

Memo

Date: December 19, 2024

To: Joint Office of Homeless Services Executive Leadership

From: Multnomah County Supportive Housing Services Advisory Committee

Subject: Equity Recommendations for Review

Introduction

The SHS Advisory Committee's equity workgroup met from September 2023 through May 2024 to address one of the committee's top priorities: improving equity in SHS programming. The full committee thoroughly reviewed and edited the recommendations over the span of several months and approved them in December 2024. While the committee's role is to make suggestions specific to SHS, our hope is for these recommendations to impact the Joint Office's broader equity work because SHS is a significant funding source for homeless services in Multnomah County.

Intersectionality & Equity in SHS Work

The SHS measure is committed to prioritizing the needs of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) who are disproportionately impacted by housing instability and homelessness because of institutionalized and systemic racism. Racial equity is one of our top priorities and the Joint Office should continue to use SHS resources to address racial inequities in housing and homeless services. We also want to highlight that an important aspect of equity work is **intersectionality**. Intersectionality explains how the multiple identities that people carry through life can overlap and interact with systems of power and oppression.

To create opportunities for more equitable service delivery, we call for meaningful inclusion of LGBTQIA2S+ communities, people living with disabilities, elderly people, and individuals who have been involved with the justice system in SHS **discussions, communication, and decision making**. While the communities included here are not representative of all who experience inequities in housing and homeless services, people with one or more of these identities often experience higher barriers and inequalities in accessing services that fit their needs, especially when they are a person of color. We recommend that the Joint Office consider intersecting identities in SHS programming to ensure SHS funding is strategically used to improve services for the communities most affected by barriers to public resources.

These recommendations aim to broaden the inclusion of these communities in racial equity planning and programming by recognizing their interconnectedness and the higher rates of homelessness and historic underinvestment that has left insufficient programming to meet the needs of people with intersecting identities.

With our recommended intersectional approach in mind, the committee brings forward

the following additional equity recommendations, which focus on two categories: accountability & evaluation, and equity investments.

Accountability & Evaluation

In addition to provider housing and spending outcomes, we consider equity as a key measure of success. Service providers are contractually required to *consider* equity in their work, but the current wording leaves a lot up to interpretation. Equity expectations need to be more clearly defined because they are the main way providers are held accountable. There is not currently a consistent process for service participants to share their experiences or hold providers accountable for inequitable treatment.

The SHS committee would like to see the Joint Office improve provider accountability through equity-focused evaluation, and uplifts the need to assess:

- how responsive a provider is to participant needs and concerns,
- how equitable their operations are, and
- how representative their staff are of the populations they serve.

The committee recommends that the Joint Office identify specific equity goals for all providers, provide clear guidelines for accomplishing them, and provide support for evaluation and accountability so that equity work is not performative and is responsive to the concerns and needs of the people receiving services.

We also recommend that Joint Office providers, especially the mainstream providers receiving the largest contracts, be held accountable for following and documenting their equity processes. The results of equity evaluations can help determine if a provider needs to take steps to improve equity performance, and if the Joint Office should offer technical assistance including specific supports, interventions, and goals for the provider to improve their services. The Joint Office's Lived Experience Advisory Committee emphasized this point in their letter to Joint Office leadership in December of 2023.

Aside from requesting that the Joint Office provide clearer guidance and evaluation of equity goals, the committee adds that community-based organizations should be accountable to the populations they serve and work with other providers who share participants or partner to provide services to hold each other accountable for equitable service delivery.

The committee recommends that the Joint Office develop an **evaluation tool** that is administered, analyzed, and reported by an independent third party. To prevent unnecessary administrative burden on providers, especially for smaller organizations, the Joint Office should match this tool with existing tools, processes, and best practices, and provide tangible guidance and templates for those who need to improve their equity and accountability work. The committee suggests that the tool include the following (at minimum):

- **Organizational Equity:** The tool should include questions to see how well providers are training their workforce on equity issues and how well equity is ingrained in their programs and services. Examples include equity-inclusive employee and guest handbooks and guidelines.
- **Participant Experience:** The tool should include the experiences of people receiving services. Current outcomes are often detached from what the process felt like to people and its impact on their well being. It's crucial to hear the voices of program participants and understand how well services are meeting their needs. To address this, we suggest the following:
 - More accountability for organizations regarding their equitable treatment and impact on participants, in partnership with the Joint Office, other community based organizations, and the people they serve.
 - The Joint Office should gather data and real-time feedback that captures people's experiences as they move through the system.
 - A neutral third party should collect qualitative feedback from provider participants and employees that is used for program improvement, keeping in mind provider capacity.
 - Evaluation metrics for participant experience should be created with the help of service users through participatory action research.
 - Holding exit interviews for those leaving programs is an important way to capture areas in need of improvement.
 - There should be an expectation that organizations will deliver high quality services that are responsive to participant needs and concerns, as opposed to participants being expected to accept whatever they can get. An effective product is an important part of a positive participant experience.
- **Accessibility:** The tool should set accessibility standards and include an opportunity for individuals seeking services to report on their experiences accessing services. This is especially important for community members who may need additional support and experience the highest barriers.
- **Culturally Appropriate Staffing:** The tool should evaluate workforce diversity to ensure that our system has a diverse and representative workforce that is compensated fairly. Whenever possible, these metrics should be absorbed into existing evaluations and processes to reduce administrative burden and prevent extra work for providers. We recommend that the Joint Office create evaluation metrics for SHS programs that answer the following questions.
 - Is the organization hiring, advancing, and adequately compensating peers and people with lived experience?
 - Are these employees offered regular opportunities to have a voice in improving organizational policies, programming, and processes?
 - What accommodations or training did agencies provide to recruit staffing that is diverse in terms of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation?
 - Do the majority of staff working on culturally specific programs identify as coming from that culture?
- **Grievance Process:** We recommend that the Joint Office develop a process for

addressing racist, anti-queer, or ableist incidents among provider staff and service users. Often, complaints that are elevated to the Joint Office are directed back to organizations because there isn't a process in place to address them. The committee would like to see the Joint Office take a role in providing accountability when there are equity concerns by recommending each provider have a grievance policy, offering clear avenues for participant support, and by transparently sharing findings and remedial actions with all parties involved.

Many of these recommendations are in alignment with the SHS Committee's capacity building workgroup, which developed a list of similar recommendations in April of 2024.

Equity Investments

The committee elevates the following funding priorities to further SHS equity work (not ranked in order of importance):

- **Priority Populations.** Prioritize investments that meet the housing needs of those who have been historically deprioritized and heavily impacted by inequities in the homeless services system, such as the Black community, the LGBTQIA2s+ community, those with disabilities, the elderly, the formerly incarcerated, and immigrants.
 - The committee specifically notes that formerly incarcerated people may face additional barriers in accessing services because organizations often braid funding together and follow the service guidelines for the most restrictive source. Under more restrictive definitions, folks exiting incarceration are not always considered homeless. While SHS funding intentionally uses a broader definition of homelessness that accounts for individuals exiting institutions, there is still a need to advocate for intentional inclusion of this population so they are not overlooked for resources. We recommend that the County provide specific guidance to providers about serving this population to prevent ongoing barriers to services.
 - The committee also uplifts the need for peer support for the elderly, who may experience difficulties navigating, accessing, and sustaining services due to increased use of technology and limited digital support.
 - Many of the services in our system are geared toward folks who identify as single adult men. There are not as many resources available for women and gender diverse people. These groups often face unique barriers to accessing homeless and housing services that can meet their individualized needs, especially when they are pregnant, have children, and/or are using drugs. The committee recommends the County examine the distribution of resources for these groups and expand homeless and housing services available to people who are being underserved and underresourced in the current system.
- **Direct cash assistance** for those enrolled in SHS services.

- **Long-term rent assistance.** In some cases community members are moving from shelter to housing without sustainable support (i.e. receiving just two months of rent assistance) and are quickly returning to homelessness.
- **Individual-based rent assistance.** Rent assistance that moves with an individual if they need to move locations or to a new agency that better meets their needs.
- **Small, new, and emerging organizations.** To expand SHS funding for culturally responsive services, the committee recommends that the Joint Office give funds equitably to a larger pool of service providers.
 - One way to do this is by creating more opportunities for new and small organizations that are focused on the needs of the underserved homeless population, and whose leadership is representative of the people they serve, to apply for funding. Currently, the large size of contracts held by a few large agencies makes accountability and asking for equity improvements challenging due to their dominance in delivering services in the County. To add more diversity to the providers receiving SHS funds, the committee would like to see the County continue to provide regular and intentional opportunities for new providers to become qualified and receive SHS funds to deliver services.
 - Along with this, the committee also recommends additional technical assistance for smaller organizations applying for funding.