

March 2021 #21-10

Summary:

Many question Metro's "vision" to implement the homeless services measure passed by voters last year. Significantly reducing the number of unsheltered homeless residents should be Metro's primary measure of success. To meet that goal, Metro should use money from the measure to convert its moribund Expo Center into a shelter to provide temporary housing for the region's homeless.

Word Count: 691

“There is no evidence that the Housing First approach is effective at reducing the total number of unsheltered people in a community.”

A Vision for Homeless Services: Open Up the Expo Center

By Vlad Yurlov and Eric Fruits, Ph.D.

A recent Oregonian/OregonLive editorial criticizes Metro's lack of "vision" in implementing its homeless services measure ([“Metro lacks vision for homeless services measure,”](#) Feb. 21). In particular, the editorial questions what the measure will achieve or what "success" will look like. This should not be a surprise. Metro never had a vision for the measure.

Last February, Metro Councilor Shirley Craddick asked, "How will we measure success? What will the voters see that's different today than it will be in five years?" No one answered her question then. The question remains unanswered today.

Here's one measure of success: a significant reduction in the number of unsheltered homeless. For the community at large, the unsheltered population is their biggest concern. These are the people sleeping on the streets, in parks, in tents, in cars, or in abandoned buildings. While a majority of Portland-area voters have compassion for the homeless, they also want an end to overnight camping. Getting the unsheltered indoors will improve the quality of life for them and the community.

For more than two decades, a "Housing First" approach has been heralded as the best solution to homelessness. Housing First has two components: first provide permanent, affordable housing for those experiencing homelessness and then provide a wide-range of supportive services to help them maintain their housing. These services can include treatment for medical and health care issues as well as mental health and substance use.

But, Housing First projects take years to build, and construction costs per unit are more than double private sector costs. The "wrap-around" services are expensive and require individuals to have both the ability and intent to fully use them. Even worse, there is no evidence that the Housing First approach is effective at reducing the total number of *unsheltered* people in a community.

(cont'd)



Oregonian/OregonLive's in-depth research on homelessness, "[No space anywhere](#)" (Jan. 24, 2015), reported the region's emphasis on a Housing First approach diverted money away from emergency shelter beds that provide immediate relief to unsheltered people. Local governments' slow-motion construction of affordable housing units cannot satisfy existing demand, let alone keep up with future demand.

Metro owns and operates a resource that can quickly satisfy much of the demand for emergency shelter. The Portland Expo Center is a 330,000-square-foot exposition center sitting on 53 acres. The facility has meeting rooms, a full-service kitchen, a restaurant, and flexible outdoor exhibit space. In her State of the Region [presentation](#), Metro Council President Lynn Peterson admits Metro's property has "really struggled financially in this last decade." The Expo Center has been losing money for years and needs significant capital upgrades to compete in the exposition market.

The exhibition space alone could serve 2,000 to 3,000 individuals. Its 2,500-vehicle parking lot provides ample space for individuals who prefer to camp or sleep in vehicles. It has easy access to public transit—the TriMet Yellow Line terminates at the front of the Expo Center and provides frequent service to downtown Portland.

Ms. Peterson questioned whether the Expo Center's current operations are the "highest and best use" for the facility. Looking toward future uses of the site she indicated, "That vision might include the kinds of shows that already take place there. Or, it might be something completely different. And I think we just want to leave it open for now to invite innovation and ingenuity around this space."

Because the pandemic effectively closed the Expo Center, Metro can reallocate money from its homeless services measure to rapidly reopen the Expo Center as an emergency homeless shelter. Repurposing the existing facility would be much less expensive than the region's current "affordable housing" construction projects. This is a better use of funds than Metro's visionless, complex, and time-wasting process of filtering funds through counties down to service providers.

Converting the Expo Center could bring immediate relief to thousands of homeless individuals and families while providing a much better return on investment than current plans to remodel the site for low-attendance expositions. Rather than waiting for counties to brainstorm their own homeless services programs, Metro should flex its regional government muscles and put the Expo Center to work.

Vlad Yurlov is a Policy Analyst and Eric Fruits is Vice President of Research at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization.

“Converting the Expo Center could bring immediate relief to thousands of homeless individuals and families while providing a much better return on investment than current plans to remodel the site for low-attendance expositions.”

Attention editors
and producers:

Cascade Commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic.

Please contact:

Cascade Policy Institute
4850 SW Scholls Ferry Rd.
Suite 103
Portland, Oregon 97225

Phone: (503) 242-0900
Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
info@cascadepolicy.org