

Mayor Wheeler and Commissioner Ryan to announce proposals to fast-track construction of affordable housing and move homeless Portlanders closer to services

Mayor Wheeler Speech
October 21, 2022

Introduction

Good morning, thank you for joining us today.

I really appreciate my City Council colleagues for their unanimous support for this plan we're announcing today. Normally I would talk first, but I want to show my appreciation to my City Council colleagues and have them speak first.

Beginning with my co-sponsor Commissioner Dan Ryan followed by Commissioner Rubio, then Commissioner Hardesty, and finally Commissioner Mapps.

Welcome Commissioner Ryan.

[Commissioner Ryan to Speak]

There is no issue more critical to Portlanders than addressing homelessness. And today we're here to talk about a plan, that I am confident will save lives and livelihoods for all Portlanders, housed and unhoused.

Those Portlanders who are unhoused and, on the streets, deserve our understanding, compassion, and help. The goal should be to connect people to whatever services they need to get off and stay off the streets.

Recent polling by the Oregonian found that 94% of Portland area voters identify homelessness as their problem of greatest concern.

The magnitude and the depth of the homelessness crisis in our city is nothing short of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Not everyone who is experiencing homelessness has a debilitating substance abuse or a physical or mental health problem, but indications are that a rapidly growing number do.

Rising cases of untreated mental illness, and the flood of cheap and potent drugs is increasing injuries and deaths among Portlanders and Oregonians who are experiencing outdoor homelessness.

For example, the overdose rates for people experiencing homelessness can be 30-times greater than the general population.

Moreover, according to a recent Oregonian study, 63% of homeless Portlanders suffer from mental health issues.

Total drug overdoses increased 94% between 2019 and 2021, and fentanyl overdoses increased nearly 600% between those same years.

Homeless people living with mental illness are also highly vulnerable to violence.

A recent report indicated that up to 87% of them will have violence perpetrated against them.

Collectively, this is a vortex of misery for all involved.

[Pause]

Building more affordable housing units to close our housing production gap is the foundational solution to all these problems.

According to a recent housing study, the City of Portland has an affordable housing gap that exceeds 20,000 units.

We must be bold in our efforts to close this gap, as soon as possible.

In Portland, we're doing our part by reforming our permitting and approval process, but we also need changes to state law in order to increase affordable housing funding in Portland and all across the state.

With these changes, our goal is to catalyze an additional 20,000 units of affordable housing by 2033.

This is a moonshot, for sure, but I believe entirely doable if we commit to the work ahead.

[Pause]

Until then, we know that the waiting lists to get into subsidized affordable housing can span between five and ten years according to a recent study I commissioned.

With long affordable housing waiting lists, untreated physical and mental illness, and large increases in substance abuse issues, more and more unhoused Portlanders and Oregonians are waiting far too long to get into affordable housing.

We know that the consequences are harmful and can be deadly.

People experiencing homelessness tell us that what they need is understanding, compassion, and help to get off the streets.

They also tell us, in overwhelming numbers (95% according to a recent Oregonian report), that they have never been offered services.

There's no wonder, given that a recent assessment showed that there are nearly 800 encampments spread out over 146 square miles.

Even with an increased number of outreach workers deployed to the field, there is no way we can reach more than a small percentage of the people who need help in these constantly shifting encampments.

Compared to all other states, Oregon bounces at the bottom of the rankings for offering no- and low-income access to mental health and substance abuse recovery services.

It will take time for state leaders to fix this. The next Oregon Governor needs to lead this.

Only last week, Mental Health America ranked Oregon second to last with incredibly somber statistics: not only did 27% of adults in Oregon report suffering from mental illness but also 1 in 5 Oregon youth experienced a significant mental health episode during the past year.

At least half of people who need drug treatment services aren't able to access them, due to a lack of providers.

The good news is that the years-long, deadly, waiting lists to get into affordable housing and treatment programs do not have to be so harmful.

We can do better, and we will.

We can better connect homeless Portlanders to state and county services by consolidating those services in a limited number of large scale, sanctioned sites.

This will be paired with the phasing in of a citywide ban on self-sited, unsanctioned, encampments.

Why are we taking the unprecedented step of banning self-sited encampments? We need to move our scattered vulnerable homeless population closer to the services that they need.

Too often squalid, impacted by crime, and located in dangerous places, most camps lack basic safety and sanitation.

These designated campsites will include access to hygiene, litter collection, meals, and with the county, metro, and state's partnership will also include navigation to housing along with mental health and substance abuse treatment services.

Some will argue that we should establish these larger camps with access to services, but not ban self-sited camping citywide.

I believe this thinking is well intentioned, but dangerously misguided.

The fact is, for the past eight months, we have increased alternative camping options without the ban, and it has not worked.

While limited areas of the city have experienced improved conditions, most of the individuals removed from those camps simply relocate elsewhere in the city and then the process starts all over again.

This is costly, and it does not connect the majority of homeless people to services of any kind.

So, we need to do something bold, we need to do something different, and we need to do it at a scale where it will make a difference.

You might remember, with the lifting of pandemic restrictions, I declared an emergency that stepped up homeless camp removals and improved our offers of shelter space by introducing real-time reservations, rides to the shelter of choice with personal belongings, and free 30-day storage of other items.

Self-sited unsanctioned encampment removals increased by 2844% from September 2020 to September 2022.

But only about 20 percent accepted this new and improved offer of a bed in the local indoor shelter system. In fact, on most nights, there is excess capacity in our indoor shelter system.

According to our hard working city outreach workers, the majority of homeless individuals in our city said they would not go to an indoor shelter, but would like to go to a place to pitch their tent where they would not be asked to move all the time, and maybe have access to a bathroom.

For many, designated outdoor camping, with services, would a better alternative.

[Pause]

While Commissioner Ryan and I are co-sponsoring the 5 resolutions that focus on a series of projects and plans to address homelessness, I want to thank each of my City Council colleagues and their staff for providing input and ideas. I want to acknowledge their civic courage.

Now I want to briefly outline the five resolutions that will be before the City Council for a first reading next week.

The first resolution is focused on the affordable housing moonshot.

As you heard from Commissioner Ryan, this resolution envisions a partnership between the city and the state to catalyze 20,000 units of affordable housing by 2033.

The second resolution seeks to offer more work opportunities for those experiencing outdoor homelessness.

The third resolution will establish the larger scale, designated sites where individuals will be able to camp and receive services. It will also begin the process of prohibiting self-sited camping in the City of Portland.

The fourth resolution envisions the creation of a program whereby homeless Portlanders can eliminate citations and other low level offenses that are on their records in exchange for agreeing to divert into needed treatment services.

And the fifth resolution will formalize the City's requests to government partners that can help make this all work.

[Pause]

So how can our government partners help?

Let's start with the state.

This is what we need from our next governor, an immediate enactment of a statewide emergency order.

I need the governor elect to ask the outgoing governor to immediately declare an emergency declaration to start helping cities and rural areas around the state.

Two days after the election (whoever wins deserves a day off) I invite the outgoing governor and the governor elect to meet with me and the leaders of the Oregon Mayors Association to agree on what we need from that statewide emergency declaration.

Because they so often help people who are homeless from being burned out of their homes, no government agency has more experience in putting together outdoor emergency shelter camps than the State of Oregon.

Let's get some camps up before winter.

[Pause]

To the leaders of our Metro regional government.

Portlanders are not asking for special treatment. We're just asking for fair treatment.

Portland cares for eighty percent of the region's homeless population, but we are currently allocated a much smaller percentage of the available funds.

We're asking for a commitment to revisit the allocation formula in 2023 and to use any unanticipated revenues above this year's original projections to be used for one time purposes.

[Pause]

The Multnomah County Chair and I agree that both the City and the County need to work as one team to address the homeless crisis. Together, we are currently evaluating all the funding and programmatic tools that can be leveraged to meaningfully address at scale our humanitarian challenges.

In the meantime, it is election season, like my requests to the gubernatorial candidates, I would not be doing my job as Mayor, if I did not make a similar ask of the candidates running for Multnomah County Chair.

To move vulnerable homeless people closer to services, will you work with us on a phased-in ban on self-sited unsanctioned homeless camps?

And will you work with us to immediately open currently funded but apparently closed indoor shelter beds. And will you commit to working with us to provide services to the proposed designated camping sites?

I've started out by making these requests one on one in phone calls and meetings, and I acknowledge that it has ruffled a few feathers.

I know that perhaps these requests weren't necessarily what other leaders had in mind for use of their resources, but Portlanders and Oregonians have never been clearer about what their number one priority is.

And I wouldn't be doing my job for the people of Portland if I wasn't willing to make a few waves on their behalf.

I'm not here to make friends, I'm not here to make enemies, I'm here to face our challenges head on. Thank you.