



Focused Group Discussions with Columbia County Residents:

*Challenges to affordable housing for individuals and families with behavioral health needs,
and strategies to address identified barriers.*

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Conducted for:

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Summary

In April of 2022, Columbia Health Services conducted four focus groups, which were virtually hosted and offered on a variety of days and times, ranging from mornings to evenings. Follow up surveys were then issued, and finally an in-person town hall was hosted in the capital of Columbia county; St. Helens. This multi faceted data gathering approach was designed and implemented to reduce barriers to participation and ensure that all residents of Columbia County who wished to participate were able and had access. In total, there were fifty one residents of the county who participated in this process.

Earlier in the year, the data gathering design was developed, and marketing county wide was implemented to raise awareness of the project and identify how best Columbia Health Services could engage local residents, and reduce barriers to their participation. In the beginning stages of this process, key partners were identified. Through discussion with Columbia Community Mental Health (CCMH), who would be running their own focus groups and preparing their own report for the state; CCMH identified that they would be focusing on housing barriers for the LGBTQ+ population for this study. To avoid duplication it was agreed that Columbia Health Services (CHS) would then focus on barriers for residents with behavioral health needs. A key partnership was formed with Columbia Counseling & Consultation, who's Licensed Clinical Social worker has been actively providing services in Columbia County since 1997. Design of the data gathering modality was developed, and implemented with full coordination and involvement of said Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

This report describes the findings of the data generated by the focus groups, following survey, and town hall provided to the residents of Columbia county. The intent of this report is to reflect and summarize the lived experiences and barriers residents expressed seeking and maintaining housing with individuals and/or families with behavioral health needs. This data includes their specifically identified barriers, as well as potential solutions as proposed by the residents who participated in this project. Additionally, this report will outline areas of need and strategies to address them as identified through the lens of the professionals who work in this community and conducted this project.

Key Findings

~ Most common barriers to housing in Columbia County are inadequate housing stock, inadequate housing stock at an affordable price, waiting list time and no or poor credit.

~ Individuals and families with Behavioral Health needs face much greater challenges and barriers to both accessing, and maintaining affordable housing.

~ The recent population increase due to portions of Columbia County being perceived as a “bedroom” community to nearby larger metro areas, and as a cheaper place to live; has resulted in a significant reduction of affordable housing in the county.

~ Many residents report not knowing how to access public assistance in attaining housing, or who to contact if they are denied housing.

~ Rural geography, limited public transportation and travel distances to services, makes connecting with housing assistance services, as well as behavioral health services an even greater challenge.

Recommendations

~ Increase available housing stock, particularly for low income and individuals and families with behavioral health needs. While this may be outside the scope of what Columbia Health Services can provide, it should be mentioned that several large housing projects are currently being developed in Columbia County, some identified as for low income. Expansion of rental assistance and housing advocacy is another citizen identified need that could be implemented by expanded funding of current programs.

~ Educate residents on local services that may help them in both attaining and maintaining housing, and what to do if they are denied or are facing housing discrimination due to Behavioral Health or other social issues. Columbia Health Services, with funding, could develop a community outreach worker that could educate, and connect residents with existing services such as the Community Action Team and the Department of Human services. This position could travel county wide, and educate and provide services in conjunction with existing CHS professionals, assisting residents in their specific community, rather than residents having to

come into an agency located far away from them. This community outreach position would serve in an advocacy role, helping those who have faced the most challenges and barriers, and are the most vulnerable. This position could also serve to address some of the inequities currently faced by segments of the population in Columbia County.

~ Increase availability of public transportation. While additional funding would be necessary to achieve this identified need, Columbia Health Services is actively expanding their whole health services throughout communities in Columbia county, to at least help mitigate existing transportation barriers to residents.

~ Increase access and availability of Behavioral Health services in Columbia county. A correlation between populations with Behavioral Health needs and increased barriers to finding and maintaining housing has been identified. An increase in available Behavioral Health services should result in enhanced stability and functioning for individuals and families, resulting in a reduction in housing barriers. Columbia Health Services in coordination with Columbia Pacific CCO is currently actively rolling out a large Behavioral Health expansion, which will drastically increase access and provide services to Columbia county residents in their various communities throughout the county.

Introduction

Columbia Health Services, with five sites spaced in the hearts of communities throughout Columbia County, provides whole health services to all residents of the county. Columbia Health Services (CHS) historically has provided a broad array of public health services throughout the county, while contracting with a county partner, Columbia Community Mental Health (CCMH) to provide behavioral health clinicians which were housed at CHS in community locations. To better meet the needs identified by Columbia counties residents, as of 2021 Columbia Health Services has begun its own behavioral health program, with dedicated CHS clinicians housed county wide. As of summer of 2022, Columbia Health services is embarking on a major expansion of its behavioral health program, in collaboration with Columbia Pacific Coordinated Care Organization.

In August of 2021, Columbia Health Services applied for the grant which funds this study, and received notice that the grant had been awarded late fall of 2021. At this time CHS staff were formally assigned to the research project, a timeline was created and key community partners were identified and discussions coordinated. Through discussion with Columbia Community Mental Health (CCMH), who would be running their own focus groups and preparing their own report for the state; CCMH identified that they would be focusing on housing barriers for the LGBTQ+ population for this study. To avoid duplication it was agreed that Columbia Health Services (CHS) would then focus on barriers for residents with behavioral health needs. A key partnership was formed with Columbia Counseling & Consultation at the beginning of January in 2022, and a Licensed Clinical Social worker who has been actively providing services in Columbia County since 1997 was attached to the project.

With key partnerships in place, in January of 2022 the data gathering design began development. In February and March marketing county wide was implemented to raise awareness of the project and identify how best Columbia Health Services could engage local residents, and reduce barriers to their participation. In April of 2022, Columbia Health Services conducted four focus groups, which were virtually hosted and offered on a variety of days and times, ranging from mornings to evenings. Follow up surveys were then issued, and finally an in-person town hall was hosted in the capital of Columbia county; St. Helens. This multi faceted data gathering approach was designed and implemented to reduce barriers to participation and ensure that all residents of Columbia County who wished to participate were able and had access to do so. In total, there were fifty one residents of the county who participated.

This report describes the findings of the data generated by the focus groups, following survey, and town hall provided to the residents of Columbia county. This report summarizes the lived experiences and barriers residents expressed seeking and maintaining housing with individuals and/or families with behavioral health needs. This data includes their specifically identified barriers and their potential solutions as proposed by the residents who participated in this project, braided with solutions proposed by the professionals whom conducted the study.

Findings

~ **Primary barriers to housing include cost, availability, and wait time.**

Participants in this study identified several common barriers that they have experienced, in attaining, and maintaining housing. One of the primary barriers reported, one was the sheer cost of housing, including rent, fees and up front utility costs.

“Housing prices are too high for a rural community which limits access for lower income or middle class families”

“There are way more people than housing and the cost of housing is completely unrealistic in relation to incomes”

Some residents reported having to pay up front hundreds of dollars in utility fees, as well as all of the application fees and costs associated with attaining housing. Not all residents reported the same experience with high upfront utility fees, which raised the question if some residents were paying charged back fees from prior tenants.

“It is very expensive to apply for rentals and then put down first, last, and deposit. It is also very challenging for anyone to meet the income requirements of three times the rent. Many folks do not have co-signers”

“A lot of the main barriers are most jobs people can get does not pay anything over minimum wage, and you don't even qualify for rentals if you don't make five times that amount. People are having to have three jobs just to barely make ends meet. And another barrier is there is not enough housing to even support the amount of people we have, renters and sellers are being very picky with who they rent to”

Another primary barrier identified was the lack of current housing inventory which has hit a historical high, and the long wait time to even be eligible.

“there aren't enough housing landlords that take NOAH vouchers, and those that do the wait list is too long”

*“When I applied for an apartment it took me three years to find one. Not to mention this is not just half a** looking I'm talking almost daily. When renters are listing there property's at 9:00 a.m. and by 11:00 a.m. they have 30 applicants there is a major problem”*

“Cost, availability and wait lists that are too long are real problems”

“There is not enough low income housing available so people have to live with family or be homeless”

Residents have reported more than a year of wait time for low income housing, with those wait times growing even longer as the housing stock grows even smaller in relation to the population. Some participants reported moving to Columbia county within the last year or two from larger adjacent metropolitan areas in the hopes of finding more affordable housing. Unfortunately, they report upon moving to Columbia county they were unable to attain or maintain affordable housing as local availability did not match the perception they'd had before moving here. As a large number of individuals and families move to Columbia county seeking long or short term housing, available housing stock shrinks and what remains increases drastically in cost as a direct function of supply and demand.

“Not having affordable housing affects so many parts of a family. I have spent nine months in a tent and also sharing one 8’x 8’ room with my family of five. It was hell”

~ It is more difficult for individuals and families with behavioral health needs to attain or maintain long or short term housing.

Residents of Columbia county who participated in this study reported that for individuals and families with Behavioral Health needs, it was extremely difficult to access and keep housing. On a scale, with 1 being very easy, and 5 being nearly impossible, the participants of this study responded with a statistically mean answer of 4.5.

“It’s hard finding housing that accepts people with behavioral issues”

“People with behavioral health needs face discrimination”

“Its hard just to find housing with behavioral needs. There’s not enough of it in Columbia county. Also, with behavioral issues it makes it harder because you have to find housing that understands the behavioral issues of a child or individual”

“It’s a tough process to rent. When you have behavioral health needs, it makes the process much more challenging. Having behavioral health needs also can discourage yourself from finding better or more affordable options due to the overwhelming stress of looking, applying, paying, and moving to a new rental. It makes you feel stuck”

A portion of the challenges acquiring and maintaining stable housing for individuals and families with behavioral health needs that was expressed is a lack of community and landlord education, and a lack of an advocate to help residents maintain housing.

“We need landlords or advocates who can and will work to keep the individual's and families housed while addressing their other needs”

“Poor social skills can lead to scary situations when dealing with landlords and other tenants”

“A lack of trauma informed communities and landlords lead to more public disturbances from misunderstandings about needs. There tends to be more efforts towards helping people get housed, than to help them stay housed”

A common need reported by participants in this study, was for an advocate/mediator to assist with tenant/landlord interactions. County residents reported stressful interactions with landlords, and miscommunications that may have contributed to either losing current housing, or being deemed ineligible for housing. It was nearly universally agreed upon by participants that the need for an advocate/mediator was even more important for individuals and families with behavioral health needs.

~ Short term housing may be slightly easier to access than long term housing, but it comes with its own set of challenges.

“Many rentals are month to month so it does not give peace of mind when wanting a long term rental”

“I feel it is harder to find long term or home owning then short term. But they are all difficult to find in Columbia county”

“Short term housing can make it hard to save up the cost of a deposit or down payment for long term housing”

Overall, residents indicated that short term housing had somewhat less barriers than long term housing. Many indicated that long term housing was nearly impossible to attain, due to factors relating to expectations of private landlords and other variable such as income and credit requirements. The majority of participants in this study reported that due to factors such as these, as well as factors such as housing price and availability; they did not believe that they would ever be able to purchase a home in Columbia county.

~ Aside from behavioral health and financial needs, several other factors common to vulnerable populations are experienced by residents throughout Columbia county. Credit, rental and legal history were three commonly identified.

“There is a real need for felon friendly housing and housing

for individuals with disabilities”

“Lack of rental history, lack of income and the lack of available housing makes it impossible”

“Past rental history and evictions make it hard to pass requirements. And people don’t often meet the income requirements”

No or poor credit was commonly identified as a major obstacle to accessing housing. Rental history, either lack of, or lack of a perfect rental history also posed a barrier; as housing shortages have resulted in landlords being able to pass up anyone with less than a perfect history. Further challenges arise if there are past legal issues, or if someone is currently on probation or parole.

~ There are language and cultural barriers to attaining housing in Columbia County that remain to be addressed.

“I have experienced these barriers. A lot of people available to help don't seem trained or willing to work with people from diverse backgrounds”

“We actually were denied not because of our language but because our cultural beliefs. We're not the same”

“I have faced language barriers. It is intimidating to have to ask for a interpreter”

“I have a deaf colleague and he regularly talks about experiencing major communication barriers, regularly”

Columbia county has historically been a rural, farming and logging community with predominantly white (92.4% white, according to the U.S. 2021 census report), English speaking residents. The recent influx of new residents over the past decade bringing their own rich cultures, languages, and way of life makes it more imperative than ever that local services, and the community at large embraces, accommodates, educates themselves and welcomes all county residents regardless of ethnicity, gender, or religious practices. These identified barriers prove a challenge and opportunity for local services to not only enhance services to address this need, but also to educate the community at large. More specific services to help reduce language and cultural barriers to attaining housing, is clearly indicated.

~ A significant amount of residents are unsure how to access public resources for housing, or what to do if denied. A high percentage of residents use social media or word of mouth to find housing in Columbia county, with word of mouth the most common method.

“We need better accessibility. They (local social service programs) need to make the public aware of all the resources they have”

“I honestly have not seen anything being done in Columbia county to address the lack of housing, the lack of affordable housing, help with getting into housing, or any additional support for individuals or families with healthcare needs. It would be awesome if there were programs and support available in our county”

“I use word of mouth to find housing. I've had zero luck when trying to apply any other way”

Other than word of mouth, social media or internet sites were the most commonly mentioned avenues of finding housing for residents of Columbia county who participated in this study. Craigslist, Facebook, and Google and online rental sites were the most commonly cited. While Columbia county does have housing assistance (a few participants cited Community Action Team, and the Department of Human Services) these social services fell far behind word of mouth, and social media/internet sources. Aside from expanding housing assistance services, a clear need for greater community education on these resources and how to access them needs to be engaged across all communities in the county.

~ Covid has made accessing and attaining housing exponentially more difficult. Even more so for individuals and families with behavioral health needs.

Participant responses indicating how much more challenging Covid has made finding housing may seem self evident. However, it did highlight how in a rural county with comparatively less resources and services than neighboring counties; the local housing crisis and resulting increase in homelessness had had a deep impact on residents. A point worth mentioning, is that much of the more remote parts of the county is reported as not having reliable internet, which not only makes searching for housing harder, but accessing all social services more challenging as Telehealth has become more prevalent.

“Covid has made a huge negative impact. Many offices shut down or reduced their hours. Even upon opening back up, many rental agencies still will not allow people inside buildings. It makes communication very challenging”

“Covid has made it harder, some people lost their housing during this time and it's very hard to find another place”

“Covid caused rents and cost of living increase beyond available budgets. In response the state and federal assistance

programs were flooded and overwhelmed. There isn't enough support or funds for that support available and that leaves many people and families in crisis modes"

It was universally noted that Covid had significant negative impact in attaining, and maintaining housing. Participants in this study expressed that with Covid it was particularly difficult for residents with behavioral health needs; as access to social services, and even maintaining current services they were enrolled in became exceptionally challenging.

"Moving many services to telehealth has made accessing care virtually impossible for people living in towns outside of Scappoose and St. Helens. Although, for individuals who can afford fiber or more reliable internet providers, COVID has made accessing some services more possible"

"Some people don't understand others disabilities. There are not enough social services to support the adults, there are no therapists to support youth on a regular basis since Covid"

"People with behavioral health who needed housing fell through the cracks when everything shut down, and it created all new mental health needs in additional people"

~Rural geography and extremely limited public transportation results in steep barriers for residents seeking housing, as well as securing behavioral health services.

"Transportation from grocery stores to locations with food is an issue. It also creates access barriers for addiction and mental health. We need local residential facilities for mental health and addiction"

"There is not a lot of transit options so you are required to walk every where or get rides from others. And I think this makes it a lot harder for people to want to stay in Columbia county and not move somewhere with more options"

Much of Columbia county is extremely rural, with communities spread out far from housing and social service access. Participants in this study reported that unless you lived in a larger town like St. Helens or Scappoose, access is virtually impossible without a vehicle and they have to rely on friends, family, neighbors, or simply just walk.

"If you live out of the city if you don't have a vehicle it's hard to get to appointments and access food"

Columbia County Rider (CC Rider) is the counties primary public transportation system, located in the county capital of St. Helens. Historically, residents have consistently raised concerns with the limited hours and routes of CC Rider, particularly for residents living outside city limits. With Covid, transportation for county residents became even more limited. A press release from September 17, 2021 (found at www.columbiacountyor.gov/directory/TransitDepartment/news) states “as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the county opted to focus on CC Riders most utilized services, the St. Helens to Portland commuter route and Dial-A-Ride, and suspend service to extremely low ridership routes”.

“Columbia County Rider has extremely limited availability and is even harder to access in more rural locations throughout the county. Other resources like Uber is virtually nonexistent in Columbia county”

Limited public transportation, rural geography and remote communities, prove extreme barriers to finding housing, social services, and sometimes even basic necessities like food. For vulnerable populations such as residents with disabilities or behavioral health needs, the barriers become even more challenging.

“I’m disabled but have no other way to get anywhere but walking”

Expansion and accessible public transportation throughout Columbia county has been a constant need expressed by residents, as well as a topic discussed by county leaders. With housing becoming harder to attain or maintain, and residents dispersing into more remote parts of the county where rent may be slightly lower; the need for a robust public transportation system throughout the county has never been higher.

Methodology

Four focus groups with follow up surveys and a town hall were conducted in April of 2022. In order to promote a culturally competent, as well as a safe and inclusive environment; the focus groups were conducted by professionals with training in cultural and LGBTQ+ sensitivity and competency, including a Licenced Clinical Social Worker with specific training and experience in these areas.

Once these professionals had created the focus group discussion format, a multifaceted community outreach approach was rolled out (including social media, flyers throughout high visibility locations county wide, and community partners) to promote visibility and engagement for the citizen focus groups. Four virtual focus groups with an option for anonymity were held county wide with times ranging from morning to evening hours to enhance accessibility and participation in early April. Gift cards were supplied to participants, and follow up surveys were issued. Additionally, a town hall was hosted in the county’s capital to provide an option for residents who may have had technological barriers, or other reasons they could not participate in the virtual focus groups. Food and beverages were provided at the town hall, which followed

the same discussion format as the virtual focus groups. In total, there were fifty one county residents who participated in this research project, from throughout the county. This included participants from the Vernonia area which historically is the most isolated and remote section of Columbia county with some of the highest barriers to housing and behavioral health services.

Focus Group Discussion Guide

I. Welcome:

Introductions of facilitator/co facilitators and explain process (for virtual focus groups explain Zoom process, chat bar, “raising hands” etc).

Our goal is to keep the group discussion between an hour to an hour and a half maximum.

Confidentiality: In order to keep everyone anonymous, we will not ask for any identifying information (for virtual focus groups, reinforce that they can change their zoom name and keep cameras on or off based on comfort level). All of the information we collect today will be kept confidential; we will not associate anyone’s name with any of the information we report. The information will be combined with three other focus groups we are conducting and a town hall. No information will be used in a manner that would be traceable to any individual or group. We will be taking notes on the question and answer portions of this discussion. We would like to also record this discussion to help us capture everything that is discussed accurately, as long as that is okay with the entire group.

II. Purpose of Groups:

We invited you to participate today to share your thoughts and experiences regarding barriers to housing in Columbia County, for people with behavioral health needs. We are holding four virtual focus groups and one in person town hall. This research project is funded by the Oregon Health Authority. The purpose of these discussions are to learn from your experiences, so that we may form a report back to the state regarding what you, the residents of Columbia county have experienced as barriers to housing and any ideas that you may have for solutions.

Ground Rules:

1. Be respectful
 2. Listen to Understand
 3. Judgment free zone
 4. Safe space
- Any additional rules?

III. Discussion Questions:

We have a lot to discuss, and in order to get to all the questions and end when we said we would, I may have to move us along from one discussion to the next if we go longer than we have time for. Is that okay with the group?

Icebreaker: How long have you lived in Columbia County and what is your favorite activity/place/ thing to do in Columbia County. (Place answers in chat box for virtual groups).

1. What are the primary barriers you see as an issue in accessing housing in Columbia County?
2. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being very easy and 5 being nearly impossible, how difficult would you say it is for those with behavioral health needs to access and keep housing in Columbia County?
3. What are specific barriers to finding and maintaining housing? What are the specific barriers to success in short term housing, long-term rentals, and/or home ownership for individuals/singles and for families? (Follow-up probes if group can't answer question - we are not looking for these answers specifically: How about application fees, income eligibility, good credit, single vs individual, children, criminal record, inadequate housing stock?)
4. What do you believe to be the most important housing issues for individuals and families living with behavioral health needs?
5. How do you think these issues can be addressed? To your knowledge, is there anything being done effectively to address these issues?
6. How does living with behavioral health needs impact finding and maintaining housing in Columbia County?
7. What are some ways that individuals find and apply for housing in Columbia County? For example, using social media such as Facebook groups, word of mouth from friends, or local social service organizations?
8. Have you, or someone you know experienced challenges to finding and maintaining housing due to a language barrier?
9. Columbia County is a rural community, with housing often a significant distance from basic services (groceries, hospitals, healthcare, foodbank). Does the distance create

barriers to finding and maintaining housing? What barriers might one living with behavioral health needs have because of the location of affordable housing? With Columbia County being largely rural, have you or someone you know experienced geographic and/or transportation barriers to finding housing close enough to support services, such as behavioral or physical health services, case management, a food bank, etc?

10. How has Covid impacted finding housing in Columbia County? Are those living with behavioral health needs more impacted by the effects of Covid? Do you feel that Covid has had an impact on individuals and families with behavioral health needs seeking housing? If so, how?
11. What additional thoughts or stories have you heard about in Columbia County about accessing housing? Is there anything we have not asked that we should have?

IV. Closing Statement:

Thank you for your valuable time, and sharing your experiences with housing in Columbia county. We will now put a link in the chat that will allow you to enter your information to receive your gift card for participating in this focus group (or town hall) today. If you have any difficulty with the form please email prevention@columbia-health.org and we will collect the necessary info via email to get you your gift card. *(Put previous statement on slideshow for town hall).*

Your input and participation has been very valuable, and will help us create a report that accurately depicts your lived experiences with finding housing in Columbia County. If you'd like to read the report we generate from this discussion you can find it on our following website: <https://www.columbia-health.org/data.html> or by emailing prevention@columbia-health.org after July 1st. If you prefer to have a physical copy they will be available at the main CHS office across from the St. Helens high school. *(Put previous statement on slideshow for town hall).*