



Washington County

# Response to Homelessness

during COVID-19 crisis



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# WASHINGTON COUNTY HOUSING SERVICES

## RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS DURING COVID-19

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Washington County is experiencing an unprecedented rise in homelessness. As a result of COVID-19 and many other complex factors, we've seen a dramatic increase in people camping outdoors and living unsheltered in unsafe locations. Throughout this difficult time, Washington County Housing Services has been working closely with many community partners to address the urgent, unmet needs of our vulnerable neighbors who are experiencing homelessness and those at risk of becoming homeless.

Through street outreach, we have gained a better understanding of the needs and challenges that homeless individuals are facing. We find that they often struggle with chronic housing instability, along with complicated physical and mental health concerns. Based on Washington County's [January 2021 Point-In-Time \(PIT\)](#) census report, **357** persons are unsheltered or living in places not meant for human habitation:

- **13** are children, under the age of 18,
- **67** are adults with a serious mental illness,
- **29** are adults with a substance use disorder,
- **20** are adult survivors of domestic violence.

### **Overview of response during COVID-19 pandemic**

In early 2020, in the middle of the County's seasonal [Severe Weather Shelter Response](#), Housing Services was working to support people living unsheltered during the coldest time of the year. The pandemic impacted those efforts, resulting in the need to adjust plans and develop alternatives to the emergency shelter facilities that we have relied on in the past. Through the leadership of the Board of County Commissioners, partnerships with numerous allied agencies and federal [funding from the CARES Act](#), we were able to provide a variety of supportive programs and services:

- Approximately 200 winter shelter beds,
- A managed respite shelter for COVID positive people to recover from the disease,
- Expanded [Family Promise shelters](#) to provide hotel-based sheltering,
- Hotel voucher system for physically and medically fragile people,
- Temporary [Safe Sleep Village and Safe Sleep RV Program](#), and
- Outreach and support for community members living on the street and in encampments.

### **Current situation with homeless encampments**

As part of our emergency response, Housing Services has worked with other County departments and agencies on a range of strategies to decrease the spread of COVID-19, improve access to supportive services and address neighborhood concerns related to encampments. We are partnering with community organizations to seek out unsheltered individuals and families through street outreach and visits to campsites to better understand the need and provide appropriate referrals to resources. These include social services and help to access stable housing.

If you or someone you know is experiencing homelessness or is at-risk of becoming homeless, please contact **Community Connect** at **503-640-3263**. For additional information, visit our [Homeless Resources webpage](#).

### **Supportive Housing Services Program gearing up to help**

In May 2020, voters in the tri-county metropolitan area approved Measure 26-210 and established the regional Supportive Housing Services (SHS) program. SHS is expected to generate more than \$200 million annually for ten years, to address the root causes of homelessness. The program is a demonstrated successful approach that provides wrap around supports tailored to meeting the needs of community members experiencing prolonged homelessness and complex disabilities.

These supportive housing services will help ensure housing stability by combining long-term rent subsidies with case management, employment and educational supports, peer supports, recovery programs, behavioral healthcare and other types of on-site and community-based programs.

The Department of Housing Services is working to implement these services to Washington County residents. To learn more and get periodic updates about this program, visit our Supportive Housing Services webpage [here](#).

### **Encampment Management Program**

In mid-2021, the Board of County Commissioners created a program to improve countywide coordination and management of encampments. Under Washington County's organizational framework, the [Encampment Management Program](#) (EMP) is leading a multi-agency effort to assist individuals living in homeless encampments and balance the health and safety needs of all community members. The County's ultimate goal is to connect people in need with [emerging community resources](#) and help create pathways to stable, permanent housing.

Washington County greatly appreciates the patience of community members who live in the vicinity of such camps. We will continue to work diligently to seek solutions that acknowledge their very understandable concerns and also address the unmet needs of our most vulnerable neighbors. To report potential criminal activity or disturbing behaviors related to an encampment, please contact your local law enforcement agency through non-emergency dispatch at 503-629-0111. For an immediate threat to life or property, dial 9-1-1 for an emergency response.

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# WASHINGTON COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH

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Since Oregon's first positive case of COVID-19 was identified in Washington County in late February of 2020, Washington County Public Health has been working nonstop to reduce the impacts of the pandemic and [center equity in our response efforts](#). We've worked to ensure that those who are most vulnerable to the disease have access to the resources they need to remain healthy, and that those who do contract COVID-19 are able to recover fully. Among many vulnerable groups, the pandemic has greatly impacted the health and wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness.

In addition to other difficult challenges facing our homeless neighbors, the COVID-19 pandemic poses an increased risk for those who have pre-existing health conditions and often lack access to resources needed to prevent the spread of the disease. Public Health staff have worked to support Washington County Housing Services and allied agencies who are providing direct services to those in need.

### **Efforts to prevent spread of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness**

From the beginning of the pandemic, Washington County Public Health has supported Housing Services and Project Homeless Connect respite center operations, following guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on best practices to fight COVID-19.

Both the [CDC](#) and [OHA](#) recommend that if individual housing options are not available (or if people don't want to go to other housing), those who are living unsheltered or in camps should be allowed to remain where they are. Clearing camps can cause people to mix with more people in the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for the spread of infectious disease.

Hand washing and access to basic sanitation and hygiene facilities are important strategies to limit the spread of COVID-19. During the pandemic, many typical points of access to these resources have been reduced. To address this challenge, we recommend that whenever possible, public restroom facilities remain open 24 hours per day to people experiencing homelessness, and that portable latrines with handwashing facilities be provided for encampments of more than 10 people.

Increasing access to the COVID-19 vaccine for community members experiencing homelessness is a high priority for Washington County Public Health. In partnership with Neighborhood Health Center, we are working closely with local homeless services providers to coordinate vaccine clinics at shelters and day centers. We are dedicated to continued vaccination outreach to both sheltered and unsheltered County residents experiencing homeless, through ongoing clinics and mobile units that can meet people where they are.

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# WASHINGTON COUNTY FACILITIES & PARKS SERVICES

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Facilities and Parks Services (F&PS) manages and maintains several buildings, parks and other County-owned property. When F&PS receive reports of camping on County property, we assess the situation and help to coordinate a compassionate response that includes input from our partners in Housing Services, Health and Human Services, Sheriff's Office and others as appropriate.

### **Managing camping on County property**

In managing homeless encampments on County-owned property during the pandemic, we are in alignment with [guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), the Oregon Health Authority and County Public Health officials to allow people who are living unsheltered or camping outdoors to remain where they are, if it is safe to do so.

In mid-2021, the Board of County Commissioners created a program to improve countywide coordination and management of encampments. Under Washington County's organizational framework, the [Encampment Management Program](#) (EMP) is leading a multi-agency effort to assist individuals living in homeless encampments and balance the health and safety needs of all community members. The County's ultimate goal is to connect people in need with [emerging community resources](#) and help create pathways to stable, permanent housing. EMP strategies include:

- intensive outreach conducted by partner homeless services agencies,
- a centralized point of contact for information and coordination,
- sanitary and solid waste management including portable toilets,
- handwashing stations and garbage collection,
- regularly occurring health and safety risk assessments, and
- a Sheriff's Office deputy assigned to outreach.

### **Other considerations regarding camping on public property**

Washington County continues to monitor efforts by the Oregon Legislature as they consider new laws in light of the Ninth Circuit Court case [Martin v. Boise](#) that prohibits enforcement action against homeless individuals who are sleeping outside because they have no other place to go.

The County is moving forward with plans to open new shelter facilities which will create opportunities for people currently living in encampments to move indoors and be connected to supportive services. With revenue from the Metro-wide [Supportive Housing Services bond measure](#), the County expects to house approximately 500 chronically homeless community members within the first year of operation.

### **Addressing neighborhood concerns**

While the COVID-19 crisis continues, Washington County greatly appreciates the patience of nearby residents who live in the vicinity of such camps. We will continue to work hard to find solutions that acknowledge their very understandable concerns and also address the pressing, unmet needs of our most vulnerable neighbors. To report potential criminal activity or disturbing behaviors related to an encampment, please contact your local law enforcement agency through non-emergency dispatch at 503-629-0111. For an immediate threat to life or property, dial 9-1-1 for an emergency response.



Washington County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) works with community partners to address issues of concern and enforce laws to protect all community members' safety. Deputies respond to all 9-1-1 and non-emergency calls for service, including those received from inside homeless encampments and surrounding neighborhoods.

While interacting with individuals experiencing homelessness, deputies assigned to the WCSO Houseless Outreach Programs and Engagement (HOPE) team strive to connect them with County assistance programs providing alternative housing, shelter and support systems.

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:**

**Why can't law enforcement clear the camps?** Deputies are subject to County, State and Federal laws and regulations regarding homeless encampments and the removal of individuals and their possessions. The 2018 Ninth Circuit Court ruling of [Martin v. Boise](#) prohibits enforcement of anti-camping ordinances when there are not enough shelter beds available.

**Why didn't the deputy arrest someone for a violation or crime?** Due to COVID-19 and limited jail capacity, offenses subject to arrest vary depending on specific criteria. For the latest updates on our COVID-19 Jail Procedures, please visit: [http://bit.ly/WCSO\\_COVIDMeasures](http://bit.ly/WCSO_COVIDMeasures).

**What avenues are there to increase public safety within my neighborhood?**

Contact your WCSO Community Outreach Specialist to ask additional questions, schedule a public safety meeting (currently hosted virtually), or start a Neighborhood Watch Program. For more information about WCSO's Public Safety Education visit: [http://bit.ly/WCSO\\_Outreach](http://bit.ly/WCSO_Outreach).

**When should I call 9-1-1 or non-emergency dispatch?** If you see something concerning, we encourage you to say something; WCSO remains committed to community safety and livability. We urge you to contact the proper channels for your concerns. Please review the following situations when it's appropriate to call law enforcement:

**SEE SOMETHING?  
SAY SOMETHING!**

**NON-EMERGENCIES  
503-629-0111**

- Abandoned vehicles
- Suspicious persons or vehicles
- Anything out of place
- Noise disturbances
- Graffiti

Communicating what you see is key to preventing or deterring crime. Tell us about anything that seems suspicious or makes you uncomfortable. **When in doubt, just call. We are here to help.**

**EMERGENCIES 911**

- Immediate threat of harm or danger
- Serious injuries
- Endangered persons
- Missing children
- Crimes occurring now

**SHERIFF  
WASHINGTON COUNTY**