

**HUD, from page 5**

are written in such a way that they are kind of blamey," said Julia Delgado, program director at Urban League of Portland. The way it's designed, she said, "a lot of people would be reluctant to answer honestly and accurately because there is a lot of shame and stigma associated with a lot of the questions."

Her organization primarily uses the assessment with African-American Portlanders. She said it presents a host of challenges for people of color, given their deep mistrust of the system following horrific events in recent history, such as the Tuskegee experiments and forced sterilization.

Quinn Colling, an outreach coordinator at JOIN, said he's also heard from co-workers and other community partners who conduct the assessment that it may not accurately assess the vulnerability of communities of color.

While locally, a couple of questions have been added to try to address this discrepancy, such as asking if a person has ever experienced racial discrimination in housing, "there's still gaps," he said.

Portland is one of five U.S. communities that's partnered with the Center for Social Innovation in Massachusetts to study whether the tool reinforces racial inequities in housing and homelessness, despite being designed in "an ostensibly race-blind manner," said Katy Wilky, deputy director of research and evaluation at the center.

HUD awards about \$25 million annually to Portland and Multnomah County that helps pay for, among other programs, 900 units of permanent supportive housing reserved for chronically homeless people who also have a disability.

Locally, 2,051 adults without children in their households have been run through the vulnerability assessment. Due to the low level of federal investment in permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless people, just 189 have been referred to housing, and of those, 121 have been housed.

Portland and Multnomah County lawmakers have announced a goal of establishing 2,000 new units of supportive housing by 2028. An undetermined number of those units would be permanent supportive housing.

Today, about two-thirds of Multnomah County's existing 3,582 units of permanent supportive housing is federally funded. The goal is to tip the scales moving forward. Of the 2,000 new units, about two-thirds are expected to be locally funded, meaning the assistance would come with more flexibility and freedom from federal requirements. This would also mean additional units would be available to chronically homeless people with disabilities, and most units would not require third-party verification, should they materialize.

There are 517 units of both permanent and temporary supportive housing units that are either new or in development in Multnomah County since the 2,000-unit goal was set, and just 20 will incorporate HUD funding, triggering the agency's requirements.

**HUD's shifting policies**

In the wake of deep and ongoing budget

cuts starting in the late 1970s, HUD has instituted stricter requirements to ensure its remaining housing resources go to the people who need it the most.

In 2009, HUD consolidated its grants for homeless services and revamped the way it wanted housing organizations to award its vouchers for permanent supportive housing. In 2012, it implemented those changes.

Whereas before, each social-service agency that helped get people into supportive housing had its own list of applicants it would funnel into its own HUD-funded programs, HUD now wanted providers to work together, put every applicant on the same list, and pull from that list whenever any member organization has an opening.

"You can get a voucher through any organization, not just the one you have a relationship with, and that, to me, is one of the major benefits of Coordinated Access," Borke said. Under the new model, she said, providers are reaching some extremely vulnerable people who they might not otherwise have brought into the system.

In December 2015, however, HUD added new requirements that included running all homeless people who were being considered for federal housing vouchers through a uniform assessment before placing them on the list, and then providing proof of chronic homelessness should their names come up for housing.

According to Norm Suchar, who runs the homeless assistance program at HUD, this was because the assistance was going to the wrong people.

"In the past, what we saw in a lot of our programs was that permanent supportive housing projects were serving people who - to put it very bluntly - were easier to serve, who hadn't been homeless that long, whose disability was not that severe," Suchar said. "Not to say that those individuals don't also deserve help, but we knew we needed to use permanent supportive housing for those people who really had the highest level of vulnerability, who'd been homeless the longest, who had the most severe disabilities."

He said that while he is aware of complaints about the new requirements, they are working, with assistance now going to the right people.

"I don't want to claim it's super easy," said Suchar. "We are trying to look at this to see if there are better ways to do this."

When asked if the assessment process would be enough to pinpoint the most vulnerable on its own, without third-party documentation, Suchar said that's true for some communities, but it's not true for others.

Home Forward's Slingerland said HUD made the changes because it wasn't seeing the drop in chronic homelessness it expected to see after initiating the program.

Suchar said, "That is certainly one of the reasons." He also said, however, that although assistance is being better prioritized, the country is continuing to see a rise in chronic homelessness.

Slingerland said the reason HUD isn't seeing a drop in chronic homelessness is not because housing assistance is being misappropriated; it's because there isn't enough housing assistance to go around.

"These documentation requirements are trying to solve a problem and creating others that get in the way of housing the folks that HUD is actually trying to house," said Michael Buonocore, executive director at Home Forward.

"And there's an unintended cruelty to it, in asking for the kinds of efforts that are needed to verify someone's traumatic experience of being chronically homeless."

**Still looking**

On Aug. 1, Jones took George to meet with a housing case manager from Northwest Pilot Project in the cafeteria inside the Standard Building downtown. They've found an apartment in an affordable senior housing complex that he could apply for. It would cost him a percentage of his Social Security benefits and was located in the Hollywood District, close to the Max and near the Dollar Tree store where he likes to shop. It seemed perfect.

"That's quite a bit of money though," George told the case manager.

He said if he paid rent, he'd have no money left for food. They tried to explain to him that he qualifies for food stamps and Social Security benefits and that he can afford to move inside. He just didn't seem to understand how it could work.

They told him they could get him a bed and other furniture and help him make the place a home.

"All I need is a rug to sleep on," he said.

After about a half-hour, George tells the two women he'll think about it.

When Street Roots caught up with George again about a month later, he was sitting on a bench in the park in front of the courthouse. We asked if he had decided to take the apartment.

"No, too expensive," he said. "I think I'm going to stay outside again this winter."

Jones said it's a matter of finding something that's he's comfortable with. She intends to keep trying.

[emily@streetroots.org](mailto:emily@streetroots.org); [Twitter @greenwrites](https://twitter.com/greenwrites)

**BY THE NUMBERS**

Supportive housing in Multnomah County:

**3,582** Permanent supportive housing units

**118** Transitional housing units

**2,000** New units of supportive housing planned by 2028

**517** Units of supportive housing that are new or in development

Who's served by supportive housing:

**2,995** Individuals without children

**587** Families with children

**1,290** Households experiencing chronic homelessness

Source: CSH report for city and county officials

**GETTING SOMEONE ASSESSED**

If you see someone who is chronically homeless and mentally or physically disabled, you can contact the CHAT team at Transitions Projects and they'll send someone out to give the person an assessment. Include in your message a description of the person, the location where they hang out and, if you can obtain it, their name and a way to contact them.

Email [caa@trprojects.org](mailto:caa@trprojects.org), or leave a message at 844-765-9384