

Housing is health care, worthy of equal attention

The relationship between housing and health care is a logical connection. Of course, having a roof over your head is a matter of well-being.

But a new study illustrates how that relationship means smart money as well.

That study, conducted by Enterprise Community Partners and the Center for Outcomes and Research Education, documents the relationship between affordable housing for low-income individuals and the cost of health care.

The study tapped 145 low-income housing properties, with more than 10,000 residents, in and near Portland. The study included people who were

formerly or chronically homeless, as well as those in various forms of subsidized housing, including families, permanent supportive housing, and housing for seniors and people with disabilities.

The bottom line: Affordable housing reduces Medicaid costs, in part because patients can avoid high-cost emergency room visits for chronic problems. Compared to the previous year, total health care expenditures were 12 percent less the year after an individual moved into affordable housing. The amount averaged \$50 per member per month and, when multiplied by the 1,675 participants in the panel, would result in \$936,000 less per year. Nearly \$1 million in savings in one year, for just this survey group.

It also meant better preventive care: "After moving into affordable housing, clients used more primary care and had fewer emergency department visits than in the year before they moved in," the report found. "These changes were most dramatic for people moving into permanent supportive housing."

Dr. Megan T. Sandel, associate professor of pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine and a trustee with Enterprise Community Partners Inc., calls housing "a critical vaccine that can pave the way to long-term health and well-being."

The study's recommendations for Oregon are fundamental:

- The Oregon Health Authority should expand its current Medicaid waiver to include using Medicaid dollars to invest in the development of affordable housing. Permanent supportive housing and housing for seniors and people with disabilities should be prioritized for use of this funding.

- The Oregon Health Authority should provide

incentives for coordinated care organizations and Medicaid payers to use flexible-services dollars for rental assistance, eviction prevention, rapid re-housing, services such as health navigation, benefits enrollment, and improved access to primary care, mental health services and dental care and coordination of these services.

- The state should include housing stability as a metric that should be measured by coordinated care organizations and move forward with development of a methodology by which housing stability, as it relates to health care outcomes and related costs, will be measured.

In fact, no conversation about health care spending can disregard the massive correlation it has with affordable, stable and safe housing. Likewise, the investments made in permanent housing for low-income residents has to be seen in multiple lights.

Today, the crisis-level housing shortage for lower- and middle-income families is the dead weight preventing so many progressive efforts from living up to their potential. It is a roadblock in preserving communities of color in gentrified neighborhoods, where everyone could and should benefit. It is unraveling the financial stability of families despite the larger trend in economic recovery. And most visibly, the lack of affordable housing for lower incomes is a driving force in the rise of homelessness, despite a spectrum of approaches to stem the tide.

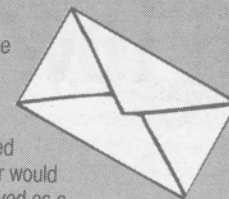
The barriers created by the lack of suitable housing are undermining hard-fought systemic changes to how the medical and insurance industries provide and finance health care services. The Affordable Care Act has brought tens of millions of Americans back under the protection of health insurance and has restored primary-care access. In Oregon, we've restructured the state's delivery system to focus resources on coordinated care networks that provide a more holistic approach to healing. But neither can overcome the obstacles created by the critical housing shortage experienced by their clients.

None of these policies can thrive in a vacuum.

Every day, we're reminded of the connection in real life. It's time policy caught up. Until our governments and private interests adopt practical and essential guidelines for fulfilling our housing supply needs, we will foolishly continue to shoot holes in one half of our lifeboat, confident we'll float on, safe and dry, in the other.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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EDITORIAL

Latest PBA panhandling campaign hampers real progress

The most recent anti-homeless campaign by downtown's Portland's Clean and Safe Program and the Portland Business Alliance (PBA) would be laughable if it wasn't so dangerous.

The public relations campaign includes A-boards around the city along with a billboard downtown, which shows a person holding a cardboard sign that reads "Your spare change funds my addictions." The hope is that people will give money to the Real Change Not Spare Change fund and local nonprofits working with people experiencing homelessness.

Street Roots thinks you should give your money to whoever you want. The idea that people experiencing homelessness shouldn't have access to income goes against everything Street Roots believes. We know first hand that money used from selling Street Roots goes to improve people's quality of life.

The program lacks both compassion and political sophistication and overrides any real conversations

around the progress we are making in ending homelessness. It's worth noting that the PBA has been trying to make this program successful for going on 10 years with no impact alleviating the vital needs of the homeless.

More so, the PBA's latest campaign comes on the heels of its recent public relations crusade targeting both Mayor Charlie Hales and Multnomah County's leadership for not doing enough on homelessness, and calling for the remote, mothballed Wapato jail to become a homeless shelter. It did all of this fully knowing it was neither practical nor politically viable to support a homeless shelter 10 miles from the nearest essential services.

It is misleading directives like these that keep the political will for real solutions mired in petty blame games and self-righteous rhetoric. It's a waste of all our time. You can do better, PBA.