

Homelessness Strategy for Oregon City

2022-2026

INTRODUCTION

In January and February 2021, the City Commission and the City's Executive Team met three times for a series of goal-setting workshops. Our goal was to align around a shared vision, discuss current community projects and issues, and provide City staff with direction regarding the Commission's priorities for the coming years. The City Commission and staff worked closely together to identify goals and strategies for the 2021-2023 biennium that will build on the work and success of previous years, while also addressing new challenges and/or shifting community needs.

The Commission wrapped up the goal-setting process by identifying eight goals for the 2021-2023 biennium. With a set of Commission Goals and Priorities in place, staff then created a biennial work plan that aligns specific actions to implement the Goals with proposed funding for each item. All of this work is combined to create a City budget that supports the Commission Goals while also maintaining high-quality core City services.

This Homelessness Strategy is a product of City Commission *Goal #4: Adopt and implement a homelessness strategy for Oregon City*. While we acknowledge that we cannot solve the homelessness problem in the Metro region, the City is committed to a focused approach that partners with local, regional, and state resources to help those that are houseless or at risk of losing their home within our community.

Our vision is...

To create a five-year homelessness strategy (2022-2026) that is designed to support current and future City activities and investments that are focused on partnerships, service delivery, and enforcement to reduce homelessness and the impact on Oregon City.

This document provides a summary of the current homelessness landscape in Oregon City, known partners, existing constraints, and potential opportunities. It outlines a set of priorities and strategies that are based on what we've learned over the past 8 years working on this issue, and what we've heard from our partners who provide on-the-ground assistance to houseless persons in Oregon City. The plan is focused on helping people in our community while also reducing the negative impact of homelessness on Oregon City.

CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

The Homelessness Program at Oregon City is currently established within the Oregon City Police Department (OCPD). It is led by the police chief and two full-time staff: a homeless services specialist and a behavioral health specialist. Staff are not sworn police officers or experts in homelessness; their knowledge comes from working on the street every day with the homeless population for the past 8 years. Staff continue to learn from a network of local service providers who help us via coordination and thoughtful problem-solving. The extent and shape of homelessness in Oregon City is affected by our proximity to and dynamics of the City of Portland and neighboring communities. Homelessness is a regional problem and the population in Oregon City changes daily. Our priorities and strategies acknowledge our limitation of resources, the need for regional coordination, and the opportunities that are most reasonable to pursue.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The homeless population in Oregon City is as diverse as any other sector of our society and is growing at a steady pace. Located within the Portland metropolitan area, Oregon City is part of a larger, regional homeless problem. Many of the individuals who are homeless in Oregon City travel throughout the Portland Metro region, living in different areas for varying periods of time. Oregon City has the highest concentration of homeless individuals in Clackamas County. Oregon City saw an immediate and



overwhelming increase in homelessness around Oregon City at the beginning of 2013, when a day shelter opened to provide homeless services. The presence of this shelter made Oregon City a destination for unhoused people seeking services.

According to the 2019 point-in-time count for Clackamas County¹, 75% of the homeless population are single adults and 15% are single adults with

children. Eight percent of the homeless population are under 18 years of age. Finally, unaffordable rent, unemployment, eviction, interpersonal conflict, and mental or emotional health issues were the most common problems faced by those who reported what caused them to leave their last living arrangement. A number of people experiencing homelessness are additionally challenged with substance dependence.

¹ [Clackamas County 2019 Point-In-Time County, August 2019](#)

COMMUNITY IMPACTS

The growing homeless population has had an impact on Oregon City neighborhoods and businesses. The presence of tents and some of the behaviors exhibited by some of the people experiencing homelessness have resulted in complaints and concerns about safety from members of the community.

Crime reports from the Oregon City Police Department indicate the most common incidents that occur by homeless individuals are trespassing, theft, drinking in public places, criminal mischief, and possession of controlled substances. Community members often report piles of trash, materials associated with homeless camps, abandoned shopping carts, and human waste around businesses and homes. Citizens also voice safety concerns for individuals traveling on foot or bicycle along streets, state highways, and Interstate 205.



Businesses, neighborhoods, and City buildings have seen an increased presence of people who suffer from mental illness in the community. While many of these behaviors are completely harmless, they can be unsettling to some. This has resulted in an increased number of emergency calls to the police department. People call because they are either worried about their own safety or concerned about the safety of the individuals whose behaviors they find alarming.

CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

The City of Oregon City and our employees do not discriminate against people because they are homeless; we serve all members of this community, whether they are housed or not. Our employees work to solve issues and concerns that are tied to behaviors, not people based on their status. The following issues are the top challenges facing the City in its response to the current homelessness environment.

Mental Health Services

The biggest challenge is the lack of available mental health services for homeless people in need. The majority of the calls received are usually linked to someone suffering from untreated mental illness. City staff have nowhere to take individuals who need behavioral health services. If an individual is an immediate danger to themselves or others, they are taken to the hospital but are generally released within hours. The lack of mental health treatment is a national problem. Officers respond and have no services or options to offer these members of the community. There are a number of people with whom we have worked for months to get services and even housed, only to find them back on the streets after having gone off their medication.

Camping, Trash and the Law



The City receives numerous complaints about camping and trash on public property and requests to ‘make a person or persons leave an area’. There are several court cases and an Oregon law that address camping on public property and guide cities in their response to these issues. Oregon House Bill 3115 was passed in 2021 and requires city ordinances that regulate sitting, lying, sleeping, or keeping warm and dry outdoors on public property must be objectively reasonable. In other words, the city is not allowed to target homeless individuals if they are sitting, lying, sleeping, or trying to keep

warm and dry in outdoor areas. In 2020, the City Commission updated the Oregon City Municipal Code to ensure compliance with the *Martin v. Boise* ruling, a Ninth Circuit case, upon which House Bill 3115 was written. The Bill also requires notification and posting of camps prior to removal, as well as a requirement that the City store personal property and debris removed from camps for 30 days. Finally, the Bill states that local governments cannot punish people for camping if the City cannot offer an alternative, such as a bed in a shelter. Therefore, City staff maintain a list of shelter options to offer homeless individuals who are willing to go to a shelter.

An additional challenge are jurisdictional issues related to camping and trash. Several of the areas where the public report refuse are public areas controlled by government entities other than Oregon City; such as METRO, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), and Clackamas County. We work with these governments to keep the environment clean and free of unwanted trash. But the City does not have the authority to remove camps or trash from properties adjacent and outside of the city limits.

Housing Services

Getting people into housing is one of the biggest challenges faced by City staff. The majority of the people staff contact on the street are not ready or willing to accept services that would lead them to housing. To get some people housed, it takes time and a process of building trust before they are ready to engage the services necessary to get housed. Additionally, the number of available shelter spaces in the Portland Metro area is limited.

Housing services in our area are managed by Clackamas County. Housing a person or family experiencing homelessness requires a coordinated, regional effort across the County, Portland, and greater Metro area. Coordination needs to be improved to better address housing options and to provide targeted, wraparound services that effectively prepare people to come off the street and return to housing.

Homelessness is a complex issue and requires a collaborative approach. There are no silver bullet solutions or individual solutions that will be successful in all scenarios.

FIVE-YEAR STRATEGY: 2022-2026

The City has identified a set of priorities and associated strategies that will focus City operations and budget considerations for the next five years. The City has already made great strides in addressing homelessness in Oregon City. These priorities will continue to support the existing Homelessness Program while building new strategies that will further our ability to assist those individuals and families most in need.

PRIORITY 1: CONNECT HOMELESS PERSONS TO RESOURCES

In order for homeless persons to transition to permanent housing, health and social services are often required for success. Oregon City has hired two staff members within the Oregon City Police Department that currently work every day with the homeless community in Oregon City by providing information, determining needs, making connections between people and needed services, and working toward getting them housed. The City of Oregon City does not provide shelters or transitional housing. We work with different shelters and Clackamas County to connect people with these providers. Our staff



will do whatever it takes to connect people with housing opportunities, including arranging transportation and temporary lodging until an opportunity becomes available. In addition, the City has taken advantage of grant opportunities that allow us to help people who are about to become homeless with assistance to keep them housed. This priority is centered on increasing services and resources for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Oregon City will support this priority by implementing the following strategies:

- Continue to fund and support the Oregon City Homeless Services Specialist and the Behavioral Health Specialist positions (2 permanent FTE).
- Build and use a network of social service providers in Oregon City and the region to provide wraparound services to homeless persons.
- Provide training to Oregon City staff to best serve the homeless community.
- Coordinate state, regional, and local resources to streamline and improve service provision and the availability of housing solutions for people experiencing homelessness.

PRIORITY 2: REDUCE THE IMPACT ON OREGON CITY NEIGHBORHOODS AND BUSINESSES

As discussed earlier in this document, Oregon City experiences a variety of impacts due to the growing homeless population both inside and outside the city limits. We are limited in both resources and our ability to house homeless individuals who are living in the City. We must work with a trauma informed approach to enforce local and state laws legally and ethically as they relate to behaviors that have a negative impact on the community. This is demonstrated in the following strategies:

- Enforce laws and City municipal code with compassion and prioritize alternative solutions. This is done through our partnership with the Clackamas County Community Court which diverts people from the criminal justice system and requires an individual to engage with needed services, such as behavioral health or substance dependence services.
- Continue to clean up abandoned campsites, waste, and trash.
- Work with partner agencies such as the Oregon Department of Transportation, Metro, and Clackamas County to keep the community clean and safe.

PRIORITY 3: INCREASE COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Oregon City has a community base that is consistently concerned about homeless-related issues and the growing homeless population in general. Many individuals have offered to help, have requested more information about the situation and what the City is doing to reduce the homeless population in Oregon City, and serve as a dependable resource for alerting OCPD of issues and areas of concern.



Staff must improve communications with our community and engage residents and businesses who are willing to provide time and resources. Finally, staff must be internally coordinated to strengthen the City's Homelessness Program and improve government processes.

The City will implement the following strategies:

- Create a centralized web site to communicate Homelessness Program priorities and strategies with the community at-large; streamline the ability to report concerns to OCPD; provide a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page to provide information to the community on commonly asked questions.
- Create an internal Homeless Solutions task force with representatives from all departments to coordinate City activities and to assist with targeted problem-solving; consider programmatic or municipal code modifications to support the Homelessness Program.
- Coordinate with local partners to leverage community members who would like to assist with homeless-related issues.

PRIORITY 4: LEVERAGE OTHER FUNDS TO SUPPORT PRIORITIES

Outside funding sources can be used to supplement and advance Oregon City homeless priorities and strategies. The City will leverage outside funding opportunities to the extent reasonably possible while also partnering with other government and non-profit organizations to increase service delivery and housing options for the homeless community. Oregon City will implement the following strategies:

- Leverage outside funding sources to the greatest extent possible; monitor grant opportunities for alignment with City priorities and strategies.
- Partner with other government and non-profit organizations to increase service delivery and housing options for the homeless community.
- Consider homelessness strategy priorities each biennium during the City's budget process to determine where and how much funds should be allocated to the Homelessness Program.