

Homelessness In Billings: Local Government Perspective

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share with you some thoughts regarding local government and homelessness in our community. To be clear, I am speaking today of my own opinions and am not taking any formal positions on behalf of the Billings City Council or the City of Billings. I also want to make clear that while I am also an employee of the Department of Labor and Industry, I am speaking today only in my role as an elected Billings City Council member.

Prior to my election in 2021, I was privileged to work alongside many nonprofits and advocates that directly or indirectly serve the unhoused population in Billings. I was director of the Head Start program in our community, which offered priority enrollment to children whose families were experiencing homelessness. Our program worked diligently to help those families find safe and stable housing as a part of our commitment to supporting young children and preparing them for success in school. After leaving Head Start, I worked with the local Yellowstone County Continuum of Care to develop their strategic plan to combat homelessness in Yellowstone County. I worked on a Youth Housing Demonstration Project as well as a funding proposal that led to the creation of mobile crisis response units in Billings. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I was asked to support the Continuum of Care in developing a quarantine and isolation facility for the unhoused, as well as a non-congregate low barrier shelter to help reduce the spread of COVID among vulnerable populations.

I have been fortunate to see the challenges with housing and homelessness from a variety of perspectives, but in no way do I profess to be an expert. Today, I hope to simply share some insights as to the factors that weigh on my mind when we consider the unhoused population in Billings. I am aware that we are fortunate to have quite a few resources dedicated to solving some of the most difficult social challenges in our community – more than many of my colleagues in cities and towns around Montana. That said, as I think you will see today, even with the services and providers we have in Billings, we are strained absolutely to capacity and need new solutions to better support vulnerable populations.

I believe the City of Billings, both local government and private service agencies, have a lot to be proud of, in terms of making critical investments, developing collaborations, trying innovative approaches, implementing best practices, and talking candidly about the challenges and opportunities we face collectively.

As a City Council Member, there is a fundamental and inextricable linkage between policy for the unhoused and public safety. While there is certainly an element of people who are unhoused and committing crime, the unhoused are more likely to be victims of crime. But even before someone is living on the street and victimized, we are faced with the reality that violence in the community is driving homelessness. There is certainly a population for whom housing is purely *the issue* – lack of housing, lack of affordable housing, lack of employment to support housing and cost of living. But for many more, housing instability is a *symptom* of deeper trauma and need. Stating that there is a nexus with housing issues and public safety is not intended to demonize but to be candid that from a core role of

government, local cities have a challenge that must be confronted honestly, lovingly, equitably, and directly. We need to ensure Billings is safe for everyone – adequate housing and sheltering services are a necessary component of that commitment.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

As you will hear frequently from local leaders, virtually any issue we seek to tackle systematically and comprehensively suffers from a lack of data. Quantifying a challenge, identifying and projecting trends, and evaluating outcomes is a chronic obstacle for public policy development, at least at the local government level.

Presently, most data estimates indicate there are roughly 600 to 1000 unhoused individuals in Billings at any given time. However, definitions matter. Beyond the individuals captured during point-in-time and other surveys, we know there are adults and youth who are in unstable and often unsafe housing situations. During the MERA program – the Montana Emergency Rental Assistance program - the number of participants was double or triple that amount, with many folks living in motels or other unstable, transitional living situations. Billings Public Schools estimates that nearly 600 youth are homeless in the district, which includes actually homeless youth who may or may not be with adult caregivers, as well as youth who are couch surfing or otherwise in circumstances that would fall somewhere between stable housing and literally homeless.

The waiting list that our local housing authority, HomeFront, has for housing vouchers numbers well over 7,000 individuals, some of whom have been on the list for years. And finally, there is a quantity of people who are on the verge of homelessness – employed, but facing escalating rents, escalating taxes, inflation, and other external pressures that seriously threaten their ability to remain housed.

Fundamentally, for local policy, getting our heads around the scope is a challenge. But I would argue that the question of total number of people who are homeless or at risk of being homeless is perhaps not as critical as understanding the subpopulations or cohorts that within those top-line numbers with distinct needs that trigger different responses, both from the human services sector and from a public policy perspective. Some data in Billings, pre-pandemic mostly, shows that Billings often has a high number of people who are unhoused or at risk for a very short period, but are able to take advantage of emergency housing assistance – rapid rehousing or emergency vouchers – as well as a high number of people who are chronically homeless, two years or more. Billings generally has a lower number of people in between, people who are unhoused for 6 or 12 months at a time. Our data is generally either very short-term or very long-term, and each of those presents a unique set of challenges and policy issues.

On the short-term side of the equation, the ongoing churn in and out of housing increases the risk of long-term homelessness. There are foundations of success in this population – the ability to acquire housing and the ability to work in order to pay some rent. But as people experience more housing “churn”, that chaos threatens long-term stability. Losing housing can mean poor rental history, poor credit history, eviction proceedings, and even employment instability. Children in that situation experience on-going disruption which can hamper their development and their success in school. As these factors add up, the risk of chronic homelessness increases.

On the long-term side, the unhoused population in Billings also battles with deep trauma, mental health issues, and substance abuse. Coming back to the nexus with public safety, we know that family violence continues to be a significant cause of housing instability in Billings. Limited sheltering, housing, and support services can result in women choosing to stay longer with their abuser, worsening the victimization and, when children are involved, creating a generational cycle of trauma, not to mention contributing to the risk of youth and young adult homelessness. Beyond homelessness resulting from criminal acts, Billings is challenged with insufficient resources for individuals with substance use disorders, mental health issues, physical health issues, and criminal histories. Increasingly, we are seeing housing instability among seniors – chronically homeless adults in need of assisted living facilities as well as elderly homeowners at risk of losing their houses due to the rising cost of living.

Given the prevalence of homelessness in Billings and Yellowstone County, it is not surprising that there is a long history of community-based efforts to respond. In fact, along with the challenges, Billings has had many successes.

In recent years, the 2004 Mayor’s Committee on Homelessness worked diligently to leverage public and private resources to tackle housing issues in the community. Over a 10-year period, this initiative resulted in the establishment of the Community Innovations initiative, Spare Change for Real Change, construction of multiple new public housing projects, resource maps to support system navigation, community gardens through Billings to address access to fresh produce, and the Purple 5K to combat homelessness and poverty.

In 2020, the Yellowstone County Continuum of Care – the HUD-designated coalition of service providers for housing and homelessness – developed a new strategic plan, intended to create the next generation of shared goals and coordinated work. That strategic plan, which I was fortunate to be invited to draft for the coalition, attempted to strike a balance between necessary housing facilities and systems navigation to help unhoused individuals find their way through the many providers in the area.

For more than two decades, housing advocates and service providers for at-risk and vulnerable populations have been working in Billings to better coordinate, organize, and prioritize what resources we do have available. The Continuum of Care supports a Coordinated Entry System, meaning a dedicated effort to share data and intake procedures among providers, creating a prioritized client list for housing, and ensuring that clients are receiving necessary but not duplicative services. CES data from 2023 is included with these remarks.

There has been much work done. But Billings continues to face communication gaps, service deficiencies, and facility needs that have not yet found a sustainable solution. As a City Council Member, I will admit that the right set of solutions continues to elude us.

CHALLENGES IN THE BILLINGS AREA

I have outlined the scope of housing and homelessness issues from my perspective in the community, but I want to be very specific on what I believe are the unique challenges we face in Billings. For this committee, I hope you hear that, while there are certainly best practices for affordable housing and supportive services for the unhoused, individual Montana cities and towns have individual challenges. There are local dynamics that greatly influence strategies for housing the unhoused. There are no easy answers.

In Billings, we must be candid that the ongoing trend of inadequate treatment options for mental health and substance abuse, coupled with unacceptably high levels of crime is driving homelessness in the community. While we are certainly seeing the impact of housing price spikes, inventory constraints, and insufficient access to emergency sheltering options, what Billings must deal with is trauma and crime. We must also acknowledge that for many people, substance abuse, violence, and mental health has generational roots, meaning that the strategies to support those individuals in accessing and maintain housing will be different than strategies to address housing for a population without that history.

In addition to dealing with generational trauma and violence as root causes leading to homelessness, Billings must also find strategies, in coordination with our state partners, to better address legitimate community concerns with respect to probation, parole, and reentry from the criminal justice system. For persons with a criminal background, finding housing and employment can be an almost insurmountable obstacle. Because Billings has two pre-release centers as well as many sober living homes, we see a lot of people on supervision. There is heavy debate as to whether Billings receives a disproportionate impact from the correctional system, but regardless, we simply have a lot of individuals with criminal backgrounds that cannot find work or housing in Billings. It is an issue to be addressed.

One of the challenges that I suspect is shared among communities in Montana is the rising cost of materials and labor for any housing development, but especially affordable housing. Recent affordable housing projects that have come before the Billings City Council have projected a per unit cost of anywhere between \$220,000 to \$350,000 per unit. Just the process of putting together a proposal to seek private financing or public subsidy can run \$100,000 or more. We must find ways to reduce materials cost by increasing resource production in our state and expanding the workforce by encouraging young people to enter into the trades. Simply helping Montana do what it does best – work hard and steward our natural resources into responsible economic growth – could have a huge impact on local governments’ ability to support our unhoused neighbors.

Finally, Billings struggles, in all honesty, with collaboration among providers. I believe that much of this has to do with limited resources. Many service providers are constantly under threat of layoffs or closure due to financial challenges. They cannot hire people to provide necessary services. They are in survival mode, which can often result in turf battles and counterproductive competition. At a local level, we must continue to work at coordination and cooperation, under a shared strategy. State funding and state policy can encourage this local work.

SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES

Despite the depth of challenges we face in Billings, I want to briefly highlight some of the incredible work that has been done recently in Billings and continues to be done to support vulnerable populations.

The Montana Rescue Mission continues to make progress on its bold Unified Campus plan, which would bring together shelter, housing, mental health, life skills and child care on a single footprint. Love and SONshine, a nonprofit organization, has opened a new housing facility to accommodate homeless teen moms. Various low-barrier sheltering efforts have also been undertaken in the community, mostly for a defined period of time. Our local Housing Authority, HomeFront, continues to lead affordable housing innovation in Billings and around the state. HomeFront is undertaking an ambitious effort in my ward in

the Billings Heights to repurpose unused man camps from the North Dakota into one- and two-bedroom apartment units, significantly reducing construction costs. In addition, HomeFront is also piloting 3-D printed homes for low-income rentals.

On the services side, Riverstone Health, our county health department, has established a targeted health care unit focused on serving the homeless population. The community has long-benefitted from the good work of the Crisis Center, a project led by our hospitals and designed to provide immediate intake for individuals in crisis paired with an intentional approach to service referral, in a 24-hour period.

The Downtown Business Association continues to fund police officers who work from a community policing model in the central business district and help vulnerable individuals find resources, rather than incarceration. The DBA has recently funded a public restroom in the downtown area to provide access to basic hygiene. Various organizations in town have established outreach teams that seek to build relationships with unhoused people and connect them to services and housing.

Billings Public Schools has also reimagined how young people access education and support services, even while experiencing housing instability. The district has undertaken ambitious return to school efforts for young people who have not attended school or dropped out. Their homeless outreach is shifting to strategically located resource centers around the community, based on a community schools concept. The district is also using newly enacted charter school legislation to pilot targeted drop-out prevention efforts paired with increased access to career and technical education.

Among the nonprofit service providers in the community, efforts continue to improve coordination and collaboration among agencies. The Continuum of Care is partnering with our local behavioral health consortium, known as Substance Abuse Connect, to develop a crisis response continuum based in the Crisis Now model. The goal is to ensure that anyone facing a crisis – housing, behavioral health, substance abuse – has someone to call, someone who responds and somewhere to go. This work aligns with the statewide Behavioral Health Commission. The Yellowstone County Commission has also used its mental health levy to support increased cooperation among housing and behavioral health providers.

The ongoing and increased collaboration between behavioral health providers and housing partners is yielding results. There is an increased focus on diversion – both diverting people out of housing crises and diverting people in crisis out of the criminal justice system. In addition, the coalitions are in the early stages of exploring Permanent Supportive Housing projects, an evidence-based strategy to serve targeted populations who will need long-term support to be successful.

The nonprofit and philanthropic sectors are also engaging with United Way of Yellowstone County, which recently received a large grant from the Bezos Foundation to tackle housing challenges in the community. Finally, I must mention the ongoing compassion of our community, which engages regularly in ad hoc efforts to minister to people in need. Churches, neighborhood groups, and businesses work to provide showers, free laundry days, free snacks and meals, and similar gifts to fill the gaps they observe in the social safety net.

For the City's part, we have invested in recent months in infrastructure that aligns with our strategic priorities. The City of Billings, in partnership with Rimrock, recently launched mobile Crisis Response Units (CRU), which pairs behavioral health specialists with paramedics and are available to be dispatched to 911 calls that have a behavioral health need. While these units are not solely focused on unhoused

individuals, those encounters are not uncommon. The goal of the CRU is to stabilize the individual, keep them out of the criminal justice system, and connect them with ongoing services to prevent future crisis needs. The CRU currently operates 10 hours a day, but there is a need to expand to a 24-hour model and to additional units. State policy decisions will be central to the future of our crisis response programs and how well we can, as a community, stabilize people so that they can access and maintain housing.

I am also proud to share that the City of Billings has, in partnership with the County and local advocates, established the first Family Justice Center in Montana for victims and survivors of family violence. The FJC, which is located at the YWCA shelter, is designed to bring together, under one roof, law enforcement, legal, and support services to improve prosecution of family violence and to better support survivors in accessing housing, employment, and other services to prevent future victimization.

I hope that you hear a few consistent themes: prevention, diversion, co-location. These three strategies are, in my opinion, essential to a community-based solution to homelessness, housing instability, and public safety. I raise these to your attention because I am convinced that blunt force strategies will fail and will further strain local governments. Many of us are contemplating the impact of the recent Supreme Court decision on urban camping restrictions. However, as appealing as simple solutions like that may appear, local governments must wrestle with the reality of enforcement. Without a rational approach to prevention and diversion, heavy-handed bans will simply fill detention centers that are already over capacity or, even worse, be unenforced, leading to further contempt for the criminal justice system, an issue we are already battling in Billings. Firm limitations are needed for public order, but those boundaries must exist in a system that has meaningful alternatives. In Billings, we still have a lot of work to do.

Certainly, we have a lot going for us in Billings to address housing issues and the co-occurring behavioral health needs that many face. Even so, I can tell you as a local leader that it is insufficient. Most of these services, as I mentioned previously, have extensive waiting lists. Individuals who need help often struggle to access it. There is, as I noted, much more work to be done. For some of that work, we need the help of our partners in the Legislature and State agencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As this Committee considers possible policy actions or legislative proposals, I would like to share a few thoughts for your consideration. Again, these are mine alone and not official policy statements from the City Council.

First, while we absolutely have more work to do at a local level in improving coordination and collaboration among providers, there are some challenges that cannot be solved in a vacuum. I believe our planning and response work related to housing and homelessness would benefit from **coordinated support from key state partners**. I want to be clear that this planning must be locally focused and led by local stakeholders. Our community needs, challenges, and barriers are unique, just as they are unique in communities across the state. A statewide committee, panel, task force, or other single-solution convening is not valuable. What I would like to see, as a local elected official, is a type of SWAT team of key leaders with decision making capability from the relevant agencies – DPHHS, Commerce, DLI, OPI, and DOC – who can sit down with us and support local leadership, not supplant it.

We need people who can rapidly address obstacles, shift resources, and engage in targeted collaborations. We have some thorny challenges that may require engagement from the state. We don't have good solutions right now to the aging unhoused population – how can we, as a community, provide assisted living for a very at-risk population? How can we get more co-located services at housing developments – can OPA move to a more satellite or mobile service delivery model? How can we reduce barriers to housing and employment for justice-involved youth and adults? Tackling these issues requires very localized planning supported by stakeholder agencies. In Billings, we have seen meaningful success using this model for criminal justice. I would love to see a similar approach for implementing locally crafted solutions to housing and homelessness.

Next, I would absolutely encourage this committee and the Legislature as a whole to continue and even **increase the focus on prevention** resources. The Behavioral Health Commission has explored some of that work. But getting to root causes of substance abuse, mental health, and trauma will have a significant impact on local efforts to address housing instability and employment to maintain housing. Along these same lines, the Legislature must pay special attention to the needs of youth, across the board: early intervention for at-risk families, meaningful work to improve attendance and reduce dropout rates, increased career programs to help all youth plan for a successful future, quick access to behavioral health supports so that young people get help before the issue spirals, meaningful rehabilitation of youth involved in the juvenile justice system, and significantly improved supports for youth in the foster care system. All these gaps directly point to ongoing challenges with homelessness across the state, for years to come.

Next, Billings needs to be able to develop a **24-hour crisis response and homeless outreach** system. We cannot have services only available to people experiencing crisis during business hours. State policy or funding that moves us in this direction would be helpful. We need clear policy and funding signals that push towards coordinated, responsive around-the-clock work. At the same time, we also need to consider pivoting that coordinated outreach, engagement, and crisis response effort to be client-centered, not agency-centered. We must move past the expectation that the most vulnerable residents of our community need to navigate a dozen or more offices to get the resources they need to access and maintain emergency shelter, supportive services, housing, and employment. The outreach and service system needs to **mobilize and physically move to people in need**, rather than expecting vulnerable people to find them. We must encourage mobile services, co-location, peer navigators that go to clients, and similar strategies – and align dollars accordingly.

To that end, my final recommendation to this committee is perhaps the most challenging. We all know that the 2025 Legislature will **address Medicaid expansion** in some fashion. I am not here to take a position on any particular approach. I would simply ask that you consider the impact of any policy decision on local government and think about “savings” from a taxpayer perspective. Policy decisions that shift costs from one level of government to another don't generally save any tax dollars. As a taxpayer, I don't care who the taxing entity is – it all comes out of the same bank account.

At the local level, there are certain things that we simply will address, because we must. If people who are unhoused are committing crimes, that will be dealt with. But those are the most expensive dollars. Our collective efforts, as state and local elected officials, should be focused on thinking wisely about how to prevent homelessness and the issues that lead to housing instability, how divert people in crisis out of systems and into services, and how to reduce the need for expensive responses to crisis – whether that

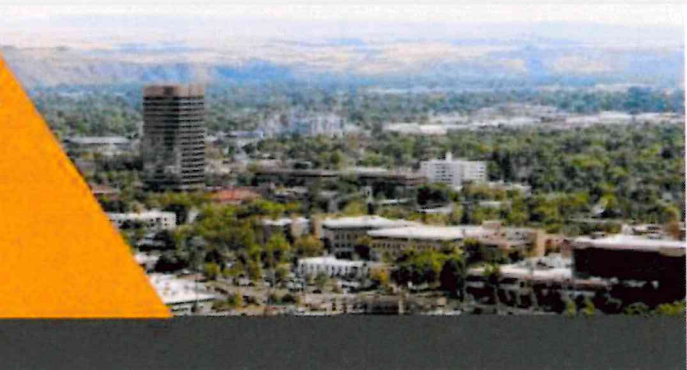
is in an emergency room or in a detention facility. When we do that, we increase the odds of actual tax savings, rather than just shifting burdens among jurisdictions.

As the Legislature contemplates what is next for Medicaid and Medicaid expansion, please engage with your local governments. If Medicaid expansion is to go away, let's start working now on alternatives. We need solutions for mobile crisis response, we need ways to sustain services for Permanent Supportive Housing projects, and we need case management strategies that are based in real needs of vulnerable populations. Whatever that path forward looks like, local governments need a voice in this debate.

Mr. Chairman and the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present this perspective to you today. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have, now or in the future. I am happy to continue supporting the Committee's work to strengthen local government.

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COORDINATED ENTRY SYSTEM 2023



Total Clients Entered:

1,364

Total Clients Exited:

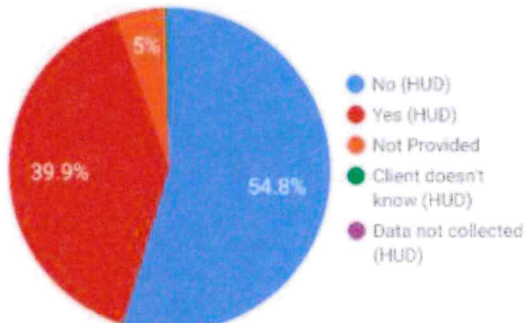
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Total Clients Successfully

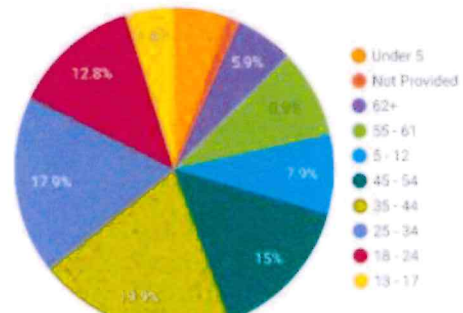
Housed:

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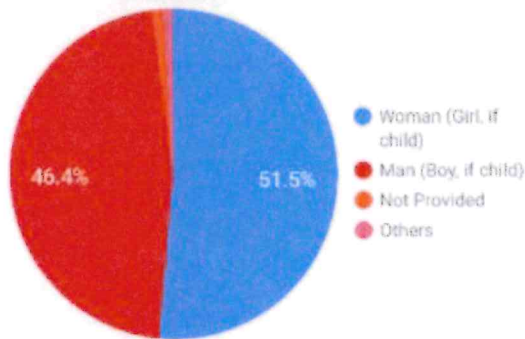
Disabling Condition



Age



Gender



Race

