

Housing crisis still roiling for poorest residents in county

Bobby Weinstock is the housing advocate at Northwest Pilot Project. The agency helps older adults obtain and maintain housing and provides support services to promote independence. He has been working in downtown Portland with people who are homeless and at-risk for 30 years.

BY BOBBY WEINSTOCK
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

An affordable rental housing crisis is taking place. More than 1,700 men, women, and children are sleeping outside every night. Another 1,000 people are sleeping in emergency shelters and temporary motel rooms. People with modest income continue to be homeless while waiting for an affordable apartment to become available.

Families are doubled up with friends in overcrowded housing situations unable to find their own home. Waiting list time for affordable housing is now measured in months and years. Social-service programs struggle to keep people in transitional housing programs much longer than optimal because no regular apartment can be found.

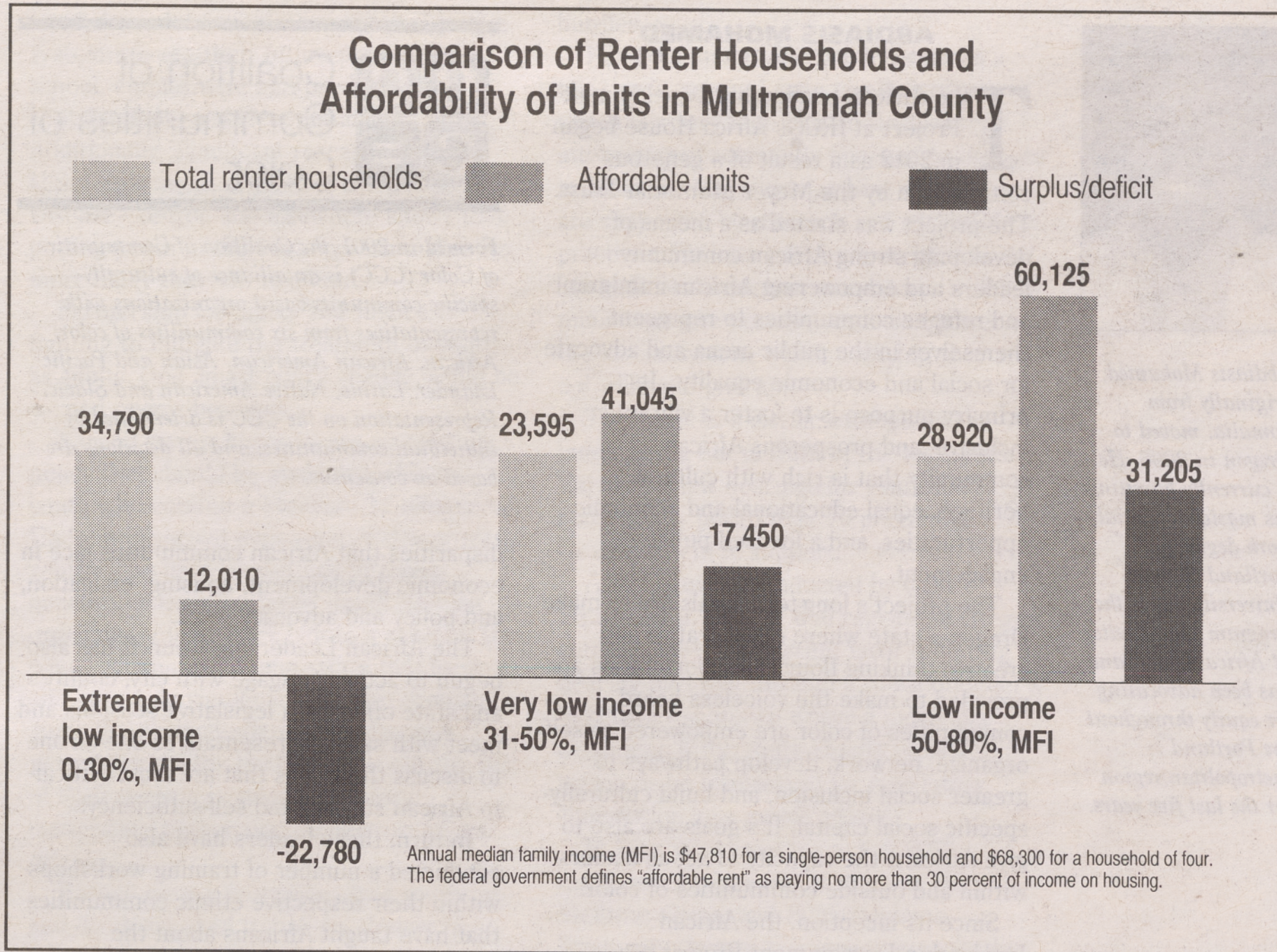
Home Forward, the local housing authority, has closed its Section 8 wait list after 21,000 households applied within two weeks for 3,000 spots on the waitlist. Due to federal sequestration budget cuts, Home Forward does not expect to offer Section 8 rent subsidy to anyone on the wait list this year. Rents are higher than ever and rising quickly. Many of those fortunate enough to have an apartment are paying most of their income for rent and are at risk of falling into homelessness.

This is not a description of some far away place. This is the current housing situation in Multnomah County. These facts may be shocking to the general public but are well-known to those struggling to secure an affordable apartment.

There are 34,790 renter households in the bottom 30 percent of median family income in Multnomah County. Income for this group is less than \$1,217 monthly for a single person and less than \$1,733 monthly for a family of four. This includes thousands who have worked hard all their lives but now find themselves surviving on little income. Included are people working part-time for low wages, retiring baby boomers whose only income is social security, disabled adults on fixed incomes, veterans on pensions, and single parent families with children, struggling to survive on AFDC benefits while juggling childcare and job-hunting.

Multnomah County contains 12,010 apartments which are affordable to its 34,790 lowest income households. Rent is considered affordable if it consumes less than 30 percent of monthly household income. Only 35 affordable apartments exist for every 100 of the lowest income households in need of such housing. This shortage of over 22,000 affordable apartments is the leading cause of homelessness.

Social-service workers encounter immense need each day in their efforts to assist the homeless. Social service providers in Multnomah County are among the best in



the nation. The City Council and the Multnomah County Commission have been heroic in ensuring funding of social services to assist the homeless and the near homeless. However, even the most proficient social-service system will have difficulty reducing homelessness in the face of such a severe affordable rental housing shortage.

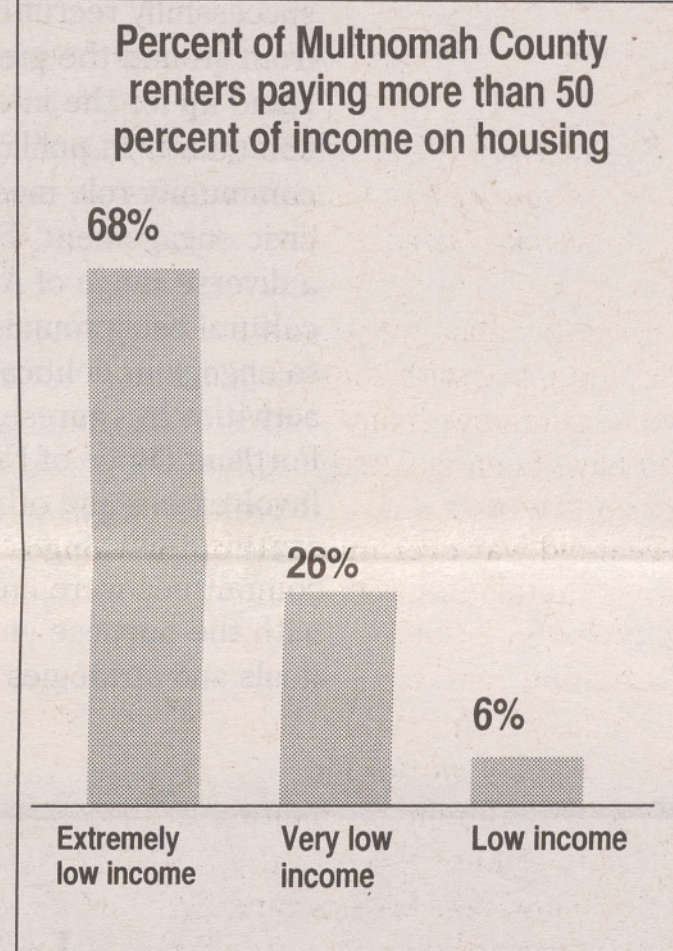
It is critical that the current reset action plan being formulated to reduce homelessness in Multnomah County includes a strategy to address the rental housing crisis. Strategies to reduce the imbalance between the number of extremely low income households and affordable housing units are necessary for the plan to be effective. These strategies might include preserving the affordable buildings we have, lowering the rent in existing buildings to make them affordable, and developing new affordable buildings. All these strategies require funding.

Public investment in affordable housing has not kept pace with the magnitude of the crisis. Traditional local funding from urban renewal districts for affordable housing is quickly drying up. To effectively address the affordable housing crisis, a strategy for increased, ongoing, and dedicated housing investment is needed. Though federal housing programs are critically important, waiting for the federal government to solve the local housing crisis is not a viable plan.

Local voters have shown a willingness to invest in the well-being of the community by supporting funding for open space, schools,

arts, libraries, children's programs, fire stations, parks, transit, etc. It's time to add housing to the list. Whether Multnomah County voters will support the request is an open question. However, the public debate which would accompany a ballot measure for affordable housing funds is sorely needed to raise public awareness of the rental housing crisis. It's time to ask for help from voters to increase the affordable housing supply and reduce homelessness.

Creating a net increase of 1,000 affordable apartments annually over 20 years would eliminate the affordable housing crisis. Any new apartment buildings would be designed to be compatible with existing neighborhoods and be disbursed throughout the County. This is doable with the support of voters. Multnomah County could be the first urban region in the nation to eliminate the human misery of not having a home. What a proud achievement that would be.



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