

Homeless Assessment and Solutions Project Proposal - Overview

Deschutes County residents are experiencing a crisis around homelessness: the high cost of housing, when combined with relatively low wages and often a mismatch between skills and job openings, is leading to a situation where many residents are forced to live in unstable and unsuitable residences, including camping in tents, cars or RVs. Virtually all of the existing homeless camps around the region lack bathroom facilities and regular trash removal, making them unhealthy and a burden on the landowners (both public and private property owners). Complaints are rising in downtown Bend and Redmond and other locations as increased parking by RVs on city streets is causing friction with neighbors and businesses.

What can we do about our homelessness crisis, recognizing we have only limited funds (relative to the magnitude of the problem) and there are much larger forces in play, many over which we have virtually no control?

Fortunately, we're already doing a lot. Central Oregon is privileged to have many individuals and groups - public agencies and faith-based and nonprofit organizations - that work tirelessly to alleviate the hardship faced by those experiencing homelessness. In addition to offering assistance after the fact, many of them work to help people avoid losing their housing in the first place. Together, these stakeholders have helped thousands of people to cope with their housing and shelter struggles.

A partial list of these worthy organizations and groups includes: The Homeless Leadership Coalition, NeighborImpact, Bethlehem Inn, Shepherd's House, Housing Works, Pfeifer and Associates, Deschutes County, the cities of Redmond, Bend, La Pine and Sisters, Pacific Crest Affordable Housing, Thrive, Deschutes United Way, Mosaic Medical, Westside Church, La Pine Community Health Center, Sagewood Sanctuary, DAWN's House, Central Oregon FUSE, and many others.

But what about the private sector? Deschutes County has historically been characterized by the willingness of our business community and private individuals to step up and engage in the development and implementation of "big solutions to big problems." The Westside Traffic Consortium, Riverhouse Gala, and the development of the KIDS Center and Boys and Girls Club are just a few examples of this spirit. Now is the time for the business community and concerned individuals to again engage with governments, non-profits, and the residents of Deschutes County to develop a compassionate, evidence-based, and effective plan around homelessness that will produce lasting results.

How do we get there from here? By following these five steps:

#1 Clarify and quantify the problem we are trying to solve

We can't fix a problem if we don't fully understand it. We need reliable answers to many questions, including:

- How many people experience homelessness on an annual basis?
 - When people experience homelessness, for how many days are they typically homeless?

- What are the demographics of our neighbors who are homeless?
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Household composition (Single or part of a family?)
 - Employment status (Have a job? Have more than one job? Full or part-time?)
 - Mental health diagnosis?
 - Substance use disorder?
- Where do people who are homeless actually live?
 - How many people live outside? Do they live in tents? In their car? In a camper/RV?
 - If they live outside, where in the County do they camp or park their vehicle?
 - If they live inside, where? In a shelter? motel? with friends?
- What percentage of people in Deschutes County who experience homelessness moved here while experiencing homelessness vs. those who lost their housing after living here?
 - Is there an “induced demand” – i.e. if we provide homeless services and amenities, will that encourage people from outside the County to move here? How do we determine the right balance of societal responsibility for assisting those less fortunate?

#2 Identify how our current situation compares to historic and future realities

How does our housing/homelessness crisis now compare to 15 years ago? And if we continue with the status quo, what will the situation look like 15 years from now? The answers to the questions in #1 will tell us what our housing crisis looks like now, but this is only part of the story. We need to know how our current reality compares to our past and we need to know what the future holds if we continue with the status quo.

#3 Map the people and organizations that are already working to address our homelessness and housing challenges and clarify their scope of work

We should not reinvent the wheel. By mapping who is doing what, we can identify potential service gaps to be filled while at the same time avoid duplicating efforts. We can hopefully get a better sense of the magnitude of the problem and how much can be addressed through improved coordination and new policies (which don't necessarily cost money), and how much really is a function of capacity (i.e. needing more funding for housing, support services, skills training, transportation and building community awareness).

#4 Research and document the successes and failures of other communities. Understand the opportunities and challenges inherent in this type of ambitious undertaking.

Deschutes County is unique and we know that a cookie cutter plan from a distant land cannot simply be dropped into our community. Our vast land mass, large forest lands, and cold/snowy weather seasons must be taken into account when assessing the viability of programs implemented elsewhere. We need to develop a plan that is designed by us and is the right fit for us, given resources available and competing needs. But such a plan can absolutely be informed by lessons learned from other communities. This step will likely involve one or more stakeholder visits to homeless camps or village projects in other communities. What advice can we pick up to shorten the learning curve, avoid missteps and significantly increase the likelihood of success?

#5 Develop a report that contains the findings from the four above steps with recommendations for what should be done (that is not already being done) to make Deschutes County a model community for alleviating the burden of homelessness.

The recommendations will be made collaboratively by a steering group comprised of representatives from public agencies, non-profit leaders, the private sector, and government. To ensure credibility, we will include members who are currently or who have been homeless in the past. Upon the issuance of the report, the members of the steering group will then solicit partners to raise resources and implement the recommendations.

While the steering group, guided by the facts gathered during this process, will make collaborative recommendations, these recommendations will be informed by the following Guiding Principles:

- **A physical space (or spaces) should exist in Deschutes County for those experiencing homelessness to live with minimal entry requirements** (other than health and safety exclusions).
- **This physical space should have areas for a variety of housing options** – this includes RV camping, tent camping, and tiny houses/ADU style, etc. In the case of the latter, the tiny homes will be provided to residents and a process will be developed to determine how they will be assigned and whether there are limits on duration of tenancy.
- **This physical space should result in residents living with dignity, respect and safety** by virtue of there being running water, bathroom facilities, electricity, and access to transit among other services and amenities. Because safety is important, law enforcement will have a meaningful presence.
- **This physical space should have a housing first philosophy**, meaning sobriety will not be a requirement for tenants. Continued residency will be a function of actual as opposed to merely potential behavior.
- To the greatest extent possible, **this physical space will be self-governed by the residents**.
- **This physical space will probably not be adequately equipped to serve the residents of Deschutes County who are experiencing homelessness and who live with the most serious of medical conditions**. A screening process will be developed to determine who needs to be referred to medical and/or behavioral health providers.
- **This physical space is also not intended to accommodate those who have simply adopted homelessness as a lifestyle**. A primary goal of this program is to provide opportunities for residents to become productive and self-sufficient members of society, considering their unique skills and challenges.
- **Funding and operational support for the project will be a mix of government, private sector (cash and in-kind), and grants**. Pay for success type funding models should be considered where appropriate.

To reiterate, the final step of this project will not “solve” the problem of homelessness – it will however identify the scope of a potential project/projects to address many of the problems we are trying to resolve. To implement the potential project, there will need to be significant additional work, funding and innovative partnerships.

Budget (Preliminary Scope of Work)

Research/Analysis (30 hours) (two to three weeks)

- Collect existing data on the scope of the current problem, compare with historic information, and develop future projections. (16 hours)
- Research communities that have implemented effective solutions to their homeless challenges and schedule site visits to two of them. (14 hours)

Site Visits (32 hours) (four weeks)

- Accompany team on two site visits, take detailed notes, coordinate logistics. (32 hours)

Facilitation/Final Report (56 hours) (six weeks)

- Recruit a diverse group of stakeholders and get them to a shared level of understanding of the issue.
 - Phone calls, outreach and meetings with key stakeholders to identify the right participants (10 hours)
 - Set up first meeting (3 hours)
- Vet solutions, informed by information from other communities and what we're currently doing in Deschutes County.
 - Prep for and hold three meetings plus follow-up (18 hours)
- Design implementation strategy (with a consideration of funding and regulatory issues) and write final consensus report (25 hours)

Totals:

- Professional staff time: \$8,850 (118 hours at \$75 per hour)
- Other Expenses/Travel: \$5,940
 - Airfare for three people to two cities: \$2,700
 - Lodging for three people for four nights (two nights in each city): \$2,040
 - Transportation in other communities: \$300
 - Food for three people for four days: \$660
 - Meeting room rental for four meetings: we can get this donated
 - Food for four meetings: \$240

Total Project Cost (est.): \$14,790

Total Project Timeline (est.): ~14 weeks