



PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Cesil George sits on a bench in Lowndale Square in front of the Multnomah County Courthouse. As a homeless senior with a mental disability, George is particularly vulnerable, but he still does not score high enough on a vulnerability assessment to qualify for permanent supportive housing.

Overburden of proof

A Portland man's inability to qualify for appropriate assistance underscores how federal rules are stifling local efforts to house chronically homeless people

BY EMILY GREEN
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Despite an attempt to get the most vulnerable among Portland's homeless population into housing, some highly qualified people are being left out in the cold.

The problem lies with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's lack of investment in – and what housing providers say is a nonsensical requirement for – federally funded permanent supportive housing. This is housing that's available only to people who are chronically homeless and who also have a mental or physical disability.

Organizations that connect people with this subsidy in Portland, as well as other cities across the U.S., are struggling to meet HUD's requirement that they provide proof of their clients' chronic homelessness before moving them off the street and into housing.

This requirement is especially challenging for cities on the West Coast, where many people sleep outdoors and off the grid, as opposed to cities where most homeless people sleep in shelters and resident lists are maintained.

"For folks who have been disconnected from services or who have been living unsheltered, finding folks who can verify that is difficult," said Ian Slingerland, director of homeless initiatives at Home Forward, Multnomah County's housing authority.

Additionally, it's often the people whose whereabouts are most difficult to prove that are also the most vulnerable and have the greatest need for permanent supportive housing, which comes linked with services such as mental health or addictions counseling.

HUD requires that service providers compile third-party documentation for at least nine of the past 12 months of their

client's homelessness to meet its chronic homelessness criteria.

Slingerland said this means that for each of those nine months, providers must find someone who will attest to seeing the person experiencing homelessness and sleeping in a shelter, outdoors or somewhere else not meant for human habitation.

Over the past year, Slingerland said, Home Forward has seen delays in spending portions of its federal rent-assistance grant because it's taking longer for members of the region's coordinated housing program to get this documentation together for each client.

Several of those members told Street Roots the process is an unnecessary waste of valuable staff hours. They also say that in some cases, it's keeping vulnerable people outdoors longer as they wait for verification

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