



Oregon's Poverty Fighting Network

March 1, 2021

Oregon House Committee on Housing
Rep. Julie Fahey, Chair
900 NE Court St.
Salem, OR 97301

Chair Fahey, Members of the Committee

My name is Scott Cooper, and I am the president of the Community Action Partnership of Oregon. We represent the 18 community action agencies covering all of our state.

I come before you today to express grave concern about HB2100, which we believe will have unintended consequences that will damage delivery of homeless services in Oregon for many years to come.

Our quarrel is not with the culturally responsive elements of this bill. They are actually quite good and a step forward. Our disagreement with HB2100 is hidden in details covered elsewhere in the bill.

HB2100 would disinvest in the carefully built network of community action agencies that has served this state for four decades. This bill would reduce formula funding distributed through the Emergency Housing Account and State Homeless Assistance Program by 20 percent, starting in 2022. It would freeze future formula funding at current service level, setting in motion a process of slowly starving the existing, locally driven, homeless response system of resources. Its replacement is only ambiguously and vaguely defined as, "local initiatives, pilots and programs to address homelessness in a specific, targeted manner as determined by the council."

The damage caused by this bill won't stop at your local community action agency. Because many community action agencies, share these resources and use them as match to bring even more resources to local communities, the disruption this bill will cause will pass through to homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, veteran's organizations and other community-based organizations. It is possible that they might get it back by applying directly to OHCS through a competitive process, but many of these organizations are volunteer led, not well versed in administrative requirements and run on the slimmest of budgets. Agencies like mine support them to get and administer these funds. Without support for capacity, small faith-based groups—critical to homeless service-provision, especially in rural communities—will simply fade away.

But let's say they can apply. This bill offers no guarantees that the 20 percent being withdrawn from a community will be returned to that community. There is new language in the bill that seems to substitute a nebulous "needs based" approach to formula distribution to the former emphasis on geographic parity. The bill would replace the current check and balance system of community consultation in formula development with the oversight of the State Housing Stability

Council. This loose language would accommodate a token distribution to a community and certainly gives no guarantees of stable and predictable funding year over year.

Stable and predictable funding is important in this work because with it, communities can invest in program expansion and infrastructure. If this bill is about making the homeless response system better, the provision to freeze future formula funding at the 2021 CSL level, does the opposite. It will limit the planning horizon for any community exactly one biennium.

Perhaps the most hurtful part of this bill is the disregard it shows for local communities. Through the nefarious provision freezing formula funding at current service level, the bill is crafted to gradually withdraw all homeless services from local control and replace it with control by a state agency. Talk of undefined “outcomes” and “frameworks” and “best practices” and “council discretion” is code for “Salem knows best.” I know that the good citizens, electors and local elected officials of Redmond, where I’m from, won’t agree with that. I suspect the good people of Medford, Grants Pass, Tillamook, or any other Oregon city might feel the same.

Bottom line: HB2100 doesn’t modernize the homeless system as promised. It redistributes money and power from local control to state control. It doesn’t expand system capacity; it diminishes it immediately and over the long term. This bill doesn’t promote a new and better vision for ending homelessness; this bill is the enemy of vision, planning and investment. This bill disinvests in the current system while offering not clear alternative for a better system.

This bill is bad for Oregonians and bad for Oregon. There are certainly better ways to address rising rates of homelessness. In a different world, we would have sat down with OHCS and discussed them rather than being forced to this table to discuss a bill that was not filed with this committee until 4:45 last night.

A conversation is definitely in order. This bill is premature.

The Community Action Partnership of Oregon urges you to not to advance this bill at this time.

Thank you for your service to Oregon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Scott Cooper".

Scott Cooper, President of the Board
Community Action Partnership of Oregon