

**PrimaryHealth of Josephine County
Testimony before the House Committee on
Rural Communities, Land Use and Water
February 8, 2016**



Recognizing the significant connection between housing and health, PrimaryHealth of Josephine County, a Coordinated Care Organization, convened a local Housing Forum on January 7, 2016 to begin a community-wide discussion related to housing resources and social determinants of health. Participants spanned several sectors including Community Action Agencies, CCOs, Housing Authority, School District, DHS, Law Enforcement, Early Learning Hub, Oregon Health Authority, Mental Health, Addictions, the Faith Based Community, Community Service Organizations and Non-Profits, the Medical Community, and one elected official, Representative Duane Stark.

Since this discussion, housing continues to be at the forefront of community discussions. For example, Jefferson Regional Health Alliance, a collaborative group of healthcare leaders, identified housing as a key issue affecting health outcomes in a retreat held last week. In another meeting the same week, the Illinois Valley Community Partners, a group focused on graduation rates and educational success, discussed teen homelessness as a key issue. This focus on housing by such a diverse group of stakeholders is a relatively new occurrence in Josephine County, highlighting the dire situation locally.

In Josephine County, a critically low amount of our community housing inventory is available. This impacts all populations. For example, it is a regular occurrence that individuals who have been waiting for months or years for a Section 8 housing voucher are not able to find vacant low income housing prior to the vouchers expiration. However, this issue does not only affect those seeking low income housing. Those looking to relocate to Josephine County for employment opportunities or other reasons also state that they are unable to find rentals.

PrimaryHealth recently assessed that just over 20% of the caseload for PrimaryHealth Community Health Workers is currently homeless. This caseload represents some of the CCOs most vulnerable health plan members. To be eligible for the Community Health Worker program, one must have a combination of high medical costs, multiple medical comorbidities, mental health and/or substance abuse issues, and/or other social or environmental risk factors. Of the 72 individuals on the current caseloads, there have been also 29 housing transitions documented after entering the program.

The leading reported causes of homelessness locally demonstrate the complexity of the issue at hand; unemployment, can't afford rent, drugs/alcohol, kicked out, domestic violence, criminal history, mental health disorder, and poor rental history. Housing forum participants spent time identifying the challenges and barriers related to housing. In addition to shortage of housing

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inventory overall, there is a lack of supported housing and transitional housing programs as well as a shortage of emergency shelter. However, getting a key is not enough. Without the right supports in place it is difficult to maintain housing, resulting in continued instability and costly turnover. Issues surrounding scarcity of buildable land within city limits also continues to surface.

It is clear that in Josephine County, community partners are eager to work together towards a solution. We desperately need a larger inventory of affordable housing. There is a clear unified voice that more supported housing and transitional housing programs are also needed, particularly those that serve youth, individuals in recovery from drugs and alcohol, and with mental health disorders. Community partners have stated that they envision working together, for example, providing coordinated wrap around services and case management to low income housing projects.

Our community is motivated to work together towards a solution to this issue. HB 4079 seems to be a simple, reasonable option that would allow pilots to get underway. This could represent a first step for communities such as ours to begin to experiment with strategies that will address the complex issues we are facing around housing.

Jennifer Johnstun, RN
Director of Health Strategy
PrimaryHealth of Josephine County
1867 Williams Hwy, Suite 108
Grants Pass, OR 97527
Office:(541) 471-4208