

Audit Report

Joint Office of Homeless Services:
Sustained focus on shelter system
needed to address unmet needs

April 2024



**Portland
City Auditor**
Audit Services

Contents

Summary 3

Background 4

Audit Results A: Shelter 11

Recommendations A: Shelter..... 28

Audit Results B: Racial Equity..... 29

Recommendations B: Racial Equity 31

The Multnomah County Chair, Chief Operating Officer, and Joint Office of Homeless Services agreed with our recommendations 32

How we did our work 32

Summary

The City of Portland and Multnomah County established the Joint Office of Homeless Services in 2016 to centralize planning, policy, and funding for homelessness programs and coordinate and improve services to address homelessness in our community, including shelters.

Since the creation of the Joint Office, the number and types of shelters serving people experiencing homelessness have grown significantly. The Joint Office has also worked to expand shelter locations across the County and reduce barriers to entry. But, our audit found that the adult and family shelters funded by the Joint Office were generally full and had long waitlists, could be difficult to access, and only sometimes helped participants move to permanent housing.

We recommend that the Joint Office evaluate information about the shelter system and use it to develop strategies to right-size shelter supply based on need, improve access to shelter, and increase successful placements from shelters to permanent housing. By the end of our audit, the Joint Office began taking steps to address some of these issues as part of its new shelter strategy.

Our audit also found that Joint Office programs overall were designed to reduce racial disparities. However, because disproportionate rates of homelessness persist—and are increasing for some communities of color—we recommend that the Joint Office continue to design programs to achieve racial equity goals and adjust strategies as needed to improve their performance.

Background

Described as the “humanitarian crisis of our lifetime,” homelessness has had devastating consequences in our community.

A growing number of people have experienced homelessness. In 2023, 6,297 people were counted as homeless in Multnomah County through a one-night census called the Point in Time Count. This number represents almost 2,500 more people than were counted as homeless in 2015. As of January 2024, a comprehensive by-name list of people experiencing homelessness in Multnomah County consisted of 11,153 individuals. Of those, 5,398 people were experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

The City of Portland and Multnomah County established the Joint Office of Homeless Services in 2016 to centralize homelessness planning, policy, and funding efforts. The Joint Office represents a shared commitment between the City and County to coordinate and improve services to prevent homelessness and support people experiencing homelessness.

The Joint Office’s adopted budget for Fiscal Year 2024 was around \$279 million. Those resources came from more than a dozen local, federal, and state funding streams. The budget funded about 100 Joint Office staff positions, up from 32 just two years before. This staffing increase was fueled by the Metro Supportive Housing Services Measure approved by voters in 2020, which funds increased services to address homelessness.

Joint Office staff administer contracts with more than 60 non-profit and public agencies, including culturally-specific service providers, to deliver a range of services to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Figure 1. The Joint Office funds a range of services to address homelessness

Strategy	Services
Avoiding homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eviction prevention rent assistance and legal services support people at risk of homelessness • Shelter diversion programs help people entering shelter or facing homelessness through one-time assistance, such as services or financial help
Safety on the Streets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach brings services and supports to people living unsheltered • Day centers offer hygiene services, storage, and access to services • Other services include hygiene and clean-up services, healthcare, and supplies distribution
Coordinated access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinated access is the main entry point for housing services • Various providers conduct assessments, which generate a vulnerability score used to prioritize participants on a single wait list
Rent assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rent assistance programs, such as rapid re-housing, housing vouchers, and Regional Long-Term Rent Assistance, help people better afford housing
Shelter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelters provide short-term stay options when permanent housing is not accessible, and include winter and seasonal shelters, severe weather shelters, and year-round 24/7 shelters
Housing access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for housing access includes support for partners who build affordable housing, housing placement and retention services, and workforce programs to increase incomes
Supportive housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent supportive housing uses long-term rent assistance and wrap-around services to support people with long-term disabilities experiencing or at risk of chronic homelessness • Recovery-oriented transitional housing offers temporary housing and supportive services

Source: Audit Services summary of information gathered during the audit.

Joint Office-funded programs serve adults, families, youth, and domestic violence and sexual assault survivors. Programs are generally managed by the Joint Office as “systems of care” based on these populations.

The number, locations, and types of shelters have expanded since 2015

Shelters are vital to protecting the basic health and safety of people experiencing homelessness. Shelters offer protection from the weather, a bed, and access to hygiene, food, and services. Although they play a key role in successful homelessness response systems, shelters alone do not solve homelessness.

The Joint Office is responsible for planning, coordinating, funding, and improving the shelter system in Multnomah County.

Our audit focused primarily on year-round shelters serving adults and families. The Joint Office also oversees or funds shelters that were not part of our review, including youth shelters, safety-focused shelters that serve survivors of domestic or sexual violence, severe weather shelters, temporary winter and seasonal overnight shelters, daytime resource centers, and some recuperative care and behavioral health-focused shelter beds.

The Joint Office funds a network of non-profit organizations to run shelter programs. Funding covers shelter operating expenses, including staff, maintenance, and supplies. Most Joint Office-funded shelters offer access to meals, showers, laundry, computers, clothing, and services. Some have shared spaces, like kitchens, meeting rooms, and clinics.

Figure 2. Some shelters have shared spaces, like kitchens, meeting rooms, and clinics



Source: Multnomah County; photo by Motoya Nakamura.

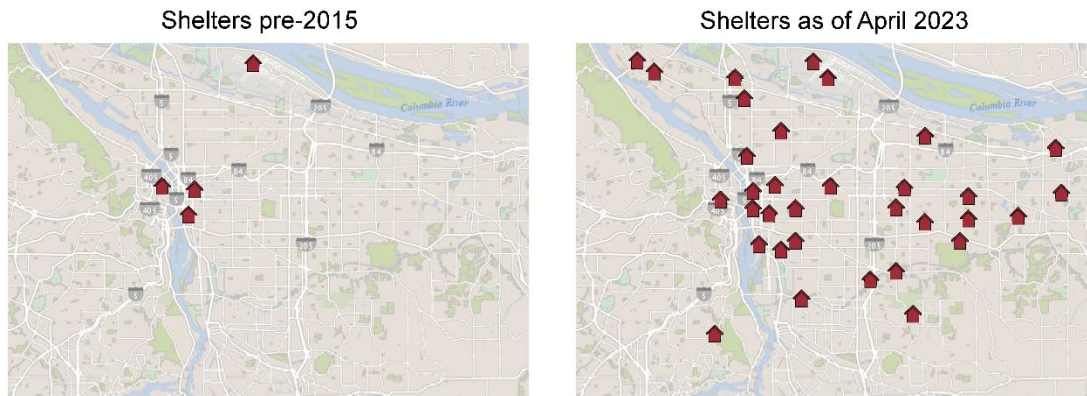
Several shelters serve people experiencing homelessness in our community without Joint Office funding. A few examples include City Team Ministries, Portland Rescue Mission, and My Father's House.

Shelter beds have more than tripled since the Joint Office was created. In 2015, Multnomah County reported 521 year-round shelter beds. By 2022, that number had increased to 2,053. More shelter is anticipated: the Joint Office budgeted for 3,220 shelter beds in Fiscal Year 2024.

The exact number of shelters can fluctuate, as new shelters open and existing shelters close. Capacity within individual shelters can also vary. Sometimes, unoccupied beds or units are not available to new participants due to repairs, staffing shortages, or holds for reservations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, indoor shelters with shared spaces, also known as congregate shelters, reduced occupancy to allow for physical distancing. As shelters return to pre-pandemic capacity levels, some have reported higher rates of critical incidents, like violence and overdoses. According to the Joint Office, many shelter providers have asked to reduce their capacities so they can offer more support to higher-needs participants.

The Joint Office has worked to expand shelter locations. In 2015, shelters were mostly concentrated in downtown Portland and the central eastside. Now, the Joint Office funds shelters across Multnomah County.

Figure 3. Shelter locations have expanded across Multnomah County since 2015



Source: Audit Services visualization of shelter locations based on the Joint Office's [interactive shelter map](#).

The Joint Office has also worked to reduce barriers to entry. Most Joint Office-funded shelters we reviewed are open 24 hours a day and use a reservation or referral system, instead of requiring participants to line up for entry. Many welcome pets. Although the Joint Office continues to fund alcohol- and drug-free options, the majority of shelters do not require participants to be clean and sober. Some adult shelters are single-gender (generally based on gender identity), while others serve all genders and some serve couples. Certain shelters focus on culturally-specific populations.

To better meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness, the Joint Office funds a range of shelter models. During our audit fieldwork, shelters in the adult and family systems included family shelters, congregate shelters, residential shelters, motel shelters, village-style alternative shelters, safe rest villages, and a safe park village.

Figure 4. The Joint Office funds a range of adult and family shelter models

Model	Who is served	Set up	Examples
Family shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent or guardian with one or more minor children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each family has their own room 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hope House • Lilac Meadows • Path Home Family Village • Rockwood Family Shelter
Congregate shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults • Some for individuals, some allow couples • Some prioritize veterans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple adults per room sleep on mats, cots, or bunkbeds, often in rooms divided into more private bays 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gresham Women’s Shelter • Laurelwood Center • Market Street • Walnut Park • Wy’East Men’s Shelter
Residential shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults • Participants are expected to abstain from alcohol and drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dorms or shared or single rooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clark Center • Doreen’s Place • Jean’s Place
Motel shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults • Priority for medically vulnerable adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motel room 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Banfield Motel Shelter • Chestnut Tree Inn • Do Good Stark Street • Jamii Program • Rodeway Motel
Alternative shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults • Intended to serve people who may not thrive in other shelter types 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleeping pods plus access to community spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beacon Village • Kenton Women’s Village • Parkrose Community Village • St. Johns Village
Safe Rest Villages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults in encampments • Two SRVs support culturally specific communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleeping pods plus access to community spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BIPOC Village • Menlo Park • Multnomah • Peninsula Crossing Trail • Queer Affinity Village • Reedway
RV Safe Park Village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People living in RVs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RVs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sunderland RV Safe Park Village

Source: Audit Services summary of information gathered during the audit.

COVID-19 and City efforts helped spur development of newer shelter models, including alternative shelters, motel shelters, and safe rest villages. As the pandemic forced congregate shelters to reduce capacity, many people experiencing homelessness were left outdoors. Homeless advocates, grassroots organizations, volunteer groups, the City, and the Joint Office teamed up to quickly create three temporary outdoor shelter villages on City property in spring 2020. Originally self-governing, the villages were later transitioned to Joint Office oversight and non-profit management. One village was later decommissioned, and the remaining sites—BIPOC Village and Queer Affinity Village—are now considered Safe Rest Villages.

Motel shelters were also born out the pandemic. Seven COVID-19 motel shelters were created to provide individual rooms and bathrooms for shelter participants who were highly vulnerable to the virus or needed to quarantine. Many motel shelters continue to operate, but according to Joint Office management, most are no longer focused on voluntary isolation.

In June 2021, the City announced plans to open six Safe Rest Villages to offer immediate safety off the streets to people living in encampments. The first sites opened in 2022. The City sited, developed, and funded capital costs for the villages, and the Joint Office funds operations and contracts with service providers to manage the sites. At the end of our audit fieldwork, the City was also spearheading development of additional alternative shelter sites across Portland, which were outside of our audit scope.

Shelters offer a range of services to help participants transition into housing

In addition to shelter facilities and operations, the Joint Office funds services to help shelter participants transition into permanent housing. Those services vary, depending on the needs of the individual participant. While some shelter participants can move back into permanent housing with limited services or short-term financial assistance, many face profound barriers and need much more support.

The housing services offered to participants in the adult and family systems also vary by shelter. The Joint Office does not fund housing assistance at the same level in each shelter and does not require shelters to furnish housing services in a specific manner—all providers do it differently.

At some shelters, the Joint Office funds on-site staff to deliver housing-related services. Staff can help participants with things like setting goals, searching for housing, applying for apartments or vouchers, compiling documents, and exploring income opportunities. Staff may also advocate for participants, since it can be hard to convince landlords to

rent to someone who has been homeless. One shelter provider explained that in addition to finding housing, they try to help participants obtain the tools and services needed to remain housed. Accordingly, their programming includes mental health services, financial instruction, tenant education classes, and wellness and recovery groups.

Joint Office funding for on-site housing staff varies. Some shelters have one case manager, while others have teams that may include resident advocates, case managers, housing specialists, outreach specialists, navigation specialists, peer support staff, and/or retention workers. Certain shelters also have wellness specialists to address health concerns and help connect participants with medical, mental health, and/or substance use disorder providers.

Everyone gets a case manager at some shelters, but at others, participants must wait to be connected to a case manager. Shelter providers we interviewed reported a range of staff-to-participant ratios, ranging from eight or nine participants per case manager or housing specialist to up to 25. A County survey indicated that caseloads for adult and family shelters ranged from six to over 37 participants per case manager. Caseloads can also vary due to staffing shortages.

Other shelters do not have the staff needed to provide housing services. Instead, mobile “in-reach” teams help connect their participants to housing opportunities. The in-reach teams offer housing assistance at various shelters and include staff from culturally specific, domestic violence, and behavioral health providers.

At family shelters, on-site staff offer housing placement, retention, and other services to help families leave homelessness and remain housed. Shelter participants may also receive services from a multi-agency Mobile Housing Team that serves families as they move to the top of the family housing waitlist (in and outside of shelters). The Team consists of staff from several community partners, most of which are culturally-specific providers.

Many shelters have partnerships with community organizations to offer additional services, such as mental health and wellness programs, addiction services, legal assistance, domestic violence support, and veteran’s services.

Audit Results A: Shelter

The Joint Office is charged with planning, funding, coordinating, and improving the shelter system. It has access to a wealth of staff, provider, and stakeholder expertise, and data about the system and its users—and now, more money than ever before that could be used to fund effective approaches. But, we found that the shelters it funded

were generally full and had long waitlists, could be hard to access, and only sometimes helped participants move to permanent housing.

The shelter system should offer immediate shelter options for people experiencing homelessness

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness and U. S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, a community's shelter system should offer immediate access to safe and decent shelter to anyone who needs it. To do so:

1. The community needs enough shelter to meet the demand; and
2. Access to shelter should be simple.

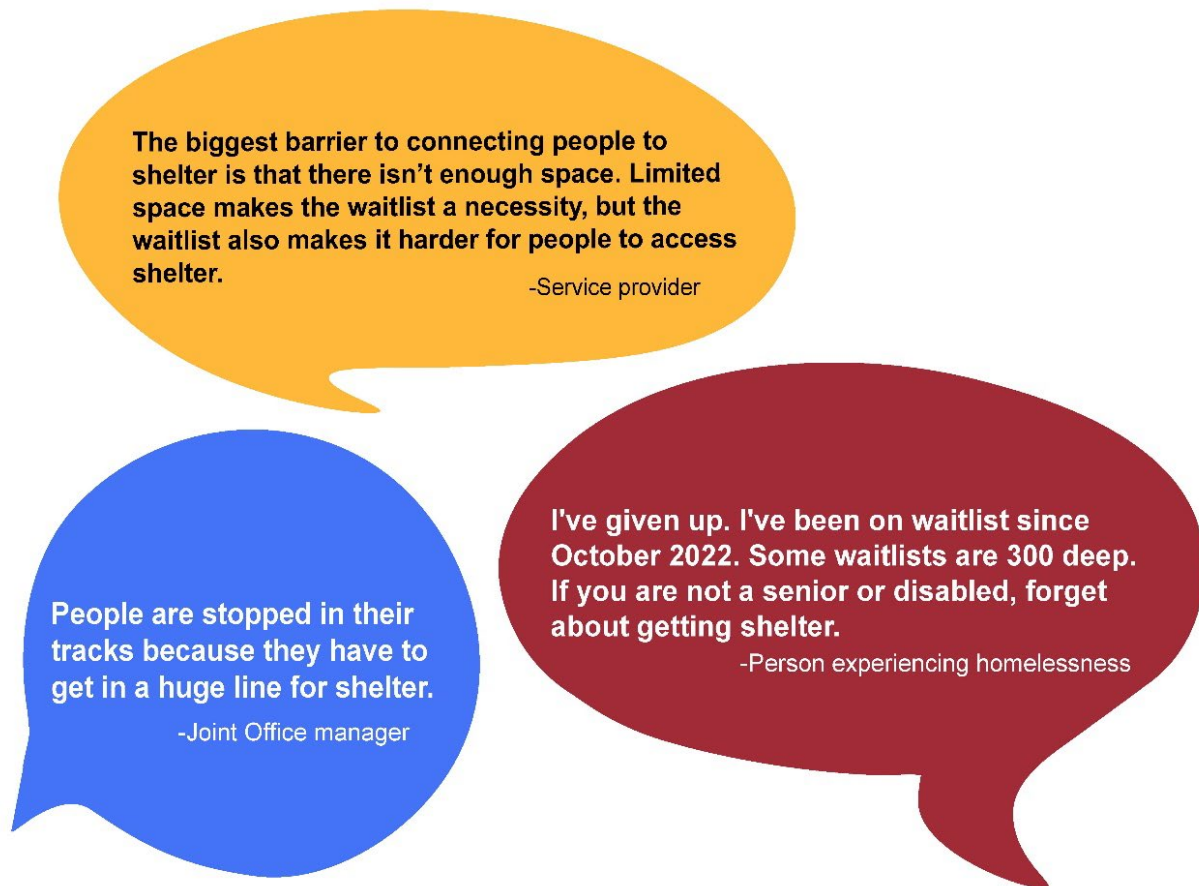
If people experiencing homelessness do not have quick and easy access to shelter, they may remain on the streets—without sanitation or protection from extreme weather and vulnerable to violence. They are also more likely to be criminalized. Continued homelessness may make it harder for people to ultimately transition to housing. There is a risk of trauma if people are unable to access shelter when they need it, and a risk that they will give up on trying to access the homeless response system altogether.

“There is just not enough shelter to fulfill the need”

The Joint Office has not created a shelter system that has enough supply to meet the demand. During our audit, shelters were generally full and waitlists were long. For example, as of spring 2023, the Joint Office funded four family shelters, which offered private rooms for a total of about 100 families. 211info, a community resource information center that coordinates entry into family shelters, reported that there were 300 to 350 families on the family shelter waitlist and wait times ranged from one to six months.

Adult shelter providers we interviewed in spring 2023 reported that waitlists ranged from about 20 people to over 100 per site. According to one shelter manager, it usually took months for someone to get into their shelter from the waitlist. Another shelter manager said the wait depended on a person's age, health concerns, and other priority criteria; one person could be on the waitlist for 30 days, while someone else could wait a year.

Figure 5. During interviews, a service provider, a person experiencing homelessness, and a Joint Office manager noted the lack of shelter



Source: Interviews with a service provider, a person experiencing homelessness, and a Joint Office manager.

During interviews, service providers, people experiencing homelessness, and a Joint Office manager noted the lack of shelter:

- People are stopped in their tracks because they have to get in a huge line for shelter.
 - Joint Office manager
- I've given up. I've been on waitlist since October 2022. Some waitlists are 300 deep. If you are not a senior or disabled, forget about getting shelter.
 - Person experiencing homelessness
- There is just not enough shelter to fulfill the need.
 - Service provider
- So currently I'm trying to get into one shelter and I'm on a wait list. So yeah, in a wheelchair on a wait list, you're like, that's a little trepidatious.
 - Person experiencing homelessness

- The biggest barrier to connecting people to shelter is that there isn't enough space. Limited space makes the waitlist a necessity, but the waitlist also makes it harder for people to access shelter.
 - Service provider
- I'm currently on a waitlist. Accessibility is poor.
 - Person experiencing homelessness
- I go to Transition Projects, but they just put me on a list usually.
 - Person experiencing homelessness
- There is not enough shelter space. Everyone hates shelters, but the need is great.
 - Service provider

Homelessness response agencies should use data to right-size the number of shelter beds available and the staff needed to support them. To determine the right amount of shelter beds, agencies should analyze the community's current shelter supply, the population already experiencing homelessness, the flow of people entering the homelessness system, and data about shelter stays, exits, and outcomes.

During our audit, Joint Office management reported relying on a combination of information to make recommendations and decisions about shelters. Data from the Homeless Management Information System and Point in Time Counts was considered, along with funder requirements and regional partner priorities. Location and site availability were also factors. The Joint Office applied an equity lens to decisions, and said that qualitative information, such as stakeholder surveys and feedback from advisory bodies, service providers, and staff, was also considered. But, the Joint Office did not have a systematic process for evaluating this information to identify the unmet need for shelter, and was not able to right-size shelter supply to meet the demand.

There was an increased focus on expanding shelter at the end of our audit. Following political and Joint Office leadership and governance changes—and a fall 2023 consultant report that found an unclear decision-making structure and identified the need for a shelter strategy—the County and City worked to design a more coordinated and structured approach to addressing homelessness. The County and City released a draft Homelessness Response Action Plan in March 2024, after our initial audit report had been drafted. Among other objectives, the Plan proposed new governance and accountability structures and development of 1,000 additional short-term shelter beds.

The Joint Office also announced a Community Sheltering Strategy in March 2024. A work group consisting of Joint Office staff, service providers, and staff from the cities of Portland and Gresham, reporting to a Steering Committee of City and County Commissioners, developed the plan. It outlines goals and strategies for improving the availability of shelter and for ensuring that shelter creates pathways to permanent

housing. The plan seeks to increase shelter supply by an additional 505 beds by the end of 2025, including 250 beds in the adult system and 150 family system units. To support its implementation, the Joint Office’s proposed Fiscal Year 2025 budget funds 90 beds in the adult system, including culturally specific shelter for LGBTQIA2S+ adults, and 90 family units.

The Joint Office’s data analysis and evaluation capacity has also improved through:

- **Staffing:** The Joint Office was staffed with just two data analysts in 2020, but had three in November 2021, and four as of April 2023. Joint Office management reported that they are requesting six additional positions for their data and research and evaluation teams in 2025.
- **Data Infrastructure:** The Joint Office reported building a data infrastructure over the last few years to better track, report, and analyze data.
- **Commitment:** The Joint Office joined [Built for Zero](#), a national movement that helps communities build data-driven homelessness response systems. Other improvements have included work toward development of an evaluation framework and efforts to take over administrative responsibility for the Homeless Management Information System from the Portland Housing Bureau.

This expanded data analysis and evaluation capacity may enhance the Joint Office’s understanding of the need for shelter and how people flow into and out of the shelter system—and inform efforts to right-size shelter supply to better meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

Joint Office has not created a shelter system that is easy to access

Access to shelter should be simple: people who need shelter should not have to go through multiple, duplicative entry processes. We found that a lack of shelter was the key reason people could not access shelter when they needed it, but the process for finding an available bed was also a barrier.

“It’s not that people don’t know about what to access or can’t access shelter readily. It’s that there’s no availability.”

— Joint Office staff

A reservation or a referral is required to enter a Joint Office-funded shelter. This means that a person cannot just walk up to a shelter and get a spot. Stated reasons for this approach include equity considerations (waiting in line may be challenging for some

people, including people with a disability) and good neighbor agreements with nearby residents and businesses that outline community expectations for shelters.

Our audit focused on family and adult shelters, which have different reservation processes. In the family system, there is one point of access: [211info](#). Families seeking shelter must contact 211 to be put on a waitlist. Families can contact 211 in a variety of ways, including by phone, text, and email. 211 has bilingual employees and can use third-party interpreters. After a family contacts 211, 211 collects information and connects them with a navigator. When there is an opening at a shelter, the navigator is responsible for coordinating the family's entry, if they can be located and still need a space.

Unlike the family system, there is no centralized reservation process in the adult system. As a result, there are many different ways to access adult shelter, but no one place to find real-time information about available spots or make a reservation.

In the adult system, individual providers have developed their own priorities and strategies for managing demand. 211 oversees the waitlist for one adult shelter and can offer contact information for other options, but does not track their availability. Many adult shelters must be contacted individually for a reservation or to join a waitlist, though Transition Projects has a centralized intake process for their congregate shelters.

Adults can also access some shelters through a referral. Referrals can happen in several different ways. For example, some shelters accept referrals from community partners, either for access to dedicated referral beds or to be added to a waitlist. To enter a motel shelter, a person must be referred from a congregate shelter. This process originated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when congregate shelter participants who were medically vulnerable or tested positive for the virus could be referred to a motel shelter.

A set-aside shelter bed program launched in April 2022 coordinates shelter bed referrals from outreach workers and partner agencies, such as Portland Police Bureau, Portland Street Response, and Portland Park Rangers. Partner agencies can refer people camping in public spaces to approximately 100 beds in several different congregate shelters, often with same-day access. The program receives Joint Office funding and is part of a City effort to respond to and improve access to services for people living in encampments. The set-aside program has many benefits, but also reported challenges, including:

- The program skips over people on waitlists in favor of people who are camping and may be less interested in shelter.
- The program reserves beds for many people who do not show up.

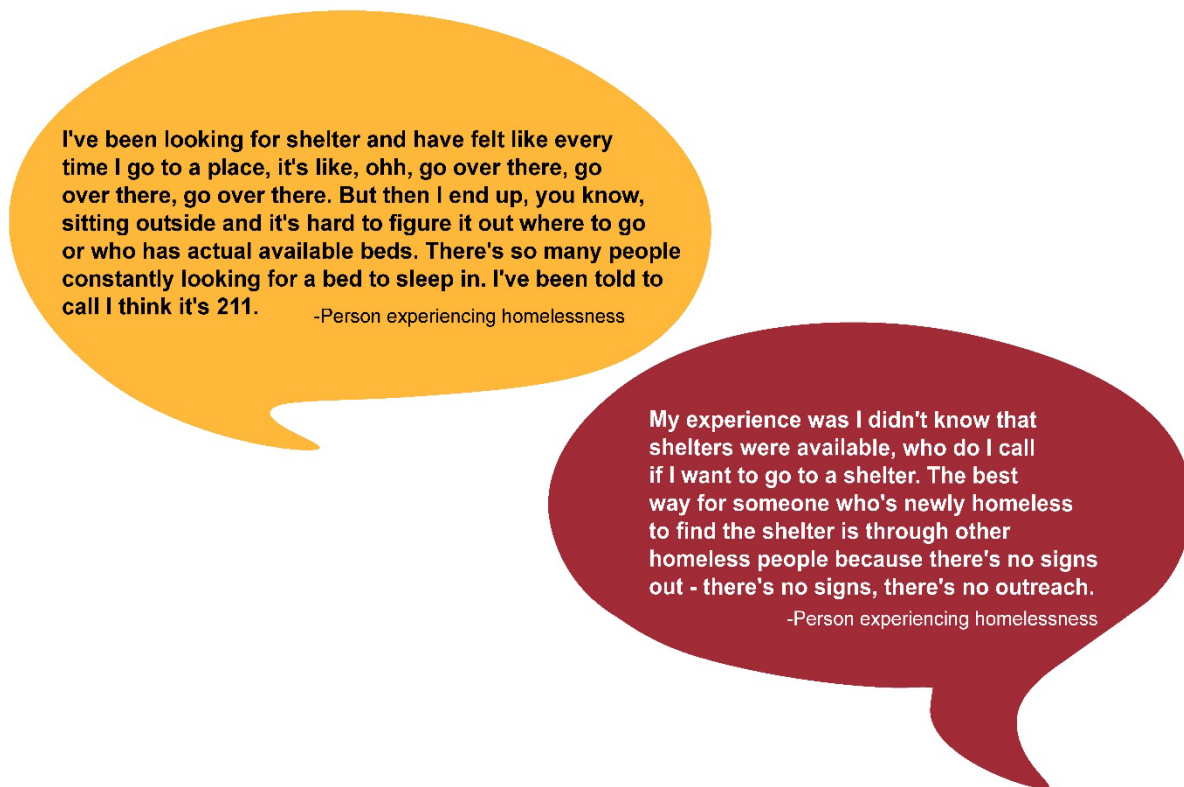
- The program is limited to congregate shelters, which are not a good option for some people who do not feel comfortable sleeping in a room with other people.
- The program is limited to specific referral partners.
- The program’s staff responsible for making referrals have limited availability.
- The program has impacted shelter operations because:
 - Some people who accepted program beds left shelter quickly, creating more work for shelter staff.
 - Some people who have been referred to program beds have needed a level of physical and/or mental health care that the shelter was not equipped to provide.
 - Some people have accepted referrals to alcohol- and drug-free shelters to get off the street, but were not ready for a clean and sober environment.

Entry to some Safe Rest Villages requires a referral from an outreach worker. The City manages the referral process, which coordinates with the set-aside program on availability.

Offering several different ways to access shelters is a positive if there is “no wrong door” to entry. But, the lack of shelter availability means there is often no right door either. For adults, having to contact multiple providers to try to find an open bed could be time-consuming and frustrating—and even more so if shelters don’t answer the phone, have limited intake hours, or can only offer a spot on a long waitlist. The process may be especially challenging for people in crisis, who already lack faith in the system, don’t have a phone, or speak a language other than English. And, it is not just difficult for people experiencing homelessness: staff from agencies that work with people experiencing homelessness told us it was hard for them to find shelter for people they served.

In collaboration with [Street Roots](#), we surveyed people experiencing homelessness to ask how they access shelter when they need it. Many people said they used an agency to find shelter, such as Transition Projects, 211, or Street Roots. Others said they learned about shelter through word-of-mouth. Several people reported success accessing shelters that are not funded by the Joint Office and do not use a reservation system.

Figure 6. People experiencing homelessness shared their perspectives on how to access shelter



Source: Interviews with people experiencing homelessness.

People experiencing homelessness shared the following perspectives on how to access shelter:

- I usually I go with those little pamphlets that they hand out—those Street Roots resource books—and I'll go through depending on which county I'm staying in. And I'll try to call and see if see if they have room. So most of the time they don't.
- I went to the Transition Projects that's down here or call 211 or stuff like that. But sometimes it helps, sometimes it doesn't.
- No idea. 211 didn't help.
- Transition Projects put us in touch with their shelter coordinator who got us into a temporary shelter the same day and a long term 24 hour shelter the next day!
- I've been looking for shelter and have felt like every time I go to a place, it's like, 'Ohh, go over there, go over there, go over there.' But then I end up, you know, sitting outside and it's hard to figure it out where to go or who has actual available beds. There's so many people constantly looking for a bed to sleep in. I've been told to call I think it's 211.
- My experience was I didn't know that shelters were available, who do I call if I want to go to a shelter. The best way for someone who's newly homeless to find

the shelter is through other homeless people because there's no signs out - there's no signs, there's no outreach.

- Go get a referral. Hope they take me in.

Given the shortage of shelter beds, streamlining entry has not been a top priority for the Joint Office. Without more shelter, a better access system would just move more people onto waitlists. Still, the Joint Office reported commissioning a study to assess the benefits of a coordinated entry process for adult shelter and a partnership with the City to work toward a shelter bed availability tool.

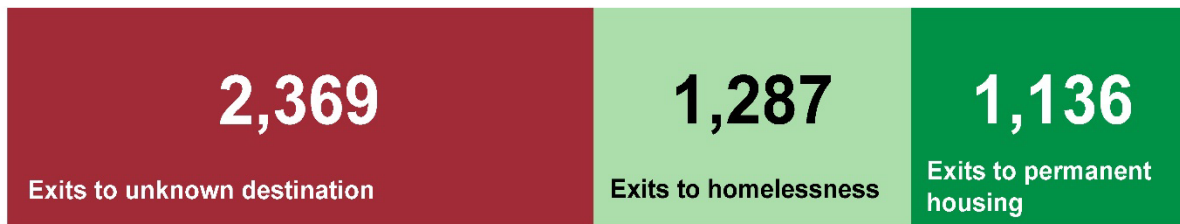
Shelters should create effective pathways to permanent housing

Beyond offering a safe place to stay, shelters should create effective pathways to permanent housing. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, “Shelter should be part of a process of getting someone housed, **not** a destination.” By helping participants quickly re-connect to housing, shelters should also support flow through the homelessness response system and allow more people to be served with existing shelter beds.

If shelters are not able to help participants successfully transition into housing, there is a risk that they will exit to homelessness instead of a home. There is also a risk that shelter stays will be longer and that spots will not open up for the next person who needs a bed.

Joint Office-reported data shows that shelters helped some participants move to permanent housing. According to the Joint Office, in Fiscal Year 2022-23, a quarter of adult, family, and youth shelter exits were to a permanent housing destination (1,136 people). However, there were more exits to homelessness (1,287 people) and the destination for over half of the exits was unknown (2,369 people).

Figure 7. There were more exits from shelters to homelessness than to permanent housing in Fiscal Year 2022-23



Source: Audit Services visualization of Joint Office data.

This data indicates that Joint Office-funded shelters sometimes helped participants move to permanent housing. But, these numbers alone do not tell us whether the shelters were an effective gateway to permanent housing. To help us make that determination, we looked to guidance from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, which recommends that to gauge—and increase—the effectiveness of shelters:

- Goals should be identified;
- Performance should be measured and reported; and
- Data should be evaluated and used to improve performance outcomes.

At a minimum, the National Alliance suggests examining:

- The percent of participants who exit shelter to housing;
- The average length of shelter stays; and
- Returns to homelessness after placement in permanent housing.

Accordingly, we set out to assess the effectiveness of Joint Office-funded shelters by comparing their performance in these areas to identified goals.

Some housing outcome targets for shelters missing, inconsistent, or not realistic

The goal of a shelter should be clear from the start to guide its design, operations, and allocation of resources. Realistic performance targets should be set to help communicate expectations, ensure that everyone is working to achieve desired outcomes, and allow progress to be measured.

“An emergency shelter will get the outcomes that it is designed for.”
— National Alliance to End Homelessness

We found that housing outcome targets for Joint Office-funded shelters were sometimes missing. For example, during our audit, no targets had been set for overall exits to permanent housing for the shelter system as a whole. Without a target, we could not determine whether 25% of shelter exits to permanent housing meant that shelters were an effective gateway to housing, or whether the exit rate met Joint Office or elected leaders' expectations. In addition, no system-wide targets had been set for length of shelter stays or returns to homelessness.

The new shelter strategy developed at the conclusion of our audit established several goals for the shelter system by the end of 2025, including:

- Shelter or house 2,699 people (half of the people experiencing unsheltered homelessness on the January 2024 by-name list)
- Increase exits from shelter to permanent housing by 15% across the shelter system. With this increase, the goal will be for 41% of adult shelter participants and 71% of family shelter participants to exit to permanent housing. The strategy also sets new exit goals for adult shelter by shelter type:
 - 28% from congregate shelter
 - 44% from motel shelters
 - 59% from alternative shelters

To help achieve these goals, the shelter strategy proposed developing capacity to support shelter participant needs, such as:

- Shelter case management staffing ratios of 20:1
- Funding for housing placement out of shelter
- Increased access to permanent supportive housing, rapid rehousing, and behavioral health supports for shelter participants

We also examined Joint Office goal-setting for individual shelters. The Joint Office included performance targets for shelters in its Fiscal Year 2022-23 contracts with providers. In general, targets focused on shelter occupancy, number of clients served, length of stay, exits to permanent housing, and/or housing retention. The Joint Office did not include the same measures in all contracts, however, and often omitted the measures recommended by the National Alliance. More than a quarter of adult shelters were missing exit to permanent housing targets and about half of adult shelters were missing length of stay targets. Most contracts did include targets for the percent of households placed and remaining in housing after six and 12 months. Those measures are related to but the flipside of returns to homelessness.

When the Joint Office did set housing outcome performance targets for individual shelters, we found inconsistencies. For example, while housing exit targets were usually based on the percent of participants exiting to permanent housing, some were based on

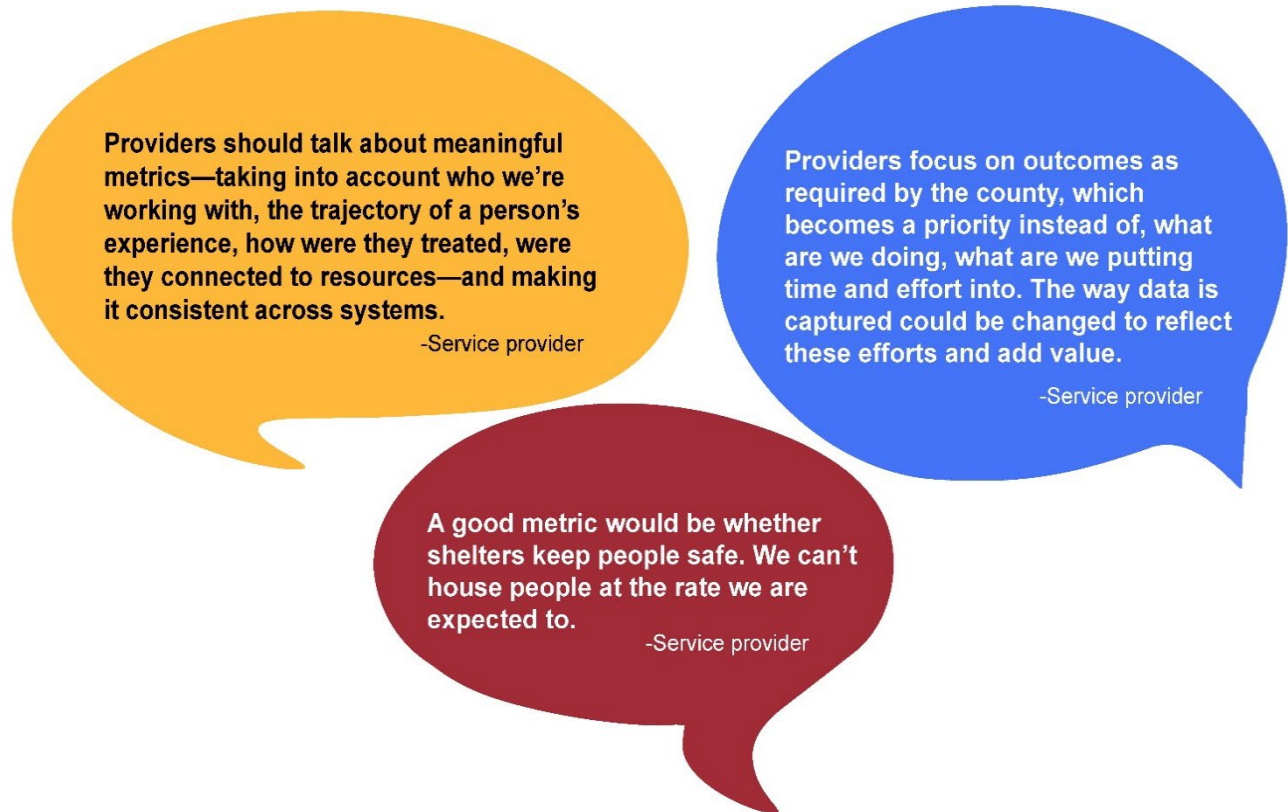
the number of housing placements. Using different performance measures makes it difficult to compare outcomes across shelters.

Performance targets for exits to permanent housing ranged considerably, from 10% to 90%. Targets were often consistent among shelter types—but not always. For example, the exit target was 90% for all family shelters, 50% for all motel shelters, and 30% for all alcohol- and drug-free shelters. However, the target for congregate shelters was either 10% or 30%.

The Joint Office consistently set length of stay targets for family shelters at four to six months. In contrast, its length of stay targets for adult shelters were either 30 days or 60 days. The short length of stay targets for adult shelters do not seem realistic if the goal is for participants to exit to permanent housing. The Joint Office did not measure how long participants who exited shelter to housing stayed in shelter, but adult shelter providers we interviewed estimated that, on average, they stayed about three months to one year.

The Joint Office also set consistent targets for housing retention for shelter participants who exit to permanent housing. When contracts included retention targets, the targets were: 80% of households remaining in permanent housing after six months, and 70% remaining after 12 months.

Figure 8. Some service providers questioned performance measures used by the Joint Office



Source: Interviews with service providers.

Some shelter providers questioned the performance measures used by the Joint Office:

- We’re given metrics to meet, but they seem made up. I don’t see a purpose for what the Joint Office is asking. The Joint Office has a goal, but just throws a number at us.
- Providers focus on outcomes as required by the county, which becomes a priority instead of, what are we doing, what are we putting time and effort into. The way data is captured could be changed to reflect these efforts and add value.
- There are a significant number of families requiring permanent supportive housing for individuals in recovery. The housing options that would meet their needs have waitlists that are too long for them to find housing within the four- to six-month shelter stay target.
- A good metric would be whether shelters keep people safe. We can’t house people at the rate we are expected to.
- Occupancy should be the only measure required. If more is required, you will be forcing people into things. Only an occupancy rate allows people to just be sheltered, because initially, that is what we want—people should be in a place where things can happen.

- Providers should talk about meaningful metrics—taking into account who we’re working with, the trajectory of a person’s experience, how were they treated, were they connected to resources—and making it consistent across systems.

We recognize the challenge in establishing consistent and realistic performance measures across a range of shelters. Serving families is different from serving adults, and the adult system includes a variety of shelter models that serve different populations, with different needs and barriers. This is further complicated by the fact that some shelters do not control the housing services their participants receive: outside teams deliver housing services at some shelters, and many shelter participants need the extra support provided through permanent supportive housing, which has a system-wide waitlist and entry process.

The Joint Office said they work with providers to establish performance measures that are customized to the provider; in other words, what success looks like for them. But, the Joint Office also attributed some of the variability in performance measures to having different contract managers working on different providers’ contracts. The Joint Office acknowledged the need for more consistency, and said that reviewing and setting goals was part of the shelter strategy work it began in October 2023.

Joint Office improved its measurement and reporting of shelter housing outcomes

After performance targets are set, progress should be measured and reported. Early in our audit, the Joint Office did not measure or report on shelter efforts to transition participants into housing in a systematic way. As our audit progressed, the Joint Office improved its measurement and reporting of shelter housing outcomes. For example, since Fiscal Year 2022, the Joint Office has measured and reported data on the number of people who exited the shelter system to housing and then returned to homeless services, including by race and ethnicity. The Joint Office also said it measured length of shelter stays and exits from shelter to permanent housing, on an ad hoc and quarterly basis, for the shelter system overall and for certain types of shelter.

In November 2023, the Joint Office developed an internal shelter dashboard to better track housing outcomes. The dashboard uses Fiscal Year 2022-23 data from the Homeless Management Information System. It shows shelter exit and average length of stay information for the shelter system overall, as well as for different shelter types, individual shelters, and demographic groups. Joint Office management said they will use the dashboard for strategic planning, shelter monitoring, and streamlining internal processes. Management explained that the Joint Office was able to develop the

dashboard due to a recent expansion in data team staffing, and noted that they are using a new data storage system that will also improve reporting capacity.

A separate [City dashboard](#) reports outcomes for Safe Rest Village participants, including exits to permanent housing and length of stay, by site and for all sites combined, along with demographic information. The dashboard is required reporting for American Rescue Plan Act funding for the sites.

Few shelters met exit to permanent housing or length of stay performance targets, but many met housing retention targets

The Joint Office's internal shelter dashboard does not include performance targets. To assess whether shelters were meeting the targets the Joint Office set for them, we compared the targets included in provider contracts and reports with dashboard performance data. We found that for Fiscal Year 2022-23, when the Joint Office set exit to permanent housing or length of stay targets for shelters and reported on their performance, few shelters met their targets:

- Of the 18 shelters that had percent of exit to permanent housing targets, only three met them. Of those:
 - One was an alternative shelter that exited 86% of participants to permanent housing, far exceeding its 30% target.
 - The other two were congregate shelters that exited 10% or 11% of participants to permanent housing, barely meeting their 10% targets.
- Of the 14 shelters that had length of stay targets, only five met them. Of those:
 - Four were family shelters that had average stays ranging from 85 to 123 days (below their four- to six-month targets).
 - The other was an alcohol- and drug-free shelter that met its 60 days or less target with an average length of stay of 46 days.

When the Joint Office included a housing retention performance measure in shelter provider contracts, it consistently set the target at 80% of households remaining in permanent housing after six months, and 70% after 12 months. The Joint Office's internal shelter dashboard, which reported Fiscal Year 2022-23 data, did not include this measure at the end of our audit period (not enough time had passed to yield data). However, the Joint Office's [quarterly reports](#) show a related measure: returns to homelessness services after 15 months. Just over 30% of people who exited shelter to permanent housing in Fiscal Year 2022 returned to homeless services within 15 months. This outcome is close to the 70% retention target the Joint Office set for many individual shelters.

Increased focus on evaluation and improvement steps may strengthen shelter housing outcomes

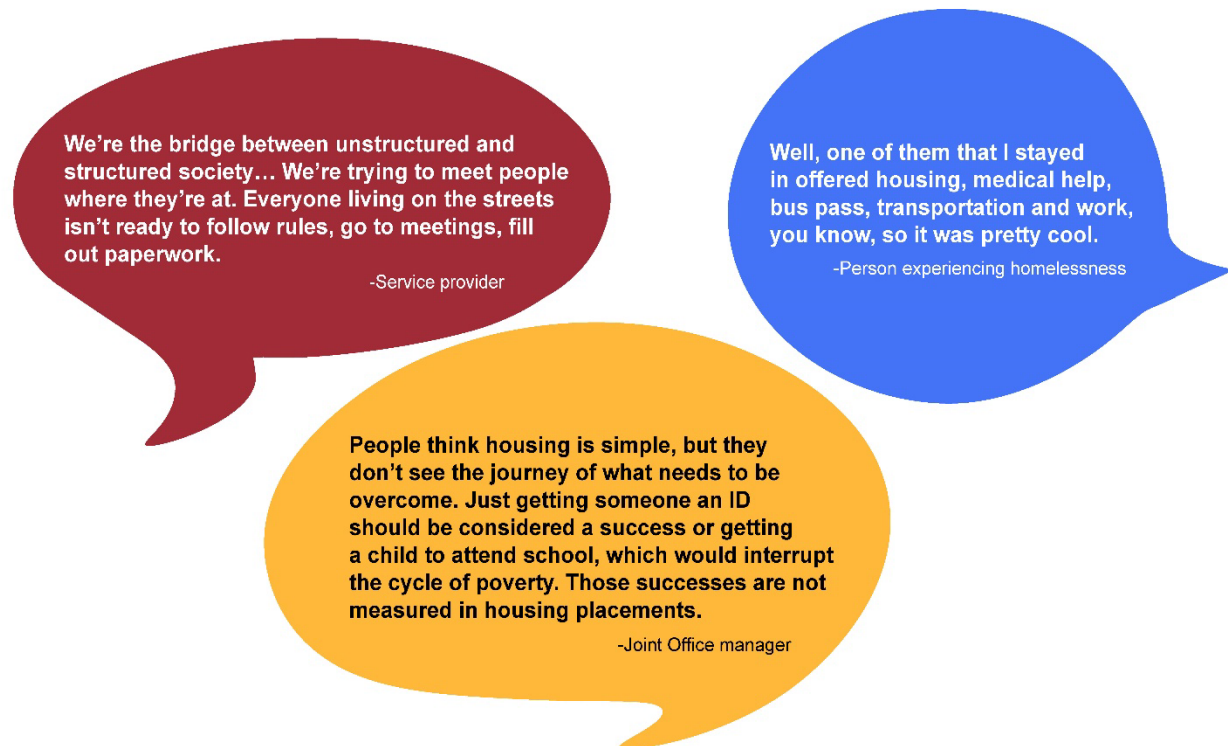
Data about the housing outcomes achieved by shelters should be evaluated and used in decision-making and accountability efforts. It should also be used to identify successful strategies to replicate and improve upon efforts that failed to meet expectations.

Early in our audit, Joint Office efforts to evaluate shelter data in order to improve housing outcomes for shelter participants were limited. The Joint Office reported evaluating data to increase shelter utilization and improve policies and practices in the family system. The Joint Office also evaluated budget data to identify where unspent funds could be shifted to better support shelters.

The Joint Office has made recent improvements that have the potential to strengthen shelter housing outcomes. For example, the Joint Office developed a process to ensure that contract management staff conduct a comprehensive review of service provider performance at least annually. During the review, staff are directed to assess whether providers met performance targets, and if not, document needed follow-up actions. While still new, these reviews may help the Joint Office better identify successful strategies and take steps to improve the shelter housing outcomes that are not meeting expectations. The Joint Office also highlighted increasing collaboration between their data and program teams, which may enhance its ability to use data to identify strategies that have—and have not—been successful at helping shelter participants find and retain permanent housing.

In addition, the Joint Office reported that the shelter work it initiated in October 2023 would include a review of housing outcomes and goals to improve them. The Joint Office said it was compiling information to help it better understand which shelter services were contributing to positive housing outcomes. It also said it commissioned an alternative shelter study to examine whether this model is effective at housing participants.

Figure 9. A service provider, a person experiencing homelessness, and a Joint Office manager shared their perspectives on shelters and housing services



Source: Interviews with a service provider, a person experiencing homelessness, and a Joint Office manager.

Service providers, people experiencing homelessness, and Joint Office managers shared their perspectives on shelters and housing services:

- We're the bridge between unstructured and structured society... We're trying to meet people where they're at. Everyone living on the streets isn't ready to follow rules, go to meetings, fill out paperwork.
 - Service provider
- Well, one of them that I stayed in offered housing, medical help, bus pass, transportation and work, you know, so it was pretty cool.
 - Person experiencing homelessness
- Shelters have to meet three goals. First, they have to provide equitable services. Second, they have to meet immediate safety needs (access to hygiene and food), and finally, they have to serve as a springboard to housing.
 - Joint Office manager
- My experience has been all bad. I've been for 1/2 year now with three different shelters. I have not seen, not once - the sad story - don't know nobody who got an apartment yet.
 - Person experiencing homelessness

- People think housing is simple, but they don't see the journey of what needs to be overcome. Just getting someone an ID should be considered a success or getting a child to attend school, which would interrupt the cycle of poverty. Those successes are not measured in housing placements.
 - Joint Office manager
- Lots of people wait years for housing; some are in shelter for years. They need services where they are at until they can get where they're going.
 - Service provider
- Using a shelter never lasted long because I never felt like staying there was helping me progress to either transitional housing or permanent housing. It just felt like, ohh, I had like one night off the street, but I didn't even get sleep in here because people in here are kind of on edge.
 - Person experiencing homelessness

For many people experiencing homelessness, the journey back into permanent housing is not an easy one. Shelters can offer stability, support, and connections to housing and other services. Now that the Joint Office has more capacity to measure and report shelter data, it should use that data to identify and build on successful strategies and improve efforts that have not lived up to expectations. This work can help the Joint Office continually improve the shelter system and help providers transition more participants into permanent housing as quickly as possible.

Recommendations A: Shelter

To help ensure that it funds the right number and types of shelter, the Joint Office should:

1. Develop a systematic, data-informed process to analyze the need for shelter, the current inventory of shelter units, and existing gaps.
2. Use the analysis to develop strategies for right-sizing shelter supply based on need. The Joint Office should adjust strategies over time as the system becomes more effective.

To improve shelter access, the Joint Office should:

3. Assess referral processes for the set-aside shelter bed program, including its impact on shelter operations.

Without expanded shelter supply, it may be difficult to improve shelter access. Once shelter supply is expanded, the Joint Office should:

4. Evaluate shelter access to understand where people encounter barriers to finding a shelter that meets their needs.
5. Use the evaluation to develop strategies to improve access to shelter. One strategy might be to develop a source of real-time, system-wide information about available shelter beds.

To help ensure that shelters create effective pathways to permanent housing, the Joint Office should:

6. Establish consistent, realistic, and meaningful housing outcome performance targets for shelters.
7. Measure and report shelter progress toward meeting their housing outcome performance targets.
8. Use the data to evaluate shelters' housing outcomes and develop strategies to increase successful placements from shelter to permanent housing.

Audit Results B: Racial Equity

Joint Office designed programs to help reduce racial disparities, but disparities persist

Homelessness disproportionately impacts people of color in our community. According to the 2022 Point in Time Count, people of color were overrepresented in Multnomah County's homeless population: people who were Black, Indigenous, and other people of color represented just over 34% of Multnomah County's population, but were 39% of the people counted as experiencing homelessness. Rates of homelessness in communities of color are likely higher than the data showed.

Some communities of color are more acutely overrepresented in the homeless population. The Joint Office reported that while Black people were 7% of Multnomah County's overall population in 2023, they were 17% of the homeless population. American Indian, Alaska Native, and Indigenous people were similarly overrepresented: they made up just 3% of the County's population, but 13% of its homeless population.

Structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism have created housing, economic, educational, and health barriers for people of color that can make it difficult to obtain and sustain stable, affordable housing. The ongoing impacts of racism have pushed people of color into homelessness at disproportionate rates and make it harder to escape.

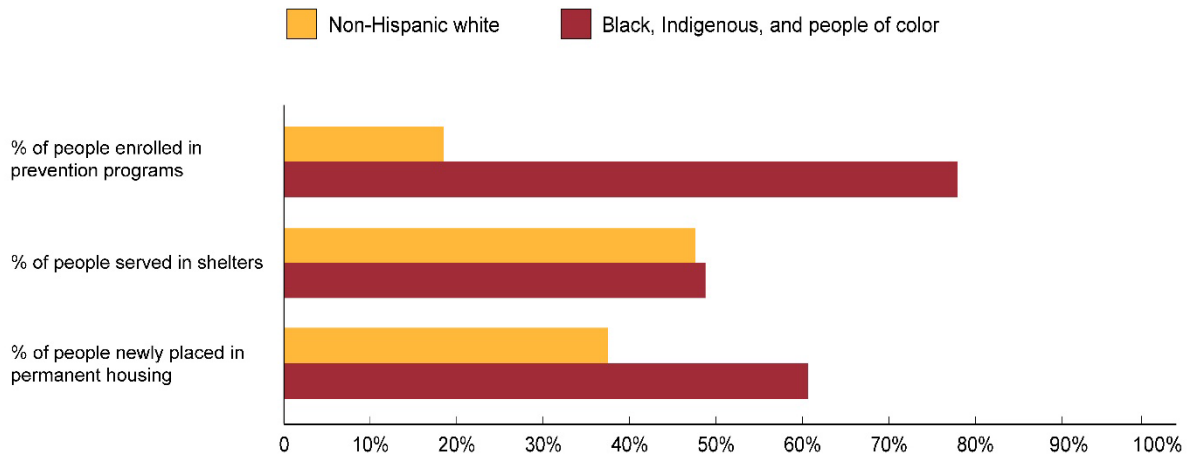
In some cases, homelessness response systems can further marginalize people of color who are experiencing homelessness. For example, policies, practices, or messaging may perpetuate inequities, and fear or distrust of providers whose staff and clients are predominantly white might keep some people of color from seeking services. Other barriers to accessing services could include racism, English-only access points, rigid eligibility requirements, and discriminatory practices.

For these reasons, our audit also examined whether Joint Office programs were designed to reduce racial disparities. We found that overall, they were. The Joint Office declared that it prioritized eliminating racial disparities, made achieving racial equity a core goal, and implemented equity-focused strategies to achieve these objectives. The Joint Office's racial equity strategies followed many best practices recommended by the National Alliance to End Homelessness and U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development:

- Involve those who are most impacted in decision-making.
- Disaggregate population and system performance data by race, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics. Use data to identify the greatest disparities.
- Understand how aspects of the homeless system contribute to racial disparities.
- Assess coordinated entry processes to understand how they may contribute to racial disparities.
- Improve internal racial equity practices, such as by identifying a staff person or team responsible for racial equity work and training staff on race equity.
- Develop strategies (policies, programs, and practices) to advance racial equity within the homelessness system.
- Monitor the impact that decisions and programs have on different populations, including through disaggregated data and feedback from those with lived experience.

According to Joint Office data, in 2023, more people who identified as Black, Indigenous, and people of color were served in Joint Office-funded prevention, shelter, and permanent housing programs than people who identified as non-Hispanic white.

Figure 10. Joint Office data shows that more people who identified as Black, Indigenous, and people of color than people who identified as white were served in prevention, shelter, and permanent housing programs in Fiscal Year 2023



Source: Audit Services visualization of Joint Office data reported in its [Fiscal Year 2023 Q4 report](#).

Nevertheless, there is more to be done. Ultimately, some communities of color continue to experience disproportionate rates of homelessness in our community—and for some, homelessness is increasing. Multnomah County’s 2023 Point in Time Count showed that homelessness among people who were Black, Latino, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander increased more than among people who were white.

According to best practices, where racial disparities persist, homelessness systems should refine their decisions, policies, and programs to eliminate the disparities and continue to monitor to see if inequities persist. Some interviewees made similar suggestions during our audit. They said the Joint Office should do more to understand outcomes by race and evaluate how well its funded programs, including culturally specific programs, are addressing racial disparities. They also highlighted the need for additional culturally-responsive services and service providers, and for the Joint Office to examine whether successful practices by culturally-specific providers could be employed by other providers. Examining and refining its strategies for addressing racial disparities are key steps as the Joint Office works to achieve its equity goals.

Recommendations B: Racial Equity

To further its efforts to reduce and address racial disparities in homelessness, the Joint Office should:

9. Continue to design programs to reduce racial disparities.
10. Evaluate the performance of its racial equity efforts to learn more about where there are gaps and continually monitor and adjust strategies as needed to better achieve racial equity goals.

The Multnomah County Chair, Chief Operating Officer, and Joint Office of Homeless Services agreed with our recommendations

We provided this report to the Joint Office of Homeless Services and County Officials for their official response as they are charged with governance of the Joint Office. The Multnomah County Chair, Chief Operating Officer, and Joint Office of Homeless Services agreed with our recommendations. View their joint audit response at the end of this report.

How we did our work

The intergovernmental agreement between the City and County establishing the Joint Office of Homeless Services authorizes both the City Auditor and County Auditor to conduct audits and investigations of the Joint Office.

Our audit objective was to determine whether the Joint Office of Homeless Services assesses the performance of the shelter system, evaluates for racial disparities and other outcomes, and uses that information to adjust programs. Our sub-objectives were to determine whether:

1. The Joint Office funds the right number and type of shelters
2. People know how to access shelters (that meet their needs)
3. Shelters are an effective gateway to permanent housing
4. Joint Office programs overall are designed to eliminate racial disparities

The first three sub-objectives focused primarily on adult and family shelters funded by the Joint Office. The fourth examined Joint Office programs overall. To accomplish our objectives, we:

- Reviewed documents and data, including:
 - Best practices for homelessness crisis response systems

- Joint Office budget documents, dashboards, publications, and contracts with service provider for Fiscal Year 2022-23, and reports the Joint Office received from contracted service providers covering Fiscal Years 2020 – 2022
- Federal, state, and local requirements related to homeless services
- Relevant audits from other jurisdictions
- Media coverage of homelessness issues
- Conducted approximately 89 interviews, including about 30 interviews with Joint Office staff and 28 interviews with homelessness service providers
- Observed meetings, including of:
 - Portland City Council
 - Multnomah County Board of Commissioners
 - A Home for Everyone (a coalition of stakeholders that worked to develop strategies to address homelessness)
 - Joint Office and service provider case conferencing

To gather additional input from people experiencing homelessness and service providers who assist them, we:

- Visited several shelters
- Surveyed people experiencing homelessness as part of the 2022 Point in Time count
- Participated in ride-alongs with:
 - [Portland Street Response](#), a City program that assists people experiencing mental or behavioral health crises
 - A Navigation Team of outreach workers that helps connect people living in encampments with services
- Contracted with Street Roots, a non-profit media and homelessness advocacy organization, to interview people experiencing homelessness about their perspectives on shelters and housing services. We also conducted outreach events at shelters and other homelessness service sites to survey more people. In all, about 106 people completed our survey.
- Gathered feedback from Street Roots about our preliminary findings

We conducted this audit during a time of rapid growth and transition at the Joint Office. Although we had generally completed our fieldwork by the end of Fiscal Year 2023, we took additional time to address some recent developments in this report, including the Joint Office’s shelter dashboard and its efforts to develop a shelter strategy.

We attempted to use data pulled directly from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in our audit, including to calculate exit to housing rates and timelines for adult and family shelter participants and to determine whether people of color were

benefitting from the Joint Office’s approach to racial equity. [Multnomah County auditors identified concerns about the reliability of the data](#). To confidently present our data analysis in this report, we believed we would have needed to explain our processes and assumptions so much that the caveats could eclipse the results. We therefore used Joint Office-reported data, which we determined was sufficiently reliable to demonstrate our broad conclusions, including that shelters helped some participants move to permanent housing, few shelters met the housing-related performance targets the Joint Office set for them, and some Joint Office programs served more people who identified as Black, Indigenous, and people of color than white.

We included statements from people experiencing homelessness, service providers, and Joint Office staff in the report to highlight viewpoints relevant to our audit objectives. The statements are generally not direct quotes and were edited for clarity.

We thank all of the people who shared their time and expertise to inform this audit. We also thank all of those involved in homelessness services work for their efforts to improve the lives of people in crisis and help ensure that everyone has a safe home.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Audit Team: Jennifer Amriott, Senior Performance Auditor
Elizabeth Pape, Senior Performance Auditor

Multnomah County Chair Jessica Vega Pederson
Chief Operating Officer Serena Cruz



April 10, 2024

Simone Rede
City of Portland Auditor
1221 SW 4th Ave, Room 310
Portland, OR 97204

RE: Audit of the Joint Office of Homeless Services

Dear Auditor Rede,

The Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS), Chief Operating Officer Serena Cruz and I are grateful to the City of Portland Auditor's office for this report. Specifically, we appreciate your thorough and thoughtful approach to reviewing the County's progress in addressing one of the most important issues facing our community right now: the thousands of people living unhoused in the County.

The JOHS is in agreement with, and will continue to prioritize, the recommendations in this audit. We are proud that your office has confirmed that our programs are designed to reduce racial disparities. We acknowledge that these disparities still exist, often due to forces beyond the control of JOHS, and we continue to center racial equity and the reduction of disparities in our programs. We will continue to monitor our progress and adjust these strategies as needed to have the most impact.

This report includes recommendations related to shelter planning and coordination, and we are pleased to share that work to expand and improve our shelter system — building on previous work since 2016 to add not only shelter beds but also different shelter types — is already underway in many of the recommended areas.

We acknowledge that much has changed within JOHS over the duration of this audit, and appreciate the audit team's responsiveness to changing circumstances as they developed their findings and recommendations, including acknowledging initiatives such as our multi-jurisdictional Community Sheltering Strategy that are already in progress.

Homelessness Response Action Plan

As noted in your audit, in March 2024 Multnomah County and the City of Portland unveiled a strategic reset of the community's response to homelessness, the Homelessness Response Action Plan (HRAP). This plan is a comprehensive two-year road map for improving our community's response to homelessness. The plan commits to pursuing detailed goals and metrics; budgeting with increased transparency, data sharing and financial reporting; and a new governance structure that broadens and unifies the work of addressing homelessness and all of its root causes

beyond just one downstream department, the Joint Office of Homeless Services.

Among other key goals, the plan includes new metrics and other concrete steps on how the community can work together to house or shelter at least 2,700 more unhoused individuals over the next two years.

Community Sheltering Strategy

One vital strategy within the HRAP is the Community Sheltering Strategy, which was also announced in March 2024 and was noted in your audit. The strategy is focused on achieving one of the goals outlined in the HRAP: adding 1,000 shelter beds in two years, and providing the housing and health resources people need to move through shelters more quickly.

The Community Sheltering Strategy was jointly developed by the city of Portland, the city of Gresham and Multnomah County leaders, along with a range of shelter operators. The work to develop the plan was in line with the first shelter recommendation in the audit: following a data and stakeholder-led process to identify needs in the shelter system — including the services needed to ensure that shelters are pathways to housing — and to set specific shelter creation goals for each system of care. More detail can be found below in our response to specific recommendations.

Transfer of HMIS to Multnomah County

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is the software that stores all of the publicly funded homeless services data for the Portland Metro Region. This includes Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties. This software is critical for tracking services and outcomes, and it provides all of the reporting to City, County, regional, State, and Federal agencies including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Since 2006, this software has been managed by the Portland Housing Bureau on behalf of the tri-county region. Over the past two years, we have been in the process of transferring that responsibility to Multnomah County. This change was envisioned to provide better support to the three counties as well as increased access to technical staff who could support the growing and changing needs of JOHS.

On March 25, 2024, the transfer of the HMIS from the City of Portland to Multnomah County was completed. This is a huge milestone for our data-driven work, and it will allow for further improvements to our HMIS system over the coming years.

Racial equity work

The Joint Office takes a multi-team approach to advancing racial equity. Last year, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development changed its data standards to be more inclusive of multiple racial and ethnic identities. With this improvement, we are able to more accurately and expansively collect data around race and ethnicity that better reflects the population we serve.

In addition to better data collection, we are building the ability to review racial disaggregations of shelter outcomes by race. The outcome disaggregation can be viewed at both the shelter system level and individual shelter level. This

disaggregation allows the JOHS program team to understand the extent to which people leave shelter for permanent housing placements, and how these numbers vary across racial and other demographics. Understanding these disparities is an important step toward building racial equity in the shelter system. See the specific recommendations on racial equity work for more detail on these ongoing efforts.

In addition to providing this overarching progress, we are pleased to be able to respond to the provided recommendations.

Recommendations (A) Shelter

To help ensure that it funds the right number and types of shelter, the Joint Office should:

- 1. Develop a systematic, data-informed process to analyze the need for shelter, the current inventory of shelter units, and existing gaps.**

We agree with this recommendation, and as noted previously, in recent months the JOHS has built upon its previous strategic work to create a comprehensive Community Sheltering Strategy. The two-year strategy includes an inventory of current shelter, identifies gaps, and outlines clear goals for improving the shelter system.

Central to the strategy is achieving the goal outlined in the Homelessness Response Action Plan to add 1,000 shelter beds in two years (including both beds currently in development and new beds), and to provide the housing and health resources people need to move through shelters into housing more quickly.

The development of the strategy took place between October 2023 and February 2024 and was overseen by both a workgroup and a steering committee. The workgroup was made up of JOHS program staff with expertise in the populations we serve, JOHS research and evaluation staff, staff from the cities of Portland and Gresham, and representatives from four service provider organizations. The steering committee was made up of elected officials from the City of Portland and the County, along with Joint Office executive leadership.

The workgroup met weekly, and performed a systematic analysis of shelter system goals, needs and gaps. For this analysis, the workgroup reviewed JOHS data on shelter models, outcomes, services, exits and demographics, and had robust discussions with our service providers and staff. Through all of this, the workgroup discussed not only what would be needed and feasible in terms of more shelter units, but also what is needed in those shelters to ensure that people are safe, successful, and able to use the shelters as an efficient and supportive pathway to housing.

This work has laid the groundwork for ongoing processes for analyzing our shelter system, including outlining key goals that will allow us to measure our progress.

- 2. Use the analysis to develop strategies for right-sizing shelter supply based on need. The Joint Office should adjust strategies over time as the system becomes more effective.**

We agree with this recommendation. As noted above, the Community Sheltering Strategy outlines goals for adding shelter over the next two years, increasing the number of shelter beds by 1,000 across our system. This increase is in service of the goal outlined in the Homelessness Response Action Plan to resolve unsheltered homelessness for 2,700 people over the next two years — equivalent to half the current number of people living unsheltered as of January 2024.

We acknowledge that implementation of the sheltering strategy, and adjustments over time, will require continued data and community-driven strategic thinking and planning.

To support this ongoing strategic work, the JOHS is in the final stages of hiring a Shelter Strategy and Operations Manager who will develop and lead ongoing shelter strategy and development.

But achieving these goals around expanded and more effective shelter, as the Community Sheltering Strategy notes, is going to take more than just JOHS. JOHS is responsible for its parts of the strategy, but right-sizing our supply across the community requires commitments, urgency and interest from a much larger variety of stakeholders. The governance structure created by the Homelessness Response Action Plan will take on the role of leading that larger body of work.

We also want to acknowledge that housing is what ultimately resolves homelessness, and while shelter is an incredibly important community need, every analysis of shelter needs should be considered within a full analysis of the correct balance of housing-related resources. For instance, if more people can find affordable housing and move through shelter beds more quickly, that frees up beds in our existing stock. Likewise, existing beds will see less demand if fewer people become homeless in the first place because housing is more available. As such, the JOHS is focusing on using overall system data to model shelter needs as part of an overall continuum of services.

As the JOHS analyzes both the need for shelter and the effectiveness of shelters as pathways to housing, we will continue to focus on data and metrics that help us understand shelter and housing program need and effectiveness, including exits to housing, and long-term housing retention.

To improve shelter access, the Joint Office should:

- 3. Assess referral processes for the set-aside shelter bed program, including its impact on shelter operations.**

JOHS agrees with this recommendation. We will begin planning for this assessment process with the City of Portland in alignment with the evaluation and assessment work mentioned in our response to recommendations 4 and 5.

Without expanded shelter supply, it may be difficult to improve shelter access. Once shelter supply is expanded, the Joint Office should:

4. **Evaluate shelter access to understand where people encounter barriers to finding a shelter that meets their needs.**
5. **Use the evaluation to develop strategies to improve access to shelter. One strategy might be to develop a source of real-time, system-wide information about available shelter beds.**

JOHS agrees with these recommendations. The process of accessing shelter should be straightforward and easy to understand, and information on shelter availability should be widely accessible. JOHS has been considering ways to streamline access to shelter, and has begun a project to develop a tool that will identify shelter availability within the system. The project will first develop an interim tool for identifying shelter availability, with a longer-term plan to create a permanent tool in alignment with the implementation of a new Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS).

Further, JOHS is currently leading several studies responsive to this recommendation, including an evaluation of alternative shelter models (such as village-style shelters) conducted in partnership with Portland State University's Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative, and an in-depth qualitative study of pathways from unsheltered homelessness to housing. Both of these studies will examine barriers to entering and staying in shelter.

JOHS is also continuing to collect information on services provided in different shelters to assess the effectiveness of different shelter models in housing shelter clients. All of these studies will assess how well shelters meet clients' needs, reduce exits to a different shelter or to the street, and rapidly connect them to housing.

To help ensure that shelters create effective pathways to permanent housing, the Joint Office should:

6. **Establish consistent, realistic, and meaningful housing outcome performance targets for shelters.**

We agree with this recommendation. Shelter outcome goals should be clear, and performance targets should communicate these expectations and allow for progress to be effectively measured. We currently track outcomes and performance measures across our contracted services. But to continue improving our ability to analyze outcomes and refine our policy and programming, the JOHS is also working to standardize performance measures across contracts for the majority of JOHS-funded services, including shelter and shelter diversion programs.

While significant strides have been made over the past year to standardize shelter performance measures, further improvements are being made to establish consistent and meaningful contract deliverables. JOHS is working to set more consistent performance targets by each shelter type (e.g. congregate, alternative, family, etc.) for, at a minimum, the three performance outcomes described in the audit report and recommended by the National Alliance to End Homelessness. These consistent targets will allow JOHS to more meaningfully track provider outcomes against contract targets as well as shelter system-level outcomes against community shelter strategy goals. Shelter access and outcome equity metrics will also be recommended in this fiscal year's contracts, with consistent equity goals set across shelter types.

As noted in the audit report, the Homelessness Response Action Plan also set new performance targets for shelter, and the Joint Office is in the process of changing programmatic expectations and contractual obligations to align with those targets. Goals for individual programs and contracts must align with the system-wide goals set out by County leadership, and that means the outcome targets may continue to evolve in accordance with those system-wide goals. Moving forward, if programmatic standards change, outcomes will evolve with them, and alignment will be a continuous process.

- 7. Measure and report shelter progress toward meeting their housing outcome performance targets.**
- 8. Use the data to evaluate shelters' housing outcomes and develop strategies to increase successful placements from shelter to permanent housing.**

We agree with these recommendations, and we are pleased to share that this work has also been well underway. With the transfer of HMIS from the City of Portland to Multnomah County now complete, JOHS is in the process of (1) being able to act on our existing plan to develop an HMIS “data mart” to ensure HMIS data are more readily available and (2) developing a series of contract monitoring reports and systems-level dashboards. Together, these tools will allow us to ensure that progress toward housing outcome targets are measured on a consistent and ongoing basis, and allow us to analyze outcomes by shelter provider, shelter site and shelter type.

These tools will allow JOHS to expand existing provider-level contract monitoring with improved reports that measure progress toward contract targets. Shelter system dashboards will measure progress toward the goals in the Community Sheltering Strategy, including performance trends over time. Shelter equity goals will also be incorporated into reporting tools and dashboards to allow for more consistent monitoring of the progress made toward reducing disparities in shelter access and outcomes.

These measurement and reporting tools will build the foundation for JOHS to evaluate how effective each program is at supporting placements into permanent housing, allowing for continuous improvement of shelter programs' effectiveness as pathways to housing.

Recommendations (B) Racial Equity


To further its efforts to reduce and address racial disparities in homelessness, the Joint Office should:

- 9. Continue to design programs to reduce racial disparities.**
- 10. Evaluate the performance of its racial equity efforts to learn more about where there are gaps and continually monitor and adjust strategies as needed to better achieve racial equity goals.**

We agree with these recommendations, and plan to continue to design programs to reduce racial disparities. As previously mentioned, JOHS has implemented better practices for race and ethnicity data collection, and has focused on developing foundational methods for understanding where disparities might exist in our system. In addition to this work, the JOHS data and equity teams have formed a collaborative partnership to expand our racial equity focus. This partnership is pulling together a cohort of staff who will expand our ability to track outcomes for people across racial and ethnic identities, allowing us to improve our understanding of disparities. These insights will guide our work of implementing a more equitable system of care with a focus on reducing disparities.

Coupled with program design adjustments, this group will establish clear goals and targets, as well as a clear process to determine the extent to which equity goals and targets are being met. This multi-team approach will ultimately incorporate a cycle of racial disparities measurement, program design alterations, target setting and measurement. This cyclical approach is aligned with the Plan-Do-Study-Act model of continuous quality improvement. This work will go beyond our shelter system and be implemented across our entire systems of care.

JOHS is also currently implementing a process to improve engagement, monitoring and support of our contracted providers' equity work. This process includes the subject matter expertise of our Equity Advisory Committee as well as that of our culturally specific providers.



Jessica Vega Pederson
Multnomah County Chair



Serena Cruz
Chief Operating Officer