

# COVID-19 Three Lessons in Organizational Resilience from Oregon

**Oregon Housing and Community Services**  
Special Achievement: COVID-19 Response

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## **Overview and Summary**

These are difficult times. In Oregon, families were already living on the financial margins and struggling to get by before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Rental vacancy rates were at historic lows, rents were at historic highs and Oregon's rate of homelessness had been among the highest in the nation. As Oregon's Statewide Housing Plan outlines, more Oregonians are living in poverty now than during the Great Recession and 27% of Oregon renters have a severe housing cost burden. The virus compounded these challenges and resulted in a drastic uptick in increased need for critical poverty-prevention services. Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) launched an innovative agency-wide approach to combat the impact of the coronavirus pandemic by quickly re-deploying existing resources to address urgent needs, thoughtfully designing programs to make the most impact with federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds, and leading legislative advocacy that secured new state and federal resources for housing stabilization and homelessness programs. The agency set new records in providing emergency assistance funding channeled to local and statewide community service agencies to prevent homelessness before it happens. Three criteria were key to innovation:

## **1. EQUITY AND RACIAL JUSTICE**

### **Statewide Housing Plan Grounded in Equity and Racial Justice**

With unprecedented needs mounting from the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, OHCS rapidly engaged in COVID-related response. Too often, in times of crisis and economic recession, communities of color are disparately impacted by the fallout of these events. In 2019, OHCS launched the Statewide Housing Plan – the agencies' foundational document which centers equity and racial justice as both an overarching guiding principle as well as a top agency priority. This framework allowed the agency to act swiftly when the pandemic hit with equity and racial justice as the guiding priority. OHCS has built in a requirement for providers to conduct culturally responsive outreach to diverse communities across the state to assess and respond effectively to the specific needs, and to gather demographic data on people being served. Our new programs are focusing intentionally on Black, Indigenous and People of Color living on the margins: protecting historically marginalized families from foreclosure and eviction, providing utility assistance to veterans to keep the lights on and providing safe shelter options for farmworkers vulnerable to contracting the virus. As the pandemic persists OHCS will continue to prioritize intentional engagement with culturally specific organizations to advance work that actively decreases financial disparities impacting communities of color.

## **2. FEDERAL AND STATE LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY**

### **Advancing Proactive State Policy Protections and Successfully Partnering with the Federal Delegation**

In a three-month timespan, Oregon Housing and Community Services set a new record in infusing emergency assistance funding to local communities. Both the April and June meetings of the Oregon Legislatures Emergency Board led to over \$100 million in investments directed towards OHCS, notably more than any other Oregon state agency. This funding both expanded upon existing COVID related programs while also creating new programs to assist Oregonians with much needed energy and rental assistance while also helping to support OHCS' portfolio of affordable housing. In order to advocate for these funds OHCS Executive Director Margaret Salazar, together with agency Division leaders, worked closely with Governor Kate Brown and legislative leadership providing testimony to the Oregon Legislature on three occasions sounding the alarm of critical housing needs facing Oregonians across the state. In addition to garnering record levels of funding, OHCS was successful in passing several key policy bills in partnership with community partners during the June emergency special session. These bills

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include protecting Oregonians from a wave of evictions by extending Oregon's eviction moratorium, enacting policy prohibiting lenders from pursuing foreclosures against homeowners and other borrowers through September 2020 and ensuring OHCS' Individual Development Account (IDA) program was amended to allow IDA savers to access their savings without penalty during times of emergency.

At the federal level, OHCS worked diligently with the Oregon delegation to express the immense need for resources across the housing spectrum. In addition to working with Senators Ron Wyden and Senator Jeff Merkley to champion flexible CARES funding investments, OHCS worked with Congresswoman Bonamici to advocate for the Low Income Home Energy Program (LIHEAP) to help low-income families pay for utilities. To date, the federal and state emergency assistance received totals more than \$200 million dollars. More emergency funds will be distributed in 2020 than in any single year in OHCS history.

### **3. MARSHALLED RECORD LEVELS OF STATE AND FEDERAL RESOURCES**

#### **Stabilizing Oregon Renters and Avoiding Utility Shut Offs**

As a result of the Oregon Legislatures commitment of more than \$80,000,000 in both state General Fund and federal Coronavirus Relief Funds, OHCS stood up the COVID Rent Relief and Energy Assistance programs to assist Oregonians facing financial challenges as a result of the COVID economic fallout. These programs are designed to provide Oregonians with the resources to prevent eviction and potential homelessness while also ensuring that household energy bills are kept current and future utility shutoffs do not occur. To date, the rapid infusion of ongoing funding makes it possible for statewide Community Action Agencies to increase direct services to vulnerable, COVID-19 impacted Oregonians. OHSC anticipates receiving more than \$50 million Emergency Solutions Grant Resources in the coming months to provide additional rent assistance and other services to struggling Oregonians.

#### **Stabilizing Oregon Homeowners with Rapid Reallocation of Hardest Hit Funds**

In anticipation of increased challenges facing families in keeping up with mortgage payments, OHCS immediately reached out to the Federal delegation about repurposing of the Hardest Hit Funds (HHF). Thanks to the advocacy of Senator Wyden and Merkley's office, US Treasury has authorized OHCS to reopen the [Oregon Homeownership Stabilization Initiative](#) programs using \$25 million in recycled HHF. These foreclosure prevention resources come at a time when Oregonians face significant financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. This program will help between 2000 and 4000 Oregonians retain the homes they own.

#### **Stabilizing Portfolios with the Establishment of the Affordable Rental Housing COVID Response Fund**

After targeted outreach to lenders, investors and affordable rental housing owners OHCS identified the longer-term need to stabilize its affordable rental housing portfolio. In order to do so, OHCS established the Affordable Rental Housing COVID Response Fund using \$20 million in federal Coronavirus Relief Funds resources. These resources are being directed to provide operating support loans to owners of OHCS subsidized affordable rental housing projects. These rental projects serve low-income Oregonians and, due to COVID-19, these properties are facing higher than sustainable levels of rent. These loans will allow owners to have resources to cover operational needs during COVID-19, as well as be able to capitalize reserves and provide patient capital for deferred maintenance during COVID-19 recovery.

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#### **Providing an Immediate and Nimble Response to Stabilize Safe Sheltering Services**

Immediately when the pandemic hit, OHCS created a comprehensive response to stabilize vulnerable households and provided shelter to those most at risk. This work required rapidly reallocating resources. In 2018, the OHCS Statewide Shelter Study was complete with recommendations that led to a state legislative investment of \$5 million in resources for sheltering. In 2019, OHCS distributed \$1.7 million to expand shelter operations across Oregon. In 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the intention was to utilize the remaining \$3.3 million to further increase Oregon's statewide shelter capacity. However, with the onset of COVID-19, OHCS leadership recognized it was paramount to be adaptive in responding to the diverse and changing community needs presented by the pandemic to expand shelter services to meet safe, physically distance sheltering guidelines. The \$3.3 million was swiftly re-directed to shelter providers across the state to provide immediate assistance with isolation-quarantine, sanitation and hygiene to mitigate the COVID spread across the homeless population. Fast action helped control the spread of the virus. To date the rate of COVID infection remains low in Oregon, and reported cases of outbreaks in homeless shelters are minimal in comparison to other congregate care facilities.

#### **4. COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP**

#### **Facilitation and Development of Statewide COVID-19 Homeless Population Taskforce**

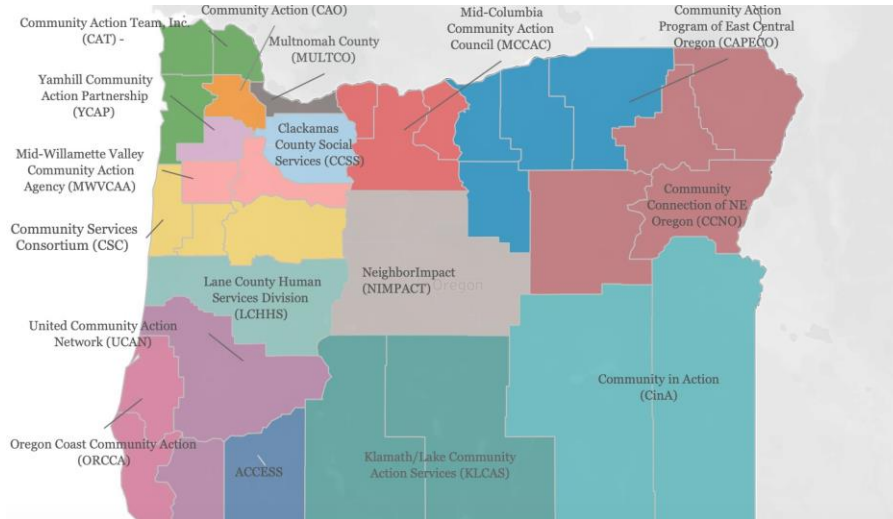
OHCS values deep partnerships. Recognizing the need for collaboration, information sharing, and the ability to quickly deploy resources across rural and urban Oregon, OHCS led the facilitation a [COVID-19 Homeless Populations Taskforce](#). This cross-agency taskforce has proven instrumental in creating a space for regional, county, and city leadership to share strategies, identify local resources gaps and problem solve widespread challenges. On a weekly basis, stakeholders report out on activities related to the mitigation of COVID-19 and the impacts on homeless service providers. The group continues to grow with over 190 people identified across all 36 Oregon counties including participants from locally designated Public Health, Emergency Management, Community Action, Behavioral Health, and other service agencies. Deliverables from the Taskforce include development of shelter operations guidance, assisting communities in application for FEMA "pre-approval" for non-congregate shelter, trainings on trauma informed care and how to create effective temporary camping solutions.

#### **Rapid Interagency Partnerships Supporting Agricultural Workers**

OHCS is unique in having "Housing Integrators," who serve as OHCS' eyes and ears out in the community intentionally developing partnerships, identifying opportunities, and working to implement new strategies. With Oregon's agricultural season ramping up, OHCS' Housing Integrators began hearing about a growing number of COVID-related housing and safe sheltering challenges facing migrant farmworkers. These concerns were echoed by other state agencies. In response to these urgent concerns, OHCS embarked upon a new partnership together with Governor Kate Brown's office, the Department of Agriculture, the Watershed Enhancement Board, farmworker advocates, and farmers to develop and deploy rapid resources to Oregon's agricultural producers to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Normally, a new program of this magnitude would take months to develop but the rapid inter-agency collaboration supported standing up the program in one month. To date the program has provided \$30 million dollars in safe, socially distanced sheltering options, safe transportation, and field sanitation supplies to the Oregonians on the frontlines. During these rapidly changing times, OHCS is taking proactive steps to ensure partners most impacted by the pandemic are heard and supported. Taking the time to listen deeply to those most impacted while being open to readjust approaches is key to our shared success. There is a great deal of work to do. OHCS remains here to help.



# COVID-19 Response OHCS Visual Aids



[COVID Rent/Energy Assistance Map by County and Service](#)

## Oregon distributes \$70 million in COVID-19 rental relief, energy assistance



FILE - In this April 23, 2018, file photo a for rent sign denotes the availability of another existing home in Jackson, Miss. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis, File)



SALEM, Ore. – The State of Oregon is distributing \$70 million to help Oregonians with rental relief and energy assistance during the coronavirus pandemic.

The funding comes from Oregon Housing and Community Services, with \$55 million going toward rental relief and \$15 million in energy assistance.

[Media: Rent and Energy Assistance](#)



[Virtual OHCS Senate Testimony](#)



[Inter-Agency Farmworker Assistance Program](#)

## \$8.5M in rent relief to be provided across Oregon communities

Oregonians looking to apply for aid should contact their local CAAs



[April Emergency Board Rent Relief](#)



## TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

Brandy Hensley  
Director, Office of Consumer Activities  
Oregon Health Authority

[COVID-19 Homeless Population Taskforce Documents and Presentations](#)