people for housing. This “Priority List” was used to assign people to housing in the order they appeared on the list, without regard to individual needs or the ability of nonprofits to provide needed services. Funding was not provided to support services that would meet people’s actual needs once they received housing. The point system for assigning “vulnerability” and prioritization was flawed and reportedly biased on its face.

CA was recently revised via a County-led process. I’ve heard the new system is even worse than the one it replaced. Multiple sources have said that now there are only several broad questions reportedly not related to people’s actual backgrounds, vulnerabilities, or disabilities, and once information is put into the computerized application system, the JOHS make final decisions about prioritization using unknown criteria through an undisclosed process.

Here is an email Ms. X just recently received from TPI relating to an inquiry she made about her status and her request to modify her intake application because her housing status had changed:

Hello,

We received your request to be screened for Permanent Supportive Housing – thank you for your submission.

We have communicated before about your screening results and Multnomah County Coordinated Access has determined that you are not prioritized to receive a voucher at this time. You may be qualified for the program, but you were not selected based on your results in January.

You are eligible for a re-screening in July.

Thank you,

This terse message to a vulnerable person with disabilities desperate for housing seems inappropriate on its face. But more than its form, it acknowledges that the JOHS alone makes decisions about prioritization for people who are eligible for long term RA. No information is provided about how decisions are made, and the JOHS has repeatedly refused to answer Ms. X's questions.

TPI also erroneously claimed that Ms. X would have to wait to be re-screened for eligibility until July. I have been informed that, legally, applicants are entitled to change their applications any time they have a change in status.

Concerns have been raised by front line staff and clients that the processes used for intake and the criteria used for making decisions about who is eligible and who gets prioritized for RA could potentially violate legal standards, including federal civil rights laws.

The entire system is opaque and appears to be severely dysfunctional. It traumatizes the desperate and vulnerable people forced to use it - consumers and providers alike. **It is unclear how Multnomah County has allowed a system this dysfunctional to continue. CA should be urgently investigated and overhauled.**

D. There is no clear delineation of criteria for different types of rent assistance, including emergency, short term, medium term, and long term.

In its briefings to the board, the JOHS and DCHS repeatedly tried to explain various types of RA according to their durations and purpose. Yet the durations seemed arbitrary and the criteria for receiving certain types of RA often did not seem to align with the purported purpose of the assistance.

For example, "eviction prevention" funds apparently go only to people who are already homeless. Funds meant to bridge people through a brief, specific challenge are used to fund people's rent in an ongoing way. No mention of accommodation for disability is provided in connection with RLRA, which on the County's website lists its main purpose as serving people with disabilities.

All criteria should be clearly and explicitly outlined on the County's website so people using the system can actually understand and navigate it, and the County should have specific accommodations for people with disabilities trying to access County services.

E. There is apparently no cohesive plan around RA at the County, no clear accountability or oversight of RA by the County, and RA does not appear to tie into the broader H2H continuum supposedly reflected in the HRS.

Lack of a coherent plan around RA, with no clear accountability or oversight regarding programs, and no connection to the broader H2H continuum, was apparent when I served as a commissioner. My deeper investigation has not provided anything to contradict this perception.

Major problems around RA oversight and accountability tie directly to what is playing out right now in terms of reports over the County's inappropriate use of SHS funds, its massive budget shortfall, and questions about leadership's mishandling of temporary vs. permanent funding streams.

F. The County budget tells the real story. It is impossible to decipher RA or follow the money.

As I have mentioned, the County's approach to its \$4 billion budget is dysfunctional at baseline, with hundreds of individual and disconnected program offers thrown together in an inconsistent and incoherent mass. The County's budgeting for RA is emblematic of the problems with the County's overarching approach to the budget.

With regard to program offers, the JOHS often allocates funds for different types of RA and other services in the same program. The program descriptions are often generic, terminally vague, involve tremendous amounts of money, are inconsistent, and cite "performance indicators" that indicate nothing about performance.

The budget does not indicate how much funding goes to any particular type of RA, what funding streams are involved, what the goals are, or how performance can be measured. Funding relationships with Home Forward are particularly unclear.

RA criteria, purposes, funding streams and outcomes should be reasonably discernible from the County budget and should be easy to follow. The opposite is true.

G. The "Extended Provider Network" (EPN), 211, and Home Forward - Enigmatic and unmonitored.

- a. **EPN.** During COVID, the County created a network of over 40 partner community-based organizations (CBOs) in order to administer COVID-related "emergency rent assistance". The CBOs helped with intake and application support, provided different types of services once people received RA, and interfaced with Home Forward, landlords, and the city of Portland. The EPN apparently continues despite COVID no longer constituting an emergency, and I have heard a number of concerns raised about oversight of the EPN, monitoring of funding going to the EPN, and the actions of some of the CBOs in the network.

Reports have suggested a **marked absence of monitoring of EPN organizations** by JOHS. **Some of the CBOs reportedly were never viable nonprofits** and/or they **operated outside Multnomah County**. Some of the CBOs that received funds apparently **failed to spend down their funds by the ends of fiscal years and simply were allowed to keep the money**. Some CBOs reportedly **used their RA funds for friends and family**.

I do not personally know if any of these claims are accurate, but they have been consistently raised over years and raise real concerns about oversight and accounting for tens to hundreds of millions of dollars for multiple organizations contracting with the

County. **Urgent forensic and performance audits should be pursued regarding the County's oversight of the EPN network.**

- b. **211.** Major concerns about all 211 services were raised throughout my service as a commissioner. I repeatedly asked for information about 211 that was never provided.

As it applies to RA, 211 is the go-to for all questions and provides resources and referrals. Reportedly, 211 often does not have answers. When they do have answers, they are often inaccurate. It is not clear how 211 obtains information, what they are supposed to be providing, or how much they are being paid to accomplish what goals.

211 has had reports of major problems for years. **There should be deep forensic and performance audits of 211.**

c. Home Forward.

Home Forward is the housing authority covering Multnomah County (though it was incorporated by the city of Portland and it was formerly called the Portland Housing Authority - not to be confused with the Portland Housing Bureau). Home Forward is a "quasi-governmental agency" governed by a volunteer board of commissioners representing different jurisdictions within the county (though their appointment is governed by the Portland Mayor and City Council through an unclear process). Home Forward is a unique and seemingly opaque entity that seems to exist outside city, county, state, and federal governments, but is connected to all of them.

Historically, Home Forward received funding almost exclusively from HUD, but over the past few years has received SHS funding from Metro through the tri-counties, including the JOHS, for RLRA. Apparently the state provides some federal pass-through funding.

Home Forward mainly provides affordable housing via rent assistance that is either project-based (units are in affordable housing developments owned by Home Forward) or unit-based (vouchers such as Section 8 that can be used toward covering rent at privately owned sites for units selected by the tenant). Home Forward apparently is required to administer RLRA vouchers, but it's virtually impossible to find any information, and the JOHS refers applicants for RLRA to Coordinated Access.

Many concerns have been raised by tenants in terms of violation of health and safety codes, lack of security, open drug use, and property destruction and dilapidation at various Home Forward-owned buildings in Multnomah County. It is not clear to what degree, if any, Multnomah County has responsibility to ensure the health and safety of Home Forward's project-based tenants or other tenants. It is not clear what entity is responsible for overseeing Home Forward's management and maintenance of its sites.

A board briefing focusing exclusively on Home Forward and its intersection with the County could potentially shed light on this organization that has such extensive intersection with the County and yet remains a mystery to many directly involved in providing County affordable housing services. From all I have heard from service

providers and end users, and information I have received from Home Forward board members and administrators, it seems that Home Forward should be audited from both a forensic and performance standpoint.

H. Investigating all of County RA is necessary but will take significant time. Starting with a single emblematic program - RLRA - can and should happen urgently.

There's a lot that needs to be investigated about RA in general, but that will take time. Meanwhile, RLRA offers a clear place to start and a discrete program to follow up on in real time. The following provides some background information from RLRA, a program which I had not even heard of until I was contacted by Ms. X.

a. RLRA background.

When Metro and Multnomah County first campaigned for the SHS measure, they promised to use SHS funds to create a regional long-term RA program to supplement federal programs like Section 8. RLRA, the concept of which predated passage of the SHS measure, was supposed to add capacity to the system and provide greater flexibility to serve "people with disabilities who were long-term homeless or at risk of long-term homelessness." The concept itself was solid. The problems were in execution, accountability, transparency and oversight.

The original plan for RLRA was contained in a "[Regional long-term rent assistance program update](#)" issued by Metro in April 2021. It promised to launch RLRA in July, 2021, which apparently didn't happen. Another "update" was posted [two months ago](#), but it didn't provide much clarity. [JOHS](#), [Metro](#) and [Home Forward](#) all promote RLRA on their websites, but their language doesn't say much, except for referring people to 211.

b. Problems with RLRA are emblematic of RA more generally.

I spoke with a lot of providers as I looked into RLRA, and they all expressed concern about this particular program. One provider told me that RLRA was developed in private between only three entities - JOHS, Home Forward (the local housing authority) and TPI (one of the county's largest shelter and transitional housing providers). No clear information about RLRA processes or eligibility criteria were publicly posted, and the process of developing it remains a mystery.

I've rewatched all board briefings about RA since the SHS measure passed, and I still can't figure out how much was spent on RLRA or what the outcomes were supposed to be. It's not been clear from my review of past county budgets, either.

All of this aligns with reports about lack of clarity, transparency and accountability around the County's handling of RA in general that I've already shared.

c. Getting information about RLRA should be straightforward and would answer crucial questions.

Obtaining answers to basic questions from JOHS would help to either alleviate major concerns about RLRA or validate them. An inability to promptly provide this information would itself be a red flag. Examples of basic questions include:

1. Who in the JOHS is responsible for administering RLRA? If Home Forward administers RLRA, where does the JOHS fit in? How does the JOHS refer people to RLRA and who oversees Home Forward to ensure appropriate use of SHS funds?
2. How much funding has been allocated to RLRA each fiscal year since its inception? How much of this is from SHS? What other funding sources are used?
3. Who in the JOHS is responsible for making decisions about RLRA and what criteria do they use in determining eligibility and prioritization?
4. How does the JOHS ensure accountability of Home Forward in fulfilling its responsibilities in paying rent?
5. How does the JOHS oversee and hold to account its EPN in providing contracted services?
6. What recourse does the County provide for tenants and/or landlords who have experienced breach of responsibility of County partners in relation to administration of RLRA?
7. How many individuals have been served by RLRA since its inception and what have been their outcomes?

d. Investigating RLRA is crucial, relevant and urgent.

RLRA directly ties to urgent questions around JOHS handling of SHS funds and the budget. It ties in to another largely opaque quasi-governmental organization - Home Forward. RLRA seems to have been grossly mishandled and unaccounted for. There is little transparency around RLRA. And, most importantly, handling of RLRA impacts real people in our community who are vulnerable and desperate.

I. Summary and path forward.

The system the County has created around RA is impenetrable and seemingly unmanaged. The money spent on administering and fragmenting the system among many small organizations seems to have wasted millions of dollars and a tremendous amount of time, but it's impossible to follow the money. The JOHS has been described as a "black hole" when it comes to overseeing RA.

The County appears to be failing in its fiduciary responsibility to plan, oversee, and account for tens to hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer money in its approach to RA over the past five years.

JOHS, DCHS, and HRS do not appear to be putting the pieces of the RA system together. No one seems to be identifying and following outcomes, holding partners accountable, or connecting RA to other parts of the H2H continuum.

Processes have been implemented that may potentially violate federal law, including requirements for reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities, and laws against bias and discrimination.

The County needs a functional, efficient, accountable, transparent, easily navigable RA system that meets legal and moral standards. Most importantly, it needs to meet the needs of the people it is supposed to serve.

There should be a thorough investigation that gets to the bottom of all the red flags surrounding the County's investments, programs and processes around RA.

This should include analysis of funding streams, review of coordinated access and prioritization, evaluation of short- and long-term requirements and outcomes of the various types of RA, investigation of transparency and accountability of County practices, and review to ensure the County's practices meet all federal and state legal requirements.

Looking into all of RA in the short term may be unrealistic, but raising questions about just a single program - RLRA - is feasible and should start now.

V. Actively intervening to reduce the unprecedented number of people dying unsheltered.

- A. Each year the Multnomah County Domicile Unknown report identifies the number of people who died on County streets the previous year.
- B. Each year the number of people dying unsheltered increases significantly. Last year's count was horrifying. When I started on the board eight years ago, the number was 79. When I left the County the number was a staggering 456.
- C. Each year the County issues press releases stating how tragic the situation is, but never commits to addressing it.
- D. There has been no County effort to reduce the number of people dying on the streets. When, as a commissioner, I proposed to use the number of deaths of people living outside as a "Key Performance Indicator", County leadership refused.
- E. For years I proposed ways the County could not only claim how tragic the deaths were, but actually do something to reduce their number.
- F. That the County's approach to this tragedy has been left to spiral downward and allow so many people to die is unconscionable. As a commissioner, I proposed a budget amendment focused on how the County could go beyond the Domicile Unknown report in order to actually analyze how to reduce the number of people dying unsheltered. It was rejected by the Chair and former board.
- G. A dedicated approach to understanding, intervening, and reducing the number of people dying unsheltered must be instated.

VI. Adopting a uniform, coordinated, and humane approach to extreme weather emergencies.

A. Background: A study in bureaucratic dysfunction punctuated by individual acts of heroism.

During my eight years on the board, the County's approach to opening shelters during severe weather was chaotic and often inhumane. Board members were not included in decision-making and board members' questions were not satisfactorily answered. Only three things were clear: (1) the Chair made the ultimate decisions about criteria for opening extreme weather shelters, (2) the criteria for opening and closing shelters seemed arbitrary and often lacking in humanity or common sense, and (3) the extreme weather shelter system was grossly dysfunctional.

People were harmed and even died in the severe heat and severe cold. Each time a snow or extreme heat warning hit, it seemed like the County had never experienced it before and started from scratch.

Communications from the County about shelter availability to the public have too often been misleading, and claims about 211 support have too often been completely inaccurate.

The County's most recent snowstorm was a study in bureaucratic dysfunction, punctuated by acts of heroism of front line workers going above and beyond the call of duty to help people despite a profound lack of support.

B. The heroes - the front line workforce, particularly unpaid community volunteers.

I want to call out the volunteers who show up to help people living outside and who volunteer to staff shelters. One couple in particular, Reid and Elena, go out every night to help people living unhoused get to shelter, stay safe, get Narcan when needed, get them to hospitals, and help them with whatever else they might need.

Reid and Elena were out every night of the severe weather emergency. They hired a U-Haul to transport people to shelter because they knew that transport offered by the county, when it existed, was grossly ineffective.

Elena and Reid singlehandedly transported 210(!) people to warming shelters in the most recent snowstorm, including people with wheelchairs, wounds, and physical and behavioral health disabilities. They responded to shelter providers who had no one to turn to to get help when confronted with challenges in shelters. And they engaged with the few other heroic workers who braved the cold to support people in desperate need.

Reid and Elena are incredible, and they do this work for no other reason than it's the right thing to do. They would love to talk to you as a board member, and I highly encourage you to at least speak with them, and ideally go out one night with them, for

even an hour. It will give you more real information about the County's systems and effectiveness than a year of board briefings.

C. Suggestions for board intervention to improve severe weather response:

- 1. Establish consistent standards for opening and closing severe weather shelters.** Set realistic, appropriate, and consistent standards for opening extreme weather shelters. within the clear structure there must be room left for discretion when conditions suggest a need.
- 2. Reduce decision-making bureaucracy.** Clearly identify a single decision-maker and winnow those involved in advising them to just a few people with direct experience in homeless outreach, shelter operations, medicine, and incident command.
- 3. Unravel the convoluted, opaque budget approach to severe weather shelter and replace it with a streamlined and transparent budget.** Program offers for severe weather response have always been indecipherable. Last year, the Chair further decentralized the system, scattering funding among JOHS, Facilities, and Emergency Management. This added cost, bureaucracy, and confusion to an already dysfunctional system. The County needs to identify what is actually needed, develop a system, and consolidate funding in an approach to severe weather shelter that is understandable, accountable and manageable.
- 4. Ensure that information about available shelter is accessible and up to date.** Information about available shelter is often not up to date or complete. A high school senior has created a simple, free app that the JOHS could use to identify shelter bed availability in real time for all shelters in the county, including during severe weather. The JOHS has spent time and resources on a pilot of a limited dashboard that could only be used by a limited number of people and in fact was not updated in real time. This resulted in people showing up at shelters that were purported to have lots of space but in fact were full. Contact the student and ask for her help.
- 5. Ensure the accuracy of County messaging and ensure that partners are aware of County promises.** There were numerous reports of people showing up at warming shelters during the recent snowstorm, with the County having promised that "no one will be turned away," only to be told there was no space.
- 6. Create a system of transportation to warming shelters that is effective, efficient and safe.** The current shuttle system is wasteful, inefficient, and ineffective. People trying to call 211 have had to wait on hold for very long times in the snow and then given inaccurate information. Lyft drivers sent by 211 on arrival refused to transport because accurate information was withheld from them about the nature and complexity of the transport.

- a) **Understand when people need isolation and actual medical transport.** In at least one case during the last storm, a Lyft driver was called to transport someone with a communicable disease to a congregate shelter. Only because a medical volunteer happened to intervene did the person end up going to a medical isolation motel shelter.
- b) **Let people know where they're going.** When shuttles have shown up, people have expressed not being told where they were being transported, often ending up far from their living areas. Vulnerable people (seniors, people with disabilities, people who are disoriented) have been left to find their way back in the snow. People's possessions have been invariably stolen on their return.

- 7. **Make sure severe weather shelters have appropriate medical supplies.** There was regular reporting that the warming shelters lacked basics such as bandages and ibuprofen. It was not clear who was responsible for providing needed supplies.
- 8. **Have services available to sign people up for OHP, disability, rent assistance, and other benefits for which they may be eligible at extreme weather shelters.** Extreme weather shelters offer an excellent opportunity to connect with people living unsheltered who otherwise are not connected to County services. People can be assisted in accessing benefits for which they are eligible, learning about resources available to them, and potentially getting them included on a complete and accurate By Name List. The County's failure to do this in the past is inexplicable and unconscionable.
- 9. **AUTHORIZE A THOROUGH, INDEPENDENT FORENSIC AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF 211.** With regard to severe weather, wait times are often unconscionably long, inaccurate or incomplete information about shelter location or availability is often provided, and transportation is often not effective.

NOTE THAT THE INVESTIGATION OF 211 SHOULD NOT BE LIMITED TO SEVERE WEATHER, BUT FOR ALL SERVICES PROVIDED BY 211, PARTICULARLY RENT ASSISTANCE AND EVICTION PREVENTION SUPPORT.