

**VOUCHER, from page 10**

saw how instrumental they were in ending homelessness in the Portland region. Since 2015, more than 1,200 homeless veterans have been placed into permanent housing, largely due to a massive influx of vouchers specifically for homeless and low-income veterans.

Weinstock said this realization amounted to an epiphany. The fundamental problem that leads to homelessness and housing instability, in his mind, he said, is that "people don't have enough money to pay market level rents."

This means that if the gap between what a person can afford and the rent of the apartment unit or home they live in is closed, the person would not have to move due to a rent increase.

"My belief now is that the key to ending homelessness is basically to help low-income people to afford their rent over the long run," Weinstock said.

"I think one of the weaknesses of our system is that we have been providing short-term assistance to people who need long-term help," he continued. "A voucher is long term."

Rutger Bregman echoed the idea that poverty and related issues, such as housing instability, is due to a simple lack of money. Bregman is a historian who gave a TED talk advocating for combating poverty by giving everyone a basic income.

"Poverty is a lack of cash," he said during the talk.

In November 2015, Northwest Pilot Project, the Urban League of Portland and Home Forward, the region's federal housing agency, launched the first pilot project to test the effectiveness of a locally-funded voucher program with funding from the Meyer Memorial Trust.

Home Forward supplied 60 of its housing choice vouchers for the program, something the housing agency is able to do because the federal government allows Home Forward to use some of its vouchers for innovative programs.

The project targeted seniors on fixed

incomes, who were facing rent increases they could not afford and who would likely be forced to move. The project was designed to test whether a voucher could prevent those seniors from being displaced from inner North and Northeast Portland neighborhoods, where many of them had lived for many years.

All 60 of the vouchers were used, and at the end of the pilot year, only two households did not remain in their housing: One person moved to assisted living, and another person died.

"It confirmed that vouchers are probably the most powerful tool to create housing stability for low-income people in the long run," Weinstock said.

Elisa Harrigan, Meyer Memorial Trust's Affordable Housing Initiative program officer, said the pilot

program is one of the most successful affordable housing initiatives that the Trust has funded.

"We're seeing folks being pushed out of their communities and being priced out of where they're living, particularly seniors," she said. "It's more cost effective to help people stay in place."

Program participants lived in their housing for an average of 11 years, according to Northwest Pilot Project's final report.

The report showed the average monthly income of the 60 participants was \$1,119, and the average rent they paid before receiving the voucher was \$901 – approximately 81 percent of their income.

After receiving the voucher for two-thirds of their rent, the contribution the individuals made was \$242 per month.

"It was wonderful to not move," Lambert said. Suddenly having hundreds of extra dollars each month from her Social Security insurance check has improved her life in

other ways.

She no longer asks family members to help her pay for medications and other expenses. "Nobody would have let me slip through the cracks," she said of her family. "But you don't want to ask. They have their own homes, their own lives."

She also felt comfortable adopting a kitten – something she would not have done had she not been sure if she could stay in her home. "It let me get a little spirit in, a little life I got to say yes to," Lambert said.

Barbara Ekong has lived in her apartment in the Woodlawn neighborhood since 2003. Like many Portlanders, her rent has increased again and again. She receives \$907 a month in Social Security.

Last year, her rent was raised to \$1,005. "I just couldn't afford it," she said.

She joined the pilot program last year, and she now pays \$272 toward her rent. "I have other bills," she said. "Before I got the voucher, I was lucky if I had \$50 for the month."

Without the voucher, Ekong doesn't think she could have found another apartment. "I would probably be out on the street. It alleviated a lot of pressure off me."

Other cities have started local voucher programs to prevent displacement and homelessness.

Washington, D.C., started its Local Rent Supplement Program in 2007, which now subsidizes the rent of 1,718 households that make less than 30 percent of median income. The district's Housing Production Trust Fund pays for the program with deed record and transfer taxes it collects.

Chicago started a trust fund in 1989 that now subsidizes the rent of 2,800 households, by bridging the gap between the rent of the housing unit and 30 percent

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HOUSING ADVOCATE WITH  
NORTHWEST PILOT PROJECT

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of the family's income. To be eligible for the program, a family of four must make \$24,250 a year or less.

"The Trust Fund plays an essential role in keeping Chicago affordable for all its citizens," according to a guide detailing the program.

New York City has a similar program that provides rent subsidies for qualifying people who live in homeless and domestic violence shelters.

As the Joint Office's voucher pilot project rolls out this year, Jolin, Weinstock and others will examine how local vouchers can best be used and if the local government can administer them effectively at low cost.

"The basic notion that they're more likely to be housed stably with a voucher, we know that's true," Jolin said.

"The question is," he said, "are we using these vouchers in the right way, with the right population?"

If a locally-funded voucher program becomes permanent in Multnomah County and receives more funding to pay for more vouchers, is it appropriate to use those vouchers exclusively for seniors and disabled people on fixed incomes? Or exclusively for homeless people? Or the working poor? Or a combination?

The bigger question is how much money the City of Portland and Multnomah County are willing to put forth for a local voucher program in the future.

Weinstock estimates it would cost \$6 million dollars to fund 1,000 vouchers. "Taking local voucher programs to scale is a significant financial challenge," Jolin said.

"We don't print money," Portland City Commissioner Nick Fish, who is an advocate for local voucher program, said. "Our capacity to fund all these urgent needs is going to be really challenged."

This local voucher program is just one on a growing list of effective, federally-funded, anti-poverty programs that, facing draconian cuts, local governments must ask if they can and should begin funding.

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