



# Community Guidelines: Expanding Shelter Programs with Equity

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## Washington County Community Guidelines Expanding Shelter Programs with Equity

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### Summary:

In the winter of 2022, the Department of Housing Services (DHS) and Office of Equity and Inclusion and Community Engagement lead a robust community engagement process to elicit feedback from Washington County residents on future shelter siting. The community feedback was used to create this document - **Community Guidelines for Expanding Shelter Programs with Equity**. Staff will use this document to inform future decision-making in support of shelter siting, programing, and additional community engagement processes. Engagement included 4 community meetings over the course of 2 weeks across the County. Over 95 people attended community meetings and 243 surveys were collected. The planning team synthesized feedback into the following **Community Guidelines** document. Below are themes that emerged from the community feedback:

- ***Address unmet needs in the community*** – The future shelter system needs to expand to up to 250 beds with prioritization of people with acute and long-term needs and those impacted by disproportionate outcomes.
- ***People need access to support*** – The shelter system needs and would benefit from a comprehensive coordinated system of care to support the housing needs of our community
- ***Shelters should be safe*** - Community safety should be addressed through person-centered security services. Shelter participants largely feel safer in Washington County programs than being unsheltered.
- ***Diverse shelter system options*** - Creating a diverse and equitable sheltering system with various shelter models and locations can meet the growing need within Washington County. Diverse shelter models to include safe parking, pod villages, organized camping, in addition to congregate and motels.
- ***Community should be involved*** - Community members indicated that it is important to keep the community informed when future shelter programs are located. Once a shelter site is located utilizing this **Community Guidelines** document, additional community engagement will provide opportunities to be seen and heard to ensure shelter programming meets the needs of the surrounding community.

In brief, equitable community guidelines for expanding shelter programs include:

- **Guidelines in Shelter Locations**
  - Access to frequent and reliable transportation
  - Access to services, employment, and community resources
  - Geographic and demographic distribution
- **Guidelines in Program Management**
  - Strong program management
  - Ensure equitable community and participant safety
  - Support community livability
- **Guidelines for Continued Engagement and Centering Equity**

- Transparent and accountable communication
- Identify Neighborhood Demographics
- Co-create Community Agreements

### **Overview**

Washington County continues to uphold its commitment to preventing and ending the homeless crisis in our community. As a demonstration of efforts to combat the complexities of homelessness, the County has set a goal of expanding its' year-round shelter capacity to serve 250 more people at a time. While shelters programs alone do not end homelessness, they play a vital role in a larger system of care. To support this significant program expansion, County staff facilitated several opportunities for the community to engage in this effort. The series of public feedback sessions, and a variety of survey tools, aimed to gather information to understand the community's diverse perspectives on how Washington County's Department of Housing Services can best create new shelter programs.

Staff heard from community members, stakeholders, and individuals impacted by homelessness. Out of these sessions, the overall recommendation was for the County's to design a better system of care to help individuals impacted by homelessness navigate to permanent and stable housing. Ideally, this system of care would include an increase in the number of shelter beds readily available, diversity in the types of shelters offered, equitable and easy access to wrap-around services, and affordable and supported housing options. Community members, stakeholders, and people impacted by homelessness provided feedback during listening sessions and community outreach events. Surveys were used as supporting data to help frame these **Community Guidelines** for locating, launching, and operating new shelter programs in Washington County. These guidelines will help to inform staff program recommendations, Board decisions; they will be renewed and reevaluated through continued community discussions as they are used to help support new shelter programs that are created over the coming years.

### **Addressing Unsheltered Homelessness in Washington County**

In January of 2021, Washington County conducted a Point-in-Time (PIT) Homelessness count. The results indicated that at least 716 people were experiencing homelessness in the county, and out of those individuals, 357 were unsheltered. This was a 16% increase from the Point-in-Time (PIT) Homelessness count conducted in 2020 which presented a total of 618 individuals impacted by homelessness with 307 unsheltered.

Prior to 2020, Washington County had just 44 year-round shelter beds which were only accessible to youth and families. The Metro regional Supportive Housing Services measure approved by voters in 2021, has provided critical funding to enable the County to expand winter shelter and bridge shelter programs in the first year of the new program. Currently, Washington County has 187 winter shelter beds and 142 bridge shelter beds open. Unfortunately, these shelter programs are operated out of temporary locations and will soon close or be transitioned into permanent supportive housing.

To address the needs of hundreds of people who are unsheltered, Washington County has made a commitment to add 250 new, year-round shelter beds, bringing the total permanent shelter beds available to 294. This expanded shelter system will require approximately 5-7 sites

geographically distributed across the County, providing a diverse array of shelter program types, including traditional congregate models, to meet the needs of the diverse unhoused population. Washington County values all shelter models to include safe parking, pod villages, organized camping, in addition, to congregate and motels. The County is committed to creating a diverse and equitable sheltering system, where an array of shelter models and locations can meet growing and varied needs. Possible shelter options would include gender-specific, family-specific, and culturally specific. In all shelter programs, the Department of Housing Services will ensure program standards responding to the health and safety needs of participants and the surrounding community, including 24 hours trained staffing, access to basic hygiene facilities, nutrition, and case management services. In addition, public health facilities such as trash removal, belongings storage, and safe sharps disposal.

### **Convening the Community to Co-Create Guidelines**

The Department of Housing and Office of Equity Inclusion and Community Engagement has recognized, from previous experiences in shelter engagement, that staff must provide an ample amount of upfront and sustained community engagement to provide more transparent opportunities for community feedback to inform the design of these programs and improve services throughout implementation. The planning of new shelters in neighborhoods across the county must value community feedback as a central component to develop these co-created shelter **Community Guidelines**.

Past feedback from community shelter meetings has helped to improve the County's community engagement processes over time and has played a pivotal role in the commitment to transparency. Staff recognized that participation to inform the **Community Guidelines** had to be far-reaching, with a diversity of participants, and efforts to proactively work towards understanding the perspectives of community members, stakeholders, and program participants with lived experiences. To help support diversity in participation, staff provided language interpretation resources throughout the entire engagement series.

The introduction of the **Community Guidelines** process is the County's commitment to addressing some of the fundamental flaws of shelter siting in the past. Neighborhoods have at times responded with concerns about shelters which has led to a deterioration of communication between the invested stakeholders in these projects. The County has responded with a greater commitment to improving community relations through intentional dialogue well before and during shelter program operations. The County is committed to addressing community concerns related to shelter siting and operations through:

- ***Strong program management*** - An experienced shelter service provider with abundant staffing, training, and management support is critical to the success of a program and ensuring equitable outcomes for program participants and the surrounding community. This support will be demonstrated by prioritizing communities and people with acute and long-term needs most impacted by disproportionate outcomes that contribute to chronic homelessness.

- ***Ensure community and participant safety*** - Unfortunately, concerns about community safety often reinforce negative stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness, especially people of color in our shelter programs. Statistically, poor and low-income people, especially communities of color, face an increased risk of being profiled, targeted, fined, violated, harassed, and incarcerated. Proactive, culturally competent and person-centered security services should be considered to prevent over-policing of program participants and help mitigate community member concerns.
- ***Support community livability*** – Programs that manage neighborhood cleanliness local to a shelter program can help to mitigate community concerns. Some clean-up programs offer employment opportunities for people experiencing homelessness and can further improve community confidence and support for shelter programs.

This **Community Guidelines** document is a living document not meant to be a final policy for all future shelters; however, it is a fundamental set of agreements that can be the foundation upon which to build in partnership with the community in the coming years. The feedback received in this process will live on here as a partial enshrinement of the experiences, concerns, and support for shelters. Future engagement efforts will revisit this document and open it up for continual improvements and additions as shelters expand. The County recognizes the need for these community agreements to address the shelter programs that are often located without the community's knowledge ahead of time and the value of building trust and partnerships with surrounding communities well before shelter programs are located and opened in a community.

### **Methods Used to Collect Feedback**

The Department of Housing Services collected quantitative and qualitative data from communities surrounding potential shelter locations, stakeholders, and people impacted by homelessness. The qualitative data obtained by participants provided measurable outcomes, whereas the qualitative data provided firsthand accounts from the participants' perspectives. Data was collected through a variety of engagement opportunities including listening sessions and surveys.

The Department of Housing Services and the Office of Equity and Inclusion and Community Engagement staff hosted four virtual community engagement listening sessions. Participants were invited using social media, local libraries, emails lists from previous County efforts, and distribution of flyers in both Spanish and English. Listening sessions were an opportunity for

participants to learn about Washington County’s current shelter programs and future planning to increase the availability of shelters, as well as to participate in an open and transparent conversation about how the County can continue to improve the shelter and housing systems while fulfilling unmet needs. Three (3) of the four (4) listening sessions focused on distinct areas of the County including Forest Grove and surrounding areas; Tigard, Tualatin, Beaverton, and surrounding areas; and Aloha, Hillsboro, and surrounding areas. The fourth session was more broadly focused on the County as a whole. Overall, a combined total of 95 participants attended the four sessions. In addition to these public events, several outreach events were held at winter shelters to provide participants the opportunity to discuss their experiences with accessing and navigating the shelter system.

Staff utilized various touchpoints to gain feedback such as surveys, newsletters, emails, and social media to incorporate into shelter location siting guidelines. Surveys, meeting poll responses, and breakout room sessions from presentations allowed participants to answer anonymously to encourage participants to speak freely and answer honestly about their experiences. A virtual and in-person survey was circulated to the general public, community partners, stakeholders, and those with lived experience to deliver feedback about the current shelter system and how to expand shelter programs. Staff also conducted in-person interviews, distributed paper survey copies, and partnered with interpreters for individuals needing language assistance. All three surveys ran concurrently which allowed staff to collect a large amount of data within 2 weeks’ time. The community, stakeholder, and impacted individual survey links were posted on Washington County’s public website and sent to individuals signed up for the Department of Housing newsletter.

There were 175 community, 30 stakeholder, and 38 impacted individual survey responses collected which exceeded Washington County’s projected goal. The community and stakeholders were able to complete the surveys online to reach individuals across the County. In an effort to meet people where they are at; staff conducted in-person conversation interviews to complete the surveys with people experiencing homelessness. Staff conducted survey interviews at several shelter program sites to include Cloverleaf and Beaverton shelters. In addition to interviewing shelter participants, staff also interviewed individuals experiencing homelessness that are not ready to enter shelter. Responses to poll questions and breakout room sessions were incorporated into the overall data collected and analyzed. The data was synthesized into primary themes.

### **Themes In Community Feedback Data**

- ***Address the unmet needs in the community*** – Through the ebbs and flows of a rapidly growing county, members of communities most impacted have expressed several unmet needs. The feedback data reflects how important it is to have a safe place to sleep year-round for people experiencing homelessness. This feedback indicated that people with acute and long-term needs should both be prioritized to support communities and people

most impacted by disproportionate outcomes which contribute to chronic homelessness. The County's plan to add 250 year-round shelter beds was endorsed as a positive step toward meeting this need. There were requests from stakeholders currently planning shelters for the County to provide capital funding support to shelters as resources for the acquisition, rehabilitation, construction, or site preparation are very limited.

- ***People need access to supportive services*** – Feedback received from the community, stakeholders, and impacted individuals indicate that they see the need for and benefit of a comprehensive system of care to support the community's housing needs. Participants responded that they would like to see services such as mental health counseling, alcohol and drug recovery support, childcare assistance, and affordable housing be at the top of the priority list. This includes a system that minimizes barriers to accessing housing and services support. Acknowledging that housing disparities most notably impact Black, Indigenous, Latina/o/x, Asian/Pacific Islander, immigrant, and refugee communities, the data illustrated the elevated need for more culturally specific resources and services. Additional feedback expressed a need for population-specific shelters such for victims of family violence, culturally specific shelters, and shelters specifically for youth and families.
- ***Shelters should be safe*** - The idea of homelessness and safety concerns intersect largely due to negative stereotypes towards people experiencing homelessness. The qualitative data collected addressed community concerns around homelessness and safety concerns experienced by people impacted by homelessness. Community safety should be addressed through person-centered security services. Impacted individual data indicates shelter participants largely feel safer in Washington County programs than they do being unsheltered. Impacted individuals and stakeholders also aligned with the community on having access to security. It was expressed that shelters should be well lit and have separate living spaces for adults, homeless youth, and families with children.
- ***Diverse shelter system options*** – Creating a diverse and equitable sheltering system with various shelter models and locations can meet the growing need within Washington County. Alternative shelter models such as safe camping and parking sites, non-congregate options such as motel vouchers, and pod villages remain a growing interest. Participants of shelter programs expressed curiosity as to whether alternative shelters would provide more access to housing options and expressed feeling secure in congregate shelters but desire more private sleeping areas and storage in congregate shelter programs.
- ***The community should be involved*** – Both the quantitative and qualitative data collected from community members indicated that it is important to keep the community involved as future shelter programs are located and planned. The data signified that community feedback sessions and notifications sent through the postal service would be most beneficial. It was expressed that the community engagement series allowed concerns to

be addressed in real-time which also gave community members a chance to feel seen and heard.

### **Equitable Community Guidelines for Expanding Shelter Programs**

Washington County centers leading with race and values the expertise of individuals with lived experience in decision-making processes. To better understand the history and legacy of racism, especially as it relates to homelessness, it is important to elevate the voices of the people who have and continue to be most impacted. The Department of Housing Services is committed to centering equity and racial justice in all programs, including the shelter program. This work must both acknowledge and work to correct the realities that most communities burdened with housing instability and discrimination are Black, Indigenous, Latina/o/x, Asian, Pacific Islander, immigrant, and refugees. Marginalized communities and homelessness are inextricably linked; therefore, the Department of Housing Services continues to keep equity and housing justice at the forefront of its programmatic work, including these **Community Guidelines** for shelter program expansion.

Washington County is committed to expanding shelter programs in a way that both addresses the needs of local businesses and surrounding residential communities, as well as the unsheltered community. The system must also increase access for historically impacted communities. The feedback outlined in this document was used to create the following best practices for locating and operating shelters throughout the county. -These guidelines will be utilized as county staff and consultants lead property searches, design shelters, and implement programs. Feedback regarding continued communications with the community will also be used throughout this process, to ensure that concerns and needs are addressed as they appear.

#### **Guidelines in Shelter Locations:**

- ***Access to frequent and reliable transportation*** – Accessible public transportation is critical to people experiencing homelessness. Transportation helps people to apply for and maintain employment, access education, mental health, medical services, and meet nutritional and other basic needs. Shelter programs should be located near readily available transportation services to ensure people can successfully access and exit shelter programs. Barriers around the financial expenses of bus and train fare will also be considered to ensure stable access to critical services and resources as impacted individuals work on reintegrating back into the community.
- ***Access to services, employment, and community resources*** – Access to services assists clients with connections to the community and creates a platform for transitions back to housing stability. Access to employment allows clients to obtain food, clothing, and other basic needs. Having the ability to access community resources such as food banks, mental health and medical care, outreach organizations, childcare assistance, alcohol and drug recovery support, and supportive services assists clients with maintaining stability as they transition. Access to culturally specific services will also be valued as they help to provide culturally competent support to communities of color, refugees, and immigrants. Additional resources also include population-specific shelters such as victims of family



violence, culturally specific shelters, shelters specifically for youth and families, shelters for couples, and those that allow people to keep non-service animals.

- ***Geographic and demographic distribution*** – To increase access to shelter programs and onsite services, geographic distribution of programs throughout the community will be highly valued. Shelter programs will not be concentrated in low-income or neighborhoods where a high percentage of communities of color reside to prevent undue burden. Consideration of potential economic or social stress on neighboring businesses and residents will be made, especially in low-income communities. Staff will utilize data obtained by mapping tools to assess geographic distribution, the potential for concentration of impacted communities, and generally to determine optimized locations for shelter programs. Geographic and demographic distribution will also include a diverse and equitable sheltering system with various shelter models such as safe parking, pod villages, organized camping, in addition, to congregate and motels.
- ***Attention to local community impacts*** – Some locations may not be suitable for shelter programs due to the proximity of other sensitive public services such as schools, playgrounds, early learning programs, and public parks. All shelter programs will be designed to partner with the surrounding community and mitigate any challenges and any proximity of sensitive public areas will be examined carefully before proceeding. Some proximity of shelter programs with public services may bring positive impacts as they provide access for communities most impacted by housing instability and generally underserved by public services.

### **Guidelines in Program Management**

- ***Strong program management*** – An experienced service provider with abundant staffing, training, and management support is critical to the success of a program and ensuring equitable outcomes for program participants and the surrounding community. Shelter staff will reflect the diverse populations impacted by homelessness. People with acute and long-term needs should both be prioritized, along with people most impacted by disproportionate outcomes which contribute to chronic homelessness. The provision of capital funding will help provide support to shelters as resources for the acquisition, rehabilitation, construction, and site preparation.
- ***Ensure equitable community and participant safety*** – Proactive, culturally and linguistically appropriate, and person-centered security services will be considered to prevent over-policing of program participants and help mitigate community member concerns. Person-centered security services should have knowledge of different cultural norms, responses, and impacts of over-policing in communities of color, as well as refugee and immigrant populations experiencing homelessness. Shelter programs will provide 24/7 security services in addition to shelters being well lit and separate living spaces for adults and children when appropriate.

- ***Support community livability*** – Programs will help to maintain the cleanliness of local neighborhoods to reduce community concerns. Neighborhood livability issues are often incorrectly associated with local shelter programs; nevertheless, shelter programs will partner to address and resolve these concerns. Shelter programs will assist with safe storage of personal belongings, monitoring spill-over such as garbage, hazardous materials and sharps from shelter participants in addition to community members utilizing shelter grounds as a dumpsite for garbage or unwanted things. Clean-up programs may offer employment opportunities for people experiencing homelessness and further improve community confidence and support for shelter programs.

### **Continued Engagement and Centering Equity:**

- ***Transparent and accountable communication*** – Community concerns about shelter programs and unsheltered homelessness will be addressed through frequent, open, and transparent communications with the public and the community local to a shelter program. Including community members in feedback sessions to understand the needs and concerns of a surrounding neighborhood will help build support for shelter programs and improve relations with their program participants. While community engagement is often not possible when specific program sites are identified, community engagement will occur prior to the opening of a new shelter program and be sustained through program implementation. Contact information will be clear and easily accessible for community and others to utilize as a place to direct their concerns.
- ***Identify Neighborhood Demographics*** – Mapping tools will be utilized to help identify the needs of a community by understanding considerations such as languages spoken within homes, special religious practices, and household income status. This information will help to improve engagement tactics and community feedback, as well as identify opportunities to provide culturally specific services and community programs for people seeking shelter in the surrounding community.
- ***Co-create Community Agreements*** – A community agreement process will uplift community concerns and identify solutions that can be agreed to by all parties including neighbors, program operators, and building owners. Community leaders and program participants will work together to liaise concerns and communications and foster a trusting relationship between all parties with each shelter program. Transparent communication will be maintained through feedback sessions, newsletters, traditional mail, and publicly accessible program information. The continued engagement will support developing and cultivating authentic partnerships with community members, stakeholders, and people impacted by homelessness.

### **Next steps**

The **Community Guidelines** for shelter program expansion will help inform program implementation as staff work to create new shelter programs over the coming years. These guidelines will provide a framework of best practices that will be revisited and continuously improved with stakeholders and further community guidance as they are utilized.

The Department of Housing Services will work closely with local jurisdictions and community-based organizational partners that have already begun to identify potential sites for future shelter programs. Staff will convene a team to consider potential sites as they are identified using the **Community Guidelines** to assess fit, priorities, and next steps. Staff will bring forward any potential sites for the Board of Commissioners' consideration before moving forward to maintain full communication with advisory bodies and key stakeholders.

As viable sites are researched, considered, recommended, and ultimately selected for shelter programming, staff will use the **Community Guidelines** to inform further community engagement activities recommended for each site and the development of programming to ensure the health, safety, and trust of participants and the surrounding community alike.