

Veteran homelessness grows across Oregon

Rural counties see greatest increase, with 73 percent living unsheltered in those areas

BY EMILY GREEN
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

Homelessness among military veterans has increased 9 percent in Oregon since 2017, with 1,363 veterans experiencing homelessness across the state, according to data released from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development earlier this month.

Oregon continues to have the third highest percentage of homeless veterans that are unsheltered, with 55 percent sleeping outdoors in 2018. Nationally, 38 percent of America's 37,878 veterans experiencing homelessness were counted as unsheltered during the Point in Time Count this past January.

Oregon's rural continuums of care saw the greatest increase in homelessness among veterans, jumping from 379 in last year's count to 474 this year.

Homeless veterans in rural Oregon counties now outnumber homeless veterans in Multnomah County, which saw an increase of just two, up to 448.

There are several reasons veterans may gravitate to rural areas, explained Gus Bedwell, the state's veteran housing integrator.

He said many veterans living in rural areas camp, considering themselves nomadic rather than homeless.

"They watch the weather and go to different locations, but they're trying to live off the grid because of their experiences in the military and they don't necessarily want to live in a dense population," Bedwell said.

This is consistent with HUD's data, which indicated 73 percent of veterans living in Oregon's rural counties are unsheltered.

Oregon also has a population of veterans older than the national average, with more than half older than 60.

"What that means," Bedwell said, "is you have a high number of veterans that are Vietnam veterans, and they may or may not be combat veterans, but they all came home to pretty much the same experience, and that is not a very 'welcome home' environment. They may not want to be engaging in society or letting people know they were in the military because of that."

Bedwell was hired in July to help regional service providers better coordinate among themselves to house homeless veterans in their areas.

It's part of a campaign called "Operation Welcome Home," which will officially launch in Corvallis on Nov. 15.

When voters passed Measure 96 in 2016,

they set aside 1.5 percent of state lottery funds to support programs for veterans, budgeted as \$14.9 million to the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs in the current biennium.

While much of these funds support services such as suicide prevention, education grants and volunteer programs, in 2017, Oregon lawmakers directed \$1.5 million of that lottery revenue for veteran homelessness prevention and housing.

Together, Oregon's Housing and Community Services and Department of Veterans Affairs are using that money to develop a plan and create infrastructure aimed at housing Oregon's veterans.

Bedwell's salary is funded through a portion of this allocation, along with a housing project for veterans in Independence that's under construction and increases in funding for veterans services at community action agencies.

Operation Welcome Home is a short-term campaign running through May 2019, involving 10 communities chosen to receive intensive assistance and strategy development in their efforts toward ending veteran homelessness.

Bedwell will provide that assistance to those selected communities. He's an Army veteran with extensive experience working in veterans' services. This will be his first job directly involving housing programs.

The 10 communities he'll be working with include a mix of urban and rural regions,

with community action agencies serving as the lead organization coordinating with other organizations in their areas. Those selected include Clackamas County Social Services, Oregon Coast Community Action, ACCESS in Jackson County, Yamhill Community Action Partnership, Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agencies, Lane County Human Services Commission, Community Services Consortium serving Benton, Lincoln and Linn counties, and several others.

Bedwell said one of the first things he hopes to accomplish is helping these organizations and others through the process of coming to the table and agreeing upon the work that they're doing and how they're going to collaborate and share resources.

"You've got a lot of little agencies that are doing really good things, but they're doing it separate of each other," he said. "They may know each other, but aren't doing a lot of the collaborative work that really needs to be done to make these things happen."

Another challenge in Oregon, said Bedwell, is identifying who among people experiencing homelessness are veterans. He said when social service providers ask "are you a veteran" as opposed to "have you served in the military," veterans in underserved communities, such as veterans of color, LGBTQ and female veterans, are more likely to say "no" even though they've served.

FINES, from page 5

Milwaukie for the court date from the homeless shelter where she was staying with her three kids in tow, she said.

"Maybe some people don't come into court because they're working hard and they don't have transportation – there are a lot of different reasons that affect a person's ability to get to court," Collins said. "They don't show up to court, and then the presumptive fine is imposed, and that means there is no consideration for a person's ability to pay."

Justice system fines and fees "adversely affect people of limited incomes," he said. "It can be the kind of downward spiral that I can see people caught in: They get a fine, and then they either don't pay it or aren't able to pay it, and they end up with collection fees, and pretty soon the amount gets a lot larger and even harder to manage."

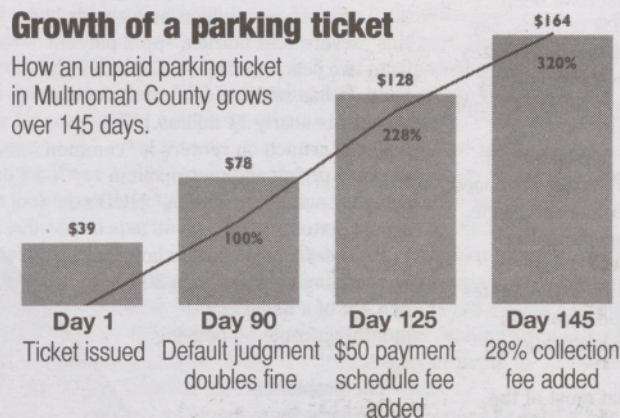
The outstanding debt owed to the Oregon Judicial Department has increased by an average of \$100 million per year, for the past five years.

Part of that growth is attributed to debtors like Mendoza, whose balances owed to private collections companies increase with interest while they struggle to make ends meet. Her only income aside from about \$600 in food stamps each month comes from plasma donations, although she recently applied for unemployment and is waiting to see if her application is approved.

Mendoza said she knows that when she finds work again, it will just be a matter of time before her wages are garnished to pay

Growth of a parking ticket

How an unpaid parking ticket in Multnomah County grows over 145 days.



for her traffic debts. That's what happened in 2014 when she was working at Sandoval's Café and Cantina inside the Portland International Airport.

She was renting a one-bedroom apartment at the time for about \$950 month, often getting home from work after her boys were already asleep.

When she first discovered her wages were being garnished, she said, she cried.

"I had put in like 30 hours' overtime, and I was so excited for that check because I had busted my butt," she said. "It was going to be nice – 30 hours' overtime! They ended up garnishing, and I was left with like \$300."

She said that was when things really started to slip. When she lost her job at the airport, she became homeless, and the vehicle she was not allowed to drive became

her family's home.

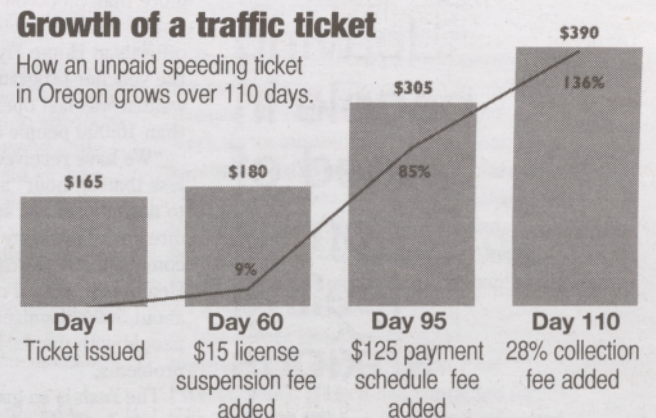
While \$144 million in criminal fines and fees that the state will collect this biennium may seem like a lot, it's just a drop in the bucket of the \$1.7 billion that's actually owed. The Oregon Judicial Department estimates that only 15 percent of that balance is collectible.

Of accounts where driver's licenses are suspended due to nonpayment, collection rates are also low. In the Central Oregon city of Veneta, for example, 35 licenses have been suspended for nonpayment since January 2014, but only 4 percent of the fines owed have been paid. In the city of Yamhill, just 2 percent of fines and fees owed on 98 suspended licenses have been paid during the same period.

With so little of Oregon's outstanding

Growth of a traffic ticket

How an unpaid speeding ticket in Oregon grows over 110 days.



SOURCE: OREGON JUDICIAL DEPARTMENT 2018

criminal and traffic debts being collected, while at the same time causing so much strife in the lives of low-income debtors, it begs the question: Are Oregon's monetary sanctions causing more harm than good?

Throughout November, Street Roots will attempt to answer this question. We will examine how far the scales of justice have tipped against those with lesser means, and we will ask what the imposition of these fines and fees is accomplishing and where the money is going.

Ultimately, we'll ask: How do we balance the need for court funding and accountability with the responsibility to reform Oregon's justice system into one that's equitable?

emily@streetroots.org
Twitter @greenwrites