



28 March 2021

Senator Lee Beyer and Representative David Gomberg
Co-Chairs
Sub-Committee on Transportation and Economic Development
Joint Committee on Ways and Means
Oregon Legislature
Salem, Oregon 97301

Dear Co-Chairs Beyer and Gomberg, and members of the Committee:

My name is Jimmy Jones and I am the Executive Director of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency here in Salem, where we serve people in poverty in Marion and Polk Counties, as well as nine other Oregon counties in some programs. I am also the Chair of the Legislative Committee of the Community Action Partnership of Oregon, which for nearly 40 years has been Oregon's delivery system for homeless, housing, energy, weatherization and other anti-poverty programs. My agency also operates the ARCHES Project here in Salem, which is one of the most well-known, widely respected and comprehensive homeless service models in Oregon. I write in consideration of House Bill 5011, which provides funding for Oregon Housing and Community Services.

Across the state, Community Action stepped up and delivered during the pandemic, through COVID, wildfire, smoke, floods, and the ice storm. As a network in 2020 we delivered nearly \$95 million in emergency rental and energy assistance alone, in the span of just six months, to tens of thousands of Oregonians struggling with their rent and energy bills. Without that assistance thousands more would have faced eviction and homelessness. Here locally in Marion and Polk, we delivered more than \$8 million in emergency assistance to 1,440 households. And we stand ready in 2021 to assist our neighbors again, with nearly \$26 million in rental and utility assistance locally, through the federal Emergency Rental Assistance program. The need is very great. We currently have more than 2,500 households locally on our waitlist for such assistance in the coming months.

Statewide our network has more than 1,000 partners, including culturally specific organizations which we have sub-contracting relationships with for these new federal funds, in addition to established relationships that sub-contract the Emergency Housing Account (EHA) and the State Homeless Assistance Program (SHAP) funds. COVID will long be remembered as a crisis of the working poor. Our communities of color, in particular, have suffered the burden of the pandemic the most. Unlike many others they had to go to work to pick and pack our food, risk exposure to the virus for both themselves and their families. Many others lost income, jobs, child care and access to critical services as so many state offices and some non-profits closed their doors.

Our work in Salem demonstrates the gravity of that need. In our 2020 emergency rental assistance alone, 52 percent of the households served represented communities of color, more than twice the demography of Marion-Polk and considerably more even when we adjust for percentages of populations in poverty. We did not shoulder that burden alone. Community Action was born more than fifty years ago in recognition of the necessity of local collaboration and out of respect for local control. We partnered with local Latinx, African American and other culturally specific providers, who helped deliver these services during a time of enormous crisis.

Oregon Housing and Community Services' Budget Presentation tomorrow includes a great many critical services for Oregon. The statewide housing plan, in particular, outlines many critical priorities facing our state over the next two years, especially enhanced support for unsheltered homelessness and permanent supportive housing. There are several critical priorities however that remain unmet and unaddressed. The state's wildfire response as a whole has not met the need for the wildfire affected communities. Many of the evacuees that remain unhoused from the Santiam Canyon fire, for example, were already homeless before the wildfire. Like every other homeless population, they have barriers in mental health, substance use, criminal history, income limitations, rental history, and enormous and layered traumas. I served on the Governor's Wildfire Economic Recovery Taskforce, and the final document from that body hardly even mentions our homeless. Oregon DHS took over the sheltering operations for that group earlier this year, but now plans to exit them all from the only shelter they have in the motels, where they have lived since Labor Day. It will take two years to fully resolve this matter and there's too little being done at the state level for our homeless who were displaced by the wildfires.

Secondly, while recognizing the need of OHCS to broaden their partners and expand their work, and for greater public accountability from the state level on down, we need to make certain that existing homeless services across Oregon, which are working, remain fully funded. These services are products of local expertise, products of relationship with dozens of agencies, products of collaboration with local government, and designed to meet specific local needs and conditions that the state as a whole can never hope to understand. We need to preserve the ability to plan and make long-term investments in our homeless infrastructure and develop longer-term collaboration through our EHA and SHAP funds in particular, all of which is at risk in the Department's full legislative agenda in 2021. Slide 12 of the Department's presentation highlights their 2021-2023 budget by OHCS program area. Only \$97 million of their budgetary outlay, less than 2% of their total budget, funds the entirety of homeless services across Oregon. Fracturing that system, instead of expanding it, disinvesting in the good work that's on-going, instead of growing from it, is the wrong policy choice at the wrong time for the wrong reasons.

And what would be lost if these commitments are not maintained? Our ARCHES housing project, which is known for innovation and excellence across Oregon, is the primary direct service program for the unsheltered homeless in our community. We provide shelter,

permanent housing, food, showers and laundry, mobile services, outreach to camps, critical mail services (so the very sick and very disabled homeless population can receive their medicine), transportation services, and other desperately needed direct services to the homeless in our community. Our Day Center alone sees more than 1,000 clients each month, where people come to get a hot meal, escape the cold and wet weather, and find connections to treatment, medical services, and mental health. Since it opened fully in April of 2020, it has seen more than 48,000 duplicated visits, provided 58,474 meals to the homeless and 2,146 shower and laundry services. Our sheltering project this year alone has provided 7,072 bed nights in the middle of a pandemic, using a mixed delivery system of hotels and congregate shelters. We have personally, in the field, made contact with 2,107 homeless residents in camps since July of 2020, bringing with us blankets, tents, tarps, food, and many other desperately needed provisions. And in the last year we housed 538 homeless persons, on top of the 1,800 prevention households we served. We operate three residential facilities for the chronically homeless, for veterans, and for homeless youth. We fund the managed camping projects across Salem, including the one at the state fairgrounds. And we are close to acquiring a Project Turnkey property to provide even more sheltering. We can continue this work or we can choose to disinvest in it, at a time when our unsheltered needs have never been greater.

I hope that the Joint Committee will act favorably on the Department's budget recommendation laid out in their presentation. But I also hope that both OHCS and the Committee will remember that this work is tragically underfunded, and the systems we count on to hold the line on unsheltered homelessness are hanging by a thread.

Respectfully,



Jimmy Jones
Executive Director