



OREGON

MARION COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Work Session Summary Minutes

Joint Marion and Polk County Discussion

December 2, 2025. 3:00 PM

Courthouse Square, 555 Court St. NE, Salem
5th Floor, Suite 5232, Commissioners Board Room

ATTENDANCE:

Marion County Commissioners: Danielle Bethell, Colm Willis, and Kevin Cameron.

Marion County Board's Office: Matt Lawyer, Heather Inyama, Jon Heynen, Chris Eppley, Jan Fritz, Alvin Klausen, Trevor Lane, and Toni Whitler.

Marion County Sheriff's Office: Nick Hunter.

Marion County Legal Counsel: Steve Elzinga.

Marion County District Attorney's Office: Lena Prine.

Marion County Health and Human Services: Ryan Matthews, Debbie Wells, Naomi Hudkins, and Katrina Griffith.

Polk County Commissioners: Lyle Mordhorst, Jeremy Gordon, and Craig Pope.

Polk County Community Corrections: Jodi Merritt.

Polk County Community Outreach: Brent DeMoe.

Polk County Management Services: Gregory Hansen.

Polk County District Attorney's Office: Aaron Felton.

Polk County Health and Human Services: Jennifer Lief.

Polk County Counsel: Morgan Smith.

Polk County Sheriff's Office: Mark Garton.

Salem Fire: David Gerboth.

Salem Police Department: Trevor Womack.

City of Salem: Julie Hoy, and Gretchen Bennett.

Salem Reporter: Abbey McDonald.

Salem Housing Authority: Nicole Utz.

Homeless Alliance: Misty Bolger.

Commissioner Danielle Bethell called the meeting to order at 3:00 p.m.

Current Conditions and Data Overview

- Joint session to address homelessness in Salem.
- Data on Wallace Marine Park:
 - 90 individuals identified:
 - 40% with outstanding warrants.
 - 20% on supervision.
 - Significant presence of noncompliant individuals and sex offenders.
- High rates of criminal activity:
 - Theft (frequent incidents inside/outside the park).
 - Drug-related offenses (notably fentanyl).
 - Violent crimes.

- Physical assaults.
 - Sexual assaults.
 - Unreported overdoses are common in the park.
- Weapon proliferation:
 - Guns, knives, bear mace, and other items were both present and trafficked.
- Disease is spread by frequent sharing of needles.
- Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, and Methicillin-Resistance Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) infections are prevalent.
- Emergency service data during January 2023 – October 2025 timeframe:
 - 675 calls to Marion Square Park.
 - 110 calls to Wallace Marine Park:
 - Higher severity of calls at Wallace Marine Park.
- Babies and children sometimes live in the park, sometimes hidden.
- Confirmed instances of children removed by authorities due to neglect or concerns.

Services, Coordination and Gaps

- Specialized police/community services teams expanded to cover seven days a week:
 - Success in reducing trash and rehousing some, but major gaps persist.
- Coordination between Marion/Polk Counties, City of Salem, and Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) is a persistent challenge:
 - Responsibilities often fall between the cracks, leading to inefficiency.
- Service providers reduced due to less funds, further straining system capacity:
 - Housing Authority, Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams, and outreach.
- Law enforcement, mental health, addiction recovery, and public health agencies play a part, but lack a central "office to end homelessness,":
 - Makes high-level coordination difficult.
- Information sharing is not systematized:
 - Heat maps and data exist.
 - Person-level case tracking is ad hoc and complicated by confidentiality laws.
- Multiple multidisciplinary teams operate independently:
 - Inconsistent data sharing and no seamless handoff between teams.
- County and city outreach efforts do not always align:
 - Some resources are duplicated, or individuals fall through gaps.

Public Health, Safety, and Environmental Concerns

- Ongoing concentration of unmanaged homeless camps is widely acknowledged as a serious threat to public safety and health.
- Drugs are ubiquitous:
 - Overdose deaths and spread of infectious diseases are ongoing realities.
- Weapons and daily violence heighten risk for both housed and unhoused residents:
 - Many crimes go unreported due to potential retaliation.
- Environmental degradation is severe:
 - Garbage, human and animal feces, and rats are common.
 - Contaminated areas pose hazards to public and emergency responders.
- Children are especially vulnerable:
 - Evidence of babies born and hidden in the park.
 - Children living in unsafe/unhygienic conditions.
- System is overwhelmed:

- Emergency responders are strained by high call volume and severity.
 - Especially in Wallace Marine Park.
- Lack of adequate shelter and mental health/substance abuse treatment capacity leaves vulnerable individuals with few alternatives.

Strategic Priorities and Next Steps

- Develop regular, comprehensive data sharing and outcome tracking mechanisms across jurisdictions.
- Create a formal policy-focused work group to address legal and regulatory barriers:
 - Explicit inclusion of judges and community corrections.
- Establish a law-enforcement-specific work group:
 - Judges to align operational approaches and ensure consistent practices.
 - Senate Bill 48 implementation.
- Cost analysis by jurisdiction to evaluate allocation and efficacy of current resources:
 - Marion County, Polk County, and City of Salem.
- Reduce the proliferation of uncoordinated committees:
 - Streamline efforts into focused groups with clear objectives.
- Align policy positions and expectations at the jurisdictional level to empower staff and avoid fragmentation.
- Expand and sustainably fund specialized outreach teams:
 - Proactive, safety-oriented ideas to encampments and transition to services.

Other

- Acknowledgement of historic tendencies to shift the problem:
 - Sending homeless individuals from rural areas to Salem.
- Renewed efforts for local responsibility in Polk and Marion counties.
- Recognition of critical work done by both county and community-based organizations.
- Need for more effective integration and less duplication.
- Structural/policy barriers to developing new shelters and treatment facilities:
 - Expensive code compliance and unfunded mandates.
- Importance of involving ODOT and other state-level partners:
 - Particularly regarding properties spanning multiple jurisdictions.
- Discussion of compassion fatigue, need mentorship opportunities, and impact of decades of layered state and local regulation on the current crisis.

Next Steps

- Policy group to define jurisdictional alignment on key questions:
 - Whether unmanaged encampments should be permitted in city parks.
- Establish clear mechanisms for regular updates between city and county authorities:
 - Include roster of service provider participants.
- Assign staff to attend and report back from key interagency meetings:
 - Naomi Hudkins from Marion County
- Convene broader and more inclusive case management teams:
 - Potentially through a formalized multi-disciplinary team structure.
 - For complex cases and individuals.
- Undertake a cost analysis and present findings to policy makers.

- Work towards a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and data-sharing agreements to facilitate cross-jurisdictional collaboration.
- Plan future meetings that include full policy-making bodies to ensure buy-in and authority for large-scale solutions.

Adjourned – time: 5:00 p.m.

Minutes by: Mary Vityukova

Reviewed by: Gary L. White