

Aligning Housing and Workforce Systems in Multnomah County: Economic Opportunity Program Rent Assistance Results

Executive Summary

The impact of homelessness and housing insecurity is broad, deep, and community-wide, from increased demands on emergency services to lost productivity and revenue. Even so, perhaps the greatest cost of homelessness is immensely personal. The trauma of losing one's home and often every possession except the ones carried out the door impacts every aspect of a person's life. It undermines one's sense of self-worth and subjects the individual to very real physical dangers and emotional trauma. Yet, with just a little assistance, individuals have enormous capacity to persevere and take advantage of employment programs to increase their incomes and be able to stabilize, and then maintain their housing.

The Economic Opportunity Program (EOP) gives low-income individuals the opportunity and assistance that they need to develop career goals that lead to self-sufficiency and housing stability. EOP participants work with Career Coaches in Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to create career plans and access vocational training to gain living wage employment. Within the program, they have up to three years to work on their career goals, which may include basic skills, soft skills, occupational skills training, job readiness training and job search assistance.

Worksystems and EOP CBO partners have seen that participants who are homeless or struggling to maintain their housing find it difficult to engage in employment services, trainings, and job search, and often leave the program without accomplishing their career goals. In order to support these community members in working towards career goals, members of Portland's local Continuum of Care, A Home for Everyone, funded rent assistance for EOP participants who are homeless or at risk of losing their housing.

*"I went from homelessness to hopefulness."
-Economic Opportunity Program Participant*

Bringing housing services to the Economic Opportunity Program (which is part of the local public workforce system) was a catalyst for systems alignment between the housing and workforce development systems. The model builds upon the expertise and resources of each system in order to create more effective and efficient services for shared customers. Before these funds were available, participants went without housing assistance and often dropped out of the program or had less success due to the challenges of participating in training and employment while not being housed.

Given the current housing crisis in Multnomah County, it is important that the housing and employment systems collaborate in order to prevent homelessness and stretch available housing support. Aligning services allows us to better support housing insecure individuals to become self-reliant through employment. Having housing stability allows participants to focus on career goals that will lead to career

track employment with wages sufficient to meet the ever-rising cost of housing within the region. In the first eighteen months that EOP rent assistance was implemented, EOP rent assistance recipients were 38% more likely to complete training and 67% more likely to obtain career track employment than those who needed housing assistance, but did not receive it (limited funding at the end of the program year created a natural comparison group). Participants who received rent assistance increased their income at program exit at a rate of almost double that of those who needed rent assistance but did not receive it.

The 80 EOP rent assistance recipients increased their incomes by a total of \$718,579 after an investment of \$238,179 in rent assistance. EOP rent assistance recipients were able to increase their incomes by triple the amount of the public investment in rent assistance. Since 70% remained housed 12 months from the time their rent assistance ended, it is likely that they will not need to return to the public system for housing assistance and the initial rent assistance investment is able to support others in need.

These results highlight how systems alignment can increase participant success and create greater returns on investment for public funds. Low-income residents benefit when public systems work together in a coordinated fashion.

We are fortunate in Multnomah County to have a leadership structure that fosters collaboration by its very nature. A Home for Everyone involves a broad spectrum of stakeholders including public agencies, elected officials, service providers, business sector representatives, and concerned citizens. It initially formed in

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the process of resetting the County's 10-year plan to end homelessness. A Home for Everyone played a key role in fostering collaborations through the formation of focused workgroups in 2014 in order to develop the region's action plan for ending homelessness. Its Workforce & Economic Opportunity Workgroup brings employment and

housing agencies together to discuss how employment programs can be one of the solutions to preventing and reducing homelessness. In the early stages of our work together, we can already see how providing access to flexible, responsive workforce and housing supports leads local residents to attain greater housing stability and increased economic self-sufficiency.

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The full report will be posted on Worksystems' website at www.worksystems.org.

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¹ All data reported, unless otherwise noted, is from October 1, 2015 to March 31, 2017.