



Office of Commissioner Dan Ryan  
February 2021

# Street to Stability (STS) Action Plan

## Overview

Over the past decade, houselessness has been one of the biggest challenges facing our city. Despite the year over year increase in regional investments and incremental improvement in strategies, we have not yet been able to develop solutions that decrease the number of Portlanders who are living unsheltered. Racism, poverty, lack of employment and opportunity, incarceration, addiction, mental illness, domestic violence and disinvestment in success after foster care are all drivers of our houseless crisis. The 2019 Point in Time (PIT) count showed that there were over 2,000 unsheltered individuals in Multnomah County. Despite the methodological limitations of the PIT count, this was the largest recorded number of individuals living unsheltered in our region's history<sup>1</sup>.

In the same report, we learned that the overrepresentation of people of color in our houseless population continues to increase, especially among those who identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Black or African American. As reported in the 2019 PIT count, people of color made up 29.5% of the county's general population and made up 38.1% of our houseless population.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the resulting economic crisis, our City and region is at an inflection point. Unemployment has increased from 3.4% to 9.7%<sup>2</sup> and households facing food insecurity have increased from 1 in 9 to 1 in 5<sup>3</sup>. Thousands of families and individuals are at risk of homelessness<sup>4</sup> and without a more recent PIT count or a comparable data-driven analysis of the houseless population, we are unable to assess the number of people living unsheltered in Portland today. It is possible that the size and composition of the unsheltered houseless population has changed drastically throughout the pandemic.

We know anecdotally that our unsheltered houseless population has grown as a result of the pandemic. Couple this with an eviction moratorium expiring in June of this year, and the situation becomes incredibly dire. In order to prevent a spike in houselessness,

---

<sup>1</sup> [Rise in homelessness evident at Portland park | kgw.com](#)

<sup>2</sup> [DataCommons.org](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Oregon Food Bank](#)

<sup>4</sup> [PHB – Council Work Session 01-12-21](#)

and specifically a spike within the chronically houseless population, it is imperative that we take decisive steps to ensure the City and our partners possess the ability to act with immediacy and nimbleness in addressing the homeless crisis and the tangential effects of the pandemic. Swift, innovative and compassionate action driven by a racial equity framework is essential to the development of new strategies for the near and long-term.

## The Challenge

At present, there are two primary issues that impede our response to the homeless crisis: the presence of silos throughout existing systems, and shortcomings in data.

- **Silos**—We face a problem of silos – both internal to the City and with our regional partners. This issue is due in part to our city’s antiquated form of government. Global crises like homelessness impact every bureau and every jurisdiction in our region. However, we lack a comprehensive continuum of support and a mitigation strategy to address all aspects of this crisis. Many of our bureaus and partners are working individually to address the pieces that are within their span of control, but we are not working together to address the crisis as a whole.

The siloed response to the houselessness crisis exists not only within the City, but between the City and outside entities as well. The Joint Office of Homeless Services, Multnomah County, Metro, and unaffiliated nonprofit/faith-based entities all leverage resources toward this crisis, and to varying degrees, this phenomena plays out between each of them and the City as we all do work pertaining to houselessness. This is not to say that any interactions between the City and these entities are in bad faith or are completely failing; rather, simply by the nature of the institutions themselves, siloing takes place and inefficiencies are the inevitable result.

As we move forward to build upon current strategies and develop new ones, it is imperative we increase regional coordination to accomplish four things –

- 1) Better understand the totality of our regional efforts towards meeting the needs of our houseless community, both governmental and nongovernmental.
  - 2) Identify gaps in our response and areas of improvement – eliminating strategies that are ineffective or not relevant to our core outcomes.
  - 3) Develop a comprehensive and inclusive plan where we work together across bureaus and jurisdictions to develop a continuum of services that works towards shared outcomes.
  - 4) Agree to share information, resources, strategies and values to ensure that our collective effort is having a substantive impact.
- **Data**— Another major issue that impedes our ability to address the homeless crisis with nimbleness is our ability to access and share real-time data across bureaus, jurisdictions and other partners. As mentioned in the previous section, our last Point in Time count was in 2019. However, larger questions exist about

the efficacy of the PIT count itself. Many experts argue that the PIT count is ineffective relative to By-Name Lists. Regardless, we currently do not know how many individuals are living unsheltered, nor do we know who or how often an individual is moving through our systems of care in real time.

The City and our partners need to develop a system of data collection that captures and provides decision-makers with real-time information like –

- 1) The number of unsheltered houseless individuals on our streets.
- 2) How many shelter beds are available on a given night in Portland.
- 3) What services are the houseless responding positively to?
- 4) How much do these services cost?

Having high-level data points that are both regularly updated and easily accessible is something we do not currently have easy access to.

The lack of access to key data points and to an understanding of crucial metadata schemas creates two systemic problems. The first relates to public perception. Portlanders are persistently convinced that *nothing* is being done to address the crisis at hand. A comprehensive and shared set of data, that articulates the scope and scale of our current response, will give stakeholders and constituents the confidence that we have a strategy, and that strategy is working.

The second impacts decision makers. Without a culture of data-informed decision-making (and the necessary data to make such decisions), strategies to solve any issue are subject to error. This is especially so during a time of unprecedented crisis, such as the pandemic we currently face, when variables are subject to rapid change. When dealing with an emergency as systemic as houselessness, stakeholders and decision makers from a wide array of institutions are involved. Ensuring that everyone (whether they are elected officials, agency heads, direct service providers, leaders of nonprofits and community-based organizations, and others) is relying on the same data management systems and seeing the same topline data reports is essential to building an effective, system-wide response.

## Action Items

a. Convene City Council Street to Stability (STS) Task Force

Commissioner Ryan's office will lead the City's efforts to address the homeless crisis by convening a City Council STS Task Force, comprised of staff from each office. They will meet regularly to develop cross-bureau and cross-jurisdictional strategies to address the region's response efforts. JOHS Director Marc Jolin, as well as staff from PHB, PBOT, PPR, HUCIRP, ECC, or other government entities will attend these meetings as needed to provide information and assist in crafting and executing strategies.

b. Convene STS Stakeholder Advisory Committee

Commissioner Ryan's office will convene a group of community leaders, key stakeholders, and people with lived experience to help inform the regional

response and provide feedback at key decision points. The group will also help to educate constituencies, leverage resources that amplify the work the city is doing, and ensure no efforts are unnecessarily duplicative. 2021 is about alignment around our City's top priority.

c. Identify "backbone"

We are moving into a critical juncture in this work. As such, it is essential that we build key relationships with entities that can serve as a backbone in this work—group(s) that will keep the various stakeholders engaging in this work accountable to the common values and best practices we have identified over the years.

## Summary

This crisis is massive and longstanding, and its root causes are decades old and systemic on a federal level. The work that has been done to build a response to this crisis, especially over the past five years, is truly exceptional. Portlanders are largely unaware of the amount of work and institutional groundwork that has been laid with minimal resources. So many inspiring individuals have been doing this work alone for years, lacking the levels of funding and public support needed to succeed. In particular, the Joint Office of Homeless Services has done an outstanding job in addressing this crisis with limited funding and capacity. We invite our local elected officials, community providers, those with lived experience, and key stakeholders to join us as we work to build upon the strategies that have been working and incorporate new programs as part of our continuum of services.

Portlanders experiencing houselessness are among the most marginalized and disadvantaged people in our city. As decision makers in our city, we have an obligation to examine the policies and practices that continue to contribute to the structural inequality of this crisis.

These are just the first steps in developing a comprehensive regional strategy in addressing the homeless crisis. As we move forward, we must have an unwavering commitment to collaboration based in a good-faith desire to address the issues we face – sharing both the failures and successes of the strategies we implement. If we can build and maintain an atmosphere based on these shared values, we will be able to effect a degree of change and assist our most vulnerable neighbors.