



PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

Ten-year plan to end homelessness gets regional redux

Portland, Multnomah County update their roadmap to address rise in families on the streets

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Now in the autumn of its life, the region's 10-year plan to end homelessness is getting a makeover, of sorts.

The yearlong effort by Portland and Multnomah County is referred to as the 10-year reset. More than 40 people representing social-service agencies and a wide variety of other organizations are involved in identifying programs and services that have been effective, areas of need and refocusing service dollars and energy.

The reset plan is expected to be presented to the Portland City Council, Multnomah County Commission and the board of directors of the area's housing authority, Home Forward, in the coming months.

The original 10-year plan is in its final two years, and service providers say it needs to adapt to reflect the changing demographics of the area's homeless population, the lingering impacts of the recession and ever-dwindling budgets at the federal, state and local level for social services.

At stake, they say, is the ability to end homelessness — whether for an individual or family — as quickly and efficiently as possible. There is also hope the reset plan will reinvigorate political and public support for ending homelessness, and attract more money from local organizations and the federal government.

Discussions about the reset plan began approximately a year ago when County Commissioner Deborah Kafoury and City Commissioner Nick Fish, the two elected officials most involved in homeless issues, convened a group now known as the Reset

Committee to look at refreshing the 10-year plan's goals and priorities.

"It seemed to me a perfect and opportune time to take a look at ... successes, new and creative ideas that might work better than ways we've been doing it in the past," Kafoury says. "With any strategic plan, you don't do it once and never look at it again."

The 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness was created in 2004 when the administration of former President George W. Bush directed major cities with large homeless populations to develop a plan with policies and strategies to end homelessness within 10 years. In the Portland area, the plan is a collaborative effort among Multnomah County, the City of Portland and the county's housing authority, Home Forward.

The plan emphasizes ending the homelessness of the "chronically homeless," people who have been homeless for at least a year. To do that, it focused on the creation of permanent supportive housing: housing connected with wrap-around services such as mental health and substance abuse treatment, health care, disability services, employment training, access to services assisting with benefit applications, among other programs.

"The reset process reflects a new approach to ending homelessness. Eight years into the first plan we are hitting the refresh button," Fish said.

"We need to be clear about our expectations. We have much to be proud of during the first eight years. (Former City Commissioner) Erik Sten, (Former County Commissioner) Serena Cruz and others deserve much credit for designing this system. But the truth is that we never expected to "end" homelessness in 10 years. I never liked the concept of a "10-year" plan

— it was a requirement of federal funding, but was inherently misleading."

The plan's philosophical driver is quickly getting a homeless person into permanent housing. This "housing first" model assumes that once a person is housed, it is easier to solve the issues compromising their ability to stay in housing.

The plan's most prominent manifestation is the resource access center in Old Town Chinatown. The Bud Clark Commons, as the building was named, houses a large day center and a 90-bed men's shelter, operated by Transition Projects. Its upper levels hold 175 units of affordable housing reserved for housing the unhealthiest and most vulnerable homeless people, managed by Home Forward.

"I think that (the 10-year plan) has been successful in what it set out to achieve in terms of using things we and our partners knew worked to end people's homelessness," says Traci Manning, the director of the Portland Housing Bureau. "In terms of the chronically homeless, supportive housing was very successful. A lot of the targets that we set for ourselves ... have played out."

In many ways, by the time the recession began in the fall of 2008, the 10-year plan might as well have been on autopilot. The city and county were meeting or exceeding the vast majority of the plan's goals, and while it's debatable whether homelessness is something that can be completely eradicated, people were getting into housing. But the recession threw the social safety net for a loop. Suddenly, providers found themselves dealing with an emergency.

Within months, Oregon's unemployment shot up to 11.6 percent by the summer of 2009, from 6 percent one year earlier.

Oregon still has the grim distinction of being one of the hungriest states in the country, with one of the highest employment rates, and high rates of homelessness.

The recession's most notable impact is a sharp increase in family homelessness. "We've seen a notable increase," says Marc Jolin, the executive director of the outreach agency JOIN.

Many homeless families, Jolin and others say, are homeless simply because a member lost his or her job. According to the city's 2011 street count, which provides a snapshot of how many people are sleeping outside on a January night, the number of homeless families increased by 35 percent since 2010. That year, the social service agency Human Solutions opened a new family shelter with a capacity of 80 families.

"It was packed," Kafoury says of a recent visit to a family shelter.

Identifying and serving the changing demographics of the Portland area's homeless population is the main reason for the 10-year plan's reset.

"I think there was a desire to broaden the scope of who was being served under the 10-year plan," Jolin says. "It's been fairly narrowly focused on chronic homelessness."

The revised plan is still in draft form and subject to change as the reset committee meets for the last time in January. But a recommendation unlikely to change is naming four subpopulations within the homeless population as priorities for services: families with children, people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, and youth.

"There was a lot of discussion," says Sally Erickson, the Portland Housing Bureau's manager of homeless programs. "Our resources are insufficient to meet the need. We kept landing on vulnerability."

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