



## Written Testimony to the Oregon Ways and Means Committee

3/28/2025

Dear Co-Chairs and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony advocating for continued and increased funding for homelessness response and eviction prevention in Oregon. I represent Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, serving Union, Wallowa, Grant, and Baker Counties—rural communities deeply impacted by housing instability and poverty.

### Poverty Levels and Economic Hardship in Our Communities

Our region faces persistent economic challenges, with many households teetering on the edge of homelessness due to job loss, continuous rising housing costs, and limited access to supportive services. According to the most recent data:

**Baker County:** Approximately 15.3% of residents live below the federal poverty level, with a per capita income of \$21,683. Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/bakercountyoregon/HSG651222>

**Union County:** 17.4% of the population experiences poverty, highlighting the financial strain on many households. Source: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-counties/oregon/union-county>

**Wallowa County:** 13.7% of residents live in poverty, with a per capita income of \$23,023. Source: <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?eid=268359&rid=175>

**Grant County:** 13.7% of the population faces poverty, with a per capita income of \$22,041. Source: <https://datacommons.org/place/geold/f1023>

In each of these counties, per capita income remains far below the state average, and reliable access to services like behavioral health, addiction recovery, and transitional housing remains limited. These conditions create an environment where one unexpected event—a car breaking down, a medical emergency, or a temporary layoff—can quickly lead to housing instability or homelessness.

### Housing Shortages and Lack of Resources





We are experiencing a significant shortage of affordable housing across all four counties. Families and individuals face high rent burdens, with some paying more than 50% of their income toward housing. The housing stock is limited, aging, and often unaffordable.

In rural areas, the challenge is compounded by:

- Fewer available units and limited development of new housing
- A lack of transitional housing and shelter space
- Insufficient behavioral health and recovery services to support long-term housing stability
- A growing reluctance among landlords to rent to vulnerable populations due to previous negative experiences

Emergency rental assistance programs that help prevent evictions are depleted within days of being made available. We routinely must turn people away—not because they aren't eligible or deserving, but because the funds are depleted as soon as we receive them.

#### Local Successes and Ongoing Needs

Despite these challenges, we've made meaningful progress through innovative local partnerships and targeted interventions:

- **Emergency Response and Rehousing Efforts:** In September 2023, Union, Wallowa, Grant, and Baker Counties received \$1.2 million in state homelessness emergency response funds. These dollars helped rehouse over 80 households, more than double the contractual obligation, demonstrating that with the right resources, our communities can respond quickly and effectively.
- **Community-Based Collaboration:** Our success has come from strong partnerships between local nonprofits, county agencies, and service providers who know our community's needs firsthand. Programs offering rapid rehousing, eviction prevention, and case management have been key in helping vulnerable households achieve stability—even in the absence of reliable access to longer-term supports like Section 8 vouchers.

Unfortunately, sustainability remains a pressing concern. Local housing authorities are currently over budget for voucher programs, and many of our clients who would previously have transitioned into Section 8 cannot access that option now. This creates a dangerous gap in our continuum of care, where households who have worked hard to stabilize are again at risk of losing their housing simply because there's no long-term support available.

We urge the Committee to prioritize:



**NORTHEAST OREGON**

Baker County  
Grant County  
Union County  
Wallowa County



**Community Connection  
of Northeast Oregon, Inc.**

Community Action Agency  
Aging and Disability Resource Connection (ADRC)  
Area Agency on Aging (Dist. 13)  
Housing Counseling Agency  
Public Transit Provider

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- \$172 million for eviction prevention to keep families housed and avoid backsliding into homelessness.
- Continued investment in long-term rental assistance, including ORI and Balance of State programs that provide extended stability for high-barrier clients.
- Increased funding for rural housing development and preservation, including transitional and supportive housing options.
- Expansion of supportive services in rural communities, including mental health, behavioral health, addiction recovery, and employment support.
- Investment in flexible, locally administered funds to help households manage unexpected crises that threaten housing stability.

Thank you for your commitment to addressing Oregon's housing and homelessness crisis. With continued legislative support, we can build on the gains we've made and work toward a future where every Oregonian—regardless of where they live—has a safe and stable place to call home.

Sincerely,

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### **From Homeless to Housed: A Journey of Hope**

A couple, ages 60 and 52, faced the unimaginable when they lost their home to a devastating fire, along with everything they owned—including the livestock that helped supplement their income. One member of the household had been employed but lost that job due to serious medical issues, further complicating their ability to rebuild their lives.

For seven long years, they struggled to find stability, living in their car, in tents, and briefly in a small camper donated by their church. But despite their best efforts, they couldn't break free from homelessness. Around three years ago, they sought assistance from Community Connection. At the time, due to limited funding, the agency was only able to provide help with fuel costs to keep them warm through the winter months. Along with fighting for disability assistance to gain income, they were unable to afford the necessary deposits, move-in costs, or any other resources needed to secure permanent housing.

Then, about a year ago, a compassionate pastor told them about a new program through Community Connection funded by the Governor's, Executive Order 23-02. The couple reached out to the agency again, and this time, they were enrolled in the Balance of State Rapid Rehousing program. This program changed their lives. They were able to find a double-wide trailer in a mobile home park with both rent and lot costs covered. With assistance from Community Connection, they were able to pay for the move-in costs, deposit, and both the first and last month's rent. Even better, the trailer was eventually donated to them, with the title transferred into their name.

Just recently, the individual came into the Baker County office seeking energy assistance. During this visit, it became clear that the furnace in their new home was malfunctioning, making loud noises and not working at all. The trauma of losing their first home to a fire came rushing back. Fortunately, through the LIHEAP program and with support from the weatherization team, Community Connection was able to arrange for a brand-new furnace to be installed in their home.

Since securing stable housing, their lives have transformed. They have managed to build a savings account, and their health has either remained stable or even improved. Most importantly, they have regained their dignity and sense of security. They now walk with their heads held high, proud of the progress they've made.

The couple shared, "We don't know where we would be without Community Connection. Just go and talk to someone, tell them your story, and they'll help you access the resources you need to rebuild your life. Community Connection has changed our lives 100%."



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The journey from homelessness to housing is not just about the physical space we occupy, it's about the sense of safety, stability, and hope that comes with it. Programs like these, funded through Executive Order 23-02, don't just provide shelter—they give individuals and families the opportunity to heal, to thrive, and to once again believe in a better future. The impact of this work is profound, and we see it every day in the lives we touch.



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## Success Story: Ms. Smith's Journey to Stability through Compassionate Case Management

When Ms. Smith first connected with our agency, she was housed but far from stable. She had experienced nearly a year of homelessness after leaving her previous apartment—unable to find a unit that met her physical needs or felt emotionally safe. During that time, Ms. Smith struggled with accessing appropriate healthcare, securing safe and stable housing, and feeling heard by service systems meant to support her.

By the time she entered the BOS Rapid Rehousing program, Ms. Smith was vocal about her dissatisfaction with her current apartment, citing accessibility issues, malfunctioning appliances, and unsafe sidewalks that had led to repeated falls. She also expressed deep frustration with the lack of options, noting past negative experiences or reputations of other units in town. Despite receiving rental assistance, Ms. Smith often expressed a desire to leave the program and relocate—though she remained in contact with her case manager throughout.

In March 2025, Ms. Smith experienced a medical crisis. She called our office, unwell and frightened, but unwilling to call 911 out of fear that her cat, Benjamin, would escape if she were transported. Our case manager responded immediately—personally accompanying her to the hospital, making sure Benjamin was secured, and advocating for Ms. Smith through her emergency room visit. Ms. Smith allowed the hospital to list our case manager as her emergency contact, a significant moment of trust and connection.

The visit led to a new diagnosis and prescription. The next day, Ms. Smith picked up her medication and began taking it. She scheduled a follow-up appointment with a new primary care doctor and agreed to have her case manager accompany her. With growing trust and consistent support, Ms. Smith began taking steps to stabilize her health.

While she continues to express challenges with her current unit, Ms. Smith has stayed connected to the program and has become more engaged in case management. We are working to locate a safer and more appropriate housing option that meets her physical and emotional needs.

Ms. Smith's story is a powerful reminder that housing is just one piece of the puzzle. For individuals exiting homelessness—especially those with trauma histories and complex needs—case management, patience, and human connection are critical. Because of this support, Ms. Smith is no longer navigating her challenges alone. Her path forward may not be linear, but she is taking it with the support of people who care and are committed to walking alongside her.