

My name is Cynthia Aguilar-Arizmendi and I am a Policy Coordinator at Unite Oregon, a membership organization led by Black, Indigenous, People of Color, immigrants and refugees, rural communities, and people experiencing poverty. Growing up in a working-class neighborhood, I have experienced firsthand the reality of not being able to afford your rent and how lack of resources can put people in desperate situations.

Over the past few months, I've seen a lot of concern around public consumption of substances in the streets of our cities. It's true that the overdose crisis is particularly dire for people living outside without stable housing, who face long lines and waitlists for detox services and an acute lack of recovery or transitional housing, resulting in cycles of despair.

We all agree that more needs to be done to address the crisis in our communities and save lives. But criminalization is not the answer we need, nor the approach that Oregonians voted for. Criminal penalties exacerbate housing insecurity by creating criminal records that destabilize housing, education, and employment long after a person is in active recovery. And arrests for public addiction, as some are calling for, would also contribute to shame and stigma, resulting in fewer people asking for help and more people using alone – a practice that greatly increases overdose risks. Further, creating new crimes against people experiencing addiction in public will scare unhoused people into less safe, less sanitary, and riskier practices, which increase the risk of overdose and infectious diseases such as HIV.

We are calling for real solutions, real safety, and real healing. We cannot return to the harmful, ineffective, and costly War on Drugs, which disproportionately harmed communities of color. We can and must take bold action to get and keep our neighbors housed and stabilized – action such as requiring local coordinated care organizations to fast track housing vouchers, rental assistance, and housing support resources. Or increasing the availability of housing options that do not require abstinence (e.g., permanent supportive housing, housing treatment paired with outpatient treatment) and temporary housing.

When we prioritize connecting unhoused people to services over arrest and incarceration, our communities grow stronger and safer. Arresting and jailing folks struggling with a health issue does not address the underlying problems of addiction and homelessness, and will not provide the solutions Oregonians want and deserve. I urge the committee to invest in housing assistance to keep people from becoming homeless and therefore more vulnerable to addiction and despair.

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Schedule a meeting with me! | [Calendly](#)