

# Piloting Change

## Unsheltered Homelessness in Portland

Our team at NWPP has seen firsthand how, over the years, barriers to stable and affordable housing have grown more and more challenging in our region.

For low-income older adults, the risk of becoming homeless has skyrocketed because of several factors:

- a dramatic rise in housing costs,
- profound scarcity of deeply affordable and accessible units,
- and the widespread lack of income and service supports to keep seniors housed.

“Seniors are the fastest growing age group of people experiencing homelessness across the U.S.”

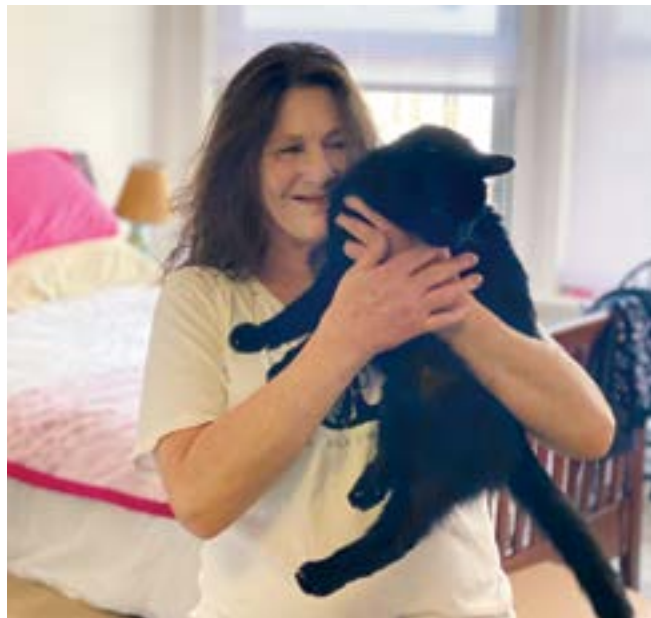
Between 2007–2017, the share of individuals experiencing homelessness that were seniors jumped from approximately one out of every 5 unhoused people to one out of every three.

### WHAT is *unsheltered* homelessness?

Not everyone experiencing homelessness is living outside. Some definitions of homelessness include staying in shelter programs, living in transitional housing, or couchsurfing.

However, according to Multnomah County’s most recent official count (2019), slightly over half of the people counted were in living situations that are considered “unsheltered,” meaning they slept outdoors, in public spaces, in vehicles, and in places “not meant for human habitation.” This high level of unsheltered homelessness fits in with national data, which show a steady increase in unsheltered homelessness across the U.S. between 2015 and 2020.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, ours was among a large number of homeless service systems throughout the country that were unable to complete an official count



*After three years living in her car because of an accident that led to job loss, Lori, 61, enjoys her new apartment in downtown Portland with her 20 year old cat, Vincent.*

of unsheltered people in 2021 due to safety concerns. Even without new count numbers, service providers in a national survey say they have seen both an increase in requests for assistance as well as evidence of increased unsheltered homelessness.

### WHO is unsheltered?

There are some commonalities among the population that is unsheltered, no matter what city or town we are talking about:

- People living unsheltered are predominately experiencing homelessness as individuals and not within a family group.
- They are more likely to identify as men, but national data shows a rise in the number of unsheltered women and transgender people over the last several years.
- They are much more likely to suffer from disabling health problems. A 2019 California study showed that

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One in 5 people experiencing homelessness in Multnomah County are aged 55 or older.

unsheltered respondents were 4 times more likely to have a physical health condition than sheltered respondents, 1.5 times more likely to have a mental health condition, 5 times more likely to have a substance use disorder, and **25 times more likely to have all three types of health conditions.**

Locally, over 1 out of every 5 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Multnomah County are aged 55 or older. The high prevalence of disability seen nationally is also echoed here, where over half of all people with disabilities who were counted in our 2019 *Point in Time* study were experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

Among all people experiencing homelessness in Oregon, there are stark racial disparities that lead to people of color, especially Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native people, to be at higher

likelihood of losing their homes due to structural, systemic, and institutional racism and racially exclusionary policies in housing.

These disparities are also visible in who experiences unsheltered homelessness in our county: Black/ African American people are almost two times more likely to be unsheltered than whites, while American Indian/Alaska Native people are over five times more likely to be unsheltered.

### Frequently Asked Questions

We at NWPP have seen up close how unsheltered homelessness has severe health and social impacts on those who are living through it. We also know that our housed neighbors often feel powerless to help and make a difference in the many efforts taking place to end homelessness. Here are some of the commonly asked questions we hear from supporters and community members who want to better understand what our unsheltered neighbors face:

**Why does it seem like unsheltered homelessness has increased during the pandemic?**

Because the pandemic limited communities' ability to collect data on unsheltered homelessness, it's unclear exactly how much of an increase has taken place. But there are many clues as to why the picture looks different than before: to limit potential exposure to COVID-19, congregate emergency shelters (traditional facilities where many people live and sleep in close quarters) have to serve fewer people to allow for social distancing. Many of these shelters also had long waitlists even before the pandemic began, so many who hope to enter a shelter are forced to remain outside while they wait.

It's also important to note that many services and supports that unhoused people rely on—housing navigation, day centers, meal sites, and transportation—continue to have limited access and hours, leading some to camp in more visible, accessible areas than before to be closer to assistance.

**Is the solution to unsheltered homelessness just adding more congregate shelter beds for everyone who is outside?**

The short answer to this is, “No.” There are many valid reasons that not everyone is willing to access a congregate shelter. Some may have had traumatic experiences while living outside that make it feel impossible to live and sleep so close to strangers. Others may be reluctant to even temporarily part with a spouse, close support network, or a beloved pet, and many shelters are not set up to allow them to stay together in a program. Some shelters may have extremely strict program requirements or limit length of stay to 30-90 days, so because of wait times for affordable housing, this can lead to participants returning to the

streets. Most important to remember is the fact that shelter is not equal to housing, and because of negative past experiences with shelters, people may be reluctant to try them again, especially if they come with no assurance of housing placement.

### **Is unsheltered homelessness just the result of more addiction or substance use disorder in the community?**

It's true that substance abuse can lead to an individual losing stable housing and becoming unsheltered, and a significant portion of people experiencing homelessness struggle with behavioral health conditions. However, the data just doesn't back up the claim that substance use disorder is responsible for increasing local and national rates of homelessness, or even just unsheltered homelessness. In fact, many advocates and people with lived experience point out that substance use can begin or greatly worsen during experiences of unsheltered homelessness.

What the data does show is that housing affordability is the main driver of homelessness across the U.S. And if we remember how vital housing is to maintaining one's well-being—both mental and physical—it stands to reason that increasingly limited access to housing would result in worsened health for the most vulnerable among us.

### **Are unsheltered residents working towards getting a job?**

A 2021 data analysis from the University of Chicago showed that **40% people under the age of 65 who were experiencing unsheltered homelessness were already employed.** But there are a couple of key things to remember when we consider this number:

One, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the hourly amount an average worker needs to earn in order to be stably housed in Oregon (\$25.14 per hour) is the 11th highest Housing Wage in the country. This also means that a minimum wage worker would need to work 79 hours per week to afford a home. Two, the high prevalence of disabling conditions among people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, and the increase in seniors who are unhoused (see above) means that many are relying on extremely low, fixed incomes that can't stretch far enough to cover the average rent. So there's just no getting around it: more deeply affordable housing is necessary to house everyone, whether they are in the workforce or not.

### **Isn't the new regional Supportive Housing Services measure supposed to have reduced unsheltered homelessness by now?**

NWPP has worked over the past two years to help design and imple-

ment the new Metro Regional Supportive Housing Services measure programming, which is funded by a high-earners personal income tax as well as a new business tax, and is expected to eventually generate about \$248 million in revenue across the tri-county region.

However, as we approach the end of implementation year one, we are still in a very early stage for this innovative regional effort. Although we have been thrilled to see clients begin to access new services through this measure over the past few months, we know that it will take time before much of this funding reaches everyone who is in need. And because we know that truly ending homelessness requires many decades-overdue investments in our entire housing system, we will continue to advocate for policies that finally address the root causes of homelessness, especially for the most vulnerable.

By Marisa Espinoza, NWPP Policy and Systems Advocate

## **How You Can Help**

- Be a friendly face to your unhoused neighbors. Say hello, introduce yourself or just smile.
- Get to know resources that exist for people experiencing a behavioral health crisis while unhoused. Multnomah County Crisis Line: 503-988-4888, available 24/7
- Volunteer with your faith community or neighborhood association to provide supplies and support for people experiencing homelessness.
- Learn more about homelessness!
  - HereTogether <https://heretogetheroregon.org/understandinghomelessness/>
  - Portland State University Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative (HRAC) <https://www.pdx.edu/homelessness/>
- Support organizations like NWPP that focus on providing permanent, deeply affordable housing to people experiencing homelessness! Visit [nwpilotproject.org/support-us/](http://nwpilotproject.org/support-us/)