

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Task Force on Homelessness and Racial Disparities was created and charged by House Bill 2100 (2021) to identify methods to decrease racial disparity in homelessness; investigate potential changes to the state's funding structure to address disparities in homelessness; consider additional methods to receive advice and information about needed services; and identify methods to modify contracting processes and eligibility for providers of services to individuals experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity.

Process Summary and Problem Statement

The Task Force met six times between November 2021 and January 2022—a condensed timeline due to multiple factors including initial timeline and requirements prescribed in HB 2100, delays in appointment of Task Force members, identification and procurement of a third-party facilitator, end of year holidays, and other constraints due to unpredictable COVID-19 conditions, which restricted convenings to virtual formats. Due to the condensed timeline, the Task Force's recommendations represent preliminary work and may not thoroughly reflect or address all areas of potential concern. The Task Force adopted an overarching problem statement to focus its work:

Oregon has a unique and complex opportunity to reimagine its current homeless services funding system and structure in pursuit of racial equity and justice, demanding both immediate action and a long-term commitment to achieve 1) alignment, 2) structural change across philosophical differences and historical positionality within existing structures, and 3) adequate resources to effectuate the transformational change required to reduce racial disparities by people experiencing homelessness.

Recommendations

The Task Force recommends that its work be extended through 2025 to provide oversight, ongoing feedback, and overall direction to implement recommendations aimed at addressing racial disparities in homelessness, while further refining the recommended solutions the group has identified, including:

Goal 1: Decrease Rates of Disparity

The Task Force outlined 13 recommendations for the state's efforts to decrease disparate rates of homelessness among people of color. These recommendations aim to promote self-determination among historically minoritized and under-resourced communities and shift power to address the current power imbalances highlighted in the Ecosystem Power Map. Such recommendations include changes in funding and contracting processes, as well as in decision-making and in systemwide outcome evaluation oriented toward racial equity and decreasing racial disparities. Relatedly, the Task Force recommends centering the leadership of people with lived experience of homelessness in state-level decision-making. In developing these recommendations, the Task Force emphasized the role of other public systems in perpetuating racial inequity and the need for those systems – including the criminal justice, health care, long term care, and child welfare systems among others – to align behind a common, statewide strategic framework of solutions, collaboration, and resources to reverse these systemic patterns and achieve the goal of decreasing racial disparities. The Task Force also recommends that there be an audit of OHCS policies, practices, and governing legislation to better understand how racial inequity is perpetuated within the system.

The Task Force recommends establishing a State Interagency Council on Homelessness to work with the Task Force, Economic Council, and local governments to advance these recommendations and support collaboration statewide. It also recommends the state work with the Governor's Racial Justice Council to develop equitable outcomes and metrics, require agencies to prioritize racial equity and inclusion in hiring and employee retention, and develop a praxis of assessment for agencies and organizations to ascertain their cultural competence and develop action plans to reduce racial disparities.

Goal 2: Identify Needs

The Task Force offers 4 recommendations to OHCS and OHSC to improve efforts to understand the scope of services and supports needed for individuals experiencing homelessness and housing instability. As in the previous set of recommendations, the Task Force recommends compensating people with lived experience of homelessness to support the state in identifying needs, with attention to what additional supports people need to meaningfully engage in services (e.g., childcare access, transportation, shower access, and other needs). The Task Force recommends the state build mechanisms by which consumers can give input and inform decision-makers about their experiences, and make sure the input is used to make improvements. The Task Force recommends the state require input from culturally specific organizations and participants and assess whether and how current services are meeting community needs to phase out what is not working and grow what is working. The Task Force recommends setting aside state resources to fund a multidisciplinary DEI audit examining efforts to actively reduce racial disparities to level-set work across state, local, CSOs, and various partners, and identify what resources and technical assistance are needed to get all partners aligned.

Goal 3: Change Funding Structure

The Task Force developed 8 recommendations for changing the funding structure for homeless services statewide and suggested it continue convening now through 2025 to provide oversight, continuous feedback, and direction to the state on the effectiveness of implemented recommendations that are aimed to address racial disparities in homelessness. The Task Force recommends restructured funding processes centered on accountability and transparency beginning with the 2023-2025 biennium budget, as well as recommendations to increase funding for culturally specific entities and provide technical assistance to build the capacity of those organizations. Recommendations also address the need for technical assistance to support community-based organizations in advancing racial equity. The Task Force recommends that state agencies support models and solutions that work and phases out models that don't work in regard to addressing racial disparities and homelessness, while practicing increased transparency and accountability between OHCS and service providers. The Task Force offers to provide a biennial report to inform continuous improvement.

To support these efforts, the Task Force recommends that the state invest in a robust data system and offers several parameters for a successful data system that integrates both qualitative and quantitative data. The Task Force recommends that the state work to identify the legislative statutes and barriers to effective service provision for communities of color, as well as plans to address them. The Task Force recommends that the Housing Subcommittee of the Racial Justice Council establish a rubric of Racial Impact to inform policy, guide continuous improvement, and ensure Oregon's stated commitment to racial justice.

Goal 4: Modify Contracting

The Task Force developed 6 recommendations for modifying contracting through a transparent process that builds on other state-level efforts to implement outcomes-based contracting and revise internal policies and systems. The Task Force recommends that efforts to modify contracting focus on reducing racial disparities among people experiencing homelessness and increasing access for culturally specific organizations.

The Task Force recommends the state review and remove policies that have a disproportionately negative impact on homelessness among communities of color and articulate how equity goals will be pursued. Additionally, the Task Force recommends that the state review its current systems to ensure that diverse populations have prioritized access to culturally inclusive, low-barrier methods of engagement. The Task Force recommends that contracting processes be revised to reflect clear expectations around reducing racial disparities and consequences or corrective actions when expectations are not met. Other recommended changes to contracts include adding clear parameters and funding for training on best practices in equitable and just homeless service delivery, an established definition of and standard for cultural competence, and requiring meaningful, rich collaboration with local communities, including historically minoritized and excluded populations.