

Reducing homelessness: A straight-forward recommendation

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AND BOBBY WEINSTOCK
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNISTS

After declaring a Housing State of Emergency, the City of Portland has taken the compassionate step of opening up a temporary emergency night shelter this winter for homeless women. The Jerome Sears shelter near Multnomah Village gives homeless women a safe place to sleep off the streets. Couples can also stay at the shelter. Transition Projects did a great job quickly finding staff to operate the shelter. The shelter is in a city-owned building and is expected to stay open for 6 months.

Emergency shelter space for women is in short supply. Around 100 women are sleeping in the Jerome Sears shelter each night. It is unknown what will happen to the women once the shelter closes.

Emergency shelter is essential to helping people survive especially during the harsh winter months. The severe affordable housing shortage (see attached chart) makes the provision of emergency shelter a critical service. However, emergency shelter in itself does not end homelessness.

The public is losing faith in the ability of our local government and social service system to significantly reduce homelessness. However, after 65 combined years of doing this work, we fervently believe homelessness can be drastically reduced with the proper tools and intervention.

What would it take to help as many of the homeless women at the Jerome Sears shelter as possible to obtain permanent housing? Three housing specialists could be hired to help the women find permanent homes. The housing specialists could also be provided with 100 housing vouchers for use by the women. The vouchers could make it possible for these very low income women to find apartments they could afford in the private market. The vouchers could either be existing

federally-funded Section 8 vouchers or newly-created, locally-funded vouchers.

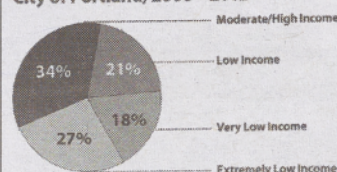
The combination of dedicated housing specialists and housing vouchers has been successful before in addressing homelessness. The number of veterans who are homeless has been drastically reduced with vouchers and social service support. Homeless families with children are also being effectively helped to achieve housing stability with this combination of tools.

Past experience in relocating shelter residents also supports the notion that the combination of housing specialists and rent-subsidized apartments will work. When the Recovery Inn homeless shelter on the east end of the Burnside Bridge closed in 1995, a similar approach was utilized to find homes for the residents. The single adults in the shelter were considered the most chronic and difficult to house segment of the homeless population. Expectations for housing success were low. A team of housing specialists was assembled. Every resident sleeping at the Recovery Inn shelter on a designated night was offered help to find housing. Housing specialists interviewed each willing shelter resident, identified the barriers to housing and how to overcome them, generated housing options, and pursued the option chosen by the shelter resident. Then, the housing specialist assisted with the application process, helped approved applicants with move-in costs and furnishings, and provided support as the formerly homeless adults settled into their new apartments.

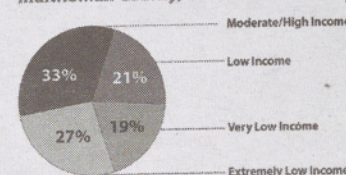
Over half of the 70 shelter residents who accepted help were still successfully housed at one-year follow-up. Of the shelter residents who were successful, 13 were placed into rent-subsidized apartments. Every one of the formerly homeless individuals placed into a rent-subsidized apartment was still stably housed one year after the Recovery Inn closed. This included individuals with mental

The Affordable Housing Gap in Portland and Multnomah County

Total Renter Households = 114,775
City of Portland, 2008 - 2012

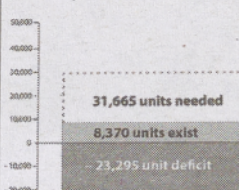


Total Renter Households = 137,450
Multnomah County, 2008 - 2012

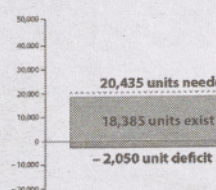


City of Portland Renter Households

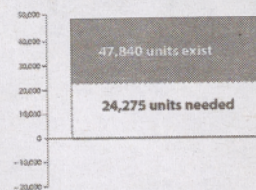
Extremely Low Income (0-30% MFI)



Very Low Income (31-50% MFI)

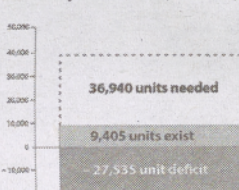


Low Income (51-80% MFI)

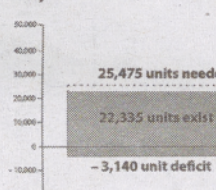


Multnomah County Renter Households

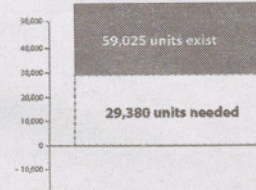
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Very Low Income (31-50% MFI)



Low Income (51-80% MFI)



Median Family Income (MFI) for a household of one is \$51,730, and for a household of four is \$73,900.



illness and/or substance abuse issues. The housing specialists believed if more rent-subsidized apartments had been available, more of the shelter residents could have achieved long-term housing stability.

In 1995, rents were much lower, vacancies were more plentiful, and screening criteria were more lenient than in today's rental market. The tough conditions in the current rental market for low income people necessitate that housing specialists are provided with housing vouchers for each homeless woman in the Jerome Sears shelter

to secure a permanent affordable apartment.

Let's provide the proven effective combination of housing specialists and housing vouchers to the women at the Jerome Sears shelter and see what can be accomplished before the shelter closes. Housing placements and housing stability will be tracked over time. We think the public will be amazed at the results.

Susan Emmons is the executive director and Bobby Weinstock the housing advocate for Northwest Pilot Project.

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