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Summary:

Portland should create a system that tracks open shelter beds to use homeless shelter space effectively. Cities in Washington and California have successfully used this approach to make the most of their public resources.

Word Count: 612

““The worst thing someone seeking shelter can hear is, ‘We don’t know if there is space.’ It’s time for answers.”

Where Can the Homeless Go? Portland Still Doesn’t Know

Shelter space can be used effectively by tracking and reporting vacancies

By Vlad Yurlov

If a homeless person asks you to find them shelter space, could you do it? It’s harder than you think. That’s because Portland lacks a key piece of a shelter system. No one knows which shelters have space or how much space is available. The first step in sheltering people is knowing where space exists. Without a tracking system, campsites spiral out of control, while their residents suffer. People with mental health problems and drug addictions are effectively cut off from recovery options.

If a homeless person were to ask an outreach worker for a place to stay, the best they could do would be to call each shelter individually. Oregon Housing and Community Services says agencies and local partners rely on 211, an information hotline which can provide only the location and contact information of shelters. Operators do not regularly maintain contact with shelters or receive vacancy updates, so they can’t report actual availability. This leaves people on public streets and away from resources. To solve these problems, Portland should implement a shelter tracking system that would allow outreach workers and officers to house homeless people quickly.

Shelter tracking systems have already helped other western states battle homelessness. Modesto, California successfully implemented a basic tracking system. It takes one person up to two hours each day to contact and receive information from emergency shelter providers in Stanislaus County. After the data is collected, it’s given to outreach workers and law enforcement officers who use it to find shelter for homeless people. Spokane, Washington goes a step further and tracks shelter capacity by having homeless shelters report their availability to a dispatcher. The city is also working on a public website that would allow easy data entry and near-real-time tracking. These examples show that a shelter tracking system is not only a possibility, but it is vital to optimizing local public resources.

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Portland should implement a manual tracking system and make use of our local Homeless Management Information System. Effective tools are currently available. The Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) has online applications which track homelessness resources through geographic information systems. The City of Portland already uses ESRI products to report and visualize campsite locations. Proper use of these resources would allow access to near-real-time data on shelter vacancies. By using available and familiar technologies, Portland could target its homelessness outreach and use shelters effectively.

A tracking system also would allow Portland to comply with the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling *Martin v. City of Boise*. In 2018, the Court ruled that local ordinances can't ban sitting or sleeping in public spaces if there is no available shelter space. But if officers can show that nearby shelters have open beds, they could help people get access to life-saving resources and minimize the risks associated with camping outside. Both Modesto and Spokane have maintained compliance with the *Martin* ruling through their use of shelter tracking systems.

The bottom line is that people are needlessly sleeping on the streets in Portland, while shelters have vacancies that are difficult to find. Over the past few years, Portland and Multnomah County have opened many emergency shelters. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, six motels have housed people to help traditional shelters with social distancing. In order to effectively house individuals who have been left in the streets, we need to know what resources are available. By creating a shelter tracking system, Portland would be able to comply with the *Martin* ruling while providing outreach workers and officers with the right information to connect homeless people with housing. The worst thing someone seeking shelter can hear is, "We don't know if there is space." It's time for answers.

Vlad Yurlov is a policy analyst at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization. He co-authored a forthcoming report on Portland's homelessness crisis.

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