



Oregon Law Center

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To: Senate Committee on Health Care
From: Sybil Hebb, Oregon Law Center
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Re: SB 850

Chair Patterson, Vice-Chair Knopp, and members of the committee:

On behalf of the Oregon Law Center, I submit this testimony in support of SB 850, which will modify current statewide death reporting obligations to track housing status. This change is one step towards ensuring that the lives of Oregonians experiencing homelessness are valued and counted, and will help us do a better job of understanding and tailoring services to meet identified needs.

Thank you to the Chair and the bill sponsors for bringing this bill forward.

The Oregon Law Center (OLC) is a state-wide non-profit law firm whose mission is to achieve justice for low-income communities of Oregon by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services. Helping families maintain safe, stable housing is a critical part of our work. Housing is about much more than a roof over one's head; it is about opportunity, stability, and health. Without stable housing, it is difficult or impossible for families to hold down a job, keep children in school, access neighborhood amenities, and stay healthy.

Housing instability can take many forms. The majority of our client community is rent burdened – one emergency away from homelessness – or are houseless themselves, living either doubled-up or in shelter, or living outside without adequate shelter.

Rates of homelessness pose great challenges for Oregon. Statewide, Oregon's population is growing¹ and yet housing production lags behind.² The cost of housing is high while incomes and vacancy rates remain low. Decades of federal divestment in affordable housing infrastructure and resources have directly led to a sharp increase³ in the number of Oregonians experiencing homelessness, including an increase in the number of school children without the stability of home.⁴ Oregon is one of four states nationally in which more than half of people experiencing homelessness are living unsheltered.

¹ Certified Population Estimates (July 1, 2019), Portland State University Population Research Center. https://www.pdx.edu/prc/sites/www.pdx.edu/prc/files/Certified%20Population%20Estimates_%202012_15_2019.pdf

² Oregon Statewide Housing Plan 2018

³ Oregon Homelessness Point in Time Count 2019

⁴ Oregon Department of Education Homeless Student Data. https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-anddistricts/grants/esea/mckinney-vento/pages/default.aspx?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

The experience of homelessness has well-documented long-term consequences on health and well-being.⁵ And yet, we do not have any statewide mechanism to count homeless mortality, and we cannot identify the number of people experiencing homelessness who have passed away due to COVID.⁶ A study done in 2020 found that nationally, there are only 68 jurisdictions that count this data, including Multnomah County.⁷ Without a statewide standardized data collection mechanism, it is difficult to identify the true impact of homelessness on mortality rates.

SB 850 will expand upon Multnomah County's good work, to add housing status to the list of data tracked in death reports on a statewide basis. Tracking this information will help us devise better responses to the needs of persons experiencing homelessness in communities across the state. As Oregon has one of the nation's highest rates of unsheltered homelessness, it is fitting that we take this step forward to establish one of the first statewide registries in the nation.

Thank you for your work and for your commitment to Oregonians.

⁵ <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/homelessness-and-health.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.statnews.com/2021/03/11/the-uncounted-people-who-are-homeless-are-invisible-victims-of-covid-19/>

⁷ <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Section-1-Toolkit.pdf>