

## The Portland Mercury

# Portland Homeless Shelters Brace for the Coronavirus

By Alex Zielinski

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One of health officials' top recommendations for people at risk of catching the quickly-spreading respiratory coronavirus is to stay home. That's not an option, however, for the hundreds of houseless Portlanders living outside, in a car, or in homeless shelters.

"Not everyone has the luxury to just stay home," says Alexa Morris, a spokesperson for the local Salvation Army chapter, which runs four homeless shelters in Portland. "For our clients, our shelters are home. We have to make it feel that way right now."

The Salvation Army is one of dozens of shelter providers that received new instructions from the Multnomah County Health Department this morning on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the strain of coronavirus that has gained momentum across the Pacific Northwest in just the past several days. There has yet to be a confirmed COVID-19 case in Multnomah County.

The county recommends shelters post signs promoting effective hand hygiene and offer adequate supplies—like soap, clean hand washing stations, and alcohol-based hand sanitizer. It also recommends staff keep tabs on guests who have a "new, worse, or different cough," and require any guests with a cough wear a face mask.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), COVID-19 is most likely to be transmitted between people if someone is within six feet of an infected person.

While the county acknowledges that guidance can't be applied in all shelter areas, it recommends shelter staff create a six-foot buffer between the beds of people showing signs of COVID-19—coughing, fever, and shortness of breath—and those who are not.

Denis Theriault, a county spokesperson for the Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS), says the county doesn't expect this will have a "drastic reduction" in the number of available shelter beds.

The new guidance also suggests separating people with COVID-19 symptoms from others while eating and while spending time in other shared common spaces.

Elderly populations and people with pre-existing health conditions have been hit the hardest by COVID-19. In China, when the COVID-19 originated, 2.3 percent of all people who contracted the virus died—but that number jumped to 14.8 percent in people 80 or older. Of the 11 Americans (one in California, ten in Washington state) who've died from the virus, the majority have been over 70 or had other health conditions that complicated their symptoms.

It's those populations living in shelters that the county is most worried about.

"This is about protecting folks in congregate shelters who are particularly vulnerable," said Theriault. "We have people living in shelters with cancer, diabetes, heart conditions... We need to look out for them."

Theriault noted that 30 percent of people staying in shelters run by Transition Projects, one of the county's largest shelter providers, are aged 55 and older.

George Devendorf, executive director of Transition Projects, said all Transition Projects shelters have stopped accepting new visitors out of safety precautions.

"We've put a temporary hold on new intakes and admission into our shelters until we have a better handle on how its playing out in our community," Devendorf said. "It'll give our programs a minute to pause and decongest... and allow more space for folks who are symptomatic."

Devendorf said Transition Projects has increased its janitorial staff to disinfect its common areas more frequently, including its resource center at Bud Clark Commons, which can serve up to 500 people each day. He said his staff are proceeding "under the assumption that the virus is already here."

Lisa Frack, a spokesperson for shelter provider Human Solutions, says that shelter staff are focused on working with the county to plan for COVID-19's possible spread. That includes making sure employees and volunteers are staying home if they're sick, or wearing masks if they have COVID-19 symptoms.

"At this point, we're being as cautious as possible," says Frack.

Morris said the Salvation Army has begun handing out travel size hand sanitizers to all of its guests, and is encouraging members of the public donate hand sanitizer (minimum 60 percent alcohol) at its Happy Valley headquarters.

Until Barbra Weber's February move into Hazelnut Grove, a peer-run tiny home village, Weber had been homeless for five years. She's not too worried about the virus spreading in her community, but she is concerned about its spread between friends who rely on shelters, due to the number of people they come in contact with on a regular basis. She's also worried that the public's fears around COVID-19's spread could further stigmatize the homeless population.

"A lot of us sleep outside, meaning we live in pollution day in and day out," says Weber. "That's going to make our eyes water and that's going to give us a cough. But that doesn't always mean we're sick."

"It's just one more reason to be scared of us, to treat us differently," said Weber. "That's what I'm afraid of."

## **The Daily Journal of Commerce**

### **Affordable housing project plan changing**

*By Josh Kulla*

*March 4, 2020*

Fresh design advice is pending for a long-planned affordable housing project on the former Safari Showclub site in Southeast Portland.

The Portland Housing Bureau for nearly three years has sought redevelopment of the parcel at 3000 S.E. Powell Blvd., near Cleveland High School. In July 2019, a second design advice hearing took place for the project, which then was proposed as a five-story building with 180 residential units as well as 30 parking spaces for motor vehicles.

However, a pre-application conference, with applicant Dave Otte of Holst Architecture, was scheduled to take place on Wednesday. The latest submittal calls for a single building partially five stories and partially four stories, with 210 units. Also, there would be 40 parking spaces. The building would have four levels of wood framing above a single level of post-tensioned concrete. There would be approximately 7,000 square feet of active ground-level space.

Drawings submitted by Holst Architecture for developer Home Forward suggest the latest iteration would be an H-shaped structure. The project team is scheduled to appear before the Portland Design Commission on March 19.

Vehicle parking would be on the property's south side, with accessibility from Southeast 31st Avenue.

Money for the project is coming from a \$258 million affordable housing bond approved by voters in 2016.

## OPB

# Multnomah County Preparing For Possible Outbreak Of Coronavirus Among The Homeless

*By Rebecca Ellis*

*March 5, 2020*

As the Portland area braces for a potential spread of the new coronavirus, Multnomah County officials have turned their attention to one particularly vulnerable population: the roughly 4,000 people experiencing homelessness throughout the region.

People living on the streets are likely at a higher risk of catching the infectious COVID-19 virus than those with a home. Many are elderly or have underlying medical conditions — groups that appear especially vulnerable to the disease. The city's lack of public bathrooms makes it difficult to regularly wash your hands. And crowded homeless shelters could make for prime territory for the virus to spread.

### **What To Know About The New Coronavirus**

The new coronavirus is spreading across the Pacific Northwest. Here some basic things to know:

- Coronavirus is more severe and more contagious than the flu. Take it seriously but don't panic.
- The elderly and immune-compromised are most at-risk, but everyone can get sick.
- If you are sick stay home, self-quarantine and call your doctor.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Hand sanitizer is a backup option.
- Cough into a sleeve. Wash hands after coughing. Avoid touching your face.
- Sterilize things you touch often, like computers, phones, keys, and tablets.
- If you have prescriptions, call your doctor and ask for a 3-month supply in case of drug shortages.

More questions about the new coronavirus, answered

After the first Oregon case of the virus was confirmed Friday, Multnomah County officials rushed into a series of meetings to come up with plans to mitigate the spread of the virus among the region's homeless population.

On Wednesday, the county sent out the first set of recommendations to shelter providers. Chief among them: Providers should try to make sure people who are coughing sleep in beds at least

six feet from those who are not. And if providers run out of space, they can reduce the number of beds in a shelter.

Like the flu, the coronavirus is thought to be spread primarily by people who are within six feet from one another. Recognizing that most shelters don't have enough room to space out all their beds six feet apart, the county is asking shelter providers to focus on spacing out the beds of those who show symptoms of the virus — coughing, fever, shortness of breath. These individuals will also be asked to wear masks.

Shelters could end up serving fewer people under those guidelines. But Denis Theriault, a spokesperson for Multnomah County, said the current thinking is that this will happen through “attrition” — not replacing a bed when people leave the shelter voluntarily. The only instances in which the providers should “strongly consider” asking an individual to leave is if the person is coughing and also refuses to wear a mask.

Theriault said the county is “committed to maintaining services for the same number of people.” So if the number of beds that Portland and Multnomah County fund through the Joint Office of Homeless Services gets reduced, officials will look to provide alternatives elsewhere — potentially through using a tool like rent assistance. Theriault said discussions on this topic are ongoing.

Transition Projects Inc., the largest provider of shelter services in the region, has temporarily stopped taking in new guests in order to make more space. The nonprofit agency operates nine shelters with roughly 800 people in the system on any given night.

George Devendorf, executive director of Transition Projects, said they made the decision to tap the brakes on intakes after realizing there were almost no empty beds within their shelter system, leaving them with no flexibility to rearrange their rooms.

The move, he said, also “enables us to continue to observe how this situation is unfolding and what additional steps we might have to take as things become more clear.”

Devendorf said, to his knowledge, the agency has never stopped intake before.

Transition Projects is also ‘ramping up’ some of the precautions they take during flu season. This means having more janitors on hand for “around the clock” disinfection work, posting large laminated posters with basic guidance, and asking those who are coughing to wear a face mask — though Devendorf notes the staff will likely not be able to tell if someone is sick from the coronavirus or the seasonal flu.

“Even though there are no confirmed cases yet amongst our staff or anyone we’re serving, we’re just proceeding with the assumption that the coronavirus is already in and among us and trying to respond accordingly,” he said.

He noted his staff is trying to avoid a situation in which shelter workers become sick and are sent home, making it difficult to run their 24/7 facilities.

The county’s guidance also recommends that people showing symptoms eat in a well-ventilated space as far away as possible from others. If possible, coughing individuals should be separated in common areas, similar to sleeping areas.

Theriault emphasized that, though Multnomah county is preparing, there have not yet been any confirmed cases of the virus within the county.

In King County, Washington, which has seen 10 deaths from the virus, officials have also taken steps to try and mitigate the spread of the disease among the area’s sizable homeless population.

The head of the county has said they're setting up "modular units" to isolate and treat patients without homes. Officials have reportedly been trying to stockpile hand sanitizer, soap and wipes to hand out to people at homeless camps. And, according to Seattle's website, officials are considering expanding the city's "tiny house" villages.