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HOMELESSNESS

Salem tries for share of new state money to push new approach to serving homeless

Sequoia Crossings would join Redwood Crossings as Salem's only homeless housing with on-site caseworkers. It's an approach often considered highly effective in treating chronic homelessness, experts say.

By Troy Brynelson — Salem Reporter September 18, 2019 at 11:00am





The proposed site of Sequoia Crossings, a 76-unit apartment for chronically homeless people, at 3120 Broadway St. N.E. (Troy Brynelson/Salem Reporter)

A new kind of housing project for chronically homeless residents in Salem could be in the works if a state grant comes through.

Sequoia Crossings would be a 76-unit apartment at 3120 Broadway St. N.E. It would be a joint effort by Salem Housing Authority and The ARCHES Project to help chronically homeless people work towards becoming independent tenants.

Putting caseworkers' offices in the same building as the apartments aims to help people who are especially difficult to keep off the streets — too difficult even for the city-backed Homeless Rental Assistance Program.

There is currently no housing in Salem that takes such an approach.

However, Redwood Crossings will offer that pairing when it opens in northeast Salem next spring. The 35-unit complex at 4107 Fisher Road N.E. will be available to people who make \$13,700 or less per year.

With Sequoia in place, Salem would in the coming years offer more than 100 apartments with social services such as helping tenants access benefits, build budgets and find

employment. Such an immersive project is a particularly effective way to address homelessness, according to authorities.

But Sequoia Crossings remains a paper dream unless it wins state funding.

Salem Reporter obtained last week an application filled out by officials from Salem Housing Authority and the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, which oversees ARCHES.

The 70-page application doesn't include specifics about the building, like floor plans, costs per unit or costs to operate. It says Salem Housing Authority will own the building ARCHES will provide services to tenants.

The application makes the case why Salem should be one of the communities to receive new money available through the Oregon Housing and Community Services Department.

Legislators gave the state agency \$50 million over the next two years for projects that link case management with housing for chronically homeless people. The state housing agency is awarding \$20 million this year.

"This is new work, this is difficult work. We're looking to marry rent assistance and the services side," said agency spokeswoman Ariel Nelson.

According to the Sequoia Crossings application, there are 423 people chronically homeless in the Salem area. Marion and Polk counties combined have the third highest homeless population in the state, behind only Portland and Eugene, according to the application.

Nelson said the state received 29 applications for the money and the winners could be announced by the end of

September.



An unfinished elder care facility that will become Redwood Crossings, at 4107 Fisher Road N.E. (Salem Housing Authority/Submitted to Salem Reporter)

According to Nelson, the state agency and the Oregon Health Authority will help pay tenants' rent and the costs of social services.

Local and national experts agree that building such housing arrangements is an effective approach in helping chronically homeless residents.

Nicole Utz, administrator of Salem Housing Authority, said Sequoia Crossings and Redwood Crossings both aim to serve people who have histories of drug abuse, mental or physical issues, have been evicted and have bad credit.

The city's Homeless Rental Assistance Program does target similar demographics and pairs them with caseworkers, but tenants typically live in private properties scattered around the city. Caseworkers meet tenants for regular check-ins and emergencies.

But some residents need even more contact with workers, Utz said. Sequoia and Redwood Crossings would put workers practically in people's living rooms.

"This is a first-of-its-kind housing model in the Salem area that's going to provide a service for people that are not able to stabilize in (scattered housing)," Utz said.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness said such projects helped lower the number of chronically homeless people across the country by 26% since 2007. That, in turn, takes pressure off shelters, hospitals, jails and prisons.

"It's a model that is backed by a lot of research over a lot of years that shows it successfully moves people off the street and keeps them housed," said Steve Berg, vice president for programs and policy at the D.C.-based organization.

Berg said the approach works best when it specifically finds tenants who have the most need.

"When it's targeted toward people with the most severe disabilities, who have been on the streets the longest, it really works when nothing else really works. It often saves money for the community by reducing the costs of healthcare and the amount of time people spend in jail and homeless shelters," he said.

Berg said the scattered sites like HRAP is also very effective. He said more communities tend to go that route because it's easier than building entirely new structures, like Sequoia Crossings would be.

"It's just easier to start up. You don't have to build anything. You just have to find landlords to start everything from," he said. "It's harder to do (a building like Sequoia Crossings) because you have to raise the funds, build the building."

In July, Salem Reporter reported that many landlords who don't participate in HRAP view it's too risky to offer their properties to tenants who are chronically homeless.

Have a tip? Contact reporter Troy Brynelson at 503-575-9930, troy@salemreporter.com or @TroyWB.



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