

Legislators to invest \$400 million to combat homelessness

March 1, 2022



The Oregon Legislature is working to pass legislation that would infuse \$400 million to help combat homelessness and provide affordable housing across Oregon.

While much of the investment will happen in the larger cities of the state, funding is being made available to rural areas as well.

During a press conference Thursday, Democratic leaders announced the funding package, which includes House Bill 4123. HB 4123 will create a pilot program that provides funding for cities and counties that work together to combat homelessness.

In Coos County, the cities of North Bend and Coos Bay are working with the county to host one of the pilot programs. In Lincoln County, the county is partnering with Lincoln City, the city of Newport and the city of Toledo to host one of the pilots.

Representative Jason Kropf authored HB 4123, which was scheduled to be voted on Thursday in the Subcommittee on Transportation and Economic Development.

"Each pilot will establish a coordinated homeless response office," Kropf said. "In doing so, our communities will be better positioned to leverage existing resources. Pilots will be required to report back on their plans, their progress, challenges and opportunities. Homelessness does not have a one size fits all solution."

HB 4123 will provide \$1 million for each of the eight pilot programs, with a goal of finding what works and doesn't work.

State Rep. David Gomberg, who represents Lincoln County in the Legislature, said the program is much needed.

"As a coastal and a rural legislature, I've seen firsthand the plight of homelessness in our community," he said. "In my home county, 20 percent of student in schools are categorized as homeless. What we're talking about here is seniors, families, low-income workers and, yes, we're talking about kids."

He said HB 4123 will find solutions because it will lead to greater cooperation among local governments.

"This bill will give us the tools to work together to address our most pressing problems," Gomberg said.

"This legislation will not only yield immediate relief, it will also collect information of what programs work best. It will require the pilot programs to report to the Legislature so we can use it to make good legislation."

Lincoln County Commissioner Claire Hall also applauded the legislation.

"This program will give us a chance to make a meaningful difference in the challenge of homelessness in Lincoln County," Hall said. "Some people think homelessness is only an issue in larger communities. That's not true."

While the Democrats applauded the package, State Rep. Boomer Wright has announced he supports HB 4123.

The package announced Thursday will include three elements - \$165 million to combat homelessness, \$215 to support existing affordable housing and to build new affordable housing and \$20 million to help people get into their first home.

Sen. Kayse Jama, chair of the Senate Committee on Housing, lauded the proposal as it was announced.

"Too many Oregonians are facing housing instability or homelessness right now," Jama said. "Our hearts and minds go to those stuck in homelessness and out on the streets in our communities. Oregonians are expecting action on this issue and that's exactly what's happening today."

Jama said the legislative leaders had four goals when preparing the package.

- 1 - Address immediate needs around homelessness;
- 2 - Building investments to increase supply of affordable housing;

3 - Preventing displacement from homes; and

4 - Ensure funds are spent quickly and efficiently.

To reach goal four, much of the funding is going to existing programs that have proven to be successful. For example, Project Turnkey, which provides funding to purchase and rebuild older hotels, will receive \$50 million.

In Coos County, Operation Rebuild Hope used a Project Turnkey grant to purchase a hotel in North Bend that is currently being rebuilt to provide housing for homeless veterans.

House Majority Leader Julie Fahey, chair of the House Committee on Housing, said the goal is to make a difference quickly.

"We know that homelessness and affordable housing are some of the biggest challenges facing our state" Fahey said. "We have heard from Oregonians that they want us to take action. We are making key investments into solutions of homelessness. That includes more funding in programs that actually work. Every Oregonian deserves a safe place to sleep at night. While we are working to increase services and shelter, we also have to address some of the root causes. This package makes significant investments in affordable housing. These investments will not solve every problem overnight, but Oregonians have real problems right now."

Rep. Paul Evans said spending the money when the state has a surplus is the right thing to do.

"The package is a whole is not just about policy. It's about bringing people and ideas together for a common cause," Evans said. "I believe this package is consistent with the lessons I learned early in life about faith. Right now, Oregonians are hurting. Though wages are increasing, the net worth of working families are lagging behind. The working poor simply do not have the tools they need. This is an issue of basic human dignity. We are supposed to do everything possible to make sure our neighbors have a safe, secure place to live."

While some elements of the package are stand-alone bills, like HB 4123, most of the funding will be in the budget package that is scheduled to be voted on in the final days of the short session.