

Wait-listed

Homeless families had never been turned away from Multnomah County's shelter. But now, Human Solutions struggles to accommodate everyone who needs services.

Client shadows line the wall at Human Solutions Family Shelter in East Portland.

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

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A decision by the Joint Office of Homeless Services to start wait-listing homeless families who seek shelter beds – a first for Portland and Multnomah County – has rattled service providers at all levels of the social services spectrum.

“The decision to close intake was very painful,” said Andy Miller, the executive director of Human Solutions, the east Multnomah County social services agency that operates the county’s homeless family shelter. “What looked like an infinite escalation of our nightly census was also painful and traumatic and stressful for everyone involved.”

The family homeless system in Multnomah County is one that is not used to saying no. For as long as Human Solutions has operated a family homeless shelter, it has turned away no one, either letting them stay in the shelter or housing families in motel rooms.

Now, homeless families seeking shelter must call 211info, and once the family shelter is identified as the best service available to them, they’re put on a waitlist.

There are already 100 families on the list, which is one month old.

There are only two homeless family shelters in Multnomah County, and services mainly comprise rental and eviction assistance dollars, which cannot help every family. With the region experiencing a severe lack of affordable housing, some fear that dire consequences loom if the family

homeless system does not change dramatically.

“(Our) community does need to prepare for what it hasn’t had to witness, and that’s children sleeping outside on a nightly basis because they have no other place to go,” Miller said.

The waitlist might not last long – if recent initiatives to house homeless families are successful.

The “Home for the Holidays” initiative, a call to landlords and property owners to make units available to homeless families, launched three weeks ago and has already housed 16 families. The goal is to house 40 families by mid-January.

Human Solutions is in the process of screening 40 more units and pairing those units with families. One property owner has even offered to rent a handful of units to homeless families and charge no rent for a few months.

Miller thinks it’s likely that the initiative will quickly exceed its goal. As a result, he hopes Human Solutions will be able to take families off the waitlist for shelter.

The Joint Office is also working with providers, including Portland Homeless Family Solutions, to open emergency wintertime shelter for families, as many as 75 beds, this month.

Miller said Human Solutions is exploring master-leasing an entire apartment building. Miller said the agency wants to lease a “well-run, attractive building in a good location” for up to five years. Human Solutions would, in turn, sublease the units to families, setting

monthly rent at amounts the families could afford and not allowing no-cause evictions.

“It buys us some time and gives us built housing now,” Miller said. “There’s a lot of housing being built in Portland. It’s just not affordable and not accessible to the folks who need it the most.”

He said Human Solutions is talking with property owners, and he hopes to identify a property as quickly as possible.

The initiatives come after a six-month period that has seen a 300 percent increase in homeless families seeking shelter.

Families with children made up 654 of the more than 4,100 people experiencing homelessness in Multnomah County this year, according to the 2017 point-in-time count. About 12 percent of them were unsheltered.

Human Solutions’ shelter has a capacity for 130 people. Since opening at a new space in outer southeast Portland in February 2016, the shelter has always exceeded that capacity. Through late 2016 and early 2017, an average of 220 adults and children sought shelter. Once the shelter reached capacity, Human Solutions sent families to motel rooms.

Those numbers were the basis for the shelter’s budget – \$1.6 million from the Joint Office of Homeless Services for the 2017-18 fiscal year to operate a 205-bed shelter, which includes 130 shelter beds and overflow hotel rooms.

“We thought we were at a right-sized

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