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of their homelessness, which typically takes a month or longer.

A federal audit of Home Forward in April and recent audits of other area housing providers have resulted in an increased demand from HUD that local organizations provide more rigorous documentation of their clients' chronic homelessness, compounding an already challenging requirement.

But before a mentally or physically disabled person with no home gets to this point in the housing process, they must score high enough on a vulnerability assessment to get placed on the list for housing. This HUD requirement also has its pitfalls.

Finding a home for Cesil

Flaws with the vulnerability assessment process are glaring in the case of a homeless senior citizen named Cesil George.

For nearly two decades – maybe longer – George has spent most of his days in the park in front of the Multnomah County Courthouse in downtown Portland.

He used to wear a skirt and, at times, flashy costume jewelry. Over the years, he became recognizable to many people working in the surrounding government buildings. These days, he wears more conventional clothing and carries all his belongings in canvas bags tied with rope to the end of a long stick, in the traditional bandle fashion.

He sleeps in doorways along downtown sidewalks where he knows he won't be hassled and spends his winters under bridges. He never seeks out cooling centers in hot weather, nor does he sleep in shelters when it's cold. He doesn't seek help from any social service provider or passerby but instead has survived off what little money the people who frequent his favorite park give him, unsolicited.

The park where he lingers, Lownsdale Square and Chapman Square, bustles with law enforcement officers, attorneys and other county and city workers.

For George, it's a place that feels safer than Old Town, which he ardently avoids, even though it's where many resources he could be accessing are located. He's said he won't go there because he is afraid of other homeless people who have assaulted him in the past.

With his advanced age and easy-going demeanor, George is an easy target.

While he has a difficult time keeping his memories straight, there are a few details of his life that remain constant. He was born in Salem, raised in Woodburn and lived all his life in Oregon. He was married at one time and held a janitorial position at the Pendleton shirt manufacturing facility in Milwaukie before it shuttered in 1997. He has also been a patient at the Oregon State Hospital, a residential facility for people with mental illness.

Throughout the past 16 years, Tammie Jones has seen George hanging out in the park most mornings on her way to work at the Multnomah County Justice Center.

When she heads home around 6 p.m., he's usually still there, often sitting quietly on a bench.

Some days, Jones buys him a coffee from Starbucks or gives him some cash for lunch.

"He doesn't use drugs or alcohol, so I always felt comfortable knowing he was using the money for food," she said. "He also is humble. If he doesn't need money, he won't take it."

Through the years, Jones noticed George was getting older and "starting to go downhill."

He'll be 70 in November.

As the county court domestic violence coordinator, Jones is familiar with available resources and how to connect people to them. So, about 10 months ago, she decided to make it her mission to help George in her free time.

She walked him through applying for food stamps and Social Security benefits, and she took him to Loaves & Fishes, explaining to him that he could get free meals there in peace.

George didn't have identification or any other documents he needed, so Jones used her clout as a government employee to vouch for him, which luckily worked when it mattered.

Every step was a challenge. George didn't always remember to meet Jones in the park, and she would have to track him down. Appointments went missed and rescheduled. It was difficult to get him to enter office buildings; he suspected at times that it was a coordinated effort to take him back to the psychiatric hospital or to jail.

It took four visits to the Oregon Driver and Motor Vehicles office to get him state-issued identification.

"Getting him food stamps took an act of God," Jones said.

Six months after he received his food stamps card, a man who frequently targets him stole it.

It took two months and several attempts to get a replacement card. When asked, George said he had fewer meals during that time.

It was clear, watching Jones escort George to appointments and assist him with paperwork and communications, that even some of the simplest tasks would have been insurmountable for George to complete on his own.

About eight years ago, when he began biking past the park on his way to work, Chuck Sparks, a deputy chief at the Multnomah County District Attorney's Office, also noticed George was an area fixture who might need help.

Eventually, he began to greet George each morning.

"He's a quiet guy," Sparks said. "He's not a homeless person that asks you for money.

He just stands there and kind of watches the world go by."

Sparks, too, became concerned with George's predicament.

"He's pretty unguarded. If he has a little something to his name, he gets targeted," he said. "I believe he's just getting increasingly vulnerable, and I'm afraid he's going to be one of those people who falls asleep during a snowstorm, and then they find him the next morning."

It would seem someone like George, a mentally disabled senior citizen who's been homeless for at least 16 years, would be a slam dunk for permanent supportive housing.

Jones wanted to get George run through the vulnerability assessment so he could get placed on the list. He wouldn't go into Old Town, so she lured him to a downtown café with the promise of

breakfast, where Roberto Rios ran him through the assessment.

Rios, a Coordinated Access case manager at Transitions Projects, said George had difficulty answering the questions. He couldn't remember dates and things that had happened in his life.

"The first thing he asked me was, 'Are you going to send me back to the state hospital?'" said Rios.

Questions he couldn't answer received no points, and a person needs a high score to be considered for permanent supportive housing.

The bulk of the questions rely on the answers supplied by the person being assessed. Questions answered by the

assessor, such as whether the person is showing signs of poor hygiene or living skills, are subjective.

The way the housing list works, those with higher scores will always be prioritized over those with lower scores. People can languish on the list without ever making it to the top, where housing becomes available.

George scored so low he didn't make

the cut for temporary housing assistance, let alone the permanent supportive housing he needs.

Rios said typically people he assesses are able to answer the questions. When they can't, it's usually due to mental illness, he said.

While each jurisdiction is free to use the assessment tool of its choice, the assessment used in Multnomah County, the VI-SPDAT (Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool), is the nation's most popular. However, cities

are learning it has shortfalls and are adjusting their practices.

In Denver, an appeal process has been established, and in King County, three mechanisms have been created to flag assessments that are inaccurately scored.

"I don't think any community would say they've nailed it," said Hedda McLendon, a housing manager at King County Department of Human Services in Seattle.

Portland and Multnomah County's coordinated team of housing providers, Coordinated Access, adopted an appeal process similar to Denver's earlier this year.

Rios, upset when George received such a low score, filed for an appeal. George's case was one of four appeals that have been reviewed by a panel of seven Coordinated Access members.

The panelists applied additional points to George's score based on information Rios provided.

George's new score was almost double his initial score, but it still wasn't high enough to qualify him for permanent supportive housing.

Those at the top of the list have scores of 18 to 20. He scored 15.

The bump in score, however, qualified George for Rapid Rehousing, temporary housing assistance lasting two years that does not come with support services.

"Although, there are fewer Rapid Rehousing resources," said Stacy Borke, programs director at Transitions Projects.

Borke said that ideally, George would get housing through Rapid Rehousing and then get reassessed in the future with the hope that he would qualify for permanent supportive housing with case managers using different strategies to better understand his needs.

"There are some folks who are absolutely deserving, who may not have a chance to get housing. We have a zero-sum system right now because of the lack of federal investment that we see," said Denis Theriault, communications coordinator for the Joint Office of Homeless Services, under which Coordinated Access is housed.

"As vulnerable as someone who's on the list is, who has a score that maybe isn't as high as others," he said, "that just means that there are that many more people who are even more vulnerable."

Jones and Sparks regularly discuss George's situation with each other, and have become disillusioned with the difficulty in getting George indoors. "If we can't find a home for Cesil George, whom are we going to find a home for?" asked Sparks.

Baring the soul

The vulnerability assessment, or VI-SPDAT, is a series of personal questions about medical and criminal history, drug and alcohol dependency, living situations, daily activities and risky behaviors such as sex work and sharing needles.

In addition to its shortfalls in capturing the vulnerability of some people struggling with mental illness, those who use the VI-SPDAT say it's inadequate in assessing people of color, who face unique challenges when it comes to self-reporting intimate details of their life to a stranger with a clipboard.

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DENIS THERIAULT,
COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR FOR
THE JOINT OFFICE
OF HOMELESS SERVICES

BY THE NUMBERS

Vulnerability assessment in Portland and Multnomah County:

2,051 Adults without children who have had the assessment

189 People referred to housing following the assessment

121 People housed after being referred

Source: Joint Office of Homeless Services