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Oregon’s faith communities take action, seek legislative solutions to housing crisis

PORTLAND, Ore. – Together, ministry partners are putting their faith into action to help solve Oregon’s houseless crisis by encouraging lawmakers to pass legislation to convert underutilized property owned by faith communities and other entities into affordable housing and secure historic investments for youth experiencing homelessness.

“Our faith compels us to act for the betterment of our communities and right now our communities are suffering without adequate access to housing solutions,” said Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) President Frank So. “That’s why we are so pleased to see our ministry partners work with lawmakers to introduce legislation in Salem that will make a real difference in the lives of Oregonians.”

Today, the House Committee on Housing and Homelessness will hear testimony on House Bill 3482, which would invest up to \$20 million in loans and grants to enable faith communities, tribal governments, housing authorities and local governments to conduct feasibility studies on using property to develop affordable housing projects. A portion of the funding is to help provide education for communities to learn about the benefits of affordable housing in their neighborhoods.

The Rev. Julia Nielsen, executive organizer of the Leaven Community Land and Housing Coalition, has been working with a number of faith communities looking to explore affordable housing opportunities on their unused parcels of church property. However, one of the biggest hurdles they often face is putting the financing together to afford the feasibility studies that are needed to begin the work. An ordained deacon in The Oregon-Idaho Conference of The United Methodist Church (UMC), Nielsen has worked with Portsmouth Union Church in Portland on developing their affordable housing complex for veterans. She also served as a consultant as Christ Church Cedar Mill started the work on their affordable housing apartment complex for LGBTQ+ seniors.

Every \$10 million invested in predevelopment costs could make available enough land for 2,500 affordable housing units.

“At Leaven, we’re grateful to be partnering with Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon and Reps. Mark Gamba and Tom Andersen, along with Sen. Deb Patterson to introduce this legislation,” Nielsen said. “Our

faith communities are eager to get involved because they see houselessness as a social justice issue and they want to act their faith. They have the spiritual desire to be part of the solution, they just need the support of a few more resources to get started in this process.”

Leaven is working with more than 50 United Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran and Presbyterian churches across Oregon to leverage their vacant church properties for use as affordable housing complexes. Nielsen has even authored a guidebook to help churches to start this process. Typical barriers are financial resources to even begin a feasibility study and potential pushback from the neighborhood when they are unsure or uninformed about the benefits of affordable housing.

In Portland alone, a City of Portland study identified more than 600 acres of faith-based property that could be used for affordable housing development.

“We want to switch the narrative from ‘not in my backyard’ to ‘absolutely, yes, I want this in my backyard,’” Nielsen said. “We are eager for lawmakers to move this legislation forward.”

Bishop Cedrick D. Bridgeforth of Greater Northwest Episcopal Area of The United Methodist Church said the action being taken by faith communities – more than just the UMCs he serves in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Alaska – is akin to listening to Jesus’ command in the parable of the Good Samaritan when he encourages his disciple to “go and do likewise” in his life.

“Providing affordable housing in our communities calls on all of us to dig deep – regardless of our faith backgrounds – to create a just world where everyone – everyone – has the opportunity to thrive,” Bridgeforth said. “I’m so proud of the work our United Methodist Churches are doing at so many levels to address this state of emergency in Oregon. And I know it couldn’t be done without partnerships with EMO, Leaven and other entities who see this as our faithful response to the realities of our neighborhoods and cities.”

But the work of faith communities doesn’t just stop at House Bill 3452. **Today, HB 2001 and HB 5019 will be considered by the Oregon Senate.**

With Gov. Tina Kotek’s declaration of houselessness as a state of emergency, EMO has partnered with lawmakers this session to expand funding Oregon youth experiencing homelessness. Approximately \$25 million has been dedicated for houseless youth services – everything from emergency funding to families in danger of losing their homes to housing for courageous youth. Of the \$25 million, \$6.5 million will be directed toward the expansion of the Oregon Department of Human Services host home program for unaccompanied youth.

Oregon has the fifth highest number of youth experiencing homelessness in the country. There are 8,278 youth in need of shelter and more than 18,000 students K-12 experienced houselessness last school year.

For more than a dozen years EMO's Second Home program has served houseless students in various communities by partnering them with, essentially, host families who are willing to provide a home and support for a youth as they make their way through high school. While there are other host home programs across the state, EMO has seen its youth participants graduate high school at a rate of 94 percent by recruiting home providers and giving full agency to the high schoolers they serve, allowing the students to select the family where they'd like to live.

The students who live and graduate from high school in these host home facilities have proven far less likely to experience homelessness again and have gone on to live fruitful, productive lives.

"The stories we've collected over the years from these youth who have gone on to be successful adults just blow you away," said Jenny Pratt Hale, Second Home program director for EMO. "The additional grants we can apply for through legislative funding will allow us to expand our footprint in this work and help other communities see how critical host homes are in breaking the cycle of poverty in our state. In turn, this creates so many other socio-economic benefits for the state of Oregon."

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon partners with 14 different denominations, and its mission is to bring together diverse communities of faith to learn, serve and advocate for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

"While we continue to advocate legislatively for additional funding to address long-term, faith-based solutions to the affordable housing crisis, we know our churches are out there walking the walk right now," So said. "We cannot discount our faith communities willing to serve a warm meal, provide emergency shelter in cold weather or offer mailboxes for the houseless. We must work toward justice, not just charity, to help every Oregonian thrive."

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