

# Ending Unsheltered Homelessness in Portland

The City of Portland has the responsibility, resources, and public mandate to end unsheltered homelessness within its jurisdiction. State, county, and city authorities have failed to act promptly, collaboratively, or effectively, leaving a legacy of broken promises and unmet goals instead. The consequences have been severe: population and livability loss, economic sluggishness, and a tarnished national reputation.

Portland city government must no longer delegate or lay blame for our fundamental responsibilities. We must listen and learn from those who have found successful solutions in their respective cities. We must lead, compassionately and cost-effectively shelter our unhoused population, end public camping, and once again enforce our community safety laws (no camping, vehicle licensing, sanitation).

## The Current State of Unsheltered Homelessness in Portland

Portland is grappling with a significant homelessness crisis, marked by a rising number of unsheltered individuals. The city faces ongoing challenges in balancing public safety, health concerns, and the rights of the homeless population.

The most recent United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Point in Time count of people experiencing homelessness in Portland/Multnomah County was taken in January of 2023. At the time, there were 6,297 homeless people in our County, and around 63% of those were unsheltered. Multnomah County reported that their results were “an undercount.”<sup>1</sup>

From 2017 to 2023, the number of unsheltered homeless persons in Portland/Multnomah County increased from 1,668 to 3,944, a 136% increase. Portland/Multnomah County now has the highest per capita unsheltered rate in the nation, except for six cities in California.<sup>2</sup>

The City of Portland spends \$300 million annually to address the aggregated costs of unsheltered homelessness - including sweeps, clean-ups, litter collection, graffiti removal, public safety issues, and fire response.<sup>3</sup>

## The Impact of Unsheltered Homelessness on Portland Residents

Not only is unsheltered homelessness unsafe, unsanitary, cruel, and inhumane for those who are experiencing it, but it also impacts our housed residents and the community at large.

As people struggling without shelter seek refuge on sidewalks and public spaces, businesses are unable to operate effectively due to the encampments outside their doors. This results in reduced foot traffic and economic strain, which results in an empty and desolate downtown, with some residents choosing to move away in search of more stable environments.

We've lost tens of thousands of citizens over the last five years, especially among families and children.<sup>4</sup> Many others are asking themselves hard questions about their future in Portland.

In addition to the economic and social impact on residents, unsheltered homelessness also impacts community safety. Portland's

unsheltered homeless (less than 1% of our population) are responsible for over 50% of police arrests.<sup>5</sup> This is straining public safety systems to a breaking point. Officers take longer to address high-priority calls for all residents. In 2014, Portland police took 6 minutes to respond to high-priority calls, and in 2023, it took 24 minutes.<sup>6</sup> Our public emergency response network (police, fire, ambulance) is overburdened, understaffed, and unsupported.

Unsheltered homelessness is not normal. Not caring for our unsheltered homelessness and allowing it to grow unchecked creates a true "death spiral" – skyrocketing expenses due to a large population living unsheltered on our streets, which then results in a falling population and tax base, making the crisis increasingly difficult to resolve the longer we delay addressing it.

## Who is Unsheltered in Portland?

In Portland, the unsheltered population includes a diverse range of individuals experiencing homelessness. This group encompasses people of various ages, genders, and backgrounds, including those suffering from mental and physical health issues, substance use disorders, and economic hardships. Many have lost jobs, faced eviction, or experienced family breakdowns, contributing to their current state of homelessness. Additionally, there is a notable presence of veterans, LGBTQ+ individuals, and youth among the unsheltered population in Portland.

- The unsheltered population in Multnomah County is more likely to suffer from addiction disorders and mental illness.<sup>7</sup>
- People who identify as BIPOC make up 34% of the Multnomah County population but comprise 39.6% of the homeless population.<sup>8</sup>

- Half of all people over 70 who are homeless are unsheltered, reinforcing the urgency to provide housing and shelter for this vulnerable population.<sup>9</sup>

## Why Are So Many People Unsheltered in Portland?

The high number of unsheltered individuals in Portland is due to several interconnected factors:

### **Lack of Affordable Housing**

When a city becomes unaffordable to the people who live there, rising housing prices push people into homelessness.

According to Salary.com, the cost of living in Portland is 25% higher than the national average, with the largest increases over the last year being transportation, food, and housing.<sup>10</sup> The average rent in Portland is more than \$1,700/month, and only 3% of apartments are less than \$1,000/month.<sup>11</sup>

### **Mental Health, Addiction, & Disability**

In 2022, the Multnomah County Point in Time Count reported that 80.3% of individuals experiencing HUD homelessness self-reported suffering from one or more mental, physical, or addiction disabilities.<sup>12</sup> The Institute of Medicine states that “not only can homelessness be a consequence of mental illness, but a homeless life may cause and perpetuate emotional problems.”

### **Drug Use**

Drug use is a significant factor contributing to homelessness in Portland. Addiction often leads to job loss, strained relationships, and financial ruin, making it difficult for individuals to maintain stable housing. Most alarming is the recent introduction of fentanyl to the communities of Portland, which, according to the CDC, is estimated to be 80 times as potent as morphine and hundreds of times more potent than heroin.

Overdose deaths, largely driven by opioids like fentanyl, increased by 221% in Oregon from 2019 to 2022.<sup>13</sup>

### **“Homeless Upon Arrival” and Other Inflow**

35% of homeless persons in Portland/Multnomah County are “homeless upon arrival,” meaning they were experiencing homelessness prior to their arrival in Multnomah County. Portland has one of the highest, if not the highest, “homeless upon arrival” inflow rates in the nation.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to “homeless upon arrival,” many people are released to homelessness from prison, hospital stays, or when they age out of foster care. This “discharge to homelessness” is not only inhumane but exacerbates the unsheltered crisis.

### **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 the unsheltered population. Many individuals facing these conditions struggle to maintain employment and afford medical care, leading to financial instability and eventual loss of housing. Additionally, the limited availability of accessible and supportive housing options exacerbates their vulnerability, leaving them without adequate shelter and necessary health services.

## **We Have Continued to Fail Our Unsheltered Neighbors**

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. Here’s a quick summary of some previous initiatives that have fallen short and, as a result, exacerbated our city’s homelessness issue:

### **Deinstitutionalization of the Mentally Ill, 1960s-1980s**

Between 1960 and 1980, the number of mentally ill patients living in our nation’s state hospitals dropped from 535,000 to 137,000.<sup>15</sup> The rapid closure of many states’ psychiatric hospitals without sufficient community-based resources in place led to a range of unintended consequences, including homelessness, incarceration, and a lack of adequate support for those with severe mental health needs.

### **Martin v Boise, 2019**

The Ninth Circuit Court’s 2019 decision in *Martin v. Boise*, which prohibits law enforcement from enforcing no-camping laws for sleeping on public property in the absence of adequate shelter alternatives, has had unintended consequences in Portland.<sup>16</sup> While the ruling aimed to protect the rights of the homeless, it has also led to a visible increase in encampments throughout the city. This has strained public resources and exacerbated tensions between the housed and unhoused populations, and without sufficient investment in shelter and supportive services, the ruling has not addressed the root causes of homelessness.

Today, Oregon is one of only four states where more than half of the homeless population is living unsheltered.<sup>17</sup>

### **Grants Pass v Johnson, Supreme Court Decision, 2024, & Oregon House Bill 3115, 2021**

The Supreme Court’s 2024 decision in *Grants Pass v Johnson* overturned *Martin v. Boise*, and now cities can enforce no-camping laws. However, this law will not apply in Oregon because the state legislature passed HB 3115 in 2021, codifying the Boise decision into law.

Oregon is now the only state in the nation that legally allows camping if there are not enough shelter beds available.

Portland is a ticking time bomb. Sandwiched between California and Washington, the two states with the highest unsheltered homeless populations in the nation, with over 115,000 and 12,000, respectively, if they begin aggressively enforcing their no camping laws, Portland, our state's largest city, may become the city of last resort.<sup>18</sup>

Portland does not have enough emergency shelter beds to accommodate this inflow, and most would be unsheltered and have to camp on the streets.

### **Tents and Tarps**

Contrary to human rights and our current laws, our City/County's ongoing pattern and practice "to hand out tents and tarps to the unhoused" is as ineffective as it is inefficient and inhumane.<sup>19</sup>

### **Encampment Cleanups**

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. These cleanups frequently involve the removal of personal belongings, including essential items such as tents, bedding, clothing, and identification documents, exacerbating the challenges faced by homeless individuals.

In addition, camp removals cost \$22.9 million per year, and the city sweeps 19 camps on average daily.<sup>20</sup> With no shelter available, these individuals are often provided with a new tent to find a new location to camp until the next posting of an impending camp removal is received.

***So, what's the best option to immediately help our unsheltered neighbors?***

## **Priority #1: Walk-In Nighttime Emergency Shelters**

It's impossible to solve homelessness without first solving unsheltered homelessness. The best, most accessible, and immediate solution to unsheltered homelessness is walk-in nighttime emergency shelters, which will supplement the shelter and transitional housing options currently available in Portland.

### **Unsheltered Homelessness Was Never Normal in Portland**

In the 1990s, Portland was nationally lauded for setting up a network of publicly and privately operated 10-hour nighttime-only emergency shelters to care for its homeless.<sup>21</sup> The whole plan was implemented in 12 months. As a result, the city had few, if any, people living unsheltered; anyone who wanted emergency shelter could now get it; and Portland's community safety laws (no camping, vehicle licensing, sanitation) were always enforced.

### **Unsheltered Homelessness Is Not Normal In Other Cities**

Most cities with low rates of unsheltered homelessness provide a wide range of shelter options, including nighttime emergency shelters. Portland does not. For example, the City of Boise/Ada County provides nighttime emergency shelters, 24-hour shelters, and transitional housing and has 115 unsheltered homeless.<sup>22</sup> Boston provides the same and only has 119 unsheltered homeless.<sup>23</sup>

Most emergency shelters in Philadelphia are nighttime shelters, closed during the day. Philadelphia has 788 unsheltered homeless people, but it is twice the size of Portland/Multnomah County.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, the latest data shows Portland/Multnomah County has over 3,944 unsheltered homeless individuals.<sup>25</sup>

## What Are Nighttime Emergency Shelters?

Nighttime emergency shelters are shelters that provide nighttime housing using existing trauma-informed facilities, such as community centers, churches, and businesses.

For example, the United Gospel Mission recently operated a nighttime emergency shelter using the Church of Nazarene with limited financial support from Shelter Portland to provide safe, secure sleeping arrangements for more than 45 guests per night. The emergency shelter is open from 9:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. There is a 23:1 guest-to-staff ratio, and the average cost per person per night is about \$16.<sup>26</sup> Because this shelter only operates at night, the church can resume normal operations during the day.

Generally, nighttime emergency shelters operate at less than \$20 per person per night.<sup>27</sup> Nighttime-only shelters, while they do not offer the 24-hour programming a Safe Rest Village alternative shelter provides, are one-eighth the cost and one-half the cost of permanent supportive housing. They're a low-cost way to end unsheltered homelessness and focus our funding on building more affordable housing, the ultimate solution to homelessness.

## The Two Types of Nighttime Emergency Shelters

There are two types of nighttime emergency shelters: low-barrier and medium-barrier.

Common at both, all adults are welcome, as there are no conditions for entry. Sobriety is not required, but drugs or alcohol are not allowed in the facility.

### **Low Barrier Shelters**

At low-barrier shelters, the doors stay open, and guests can exit and re-enter throughout the night.

With the unchecked growth in Portland's unsheltered homeless population, almost 65% of our unsheltered homeless have lived on the streets for over a year and often suffer from mental illness, addiction, or physical disability.<sup>28</sup>

These individuals often need extra support as they transition from survival mode to a more structured environment, and these low-barrier shelters provide a higher level of care, safety, and security for these persons on their journey to housing.

### **Medium Barrier Shelters**

At medium-barrier shelters, the doors close at 11 pm, and exit and reentry are prohibited after this time.

Generally, 53% of the unhoused have jobs.<sup>29</sup> Medium barrier shelters ensure guests are rested and ready for their next work shift or step towards permanent housing.

This shelter is a better fit for someone recently homeless or those released from detox or prison because they may benefit from the restricted entry and exit.

## How Nighttime Emergency Shelters Work

One of the best things about nighttime emergency shelters is how simple they are to operate. Here's how we make them work:

### **We Partner with Organizations Who Have Unused Space**

Buildings not being utilized at night, such as community centers and churches, are "flipped"



from their day use to nightly shelters. Building owners are compensated for using their space, creating a win-win scenario.

Portland has:

- Dozens of community centers, both public and private
- 517 churches
- Thousands of businesses and city-owned facilities

### **We Provide Professional, Trained Staff**

We staff our shelters with professionals and people with lived experience from Portland's homeless service agencies to ensure a safe and welcoming environment focusing on a safe night's sleep. We support this staff with neighborhood volunteers who want to help their unsheltered neighbors.

## The Benefits of Nighttime Emergency Shelters

The main benefit of nighttime emergency shelters is that they get people off the street and into comfortable, safe sleeping arrangements. In addition to that, here are a few other benefits of nighttime emergency shelters:

### **They Are Inexpensive to Set Up**

Because nighttime emergency shelters utilize existing facilities, there is nothing to build and little, if any, capital costs. In comparison, a transitional alternative shelter could cost \$2.7MM to build.<sup>30</sup>

### **They Are Cheap to Maintain**

In addition to a low upfront cost, nighttime emergency shelters are also cheaper to maintain. They cost an average of less than \$20 per person per night.<sup>31</sup> In comparison, the City/County Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) Congregate Shelters costs about \$62 per person per night.

Based on Portland's current unsheltered homeless population and then adjusting for certain populations the county traditionally serves (families, children, etc.), setting up a network of nighttime emergency shelters will cost less than \$25 million.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, the City of Portland spends \$300 million annually to address the aggregated costs of unsheltered homelessness.<sup>33</sup> Ending unsheltered homelessness will cost less than a tenth of what the City of Portland is currently spending.

### **They Are Quick to Set Up**

The most important benefit of nighttime emergency shelters is that they're quick to set up. We've created emergency shelters in as little as 3 months, which means more people have a place to sleep at night sooner than other options. In addition to being quick to set up, they can just as easily close (and at a low cost) as the need for emergency shelter is reduced.

By utilizing existing buildings, nighttime emergency shelters can be set up and begin serving our community in days. For example, the Portsmouth Union Church nighttime emergency winter shelter was planned, funded, and operational in 90 days. Also, all our shelters are located near transit corridors to provide easy access for staff, volunteers, and guests.

## Why Walk-In Nighttime Emergency Shelters Haven't Been Adopted City-Wide

All of that sounds great, right? Nighttime emergency shelters get more people off the streets and save residents money. So, why haven't we seen widespread implementation already? The answer comes down to administration and leadership mistakes.

The most profound changes occurred in 2017 when the JOHS took over the management of shelters, which had previously been managed by the City of Portland. They then implemented a completely new set of shelter guidelines.

### **24-Hour Shelters**

One of the first changes made by JOHS, the new agency overseeing Portland's response to homelessness, was to convert most emergency shelters from nighttime only to 24 hours a day. While the intent was to provide more care for our homeless population, the result was a major increase in cost. With this change, the JOHS tripled its expenses without adding one shelter bed.

Emergency shelters that served our community for decades but did not meet these new guidelines were defunded, or new operators trying to respond to our homelessness, behavioral health, and addiction crisis were not funded at all.<sup>34,35</sup>

### **Stay Limits Removed**

In addition to the new mandate requiring 24-hour shelters, stay limits were removed. These stay limits were designed to encourage folks to engage in services and help them move out of the emergency shelter and into housing. Also, little effort was made to address a person's root cause of homelessness.

### **Walk-Ins Were No Longer Allowed**

Before 2017, most emergency shelters were available on an emergency walk-in basis. Walk-ins were no longer allowed in the new JOHS shelter guidelines and a reservation-only system restricted entry. Now, on a person's worst day and time of crisis, they must make a reservation and then wait up to 28 days to gain entry. This is also exacerbated by the fact that many of our unsheltered community struggles with mental illness and substance use.

### **Shelter Bed Use No Longer Required**

In Portland, shelter beds are assigned and then no longer required to be slept in, allowing a person to access meals, showers, and laundry while, in some cases, living in a tent.

The result, Portland now has one of the nation's worst shelter bed utilization rates. For example, on one of the coldest nights in January 2023, some 796 beds went unused, a 75% shelter bed utilization.<sup>36</sup> By comparison, the Road Home Homeless System in Salt Lake City, which requires every guest to stay in the shelter every night, has a 99% shelter bed utilization rate.<sup>37</sup>

JOHS has unwittingly set up a non-flexible shelter system that reduces outflow and refuses access, even when beds are empty, to life-saving shelter for some of our most vulnerable community members.

## **Priority #2: Day Shelters**

Nighttime emergency shelters are the top priority because they get people off the street and into safe sleeping conditions as soon as possible. Next, we want to focus on day shelters that offer services to help homeless people get the support they need to secure employment and eventually move into long term housing solutions.

### **What Are Day Shelters?**

Day shelters are supportive and trauma-informed facilities that serve as a warm handoff from the nighttime emergency shelter. They link a person to a comprehensive network of services and trust, helping to house the homeless and provide help for those at risk of homelessness.

Day shelters provide meals, showers, clean clothes swaps, storage, Goodwill vouchers, TriMet vouchers, social services, and much more.

## The Five S's: Safety, Security, Shelter, Sleep, and Services

Our nighttime and daytime shelters focus revolves around the Five S's: Safety, Security, Shelter, Sleep, and Services. Here's how our shelters address each one:

### **Safety**

Nighttime emergency shelters are open 365 days a year, providing a safe and clean space for people to spend the night. People can be warm in the winter, dry in the fall and spring, and cool in the summer. Shelters are tailored to the different needs of the population and community they serve.

### **Security**

Camping on the street is not only inhumane but also unsafe. With a roof over their heads and a warm bed, our unsheltered neighbors can sleep soundly, knowing they are cared for.

### **Shelter**

Any previous night stay at a shelter guarantees a bed the next night at the same facility. There will always be a bed for guests, whether it's their first night or the shelter is full, because when we are fully operational, we will always have a bed for you at one of our other nighttime emergency shelters. Friends (human or pet) and families (biological or street) can sleep next to one another to ensure their support group stays together.

### **Sleep**

Sleep is a vital function for anyone, no matter where they live. By getting a good night's sleep, our nighttime shelter guests will be healthier and ready to tackle the next step in their housing journey.

### **Services**

While our nighttime emergency shelters focus on providing the basic needs of Safety, Security, Shelter, and Sleep, day shelters serve as a warm handoff from night to day to provide services that address the root cause of homelessness. We can help connect people to sober living facilities, family members or friends, employment opportunities, and much more.

With 50% of all foster care kids and newly released prisoners becoming homeless within 18 months, nighttime and day shelters ensure that nobody will fall through the cracks.<sup>38</sup> And, with addiction and behavioral health needs at crisis levels in Portland, these centers will help provide a link and referral when the guest is ready to access health and social services for a path to recovery and, eventually, housing.

## Priority #3: Built for Zero

Once we tackle the first two priorities, we move on to a life-changing model called Built for Zero.

Built for Zero is a community-wide collaboration that values every homeless contact from every organization in real time. The magic of this information will help us limit the inflow of homelessness and accelerate the outflow to permanent housing.

It may seem simple, but the ways that Built for Zero can help are astronomical. Even something as simple as calling a person's friend or family member to tell them where they are and that they are safe can be life changing.

In two months, one of our shelters at the Church of Nazarene assisted 105 guests with housing or with becoming "Housing Ready." This included helping them replace IDs or birth certificates, addressing their medical needs to relieve stress on medical facilities, and even giving them a ride home or to a friend or family member's house.



The Built for Zero initiative is only possible because we provided shelter first, with no preconditions, established trust on a first-name basis (our by-name list), learned each guest's individual needs, and then did the hard work of following through with solutions.

## Priority #4: Multnomah County Homeless Court Program

Over 50% of all arrests in Portland are of the unsheltered.<sup>39</sup> Often, a homeless person, because of addiction, property crime, and other offenses associated with living unsheltered, may have a warrant for their arrest, a criminal record, and, in many cases, thousands of dollars in outstanding fines and fees. Often, all three. Clearly, this is a never ending loop of poverty, homelessness, and getting caught up in the criminal justice system.

The Homeless Court Program is designed to help remove these barriers through action and productive growth.

### **What is The Homeless Court Program?**

The Homeless Court Program is a unique program that involves having the unsheltered person complete, in some cases, up to 300 class hours of recovery and life skills that are specifically tailored to their needs. The programs are offered by participating homeless service providers. For example, a women's shelter may focus its program on the trauma experiences because of domestic violence or a veteran's shelter may emphasize PTSD.

After the client completes their program, they become eligible for Homeless Court. The judge, who holds the court at the shelter, acknowledges that they will never be able to get money from a homeless person, dismisses their past and active misdemeanor cases, and removes their outstanding fees and fines. The client can then have their record expunged to pursue housing

and employment opportunities without the barriers they previously faced.

The Homeless Court Program isn't a handout; it's a handshake from the judge because the participants accomplish everything on their own. It is often their first positive experience with the judicial system.

We have enrolled nine of Portland's largest homeless service providers in the Homeless Court Program and want all the area's homeless service providers to join us in ending unsheltered homelessness in Portland.

## Priority #5: Rapidly Develop Affordable Housing

Revitalizing our community begins with ending unsheltered homelessness, but no one wants to live in a shelter. Our mission is to shelter the unsheltered, but our vision is to house the homeless.

Here is our solution to sidestepping the delays and high cost of new construction and property development to provide affordable housing to our homeless and housing cost-burdened neighbors:

### **Home Sharing**

Portland homes have tens of thousands of empty rooms that are full of opportunity. If we can match housemates with homeowners who have spare bedrooms, remove the barriers, and increase the incentives, we could house thousands of Portlanders—all without new infrastructure development.

### **Converting Abandoned Office Space Into Residential Spaces**

Rapidly converting office buildings into residential or mixed-use spaces can help address our housing shortage crisis and diversify our central business district. This would allow

greater numbers of full-time residents and visitors to enjoy Downtown Portland's restaurants, entertainment, and efficient transit system once again.

Calgary transformed its downtown area using this approach. The Downtown Calgary Development Incentive Program provided \$150 million in credits, resulting in 1,200 new homes, with more in the pipeline.<sup>40</sup> The first conversion was completed in 12 months.

Portland could finance these conversions through the 2023 Portland System Development Cost incentive, federal grants, and US Department of Transportation loans.

### **Delivering a Continuum of Care at One Location**

Providing all three phases of the housing continuum of care, shelter, transitional housing, and permanent housing, at one address is a seamless way to reduce the stress of change, maintain community, and support people's dignity as they move through the continuum.

Portland's churches are perfectly poised to deliver on this vision. Many Portland churches can provide shelter within their existing facilities, as well as affordable housing on their unused land. These churches hold over 600 developable acres. The continuum of care may look like this:

- Phase 1: Provide nighttime shelter
- Phase 2: Build transitional housing
- Phase 3: Develop affordable housing

### **Supportive Housing Services (SHS) Tax Affordable Housing Funding**

In May 2020, voters in greater Portland approved a new regional supportive housing tax. However, SHS funds have not been allocated to affordable housing capital improvements. We believe that to add additional housing units, all excess SHS

funds should be allocated to building deeply affordable housing.

By focusing on the top priorities of sheltering the unsheltered, we can reduce the cost of homeless services and other associated expenses, pivot, and employ those funds to build affordable housing.

## **End Unsheltered Homelessness First**

Revitalizing our community begins with sheltering our unsheltered. Our priorities of focusing on emergency shelters first and then moving on to day shelters and solutions like Built for Zero have been frequently tested, failed, refined, and retested before implementation.

They are not exhaustive but designed to address the humanitarian crisis in Portland with a 'Disaster Recovery' response to compassionately and cost-effectively shelter our unhoused population, end public camping, and once again enforce basic norms of safety and sanitation.

The quality of life, livability, and dignity for every Portlander, both the housed and unhoused, could be repaired, restored, and revitalized.

## Endnotes

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