

HB2006 Testimony February 23, 2021 – Gwenn Wysling, Bethlehem Inn, Bend, Oregon

Chair Fahey, Vice Chairs and members of the committee, my name is Gwenn Wysling, Executive Director of Bethlehem Inn – a shelter that serves men, women and families in Bend, Oregon. This is the largest such shelter in the Central Oregon region. At capacity, we serve approximately 140 people consisting of up to ten families and 112 beds for men and women. Bethlehem Inn completed expansion in 2019 from a 1960's motel, just six months prior to the pandemic. As we entered into the COVID related shelter-in-Place, we have remained in operation. With careful guidelines, we have kept our staff and residents safe.

Cities are all looking for solutions to the growing challenge of homelessness. As a result of COVID, a large segment of the population have lost work, income and housing. Communities continue to work to contain the pandemic and keep people safe. In order to adhere to CDC guidelines, we have had to limit the number we can serve, while at the same time, the homelessness continues to increase.

All Oregonians, regardless of where they come from, their city or zip code, urban or rural deserve a safe, stable place to sleep at night. In the midst of a pandemic, a safe place to sleep is essential to our individual and collective wellbeing.

We must come together as a state to work to break the cycle of homelessness. The Oregon Legislature should act to make sure that HB2006 is passed so that needed shelters can open to serve as a bridge and provide the necessary resource to those in transition and experiencing homelessness. Finding a workable location is often dependent on the timeliness of seizing an opportunity. Time is of the essence in pursuing funding and an available location.

Each winter, our local Homeless Leadership coalition spends an entire year trying to find a location that can be used as a warming shelter for the region. This need has increased. Bethlehem Inn is at capacity and cannot take on more during the winter – especially this winter. Finding a permanent place to serve as a warming shelter to help those with nowhere to go. No one organization can do it all. We support the work of other shelters and more are needed at this time.

Organizations such as Bethlehem Inn and those working to locate new shelters are focused on being part of the solution to the problem of homelessness; our region would benefit greatly from HB2006. With current funding available through Project Turnkey, Bethlehem Inn would likely already be providing shelter during this serious winter storm. Instead, we are spending valuable time and resources having to apply for conditional use and now are subjected to a long and drawn out waiting period. Because we were unable to use the earlier flexibility and had to apply under the current criteria, which is resulting in money, energy and time delays as we deal with this opposition. An appeal could ultimately delay the process and jeopardize the available funds to bring this important resource to life in a community that currently has no permanent shelter beds.

Everyone deserves respect and dignity of life. A healthy foundation begins with having shelter help and hope - none of us do this alone. Creating possibilities through HB2006 can help to facilitate qualifying emergency shelters, who like Bethlehem Inn have a track record and best practices to operate and manage a shelter to keep everyone safe – residents, staff and neighbors. We need to act now before the problem gets even worse. Lives can be saved and those lives and cities can be positively transformed. Thank you.