

February 25, 2025

TO: House Committee on Housing and Homelessness

FROM: Lynelle Wilcox, a concerned citizen, and Program Manager of SafeSleep United - an overnight, low barrier shelter for women

SUBJECT: Support of House Bill 3644 - requiring the OHCS to create a statewide shelter program through which regional coordinators are selected to administer funding to shelter providers.

Dear Chair Marsh, Vice- Chair Breese-Iverson, Vice-Chair Anderson, and members of the House Committee on Housing and Homelessness,

I am writing in strong support of House Bill 3644. Fellow supporters of this bill have already shared many points and perspectives that echo my own reasons for supporting this bill. Yet I want to also focus on the reasons people may oppose this bill.

I printed and read each opposition letter today. At the time, most were from concerned citizens; one was from a doctor, and one was from a City Councilor of Brookings. I'm grateful for the diverse input on this bill.

Overall, opposition focused on a few common themes:

How to do this work better:

- Concerns that we provide daily support vs. getting people out of homelessness.
- We need to do more to address root causes instead of so often treating symptoms.
- We need to use existing funds better.
- We need more holistic approaches.
- We should look at Bybee Lakes Hope Center and other private agencies as a model and partner.
- We need to help people to get into programs for drugs, mental health, employment.
- We need to reduce barriers along the way of people becoming clean and sober.
- We are cherry picking easy people, leaving people who are chronically homeless behind.
- We need a system that enables accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and long term sustainability, not temporary fixes or untested expansion.

Why we shouldn't do this work:

- We don't have the money to do this and we can't afford higher taxes for this.
- We need to leave this problem to the private sector.
- Disapproval of low barrier philosophies. Beliefs that Housing First and drug decriminalization doesn't work.
- Statistics show homelessness rising, so money we've spent isn't doing anything.
- We should stop using taxes and raising taxes for housing goals and social programs for people who are here illegally, and for people who are unwilling to better themselves.
- We already have supportive housing for those that want it.
- More money brings more homeless people and we've become a magnet for drugs and homelessness.
- We don't need ANOTHER entity to work on homelessness. We need to stop throwing money at homelessness; it attracts more homeless, enables more vagrants, and feeds NGOs and the homeless industrial complex.

In the past and present, unrelated to this bill, I've had some concerns that echo some of the opposition concerns. Yet in volunteering at warming centers, serving as a homeless advocate, working with many homeless service providers, and now serving as the Program Manager of a low barrier, overnight women's shelter, my perspectives have shifted in many ways as a result of seeing what can make a difference, and from hearing so many stories along the way. Sharing some thoughts about HB 3644 and some of the concerns conveyed by people who oppose the bill...

- *Concern that we provide daily support vs. getting people out of homelessness.*

Managing homelessness/solving homelessness: It's a reality that we have the ongoing need to balance managing homelessness (taking care of basic human needs, so people might live to see the next day), with solving homelessness - providing a place for someone to live. It's likely that no two people may ever agree on the money and ratios of those two needs, yet it's necessary to do both. (Unless we choose to let people die so we have fewer people to house, yet I hope we have a shared value in wanting to reduce homelessness more humanely than that.)

Regarding opposition letters about how to do this work better

House Bill 3644: This bill was created as a result of a report developed by a Sustainable Shelter Work Group, that was jointly convened by Governor Tina Kotek and Representative Pam Marsh. The mission of that group was to build a sustainable state-wide shelter system, with intentional focus and review on what we've done so far, where are gaps, what's working/not working, and ways to develop a transparent, data driven, efficient, and effective sustainable state-wide shelter system, with equitable access for all.

Their report includes goals and strategies that directly connect to concerns shared about how we need to do this work better:

- *We need more holistic approaches.*
- *We need to do more to address root causes instead of so often treating symptoms.*
- *We need to help people to get into programs for drugs, mental health, employment.*
- *We need more holistic approaches.*
- *We need to reduce barriers along the way of people becoming clean and sober.*
- *We should look at Bybee Lakes Hope Center and other agencies as a model and partner.*

Outputs AND outcomes: The report includes a focus on **outcomes**, as well as outputs. Outputs include beds created, hours spent on case management, number of people served. Outcomes reflect a focus on the individuals served, how they progress in the shelter system, what difference was made in their stability and lives.

A focus on outcomes and partnerships provides a holistic approach, where services and supports address and resolve issues beyond just symptoms, and where guests' hearts and emotional health are as important as statistical outputs. The report also includes a focus on mental health and addiction supports, with intent to reduce barriers for all.

Outputs enable us to share successes that are broader and deeper than the common and valuable metrics of getting a job or an apartment.

Success stories are diverse -

Some people are finally safe enough in a shelter to have breathing room to fall apart, before they can fall together again.

Some people believe they will die on the streets - it's just a question of when, so why bother to try for help or sobriety? Yet some people grow hope and belief that they CAN create a better life.

And success can be someone who dressed down and baggy on purpose, so she wouldn't attract attention because even though rape has nothing to do with what we wear, it can be so easy to believe that it's on us to prevent it by blending into the background. And success can be when she decides to believe it isn't her fault and never was her fault, and she lets herself dress and bloom pretty, not letting the rapists win anymore by making herself less visible.

Success can be when someone comes in worn down, with no opinions, no oomph, maybe from years of abuse, neglect, sex trafficking, and/or rapes, and they accept anything offered to them as if they are not worthy of anything. And one day, that woman rejects the pink shirt you offer her, because she really hoped for green, because she remembers now, and found her voice, about her favorite color.

Remembering your favorite color, finding hope and a reason to live, even going back to abuse but this time with the knowledge that NOW you know where to go if you need to escape again, relapsing and trying again - telling yourself it's a process and NOT telling yourself that you're a horrible worthless person, finding your voice.... each of these things, and so much more, are significant flavors of success.

- *We need to use existing funds better.*
- *We are cherry picking easy people, leaving people who are chronically homeless behind.*
- *We need a system that enables accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and long term sustainability, not temporary fixes or untested expansion.*

Responsible use of existing funds: Outcomes happen best from a collaborative approach, where partnerships are developed to utilize existing agencies and resources, so agencies are complementing each other's services and supports; not duplicating services or costs, and not recreating the wheel. Collaboration also enables more streamlined services, leaving more time and resources for serving people who may have more difficult situations.

- **More equitable access:** All of that this often already happening. Yet a focus on outcomes is more integrated and holistic, with teamwork that makes harder situations a little easier for clients and service providers to navigate, and with guests' hearts as a more tangible and relevant focus. The report also includes development of more consistent exit criteria and policies, so services are offered more equitably to people who are easy to serve, and to people who are harder to serve, within independence and safety standards.
- **Regional focus and accountability:** The report's regional approach supports paths for different focuses based on regional needs, yet still incorporates more consistency in some definitions, metrics, criteria, training, and concepts, contributing to the goal of

creating a state wide system that enables accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and long term sustainability, as we provide holistic services to manage and reduce homelessness.

Re: opposition letters about why we shouldn't do this work:

- *We don't have the money to do this and we can't afford higher taxes for this.*
- *Statistics show homelessness rising, so money we've spent isn't doing anything.*

The rise of homelessness is not a reflection that homeless services are not doing anything. Homelessness is rising as more and more people are priced out of their homes and apartments, as more people age and develop physical and/or mental disabilities. We are hearing from many senior citizens who are suddenly homeless for the first time in their lives because they can't afford rising rents, or a partner died and they can't get by on one income.

Anything we spend to manage or reduce homelessness is an investment. Investments rarely pay off immediately. It took us decades to get into this situation, and it will take more time to get out of this.

Yet people's hearts, hope, and lives are at stake. We've already invested a lot. This bill enables a sustainable shelter network so we can honor the investment we've made so far, and so we can still serve current and new people who are or will be experiencing homelessness. This bill enables as close to a "do no harm" approach as we can get. This bill reflects the humanity that we wish for fellow human beings who might be us one day.

- *We need to leave this problem to the private sector.*
- *We already have supportive housing for those that want it.*

I used to believe this too. Yet the number of people experiencing homelessness, and the number of people needing supportive housing, and the scope of work needed exceeds what can be done through existing supportive housing, churches, and private sector agencies. Additionally, those churches and agencies often have criteria that would exclude many people, which isn't reflective of the equitable access values that enable fairness to all.

- *Beliefs that Housing First and drug decriminalization doesn't work.*

Drug decriminalization had good intentions, yet didn't produce the desired results, so that is changing now. Studies show that Housing First has incredible success rates.

Housing First articles that share the success of Housing First philosophies:

<https://endhomelessness.org/resource/housing-first/>
<http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/housing-first-fact-sheet.pdf>
<https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/ending-homelessness/proven-solutions/>
https://www.vox.com/2014/5/30/5764096/homeless-shelter-housing-help-solutions?fbclid=IwAR1sWrlOgQuIgXy3H46GnsDnJOda_jluuWoXlpdEg3ag_nar1H-X9Wq3NRs
<https://phys.org/news/2017-03-housing-homeless-cheaper-society.html>
<https://www.businessinsider.com/santa-clara-homelessness-study-2015-5>
<https://www.citylab.com/equity/2015/05/the-case-for-giving-homes-to-the-homeless/392696/>
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/housing-first-homeless-charlotte_n_5022628

<https://thinkprogress.org/leaving-homeless-person-on-the-streets-31-065-giving-them-housing-10-051-3107834a8632/>
<https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/mar/12/shaun-donovan/hud-secretary-says-homeless-person-costs-taxpayers/>
https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2019/4/9/doing-the-math-on-housing-the-homeless?fbclid=IwAR2h-nimSGCcxRT6XK29Nz90OJwq5vg58pkrVb0tRVv7KIO_qKwq8pbE-7c
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/homelessness-finland-housing-first_n_5c503844e4b0f43e410ad8b6
<https://www.npr.org/2015/12/10/459100751/utah-reduced-chronic-homelessness-by-91-percent-heres-how>
<https://www.texastribune.org/2019/07/02/why-homelessness-going-down-houston-dallas/>

Overall, even if people do not support Housing First philosophies, housing people costs about three times less than the costs that we bear when people are homeless. Even if we believe that Housing First is not the answer, can we come from the perspective of utilizing our limited resources most cost effectively, for the sake of our collective wallets? Isn't that the best stewardship of our dollars?

- *Disapproval of low barrier philosophies.*

Low barrier is NOT the same as saying that anything goes. Sobriety is not required, yet drug and alcohol use cannot happen in low barrier shelters, and behavior needs to be safe for the person, other guests, and staff. Boundaries still exist.

Low barrier philosophies reflect a value that every human being is worthy of having some basic human needs met, not contingent on being clean and sober. That may not be a shared value among all people, yet sobriety is often hardest when you are still in survival mode, and studies show that having a safe place to live can enable stability that leads many people to pursue and achieve sobriety.

Many people did not struggle with addiction until they became homeless, and used drugs and/or alcohol to stay awake, to stay warm, to address physical and/or emotional pain, to deal with the trauma, risks, discrimination, and violence that happens almost daily to people experiencing homelessness.

It's easy to perceive so many survival mode behaviors as moral failings, and it's common for punitive perspectives to come up about that.

I used to think that I would always stay true to my values through life's ups and downs. Now I see that alignment with life values can hinge on the luck to not be in situations that are so desperate that survival and values conflict. There but for the grace of God or the universe go I, or any of us. I no longer can say with certainty what I would do if life led me to become homeless and desperate to survive. Believing I can accurately predict what I would do in a desperate survival mode situation is a delusion of luxury.

Yet even if I believe that a place to live should be contingent on sobriety, Housing First reflects the most cost effective stewardship and use of our dollars. Isn't that a shared goal among all of us?

- *We should stop using taxes and raising taxes for housing goals and social programs for people who are here illegally, and for people who are unwilling to better themselves.*

Along the way of doing this work, I used to think why don't they just... get a job, do detox and recovery, see a psychiatrist and get medication to address mental illness? Lack of doing those things reflects unwillingness to better themselves.

People's stories and realities have shown me that nothing as simple as my "why don't they just...?" expectations. One of the most vivid examples when one woman told me "Lynelle, I did go to a psychiatrist to get medication. The only meds that stop the voices in my head cause extreme diarrhea. As a homeless woman, how is it possible to have fast and easy access to a bathroom 24/7? I get to be the crazy woman who sometimes yells and curses at people no one else can see. Or I get to be the sane lady who has poop on her clothing. And how much shame comes with that?"

And with her two options, I'd make the same choice she did. What would you choose...?

Yet even with less dramatic examples, nothing is as simple as any of my "why don't they just...?" expectations. It's easy to think people just don't want to better themselves, yet that perspective lacks the realities and context that are not visible to the eye.

- *More money brings more homeless people and we've become a magnet for drugs and homelessness.*
- *We need to stop throwing money at homelessness; it attracts more homeless, enables more migrants.*

Many homeless service providers hear stories and/or have intake and/or assessment questions where guests share where they've been, how/why they came here. The majority of the people we serve are from this area in their present or past, or they have family here. Homelessness is growing, yet that is not because we are a magnet for homelessness. Homelessness is growing because people are being priced out of rentals, lack of truly affordable housing, deaths that leave a household with one income when they used to have two, health issues, job losses, the need to flee domestic violence. The magnet theory doesn't hold up to reality.

- *We don't need ANOTHER entity to work on homelessness. We need to stop feeding NGOs and the homeless industrial complex.*

House Bill 3644 isn't about another duplicative entity to feed; it's about creating a statewide shelter program that is sustainable, accountable, transparent, more equitable, effective, and regionally based. We don't have that yet. Creating this would directly address most opposition's concerns about how we can do this work better, and this bill even includes actions that address some concerns about why we shouldn't do this work.

As far as feeding the homeless industrial complex...Every person I know who does this work is multi-talented, diversely skilled, and marketable. Every person I know who does this work would love homelessness to be solved, so we can choose other directions, or take a break, or just breathe without worrying or crying about who might die in the cold or the heat this day because they have nowhere to live. Every person I know who does this work would be overjoyed to not have that in our thoughts and hearts every day.

What House Bill 3644 won't do:

House Bill 3644 can make a wonderful and necessary difference to support the investments we've already made, and to enable more equity and sustainability to manage and solve homelessness and save lives. Yet some opposition points are accurate that some harder situations are not being solved, and some people will still fall through those cracks. The problem is bigger than "just" housing.

Changes are also needed in how we serve and care for people struggling with mental illness beyond what permanent supported housing can provide. We need more paths for people to have guardianship or commitment with safe and human places for people to get the help they need. We need more places for that to happen, and more staffing for that work.

We also need options for people who are not able to do Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) independently, including options that can support people who may also be struggling with mental health or addiction.

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*Some people will still fall through the cracks. We need to fix those cracks too.*

*One woman struggles with schizophrenia and hears voices all the time. she explains that it's like a restaurant full of people, all talking about you, so it's noisy and hard to hear specific words, but you can tell none of them like you. It's so loud and overwhelming that it's hard to remember things, focus, or have a conversation.*

*After trying many different medications, the woman was able to function and converse better when they found meds that dull the voices. But no meds stop the voices, and the meds cause weight gain, depression, and leave her with low energy.*

*And even with the voices dulled a bit, at every waking moment, she is hearing, thinking, acting, and speaking around and above the voices in her head. I don't know if I could even be functional through all that.*

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A man called me about his wife. They were kicked out of apartments and shelters because of her yelling. She sees people doing horrific things that other people are not seeing. If we were hearing and seeing these horrors, we'd be yelling too.

He tells me that this happened slowly. He loves her but doesn't know how to save her. Meds have not helped. He married her with a promise to be there for her, through good and bad, thick and thin. He can't leave her homeless and alone. If they can't keep a place to live and her behaviors won't work in a shelter, he'll stay on the streets with her, because he loves her and he signed up for life.

Some people go down with their loved ones, through hell, and hopefully back out, somehow, some way.

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*One lady struggles with mental health and multiple personalities. She stays outside. One night the people in her head were yelling and cursing.*

*She came to our door in total tears. Explaining that she is exhausted and just wants to SLEEP, but "they" won't let her. She wonders if we have earplugs so she might finally SLEEP? We gave her some earplugs and a hot cocoa.*

*And the voices still screamed loudly. She came back to the door, in complete exhaustion and total tears, and handed me back the earplugs. And told me they don't work. And what can you say to that?*

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One woman was waiting outside to come in for her intake. She was on the phone, speaking with her 7 year old daughter as I walked up to open the shelter. She handed me the phone and asked me to say hello to her daughter, because her daughter wanted to say hi to me, knowing her mom would be staying with us. She told me her name and I said that's a very pretty name. She told me that her mom named her. Not even knowing her mom yet, it was obvious to me that her mom named her.

As I got to know the woman, I learned that her daughter lives in another state. I asked if her intention is to move there, and she shared that no... she struggles with mental illness, and she's doing well for now, yet even with meds, her mental health fluctuates, and she doesn't want to expose her daughter to that. Her daughter has a good life with her dad and his partner who also loves her. How could she do better than that for her daughter?

She will continue her connection through calls. They each know what's up with each other on a regular basis and their love and connection is very clearly strong. She's giving her daughter her best self, across time and miles.

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We live among warriors. These are some of the many people who struggle with mental health. They are often shunned, feared, treated as if they are vermin, invisible, dangerous, sub-human.

It is harder for them to find and access equitable temporary shelter or permanent housing because we don't have adequate knowledge, funds, treatment, and supports.

Many of them fall through the cracks and are dying on the streets, as another statistic, without the accuracy and dignity of also being acknowledged as an equitable traveling soul and fellow human being.

There is a Halloween meme that I love:

Halloween: a day when we get it right.  
Strangers come to us,  
beautiful, ugly, odd or scary,  
and we accept them all without question,  
compliment them, treat them kindly,  
and give them good things.

Why don't we live like that?

- Steve Garnass-Holmes

What if we gift ourselves and each other by trying to get it right every day, year round?  
House Bill 3644 is a start.

Thank you for your consideration.  
Lynelle Wilcox