

# Homeless initiative members press for change



Kaellen Hessel, Statesman Journal 7:24 p.m. PST February 20, 2016

*Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative Task Force members articulate hope this committee will bring about real change.*

What was clear from the Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative Task Force's first meeting is that when it comes to homelessness, something's got to give.

Multiple task force members — who represent nonprofits, government, business and law enforcement — said they want to see change come from the joint venture among Salem, Keizer and Marion and Polk counties.

Salem Councilor Warren Bednarz said he's looking for an "action plan, not a discussion, not a report."

It's not the first time the community has tried to put a dent in homelessness.

In 2009, a 10-year plan to end homelessness was released. It was among hundreds of plans created by cities nationally at the encouragement of the federal government.

Marion and Polk counties' plan has vague goals, such as "increase community awareness to build support and remove stigma."

According to the 2015 Homeless Count, 1,660 homeless individuals live in Marion and Polk counties, including 308 who are chronically homeless.

Marion County Commissioner Janet Carlson, one of the four co-chairwomen, said she hopes this

collaboration will "put some meat on the bones" of the 10-year plan.

The goal "is to identify and launch proven strategies that will reduce homelessness," according to the task force's charter.

"The beauty of the four jurisdictions working collaboratively is that we can pool resources to look for solutions and we can share the implementation of some solutions," Salem Mayor Anna Peterson said.

The first meeting was meant as an orientation meeting, Carlson said. Members listened to social service providers and housing agency representatives share background information about homelessness, a brief overview of the area's housing inventory, the housing-first concept and the continuum of care.

Carlson said that by the third or fourth meeting, they might be able to start looking at recommendations.

One problem identified to the task force is the scarcity of modest housing.

The Salem Metropolitan Area has one of the lowest vacancy rates in the state, said Andy Wilch, Salem Housing Authority administrator.

"When we talk about the scarcity of housing, it's the marketplace gone wild," he said.

High demand for housing drove rents up 10 percent in the Salem area from the spring of 2015 to the fall, Wilch said.

In the outlying areas, it's worse. Rental managers in small communities in Marion County estimate the vacancy rate is less than 1 percent, said Shelly Wilkins-Ehenger, executive director of the Marion County Housing Authority.

In 2015, the county housing authority issued 700 vouchers to help pay for rent, but fewer than 200 households could find a place to live, Wilkins-Ehenger said.

Task force members plan to focus on housing supply and development at their next meeting. Carlson said that if they're able to narrow their priorities soon, they might be able to get some of the money the Legislature set aside for affordable housing.

As part of the overview, staffers from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development gave a presentation on a best practice that's recommended by the federal government.

The housing-first concept is that if you give people housing with no strings attached, they'll be able to think about their futures now that they're no longer living in crisis. It's not a program or one-size-fits-all model, said Kristen Arnold, from the HUD office in Portland.

"There aren't barriers," Arnold said. "You're going to meet someone where they're at."

The model can be controversial because there are no requirements for people to get into

housing, such as being able to pay for it or pass a drug test.

Arnold said 10 years of research have shown it's a proven model for ending chronic homelessness and is more cost-effective for a community than to have people living on the streets.

"We are just beginning what will take a community focus," Peterson told the gathered crowd.

Based on the turnout, the community may be ready for change, as well.

The 50 chairs set out for audience members at the Salem Public Library's Anderson Room were not enough. More chairs were brought out, but several people were still left standing.

As he looked around the room, Jon Reeves, executive director of Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, said "I don't know if I've ever seen this much interest in helping the homeless find housing and self-sufficiency."

If the community is ever going to make a difference when it comes to homelessness, it's right now, he said.

[Learn more](#)

The next meeting of the Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative Task Force, scheduled for 4 p.m. March 29 at the Salem Public Library, will delve into the housing market and development opportunities.