



DATE: April 3, 2017
TO: House Committee on Human Services and Housing
FROM: Lisa Nichols, Assistant Director Lane County H&HS
RE: HB 3063, relating to housing for individuals with mental illness

Chair Keny-Guyler and members of the Committee:

Lane County offers its support of HB 3063 and urges a DO PASS recommendation. This measure creates a distinct Mental Health Housing Fund and provides the necessary approvals for the Oregon Health Authority to administer and allocate any moneys in the Fund. It also creates an 11 member advisory group to oversee the use of the Fund.

Lane County cannot emphasize enough the importance of affordable housing options for individuals diagnosed with a mental illness. While securing housing can be a challenge for anyone, those with a mental illness too often experience increased barriers in this area. The outcomes from this dynamic are costly; high rates of homelessness and increased usage of community resources such as homeless shelters, law enforcement contacts and jail stays. We are convinced that an “upstream” investment in housing will save the resources now being poured into services that are only dealing with the symptoms produced from a lack of housing. HB 3063 is good public policy.

Our experience locally suggests the need for additional housing units for this population:

- A multi-disciplinary team of behavioral health and criminal justice professionals have been focused on the services and resources for individuals that intersect both of these systems. Their highest priorities are affordable housing options and crisis intervention services. While the group has had some success in implementing additional crisis service options, funding and resource constraints remain a barrier in broadening housing availability.
- We initiated a Frequent User Engagement Program where individuals who are the highest users of public services, including law enforcement contacts, emergency department visits and jail beds, are identified. A multi-agency group shares this data and implements person-specific strategy to break these cycles and realize improved outcomes for these individuals. However, breaking the cycle of incarceration and homelessness among individuals with complex behavioral health and health challenges requires housing with support services embedded in the same facility. Known as the Housing First model, the results represent reduced burdens on public services and cost offsets for the total public safety and health care systems.

Finally we note the Oregon Performance Plan (the agreement between OHA and the US Department of Justice) requires the addition of supported housing units across the State. In order to meet the requirements of the agreement as well as potentially reduce reliance on higher level institutional care settings, it is imperative that additional housing options become available.