



1 March 2021

Oregon House Committee on Housing
Hon. Julie Fahey, Chair
900 Court Street NE, Room 453
Salem, Oregon 97301

Dear Chair Fahey and members of the Committee:

I write on behalf of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, which serves Marion and Polk Counties (and 11 other counties in some program areas). Oregon Housing and Community Services plans to offer an amendment to a study bill, House Bill 2100, which will cause grievous harm to the housing stabilization and homeless services across Oregon. We encourage the Committee not to move forward with this amendment.

Oregon's housing and homeless services are in a precarious position as we enter March of 2021. This is a bad bill, which will not accomplish its stated objectives, and in turn reduce critical funding to the only successful statewide network addressing housing unstable and homeless populations, in the middle of a pandemic and on the precipice of an enormous eviction crisis sure to unfold this summer. The Community Action network has performed exceptionally well throughout the COVID crisis. On the rental front alone, the network moved roughly \$95 million in emergency rental and energy assistance between June and December of 2020. And we stand ready to move more than \$30 million in emergency rental assistance in Marion and Polk over the coming months, and more than \$225 million statewide. When those in poverty in Oregon were in need, Community Action showed up. We kept our doors open and resources moving. This we did through COVID, through fires that burned down much of the Santiam Canyon, through floods in our homeless camps, and an ice storm that left 70 percent of Marion County without power. And still we pushed on. In the most recent ice storm, we sheltered 320 persons per night in Salem alone without power, heat, or any communications. In the middle of that enormous success, Oregon Housing and Community Services proposes to undermine the only system that has worked in Oregon, in favor of a largely unworkable, unproven, and yet unknown replacement, while Oregonians are in grave danger of eviction, in need of food, shelter, and provisions, and the professional competency that can only be offered by a network that has served Oregonians in poverty for the past half century.

The Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency is the Mid-Valley's largest nonprofit. This past year we served more than 50,000 residents of Marion and Polk, and stand ready in 2021 to deliver nearly \$70 million in services and direct assistance to our neighbors in need. House Bill 2100 would cut our most important and flexible resources by 20 percent. 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 3,587 bed nights in a middle of a pandemic, using a mixed delivery system of hotels and congregate shelters. We have personally, in the field, made contact with 1,917 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. OHCS proposes to cut these services to the unsheltered homeless by 20 percent, at a moment when our homeless population has never been greater, never been in a more desperate state of medical condition, and has never experienced a year of such despair: virus, wildfire, smoke, floods, and most recently an ice storm. Who will replace us to provide these services? Who will make sure the diabetics among the homeless can get their medicines, so that they don't die of the festering open wounds that are so common in our camps?

OHCS's proposed changes in this amendment would be permanent, and would produce lasting grievous harm for the unsheltered homeless here in the Mid-Valley. Even the threat of these changes has already had terrible consequences for our local homeless continuum. Oregon Community Foundation had awarded our agency a \$7.5 million Project Turnkey award, to purchase a 68-room hotel here in Salem. But once OHCS announced its intention to move forward with House Bill 2100, we had to walk away from that desperately needed project. Without the ability to plan long-term, other critical infrastructure will soon be lost as well, and state homeless services will begin to contract as early as this summer, just as the eviction moratorium comes to an end. We have lost nearly 30 homeless residents of Marion-Polk in the past 12 months. How many more will we lose if OHCS is successful in reducing our funding by 20 percent?

Oregon Housing and Community Services claims these changes are necessary because the scope of the COVID economic disaster is beyond the capacity of our network of agencies. That claim is demonstrably false. We have hit every single mark given to us by the state in 2020. In all the time I have run housing programs I have **never** missed a spenddown mark, not once, and we will not fail in 2021. They also argue that these changes are necessary to promote equity, from a standpoint of justice and fairness. Yet these changes will certainly not produce the desired outcome. There are extraordinary opportunities here for unintended consequences, and the most likely beneficiary of the changes proposed by OHCS will not be our Latinx or African American communities, but housed white women with children, who are already connected to the workforce. And who will be punished? It will be those lost souls in Eugene, Salem, and Multnomah County, who are living in unsheltered conditions and dying painful deaths outside. Lastly, there are those who will argue that Community Action is incapable of answering the need for racial justice in Oregon, and yet we were born from a racial justice movement. My agency has 425 employees, 44 percent of which are people of color. We serve more than 50,000 Oregonians, more than 60 percent of which are people of color. We are largely an agency of color, serving communities of color.

Certainly there are problems in the state homeless response system. Grossly inadequate funding, a data system so poor that it would be difficult to design a better system if you were deliberately building one *not* to work, a Byzantine finance and contracting system and too little flexibility generally. But blowing up what works with no plan, no proven alternative, no history of direct service at scale, and no hope for success is not modernization. It's reckless. My organization urges you to set aside this bad, poorly written legislation that will harm people in poverty across Oregon.

Respectfully,



Jimmy Jones
Executive Director