



HOUSING SENIORS | CREATING HOPE | PILOTING CHANGE

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House Committee on Human Services and Housing
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Chair Keny-Guyer, and members of the committee: Good afternoon and thank you for hearing our testimony. My name is Marisa Espinoza and I work at Northwest Pilot Project in Portland. We serve seniors who face a housing crisis with eviction prevention and homeless placement. For the past 5 years I was a housing case manager, and I recently moved into the role of public policy coordinator.

As a former case manager I know this: those of us working on the frontlines are doing our best to get folks housed, providing services that address a range of housing needs. Needs that tie to health, the trauma of being on the streets, addressing barriers to landlord approval, and more.

And yet, for all our hard work and compassionate care, we hit the same wall again and again: the folks with the lowest incomes just can't afford today's rents. People working minimum wage, people with disabilities, people who have worked their whole lives and are now on a fixed income — many of whom are trying to survive on less than a thousand dollars a month— are locked out of today's rents.

As service providers, we have to tell people every day that yes, we may have the resources to pay one month of rent but no, we don't have anything that will make ongoing rent affordable. Waitlists for subsidized housing span at least 3 or 4 years for most buildings, and Section 8 vouchers can take much, much longer. We have to tell people that this is how long it takes to get stable housing, and they tell us every day: I can't wait that long.

That's where vouchers come in. As a case manager, the day that we got locally funded vouchers at NWPP and I could use them to house my most vulnerable clients- that day changed everything.

Everything changes when you have a rent voucher. For my clients who were barely hanging on in housing they could no longer afford, where rent had jumped hundreds of dollars since they first moved in, where they were forced to skip medication refills or avoid turning on the heat in winter to save a few dollars, the voucher meant they had immediate access to affordable housing.

I helped them fill out paperwork for the local housing authority and a few phone calls and steps later, their current housing became affordable and permanent. The places where they had chosen to live, near a good bus line, near the affordable grocery store, could be theirs for the foreseeable future.

For my clients who were houseless, living in shelters and cars, they were suddenly fast-tracked to housing. Apartments that only the day before had rents that were out of reach were now an option. No more applying to waitlist after waitlist for the meager number of subsidized units.

With a voucher, we could get them housed much faster than ever imagined, many in a matter of a few weeks.

Our pilot participants demonstrated clear improvement in their health and overall stability after receiving a voucher: better access to physical health care, improved mental health status, and financial stability. One participant stated, "If I didn't have [this voucher] I would probably end up in a nursing home because my [caretaker is] here eight hours a day now, and that helps me a whole lot."

This is a solution that gets to the root of the problem for many people, especially the most vulnerable. It's a solution that changes lives. Here to talk about how a voucher changed her life is my former client Anne, who received a voucher through the Multnomah County pilot program.

I want to express my gratitude to the committee for your time and also urge the legislature to study this issue and support House Bill 4002. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Marisa Espinoza

Public Policy Coordinator

Northwest Pilot Project