

# Perspectives on Portland's Homeless Situation

The following comments from County Commissioner Sharon Meieran were solicited by SWNI News. Excerpts of this interview were published in the March and April 2022 editions.

## 1. How are we doing?

- The short answer is that, if we are talking about unsheltered homelessness, we have failed.
- A lot of people have had positive outcomes and been stabilized in permanent housing since the [A Home for Everyone initiative](#) was launched and the Joint Office of Homeless Services was established. There are some amazing people and organizations working hard to address the humanitarian crisis on full display in our community.
- But the fact remains that we have more resources now than ever before, thanks to voters, surplus revenues and infusions of federal dollars, and yet the number of people living in and dying on our streets has increased, and the conditions are worse than ever before.



Sharon Meieran

## 2. What progress has been made in the last several years?

- Unfortunately, we do not have accurate information regarding how many people are experiencing homelessness and what their underlying needs are. Furthermore, some of the information we do have has been complicated by the COVID pandemic and the need to create safe distancing and recovery sites for people at risk. But, by and large, we are doing worse in terms of the human tragedy of people living and dying unsheltered on our streets.
- This should not discount the fact that there have been positive outcomes for many people, including placements into permanent housing. That information can be provided by the Joint Office of Homeless Services. But it is difficult to get a handle on the meaning of these numbers in the context of the problem as a whole because of the lack of data.

## 3. What are the most important service priorities in your mind, from most important to lesser importance?

- As an ER doctor, the most important priorities to me are life, health and safety. Right now thousands of people are living in squalor and dying in increasing numbers on our streets. The first order of business is to stop the bleeding.
- I have proposed a plan that addresses these foundational needs in a way that reduces harm to individuals and the community, allowing people to live safer and healthier, with enhanced access to the services they need, while we are working on the longer-term plans to get them housed. I can provide additional detail on the plan.
- Once issues of life and death are addressed, the services people need depend on why they are homeless in the first place. We do not have accurate information on this, but there are two general categories of why people are homeless: (1) a specific event resulting in inability to meet rent burden - loss of job, major illness and hospitalization, etc. and/or (2) serious disabling condition(s) coupled with an inability to meet rent burden.

- *For people whose homelessness resulted from an event or need, the answer to your question depends on the specific need, such as domestic violence services, job training, emergency rent assistance, long term rent assistance, and more.*
- *For people with serious disabling conditions, their needs are related to their underlying conditions. And the greatest needs facing people living outside are too often not discussed. They relate to substance use disorder - especially methamphetamine and Fentanyl use- and serious mental illness.*
- *We do not have a system to manage behavioral health, thanks to decades of disinvestment at the federal and state levels, and in Oregon in particular a serious lack of leadership. Oregon has some of the highest incidences of mental illness and substance use disorder in the country, and is the worst in terms of access to treatment. It's hard enough to manage addiction or serious mental illness even with housing. Living outside on the streets, it's virtually impossible.*
- *That being said, there are some programs that can help prevent crises and de-escalate if they happen, but they are difficult to deploy and ensure consistency if people are not reliably in a known location. In addition, the availability of the types of teams that would be helpful, including access to medication prescribers, are virtually nonexistent compared with the extreme numbers of people needing services.*

**4. Current initiatives appear to be funded largely by the budget surpluses – can we continue adding/maintaining services long-term if there are no future surpluses?**

- *Right now, I do not believe that we are facing a funding issue. I believe that we are not effectively using the resources we have. But it's not clear whether or not this is the case, because as I mentioned in response to another question - we do not have a handle on the universe of need because we do not have accurate data, we have not set a goal we intend to reach, and we are not assessing how we will reach that goal. I believe we should be taking those steps before we ask for additional funding.*
- *I believe that one-time funds should be used for purposes of establishing the infrastructure that will support future services and operations. Once those have been established (based on reliable data informing us what we will need), we can determine what we will need on an ongoing basis and can adapt to meet the changing needs and availability of funding. At the very least, even if we do not have sufficient funds for ongoing operations, we will have data that will allow us to advocate meaningfully to fill gaps.*

**5. What is your view of Safe Rest Villages as part of the solution?**

- *The key phrase here is "part of the solution." I believe that SRVs are part of the solution.*
- *I envision a holistic ecosystem of sites to meet a variety of people's needs, at a scale that will make a difference, with the urgency that speaks to the crisis we are facing. SRVs meet important needs and should be part of the ecosystem. However, as we have seen, SRVs have faced some significant challenges, and even if they all opened tomorrow, they would only shelter a small fraction of the thousands of people living unhoused. This is why SRVs are a PART of the holistic ecosystem I envision, but not a silver bullet or standalone solution.*

**6. Is there a long-term plan, schedule and budget for providing housing and other services for our homeless individuals and families? Who owns the job of developing/coordinating it?**

- *My short answers are: (1) “No, there does not appear to be an overarching long term plan, schedule and budget for providing housing and other services” and (2) “It’s not clear who owns the job of developing/coordinating it.”*
- *There are several partial responses to this question:*
  - a. *For the Metro Supportive Housing Services Measure funds (approximately \$100 million per year for Multnomah County alone), the County adopted a Local Implementation Plan that identifies some broad priorities. I do not find this specific enough to guide meaningful decision-making and I do not feel it provides actual quantifiable goals.*
  - b. *The Multnomah County budget for housing and homeless services is based on broad priorities adopted through an unclear advisory process. However, it does not include specifics, and funds for these services are distributed in a variety of departmental budgets (e.g., housing, human services, health, etc.). The budgets are proposed by the departments to the County Chair, who then proposes an overarching budget in consultation with the department heads, and then released to the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC). At this point, it is difficult to determine what specific programs and services are being purchased, and what outcomes are expected. There is no plan with specifics and how this ties into the universe of need that is presented to the BOCC.*
  - c. *The City does its own version of the budgeting process.*
  - d. **The City and County each have their own programs and services in addition to those provided for by the Joint Office of Homeless Services, including County (public health, behavioral health) and City (urban camping cleanup, SRVs, trash pickup).**
  - e. *The Director of The Joint Office of Homeless Services, currently Marc Jolin\*, holds the authority over the operations of the system. .*

## **7. How do you view Multnomah County’s role?**

- *Multnomah County has a much larger role in terms of the of homelessness than is recognized. There is a contract between the City and County that governs the JOHS. I had assumed that there was formal shared responsibility and oversight of the office itself and also the director of JOHS, and that all the services related to homelessness were connected under one roof. However, both of these assumptions were incorrect.*
- *Under the contract, Multnomah County exclusively houses the Department of the Joint Office of Homeless Services, and the Chair holds exclusive authority and oversight over the director. The City provides funding, but any contribution to policy or oversight is informal.*

## **8. How well coordinated are the County and City, along with Central City Concern and other nonprofits dealing with homelessness and related issues?**

- *The City and County are not well-coordinated, except to the extent the JOHS serves as a connector. Therefore, while many services are connected, many are only partially connected. For example, trash pickup, shelter security, SRVs are overseen by the City, with involvement of the JOHS, and public health and behavioral health are overseen by the County.*
- *Outreach services are not centralized and are not coordinated. There is some informal coordination, but no delineation of responsibility or territory, no determination of which services best meet which needs, and no consideration of how outreach teams should be deployed. To my knowledge there is no inventory of what services are available to be deployed. Even when teams do establish relationships (with a fraction of the individuals*

needing services), follow up is often not feasible because people are not in a consistent location (this would be addressed in my plan).

- None of the constructive critique I am making of our outreach systems reflects on the individuals doing the work. They are providing incredible service under extreme pressure despite systems that pose tremendous barriers. We need to improve our systems so people doing the work do not face so many barriers, and their meaningful work can be as impactful as possible.

## **9. What is Metro's role?**

- Metro's role is unclear, aside from housing some administration and oversight committees for the Supportive Housing Services measure and administering their affordable housing bond.

## **10. What is the State's role?**

- To me, the front-line issues are about the City and County. I do not believe that we need state money to address homeless services at this moment, at least until hundreds we are able to demonstrate our universe of need, and how we are using the of millions of dollars currently available to meet this need. But we do need the State's partnership, support and collaboration, especially when it comes to preventing homelessness and addressing mental illness and addiction.

## **11. When will the recent Point in Time Count (PITC) results be available?**

- It is not clear when the PITC results will be available. But even when released, they will likely not provide significant information, other than to inform us that the situation of people living unsheltered is worsening (which we already know). The PITC is notoriously inaccurate and an undercount. I have known this intellectually but had no idea of the extent until I volunteered doing the count myself. The PITC only exists because HUD requires this in order to receive certain federal funding.
- We need a "By Name" list, which actually identifies who people are and what they specifically need. We will never be able to address our problem unless we know the scale and scope of what is needed. I have been pushing for this for a long time, theoretically the JOHS has agreed to the approach, but has no information about how or when it will roll out.

## **12. Any final thoughts on the issue?**

- Although the situation is dire, and my responses may paint a rather bleak picture, I do have hope. There are amazing people doing direct service work on the ground, and I believe that we can employ strategies that can improve the situation urgently (without resorting to strategies that are dehumanizing), and also longer term through systems changes and permanent housing strategies.

**Sharon Meieran, MD, JD**

**Multnomah County Commissioner, District 1**

Email: [sharon.meieran@multco.us](mailto:sharon.meieran@multco.us)

Phone: (503) 988-5220

\* **ED NOTE:** Shortly after this interview was completed, Marc Jolin resigned his position as Director of the County's Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS). He has been replaced by Shannon Singleton, former head of JOIN, a homeless services provider.