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## **Pandemic increases need for emergency shelter for unaccompanied homeless youth in Portland metro region**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency shelters for homeless adults have popped up around the state. But there is an at-risk population not receiving any additional shelter support: unaccompanied (no parent or guardian) homeless high school students.

Homeless youth are more vulnerable not only to illness, but also to predators and dangers of the elements if they are sleeping outside. Yet homeless unaccompanied youth are being turned away from adult shelters and denied motel vouchers because many facilities do not want to mix adults and youths, even if the youth is over 18 years old. In Washington County, the only emergency shelter for youths is not large enough to accommodate the needs of the entire county.

This has revealed a huge shelter gap for unaccompanied students 17 to 19 years old, who are still enrolled in high school and on track to graduate, but have nowhere to live. In 2016, Oregon had the highest per capita rate of unaccompanied houseless youths compared to any other state.<sup>1</sup> In the 2018-19 school year, Washington County had 543 known unaccompanied houseless public school students, more than any other county.<sup>2</sup> However, the county's only emergency shelter for youths has just five beds.<sup>3</sup>

Some students have found shelter in Portland, but many students have jobs in their local communities or are getting meals from their schools, so displacing them creates further challenges. Many unaccompanied students couch surf during the school year, or live with friends or relatives with crowded households. Because of social distancing during the pandemic, many unaccompanied students have lost those social connections or been asked to leave to minimize bodies in households. Students are sleeping in cars, tents or parking lots, or living in dangerous or inadequate conditions.

Second Home, a program of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, works with unaccompanied students on track to graduate who are partnered with a volunteer host home in a zero-dollar rental agreement. Due to the heightened risks of the pandemic, the program has found that there are not as many host families able to accept a new member into their household. Yet there are more students than ever contacting Second Home, expressing that they have nowhere to go and the program is their last hope. "Due to the whole COVID-19

situation, everywhere is shut down,” said one of the students. “I can’t seem to find help anywhere, and it is hopeless at this point, but I wanted to see if there was an option here for me.”

Other states and organizations across the nation are exploring options for this population. For example, Covenant House, a homeless youth shelter that operates throughout North and South America, is using their facility classrooms for additional shelter space. Other schools around the country are using their gyms for shelters with appropriate distancing space between beds.

“In Oregon, there are many physical spaces that are empty right now,” said Brittney Piper, Second Home projects coordinator. “We have reached out to our local schools and were told they cannot make additional steps to shelter students without direction from the state level.”

During the 2020 Legislative Session, a bill to expand the continuum of services available to Oregon’s unaccompanied houseless youth was drafted but did not receive a floor vote due to the legislator walkouts. The bill called for \$2.5 million to expand Oregon’s services, including unaccompanied homeless youth shelters.

“Despite the immense challenges our communities are collectively facing, it’s been inspiring to see people come together to support each other,” said Piper. “We can’t help but feel hopeful that more can be done for our students.”

*Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon is a statewide association of faith partners working together to improve the lives of Oregonians through direct service programs, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, creation justice and public policy advocacy*

<sup>1</sup> <https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2020R1/Downloads/CommitteeMeetingDocument/212427>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/ESEA/McKinney-Vento/Documents/K-12%20Totals%20by%20District%20and%20Living%20Situation%2018-19.xlsx>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.co.washington.or.us/Housing/EndHomelessness/upload/2019-Homeless-Assessment-Report\\_10-25-2019.pdf](https://www.co.washington.or.us/Housing/EndHomelessness/upload/2019-Homeless-Assessment-Report_10-25-2019.pdf).