

Chair Fagan, Members of the Committee, My name is Deborah Kafoury and I am the Chair of the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners.

Thank you for inviting me today to talk about Multnomah County's response to the COVID19 County plays even when we are not in a pandemic situation.

First and foremost Multnomah County is the safety net provider to the most vulnerable in our community.

- We provide shelter services for over 6,000 people a year through the Joint Office of Homeless Services, and we also house over 12,000 people who would otherwise be homeless.
- We fund and administer short-term rent assistance to those in danger of losing their home.
- Our Public Health Department, when not responding to COVID19, delivers WIC, STD prevention, provides Maternal, Child and Family Health Services serves over 7000 women, and much much more.
- We operate 8 Primary Care Clinics, including our HIV service center, 8 Student Health Centers, and 6 Dental Clinics. 79% of the 63,000 patients that we see already live below the federal poverty line of \$12,000 per year.
- Our case managers help people with an intellectual disability live a full life by connecting them to needed services like job training and housing.
- We protect aging adults in our community helping them enroll in programs, delivering meals, and investigating abuse.
- And much more.

Now to our response in addressing COVID19.

Multnomah County stood up its emergency operations on January 28th, a week after the country saw its first case of COVID-19, in Washington State. There were more than 100 County employees and subject matter experts working shifts to prepare for - and respond to - the outbreak.

The County is home to the state's largest concert and event venues, popular clubs and restaurants, a large port, and Oregon's largest airport. We knew that an early and robust effort would be needed.

We also knew that we needed to continue to protect our most vulnerable neighbors whose health is most at-risk from COVID19.

On March 11, the Joint Office of Homeless Services -- “the Joint Office” as I will call it for short hand -- launched a weeklong outreach push, with more than a dozen agencies, to cover the County and bring masks, supplies, and COVID 19 information cards in English and Spanish to more than 2,000 unsheltered people on how to protect themselves from getting infected.

To maintain overall shelter capacity, the County kept winter shelters open instead of closing them as scheduled. The Joint Office also allowed shelter providers to expand their use of motel vouchers and granted outreach teams the power to obtain additional survival gear for those who are unsheltered.

After consulting with our public health experts we made the difficult decision to close our library system. Patrons were asked not to return books, and late fees would not be charged. Library staff were asked to work in other capacities, such as our shelters and in the elections office during the May Primary. I am happy to report that on June 8th, we will begin offering curbside pick-up for books at four library locations. Our Libraries also served as ballot drop-off sites during the May Primary Election.

On March 17th, I issued a moratorium on residential evictions for non-payment of rent. The intent of the moratorium was two-fold: 1) to ensure that people could stay home and slow the spread of the novel coronavirus in our community; and 2) to make sure - to the extent that we can - that nobody loses their housing due to this pandemic.

When Governor Brown issued a state-wide eviction moratorium on April 1, it was no longer necessary for Multnomah County to continue with its own regulatory framework, and so the Board of County Commissioners voted to suspend enforcement of the County’s moratorium and follow the state’s policy.

We did, however, keep a critical provision from the County ordinance: a six-month repayment grace period to give tenants the time to apply for rent assistance, and cover the rent they owe from during the emergency. But for those who are already homeless, our highest priority has been to protect their health.

And to that end, at the beginning of this crisis, we reached out to our partners at Metro and the City of Portland, and we opened multiple new shelter locations, including the Oregon Convention Center and the Charles Jordan Community Center to spread out nearly 400 beds. This gave us the ability to allow physical distancing throughout all of our shelters because our existing facilities were just not set up to respond to a pandemic, but thankfully, we have a system that was able to do just that in a matter of weeks.

But because of the stay at home order, we were no longer able to rely on donations of food for people staying in our shelters. This required us to provide 1,600 meals per day across all the shelters.

We're also funding food providers who help people who aren't in our shelters. Blanchet House and Catholic Charities are providing 10,000 meals every week with our support. And in just the past month our outreach teams have delivered more than 11,000 sack lunches and water bottles to campers in mid and east county, far from downtown.

And as we move from preparing for disaster to now living with a pandemic, our commitment to protecting our unhoused neighbors must remain the same. Soon, public spaces will again host more people coming in contact with each other, and people experiencing homelessness are at a much higher risk of both contracting the virus and of hospitalization. Our public health experts recommend self-isolation as a critical tool to help vulnerable people protect themselves, and this week we began moving the highest-risk folks in our shelters to our first motel designed to help people self-isolate.

Beyond our normal shelter work, we also needed to stand up spaces where individuals who had a temperature, respiratory illness, or showed other signs of sickness could quarantine. Working with local businesses like the Jupiter Hotel we added 120 hotel rooms for people who are sick.

We are not only making sure people are able to stay in their homes, but we want to make sure that they are safe in their homes. COVID has been a huge stressor for families. People are losing their jobs, we are isolated at home, and children don't have access to their school communities.

To answer this, our public health department and County human services department have created a Cross-departmental collaboration around these growing concerns. This has led to an increase in access to domestic violence-related beds for women and children and a coordinated effort to provide food and other basic needs to individuals and families. We have also worked with our providers and staff to better understand the COVID related stressors and how to counsel individuals who call us for help.

As you can see I could go on for a long time about how Multnomah County is responding to the COVID crisis. I am going to wrap up by talking briefly about how we are now looking towards opening back up. Historical racial inequities and health disparities have only been made worse during this time. This pandemic has seen the convergence of health, social, and financial burdens that vulnerable communities, particularly communities of color, face on a daily basis. These are the burdens and issues Public Health has worked hard to resolve for decades.

As the pandemic continues, we will be closely monitoring and responding to ease the burdens for those who are most affected by our pandemic responses. For example, we must continue

physical distancing, but we know distancing is a privilege and some in our community suffer more exposure than others -- as a result of their jobs or the jobs of those in their household.

Doing all of this work is not easy and it is not cheap. I would be remiss if I did not point out that Multnomah County has 20% of the state's population; we have suffered 40% of the deaths, yet we have only received 2% of the CARES Act money allocated to the State. We need your help and resources if we are going to be able to safely and equitably get out of this pandemic.

Thank you for your time today. I am available to answer any questions.

Deborah Kafoury, Chair  
Multnomah County Board of Commissioners