



September 1, 2022

Mayor Ted Wheeler  
Commissioner JoAnn Hardesty  
Commissioner Mingus Mapps  
Commissioner Carmen Rubio  
Commissioner Dan Ryan

Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury  
County Commissioner Sharon Meieran  
County Commissioner Susheela Jayapal  
County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson  
County Commissioner Lori Stegmann

Cc: Shannon Singleton, Director, Joint Office of Homeless Services

Dear Mayor, Chair and Commissioners,

We are writing to you today to elevate the voices of social service front line workers and the need for them to receive living wages for their essential work addressing our housing crisis. As the city and county move into the Fall BMP process, we, as members of the Welcome Home coalition would like to advocate that any additional available funds be invested in increasing contractual services carried out by community-based organizations so they can continue to increase their staff wages to ensure a stable workforce to address our housing crisis.

We would like to thank you again for passing substantial funding for the Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) in the FY22 Adopted Budget. The \$161 million budget approved for JOHS represents a \$43.9 million increase from FY2021.<sup>1</sup> This record funding of JOHS in this year's budget shows your commitment to addressing our housing crisis. We thank you for making these essential investments. Specifically, the JOHS budget has around \$35 million more for contractual services this year than last year.<sup>2</sup> This means our community-based organizations doing the direct work on the ground have more resources to fill the vast need in our communities. We also want to acknowledge, appreciate, and recognize the wage-structure proposals that are planned to be released in September. This is a great step forward in addressing wage issues in social services, and it is important for our leaders to know that we have a long way to go to meeting the full scope of need.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://multco-web7-psh-files-usw2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Tab%203%20-%20FY%202022%20Joint%20Office%20of%20Homeless%20Services%20-%20ADOPTED.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://multco-web7-psh-files-usw2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Tab%203%20-%20FY%202022%20Joint%20Office%20of%20Homeless%20Services%20-%20ADOPTED.pdf> (page 2)



Despite this success, some of our coalition member agencies continue to face challenges in being able to carry out their vital work in getting people out of homelessness and into housing, as dollars have not met the increasing cost of services. These challenges are largely in part that agencies do not receive enough funding to pay direct service workers the wages they need and deserve and cover the costs of increasing services. Public funding to the organizations doing the direct service must reflect this.

For agencies' struggling with worker wages, we are witnessing a spectrum that all result in the worst outcome- no direct service workers to engage people who need assistance. One agency reported that due to JOHS not fully funding all their programs, they are losing two positions doing outreach in East County. One employee housed 13 households in the past month and is the only Spanish speaking employee conducting outreach in East County for the agency. It is obvious that losing this person's work in the community will have very tangible consequences in continuing to address our housing crisis. While they were able to offer the outreach worker another position in Washington County, shuffling direct service workers around impacts their quality of life and their ability to build trusted relationships in one area over time. This in turn, reduces the number of households assisted in getting out of homelessness- our number one goal.

On the opposite spectrum, some agencies in our coalition have job openings in the double digits and high turnover rates. An obvious correlation to this phenomenon is that the agencies are not able to pay enough to compete with less stressful jobs that candidates can acquire for similar or higher salaries.

Trust and expectations are at the heart of agencies' ability to get households out of homelessness and keep them housed. When an agency starts to support a household but is not able to sustain the support, people begin to feel distrustful of any institution claiming to offer services and help. This sentiment spreads and makes it harder for direct service workers to build enough rapport with people to get them to a place of accepting assistance. Believing you are stably housed and then facing homelessness again due to a lack of agency support attributes to people giving up on safety net services and deciding to fend for themselves. This leads to the suffering and trauma that is both visible on our streets and invisible in other unstable housing situations. Therefore, we advocate that public agency contracts acknowledge the true cost of keeping households housed and ensure that outcome requirements match the funding offered to support households.

We would also like to note that these challenges exist within the broader context of government funding for CBOs providing social services more broadly, and we recognize



that sustainable funding for organizations that allow for livable wages and meaningful support for staff are essential in every arena. Further, we know these issues are not new and we want to uplift the efforts that started in Fall of 2019 with around 15 nonprofits that contract with Multnomah County. This group of social service provider leaders has been collectively advocating to the City and County for: a one-time increase to bring wages to be in line with National Low-Income Housing Coalition's "housing wage" for Portland metro area; ongoing COLA increases; and to align contract wages with union wages but not to exceed union wages.

As elected officials charged with oversight of public agencies, we advocate that you ensure that all government contracts fully support the community-based organizations doing the essential work of building relationships on the ground. Without the labor of these people, and more public investment in long term affordable housing solutions, we will continue to see the tragic outcomes of the housing crisis in our region.

Thank you for your public service and we hope you are moved to act on this prominent issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Molly Hogan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Molly Hogan, Director, Welcome Home Coalition

Welcome Home Coalition  
P.O. Box 16490  
Portland, OR 97292  
<https://welcomehomecoalition.org/>

**Please read the added testimonies from endorsers of this letter below:**

“As someone who has dedicated years of energy, skill building and investment in my work I can attest to how hard myself and colleagues work to address the houseless crisis. While I see fierce dedication and commitment among staff, I also see stress from the rising cost of living in Portland. This work asks us to show up and be present. In order to show up as our best selves we need to reduce our own stress levels and take care of ourselves. Having the burden of financial stress lessened allows us to do our work with greater energy and focus. Cutting vital programs and



eliminating positions seems to be defeating the mission of ending houselessness. I ask that the ongoing funding expected to carry out this important work be reinstated. We are all in this together.”

- Bryn Whipple, BSW, MPSH Case Manager

“People of color make up the majority of frontline workers and need to be paid adequately if we are to utilize an anti-racist framework. Material recognition is one of the biggest ways to advocate.”

- Outreach Worker

“I agree with this letter as times have become more dire than ever before for workers and friends living on the streets. No direct worker wants to compete for the same resources as their clients.

Having a living wage is important in order for employees to stay in the non-profit workforce. Our friends depend on our relationships to help navigate difficult resources they may not be able to figure out on their own. If we are not here to assist on a reliable community level, the situation on the streets will only get worse. Thank you”

- DiJonette Montgomery-Thompson, Day Space Coordinator

“Please take care of our staff, they work endlessly for the benefit of all!”

- Anonymous

“Direct service providers have been front line workers throughout the pandemic, and now more than ever deserve a living wage.”

- Sara R., Day Space Worker

“As I work with many people across the homeless services system, I hear of and witness direct service workers living on the verge of houselessness themselves. Workers are often living doubled, tripled, and quadrupled up in inhumanely tiny apartments and even renting moldy garages, basements, attics, or motorhomes in driveways. Because they are passionate about staying in this work, many are working side gigs like Uber, bartending, or sex work in order to afford their full-time social service jobs.

I'm lucky that my partner earns a living wage. If not for my partner's income, I would be in the same or even worse conditions as my colleagues. This year's pay cut means the County pays me a lower wage for my position's responsibilities than at other agencies. During the pandemic, I risked my life 80 hrs. a week, on call 24/7 on the frontlines opening and coordinating the emergency shelters for the city. I did not ask for extra pay, so that all the federal funds could go to the program



and services. I dropped everything in my life for 2 years to answer the City's call for help. The intense work and stress load literally nearly killed me. How can I possibly deserve a pay cut and substandard wage?

In meetings with social service directors and managers, everyone's number one stressor is keeping enough people employed to keep services open and housing quotas met. Service operations are constantly just a car trouble, medical bill, COVID outbreak, or better job offer away from grinding to a halt. How can we say that we are committed to ending homelessness, when our systems are paying exploitative poverty wages and poor benefits that perpetuate it.”

- Victory LaFara, Village Program Specialist

“I am a struggling small business owner and homeless person.”

- Ronald, Independent small business owner

“Living in a city like Portland as inflation, gas prices, rent, and overall cost of living expenses all increase is incredibly difficult. I want to be able to save up to live my life and not worry about living paycheck to paycheck. I want to be able to move if I need to, not worry about medical costs if something happens. I work with people experiencing homelessness and I know how so many of us live so much closer to that than amassing wealth. I am hopeful that we can get to a place where we can be less worried about our expenses and can truly enjoy our lives and do our work to the best of our ability.”

- Meg Bender-Stephanski, Veterans Program Specialist II

“We work with our counties most vulnerable population. It is very difficult to advocate for our clients at 100% while simultaneously navigating our own housing needs. Portland metro area has some of the highest rent prices in the country, yet our pay does not reflect and/or balance that out. Direct service workers must make a livable wage.”

- Kristina Erickson, Housing Case Manager

“I think that this advocacy effort to pay direct service workers a living wage represents thoughtful, realistic assessment of what is required to solve the homeless crisis in Portland and I support it.”

- Joan Meyerhoff, resident

“178 CCC staff co-signed a letter during the budget deliberations asking for our elected officials to at least invest enough in wages to keep up with inflation. Instead, we are mostly seeing cuts in funding or flat funding (effectively a cut given the increase in costs). Some programs will see an



increase and for that we are grateful, but it creates deep imbalance when some programs get stabilized and other programs in the same departments are continually running in the red. Staff know when their programs are not financially stable, and it piles on stress to an already hard job.”

- Mercedes Elizalde, Public Policy Director

“I work for a nonprofit that provides services such as rental, food boxes, energy assistance and so many others.”

- Beezie Burton, Resident Services Coordinator

“We have had to reduce capacity in the only shelters for homeless youth in Multnomah County due to staff shortages. If you truly care, you will truly invest where we all most need it...to get and keep crucial staff in all of our programs.”

- Dennis Morrow, Executive Director

“The cost to obtain a masters in social work vs the pay will not work any longer.”

- Douglas Walta, Retired

“I’m the Board President for Janus and have witnessed the ongoing staff shortages this organization and others like it have been facing for years. Throughout the pandemic and changing labor market, Janus staff have worked tirelessly to make sure our programs for homeless and troubled youth are able to remain open and provide the critical services we provide for these youth and the communities. We’re seeing large numbers of staff vacancies that are attributed primarily to the low wages our staff earn combined with the hard work that they are doing. We’re seeing increasingly troubled youth and severe mental illness, and with that increasing violence amongst the youth and toward our staff. We need to increase the wages for these staff to compensate for the increasingly tough environment they work in and to recognize the value that they are delivering for these troubled youth and our community. I plead with you to fund higher wages so that we can adequately staff our programs and acknowledge the state of this very tough environment.”

- Sue Campo, Board President

“I have been a Housing Program Manager for over 8 years. In that time, I have seen multiple housing case managers have to leave their position and the Portland Metro area as a result of losing their housing. These advocates were tireless in their service, engagement, and commitment to the mission of assisting our most vulnerable to obtain stable housing. Yet when their own housing became unstable their wages were too low to save them from homelessness. All of these employees were forced to relocate to places outside of the state or region in order to



survive. A living wage keeps these good advocates where they are needed, where they want to help, and doesn't exacerbate the already seemingly insurmountable housing crisis. If those fighting the good fight to house our most vulnerable are not supported through living wages how can any non-profit providing housing resources say they are not contributing to the crisis? It is only through livable wages can our community, service user and provider alike, thrive."

- Deanna Dalton, Housing Program Manager

"Case managers and other direct service staff work so hard, deal with so much stress, and require a lot of specific skills and knowledge to perform at a high level for participants. To recruit and retain good staff, non-profits must pay competitive wages. Unfortunately, funding is often not sufficient to pay competitive wages. JOHS should offer sufficient funding for non-profits to pay a living wage to all staff, and should require living wages as part of contracts."

- Chris, Former Case Manager

"Though I am not a direct service provider, I believe there is no job in this world that is more important than caretakers in our community. These are difficult jobs given very little financial value in our society because there is no profit involved. People who do this work should be able to support themselves and their own families."

- Beth Trimarco, Community Member

"Having been involved in mutual aid in my community in north Portland for years, frankly, it's exhausting to see these efforts do little but put out the most immediate fires. We need more support. Everyone I know engaged in this work (paid or unpaid) is working far beyond burnout and hardly able to afford to maintain current employment with non-profits/social service agencies due to low wages. For those of us offering volunteer support to balance out the lack of services, we are running on fumes alone and often have to choose to do less outreach so we can support our own families. With harsh winter weather approaching, this is the perfect time to pay folks willing to throw themselves into this work a living wage. You've done the first step of allocating more funding to JOHS, thank you. It's a simple next step in the right direction to ensure we have the people ready to take on the challenges of increasing homelessness and housing insecurity and that means paying them a living wage."

- Andra McFarlane, Camp Outreach & Food Insecurity



**Endorsed by:**

Vialante Vieira, Housing Specialist

Mara Romero, Independent Living Specialist and Housing Advocate

Greg Griffin, Peer Support Specialist/CHW

Liz Sauer

Sophie Guthrie, Community Housing Case Manager

Chloe Faison

Trevor Newhart, Retention Worker

Anonymous

April Ewing, Landlord Recruitment and Retention Worker

Andy Nelson, Executive Director

Trenelle Doyle, HR Director

Carmen R Duran Ramirez, Outreach/Retention Case Manager

Laura Golino De Lovato, Executive Director

Nick Sauvie, Executive Director

Anonymous, Retention Worker

Anna Kurnizki, Executive Director

Erin Yanke, Operations Manager

Desiree Catalano, Behavioral Health Clinician

Brando Martin

Amy Wagner



Anonymous

Brandi Dancen

Mary Anne Joyce

Nikolai Ursin

Amanda Castellano

Hirdesh Lal, Director

Jenna Goldin, Non-profit Accountant

Rev. Dr. Chuck Currie

**The above have representation from the following organizations:**

Central City Concern

Community Warehouse

Dignity Village

Impact NW

Independent Living Resources

Janus Youth Programs

JOIN

NW Pilot Project

Outside In

Outside the Frame

ROSE Community Development

Unite Oregon