

Tenant Centered Permanent Supportive Housing

Oregon Housing and Community Services
Special Needs Housing: Combating Homelessness

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Oregon Housing and Community Services provides resources for Oregonians to reduce poverty and increase access to stable housing. Our intentional focus on housing and community services allows the agency to serve Oregonians across the housing continuum, including preventing homelessness, providing housing stability supports, financing the building and preservation of affordable housing and encouraging homeownership. In 2019, OHCS launched the Statewide Housing Plan – the agency’s foundational document, which centers equity and racial justice as both an overarching guiding principle as well as a top agency priority. Additional priorities in the plan include preventing and ending homelessness, increasing the number of affordable homes in the development pipeline and investing in permanent supportive housing (PSH), a proven strategy to reduce chronic homelessness and overcome barriers to housing stability.

In Oregon, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, families were living on the financial margins and struggling to get by. Rental vacancy rates were at historic lows, rents were at historical 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 an increased need for critical poverty-prevention services. (Because the Point in Time Count was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it’s difficult to point to how great the need is but several indicators point to its significance.)

OHCS values deep partnerships. In order to be responsive to this important state housing need for people experiencing homelessness, OHCS led the facilitation of a COVID-19 Homeless Population Taskforce now known as the Unhoused Network. This cross-agency taskforce launched in response to the pandemic and the agency coordination has continued to be 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 bi-weekly basis, stakeholders report on activities related to the mitigation of COVID-19 and the impacts on homeless service providers. The group remains pivotal in providing space for collaboration, information sharing, and the ability to deploy resources across rural and urban Oregon quickly. Participants come from all 36 Oregon counties, including participants from locally designated Public Health, Emergency Management, Community Action, Behavioral Health, Culturally Specific Organizations and other service agencies.

Together with our partners, Oregon distributed record levels of funding over the past two years in the form of rental assistance to prevent what could have been a tidal wave of new homelessness. Various federal, state, and local funds are also being used to invest in additional shelter beds, street outreach, eviction prevention and diversion programs and emergency housing assistance. One population that increasingly emerged across multiple sectors as urgently needing targeted solutions were those households experiencing chronic homelessness. Chronically homeless individuals are frequently some of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations and include people who have experienced homelessness for at least a year or repeatedly, sometimes struggling with severe mental illness,



substance use disorder, or physical disability in addition to acute traumas and adverse childhood experiences.

Permanent Supportive Housing as a Model for Serving Individuals Experiencing Chronic Homelessness

One proven national model for serving individuals and families experiencing chronic homelessness is Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). By providing on-site, individualized services, PSH stabilizes individuals and reduces costs associated with homelessness such as frequent use of emergency health care, jail stays and chemical dependency. More importantly, PSH has led to long-term housing stability for vulnerable households. PSH programs focus on individuals with the highest needs who are already homeless and have circumstances that suggest they will continue to be homeless for an extended period with access to housing and supportive services.

Addressing PSH requires a multisystem effort. OHCS values partnership for providing a coordinated and integrated system around PSH. Strong relationships with multiple different organizations and agencies have been key to shared success. Partners such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, Oregon Health Authority, Department of Corrections and Department of Human Services, Coordinated Care Organizations, developers of affordable housing and local service providers are critical to delivering successful PSH homes and services. In addition, health care providers, hospitals, health systems insurers, private businesses, charitable foundations and strong partnerships with Culturally Specific Originations and Tribal representatives can play a role in expanding opportunities for PSH.

Despite the model's success, developing quality permanent supportive housing is a complex interdisciplinary undertaking. The current need for PSH in Oregon far exceeds the amount of PSH available. According to a study completed by the Corporation for Supportive Housing, Oregon needs about 12,388 units of PSH to serve individuals and families with a range of needs and challenges. By effectively employing partnerships from across multiple sectors, residents can have a variety of their needs met in a low-barrier atmosphere.

Oregon's Supportive Housing Institute

To support Oregon communities seeking to develop PSH, OHCS sponsored the Supportive Housing Institute, coordinated and implemented by the Corporation for Supportive Housing. This innovative program is replicable and was modeled after a similar program launched in Indiana to increase the supply of supportive housing to find solutions to homelessness more effectively. Within the Institute, CSH provides technical assistance and robust training to project teams explicitly focused on Permanent Supportive Housing development and management. In addition to providing the development capital for PSH Projects, Oregon is unique in providing state funds in a holistic way by offering PSH Projects both project based rental assistance and funding for onsite wrap around supportive services. These critical resources, especially funding for services, are often the biggest hurdles to bringing PSH to life. By offering all three resources, PSH Projects can offer deeply affordable and supportive housing on a long-term basis to ensure PSH residents achieve housing stability and wellness.

This year the third cohort of teams were selected to participate in the Institute from across Oregon based on applications demonstrating a high demand for PSH in their communities. Together nine teams will refine their concept plans and navigate the complex process of developing and operating housing with supportive services for households experiencing chronic homelessness. The Institute provides targeted training, technical assistance, and project planning support to new and experienced development teams seeking to develop local Permanent Supportive Housing. The Institute runs for five months, and the cohort meets for two full days each month to work. Eligible teams must include, at a



minimum: a housing development/owner partner, a supportive service provider partner, and a property management partner.

The five-month training, implemented in collaboration with the Corporation for Supportive Housing, covers a wide range of materials and topics. Each cohort is able to brainstorm collectively to share challenges and ideas. Each group receives technical assistance and expertise in property management, financing and building design. In addition to the basics, participants are also given opportunities to envision new dynamic possibilities for helping residents not just survive but thrive. For example, one course focuses on the Trauma Informed Care model, which aims to provide a sense of safety and empowerment to support residents who have experienced previous trauma. Targeted ways of encouraging tenant informed design include involving tenants before the project opens, engaging residents in the design process, such as selecting paint, artwork or use of shared space. By thinking about the unique needs of future tenants before breaking ground, architects can also incorporate trauma informed design principles such as intentionally including open, welcoming space with natural light, and interior windows and layering of spaces to create visual connection.

These ideas translate on the ground and in the community. For example, at a PSH development for veterans recently funded by OHCS, benches were placed against the walls in common rooms with the understanding that some Veterans have post-traumatic stress disorder and feel ill at ease having their back against open space without clear sightlines. Other architects have found that bringing natural elements indoors can help reduce stress, improve mood and create spaces that are conducive to healing, health and recovery. These tiny design touches create spaces that fuse the built environment with quality of life and encourage belonging, safety and community connection. The Institute provides not only training, technical assistance and resources but also opportunities to overcome challenges in developing PSH by providing time for participants to explore and imagine more inclusive ways to do business. Participants are given space to consider what a trauma informed lens would look like in design, services and property management of permanent supportive housing.

Since 2019, 18 teams have graduated from the Supportive Housing Institute, significantly increasing Oregon's capacity to develop and operate quality PSH. Each graduating group leaves with a plan to develop affordable housing with access to supportive services for individuals experiencing homelessness. Because of the launch of the Supportive Housing Institute, OHCS greatly expanded the capacity and expertise of developing PSH in the state. The Institute is ensuring OHCS achieves our strategic objectives – Today the agency has funded 895 PSH homes and is well beyond halfway to meeting the ambitious target of funding 1,000 additional PSH homes within five years.

It takes a multifaceted approach to respond to chronic homelessness. Permanent supportive housing is a critical part of the broad spectrum of affordable housing solutions. By providing on-site, individualized services within affordable housing developments, PSH leads to cost savings in public systems, particularly within healthcare and justice systems, and long-term housing stability for marginalized households. PSH serves populations that have been traditionally hard to reach. Combining affordable housing with critical services is a proven way to help individuals experiencing chronic homelessness to stabilize. The Institute continues to “build the bench” of talented professionals who will go forward to expand this much-needed housing supply. Permanent Supportive Housing envisioned with a trauma informed, tenant centered lens can provide tangible opportunities to ensure vulnerable Oregonians with a history of chronic homelessness have keys to a warm, safe, affordable place to call home where they can thrive with autonomy and dignity.