

Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative Survey Results

BACKGROUND

The Mid-Willamette Homeless Initiative is a collaborative effort among the cities of Salem and Keizer and Marion and Polk counties, with the purpose of identifying and launching proven strategies that will reduce homelessness in the Marion-Polk county region, encompassing the cities of Keizer and Salem. Task force members include business and community leaders with expertise in social services, housing, public safety, and business.

Task Force focus is on the homeless problem in cities and counties; lack of affordable housing; best practices for reducing chronic homelessness; current available services; impacts on public safety and business; and potential revenue sources. Contributing factors such as mental illness, addiction, lack of education and the need for transportation, as well as the challenges of unique populations such as youth and veterans are also addressed.

Community surveys were conducted in an effort to gauge general perceptions and attitudes about homelessness and to better understand the needs of local homeless individuals. The results of the surveys are intended to guide strategic planning as the MWHI pivots to implementation.

PROCESS

Surveys were made available to the public through organizations serving the homeless, community partners, and online. Service providers offered assistance when necessary to clients interested in participating in the survey. A total of 106 surveys representing Salem, Keizer, and Dallas were returned: 55 representing individuals and 2 representing groups of the homeless or recently homeless population; 3 representing community partners; and 48 representing community members. The two surveys representing groups do not indicate the number of people represented, so each response counted as one in the process of tallying results. Many surveys were not fully completed.

THEMES

HOMELESS/RECENTLY HOMELESS RESPONSES

Of the 57 homeless/recently homeless respondents, 35 were sheltered either at home, with a friend or family member, or in a shelter. One chronically homeless man prefers to sleep on the street. Sheltered respondents look forward to their situations improving, but overall are fine with being in the shelter, and receive needed support and services through the shelters.

Results identify 39 women and 16 men, four of the men having had some military experience. The main age groups represented was 45-54 year olds (21 responses), followed by 35-44 year olds (19 responses, and 55-64 year olds (11 responses).

In response to the question, "Would you like to have someone help you as you attend appointments?" 12 people said yes, 37 said no, and two said maybe.

Unemployment/no income, addiction, criminal background, medical issues, bad relationships, and poor rental history were identified as the main causes of homelessness. Poor choices, mental health issues, and past abuse were also identified. Two respondents indicated that they have chosen homelessness.

Needed services that are not available to people experiencing homelessness are affordable housing and shelters, free monthly bus passes, showers, laundry facilities, and transportation including weekend bus service.

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Respondents identified the need for more shelters as the primary thing that would make services better for people experiencing homelessness. Employment, steady income, money and financial assistance are indicated as most needed for gaining a permanent place to live.

COMMUNITY PARTNER RESPONSES

Ideas for helping people exit homelessness in our community include: a continuum of care from crisis – intervention, restoration and development; fund programs demonstrating best practices and creative ideas in each area; identify main cause of an individual’s homelessness and address it; develop relationships and respect; require that homeless individuals be actively involved in the solution; and hold them accountable for their decisions.

Low availability of transitional and rental housing and unemployment need to be taken into account, as well as the increase in the number of homeless youth.

Ways community partners can work differently together to develop strategies and mutual goals include: identifying what helps and what “helping” actually hurts; supporting solutions that increase independence; including homeless community members in the discussion; having positive interventions at every step to avoid greater crisis, incarceration and addiction; ensuring that goals do not harm the community; identifying barriers to ending homelessness; tracking the number of people that find permanent housing; and setting a goal to increase the number of people finding housing by 20%.

People experiencing homelessness are telling community partners that they’ve given up hope; the waiting list for housing seems hopeless; and many want someone to support them so they can do what they want.

Strategies to help people experiencing homelessness: managed, safe parking places for people to stay; tiny house projects; fulfill basic needs; subsidized housing projects distributed across the city; focus resources on those serious about changing their situation; and develop mentoring programs. Housing/shelter space, access to transportation, and employment and job skills training are the main requests unmet by community partners.

In order to improve coordination of services avoid looking for quick fixes or elimination of the problem, recognize the source of the problem is poverty and homelessness is a visible sign, and maintain transparency in available services.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

The top five issues that need to be addressed to help people experiencing homelessness are: (1) lack of housing/shelter; (2) mental health issues; (3) employment/job assistance; (4) basic needs including food, bathrooms, showers, laundry, transportation, and clothing; and (5) addiction treatment services.

Twelve people responded that they give money to panhandlers, some based on gut reaction, and most prefer to give food. Thirty-two respondents do not give money to panhandlers. Reasons for not giving include: prefer to give to an organization that really helps; money goes to drugs or alcohol; the panhandlers are fakes; and giving to them just perpetuates the problem.

Coordination among service providers, with better communication and information sharing is important to community members.

Top priorities for respondents included: increasing the spectrum of housing, from tent cities and tiny house communities, to shelters and affordable housing; developing day centers with showers, lockers, laundry facilities, computer center, and co-located services; providing more drug and alcohol treatment and mental services; and increasing employment services to include job skills training and help finding a job.

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COMMENTS

Grace House accommodations are excellent until I can get my own place.

OHP pays for eye exams but there is no help for acquiring glasses.

Difficult to work when Bridgeway classes are spread out throughout the week.

If not at Grace House, I would be at drug house or trading sex for place to sleep.

Mentors not allowed at Coffee Creek.

The ground is cold and wet, even when it looks dry.

Anyone with mobility can get food, this town has the ability to feed people. No one goes hungry in Salem.

Homeless client was denied services for not having enough barriers.

Have more housing tiers to accommodate different levels of need. Housing should be more accessible.

Wish Grace House was an 18-month program.

Formerly incarcerated and addicted people have hard time finding housing.

Some people need longer time for recovery than programs allow.

Someone is trying to take my home. I'm afraid of being homeless, homeless women get raped.

Take care of the mother to take care of the child.

There are a lot of programs, but limited on who they can help.

Being homeless is hard. Being denied and having nothing made it worse.

Any services available for the middle class should be available for the homeless.

Why don't I meet the criteria for rental classes at Arches?

Many people have said getting services is too complicated or too far away since they don't have money for a bus pass. They don't do what they should, like dental work or medical treatment. Many cannot eat the food we provide at the food bank because of dental problems.

I know people who needed warming shelters last year and now have jobs and housing.

Address stigmas associated with homelessness.

Homelessness was created by the government turning out the mentally ill, allowing open borders, and lack of imagination for building cottage complexes. The mission has hundreds of white males who are homeless. The border is wide open. Why are there not housing projects for the homeless?

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The homeless do not need or deserve more leeway or privileges than those living by the rules of society, especially when they expect and abuse what they are unwilling to work for.

The increase in vagrancy and associated behavior such as extreme littering, drug and alcohol abuse, and fights are apparent every day downtown. This impacts the quality of all lives.

Don't be fooled into thinking you're helping people without a well thought out program that gets to the root of the problem. We have done a disservice to the police and downtown businesses by allowing this to go on and not offering any real help. Salem is noted for its hordes of panhandlers and their filthy habits. Take a look at other cities and see how they have dealt with the problem.

Other than the mentally ill, the homeless should be given options and choices rather than handouts. Handouts keep the situation ongoing and discourage change.

I hope our community will find a way to move people into stable housing and not just move them away from here to be someone else's problem. Being homeless is not a crime.

Let's make real change, not a dusty report.

Look at the root of the problem. There are legitimate families that need help but many others are just lazy and want everything handed to them, and are very successful at it.

Since homeless people don't have to answer to anyone, they take the easy way, but some try hard to get help.

Appearance is a major factor – providing showers and clothing may help.

Make sure workers have cultural and mental health training.

Start a group like Cahoots in Eugene.

Address poverty and mental illness. Tax the rich at a higher rate to pay for services.

Grateful to be part of this, feel it will create greater awareness and help individuals in need.

I hope the homeless initiative meetings have good results.

Help the community see people experiencing homelessness as neighbors and welcome them, help provide for them and encourage them.

Thanks to all who are working on behalf of the homeless community. Wish there were unlimited funds to help.

People experiencing homelessness are human beings with names, stories, joys and sorrows. Create an exhibit that features portraits of the homeless to help the community see the beauty that is hidden in plain sight.

Please help the homeless and citizens who live here.

This is a serious problem that needs a response at all levels of government.

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This process is taking way too long. We should be doing something to actually solve the problem. Studying and talking is not helping anyone who is homeless.

We've totally fallen down on the job regarding taking care of our own fellow humans. Everyone that lives here should have the basic human necessities of life, starting with adequate shelter.

There is too much reliance on private organizations to take care of a public issue. It's unacceptable for people to be required to hear a religious ideology in order to get basic services. Would rather pay taxes to provide services/housing than for a 3rd bridge.

We owe it as a community to find ways to offer shelter and care to the homeless.