

February 15, 2024

Senator Fred Girod, Co-Chair  
Representative Paul Holvey, Co-Chair  
Joint Committee on Ways & Means Subcommittee on Capital Construction  
900 Court Street NE  
Salem OR 97301

Dear Co-Chairs Girod and Holvey and Members of the Committee:

I am writing in my capacity as Salem City Councilor (Ward 7) to voice my support for the funding of the United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley Cottages United Project. The project, aimed at seniors, 55 and up, will bring 25 low-income cottages to the Salem-Keizer area. These cottages will have a maximum monthly rent of \$500.00, meet building, energy and ADA standards, serve to revitalize the neighborhood where they are located, and have the potential to be replicated in our city, county and state.

For seniors, affordable housing is a critical need in Salem/Keizer:

- According to the 2023 PIT count, Salem had 1488 homeless individuals. Of that, 429 were age 50 and over. This was the largest group in this count.
- 63% of older adults, 55 and up, have an earned income below \$35,000 a year.
- In the past 30 years, the number of people 55 and older experiencing homelessness has jumped from 11% to 50%.
- In 2023 the average social security benefit was \$1782 per month.
- For older adults, financial insecurity is a barrier to stable housing and house instability significantly impacts health.

I've worked with UWMWV's staff and leadership to support this project behind the scenes. Under CEO Rhonda Wolf's leadership, these cottages will create safety and dignity for low-income seniors. As a Commissioner of the Salem Housing Authority (SHA), I can tell you that every single affordable housing project the City builds, renovates, or oversees fills up immediately. We have several housing projects designed for low-income seniors; all of them are full. In January 2024, SHA recently celebrated the grant opening of Sequoia Crossings, which provides 60 units of affordable housing. Sequoia Crossings filled every unit in less than a month's time. Salem has added hundreds of affordable units in recent years, but there are thousands more unserved.

As a volunteer at homeless shelters and encampments, I have seen firsthand the substantial percentage of seniors experiencing homelessness. I recall speaking with a man in his 60s living in a homeless camp in Wallace Marine Park. He became homeless due to sky-high medical bills. Due to his age and physical condition, he had been assaulted more than once in the camp. During my tour of SafeSleep United (operated by UWMWV), staff informed me that they have sheltered several guests in their 60s, 70s, or 80s. Many SafeSleep guests are survivors of sexual assault and other traumatic experiences. This is how I know that the Cottages United project will be a life-saver for low-income seniors.

I respectfully request that you approve funding for the United Way of the Mid-Willamette Cottages United project. This funding will create a real-world solution to our senior homelessness issue and create a long-term replicable project.

Sincerely, *Vanessa Nordyke*

Vanessa Nordyke, Salem City Council Ward 7