



John Tapogna, a senior policy advisor at ECONorthwest, an economics and development consulting firm, said Oregon's homelessness crisis is rooted in housing costs. Westcoast states are among the highest priced housing markets in the nation. Oregon has the fourth-highest rate of unsheltered homelessness in the nation, with nearly 62% of Oregon's homeless population living unsheltered in early 2022. Only three other states had higher percentages, with California at 67%, Mississippi at 64% and Hawaii at 63%.² All of these states experience warmer average temperatures than Oregon.

In January of 2023, Governor Kotek declared homelessness in Oregon a state of emergency and asked for \$130 million in federal funds to combat the problem, but the data she used that define what counties will have access to these funds is problematic for rural counties.

Kotek opted to use the only reliable data she felt she had, the *point-in-time* (PIT) counting method of homeless individuals. Using the PIT method for rural areas simply doesn't work.

The Hidden Homeless: Part 2 Where's the Money?



By Lilly Anderson, MPH, DAFH Director, June/July 2023

Welcome back, in our last issue we were discussing homelessness in rural areas and small towns and how this issue looks different in less populated areas than it does in metro areas. Before we look at what's happening nationwide, let's take a deeper look at the unique challenges Oregon faces.

According to the HUD 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Oregon grew nearly 23% between 2020 and 2022, increasing to nearly 18,000 people. This rate is well above the national average of less than 1% growth and outpaced neighboring states, with Washington experiencing a 10% hike

and California a 6% increase.¹

According to a 2019 report prepared by ECONorthwest, Oregon has a disproportionately large population of homeless people when compared to other states. Oregon's total population

represents 1.3% of the total US population, yet Oregon's homeless population is 2.6% of the total US population. This report also suggests the state's homelessness and housing dilemma are the result of two converging crises. The first crisis is an inadequate housing supply and rising rents that put tens of thousands of Oregon families and children at risk for homelessness.²

Second, there is a smaller but persistent population of chronically homeless people that are in need of intensive social services and specialized housing, such as managed sites.² On that note, Oregon has the highest rate of chronic homelessness in the nation with 44% of individuals experiencing homelessness showing chronic patterns. Also, on the rise in Oregon, is homelessness among U.S. Veterans. While all other states have experienced steady decreases in veteran homelessness, Oregon veteran homelessness has increased by 10%¹.

As we've discussed before, rural areas don't have the same services for homeless people so there aren't centers or shelters for them to gather at to be counted. The result is that using the PIT counting method grossly underestimates the number of homeless individuals and families in rural areas and now those areas will not be receiving these emergency funds.

Another barrier to Oregon getting much needed funding is a change in how we give out funds. In the late 1990s, HUD switched its funding distribution method from allocating funds to individual organizations to creating a system that was intended to lump service providers together and create a more coordinated response. They called these lumped organizations, Continuums of Care (CoCs). In Oregon, there are seven Continuums of Care. Of the seven CoCs, six serve metro or urban areas with only one, referred to as the *Balance of State*, that serves the 26 counties that are designated as rural.³ This CoC is the *Rural Continuum of Care*, or ROCC, and at this time, ROCC is losing members as many rural counties try to reform and apply for their own funding. Due to the competitive nature of HUD grants, ROCC is often up against *Balance of State Continuums* in other parts of the country that are made up of much smaller geographic regions where it is easier and more efficient to coordinate between counties. For this reason, many of the counties that previously made up ROCC are now leaving to form smaller CoCs that they hope will allow them to be more competitive when applying for HUD grants and bring some of those federal dollars back

to rural Oregon. So far, Marion and Polk counties have pulled out and Linn, Lincoln and Benton are in the process.

What has become abundantly clear, after our brief investigations, is that the homeless crisis in Oregon is complex and severe. It will not be solved by any one agency or policy. It is going to require collaboration from all levels of government, philanthropy, non-profits and businesses all working together. Next, we would really like to learn what efforts are currently in progress or proposed. For example, In Bend, Oregon there is a desperate need for outdoor shelters and one proposal on the table is providing safe parking and managed homeless encampments on rural land.⁴ In order for this to happen, the state would need to approve a change in land-use regulation for the urban growth boundary.⁴

Next issue, we examine what efforts are being made across the state. If you are aware of any efforts to combat homelessness in your area, especially any that could be considered 'thinking outside the box,' please reach out and share those ideas with this committee. Thank you for your time and may you and yours stay safe and warm.

References

¹Hayden, N. (2023). Oregon's recent growth in homelessness among largest in nation. *The Oregonian*

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⁴Gbadebo, B. (2023). Deschutes County and city seek to provide managed homeless encampments on rural lands. *KTVZ New Channel 21*.