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Multnomah County Commissioner, District 3

Re: Comments on Non-Agenda Item for the Board Briefing session on January 23, 2024

This past week our community experienced a severe weather event that resulted in the opening of emergency severe weather shelters to provide warm places for people. I want to extend my great appreciation to the employees and the neighborhood residents who stepped up to fulfill staffing needs at various shelters across the county. The opening of shelters no doubt saved lives and volunteers made those possible.

We owe it to our community and to the volunteers who help us to ensure our shelter strategy is sustainable. Both in our everyday needs and on our worst weather days of the year, providing shelter is foundational to the County's role during emergencies and we owe it to the community and our volunteers to honor their role by fulfilling ours.

To be clear, the decision to close the emergency shelters in the midst of an ongoing severe weather event was the wrong call. Even while County buildings remained closed for regular work, shelters were cancelled and vulnerable residents were sent away. I have serious doubts about the decision-making that contributed to this critical and ill-timed mistake and it is important to know who and how that decision was made.

More than anything the County must remain adaptive to changing situations in emergencies. The over reliance on policy and implementation guidelines is not an excuse for the decision to close the emergency shelters. In fact, the County's own website says that the Chief Operating Officer has flexibility in decision-making. It does not appear that such considerations for the increased risk of freezing rain and accumulated ice across the county last week we factored.

Instead, if it was a staffing concern that led to the closure of the emergency shelters the County should not have pointed to weather thresholds as the reason for closure. I do not think our community has a chance to solve problems facing us if we aren't truthful and transparent about the challenges we face. Multnomah County employees filled the majority of the shelter staffing positions and we are grateful for that. If staffing fatigue and lack of staff was the decision-driving factor, then clarity around that issue could have allowed the Emergency Operations Center to put more urgent calls out to other partners to increase their staffing assistance.

The City and County jointly paid for a review by an outside consultant on emergency shelter operations and how to improve upon them after 2022. I expect the County Board to be briefed on that report and informed about how the County has chosen to implement any recommendations from that report. I also request that the County have a public conversation and review of the actions and decisions made as a means to help rebuild public confidence in our response system.

But for the ill-timed decision to close shelters too early, the mobilization of the County and the broader community was incredibly successful and directly resulted in providing a safer situation for over 1,200 vulnerable people in our community. It is that record of accomplishment that should be leading our discussions this week, but we must face the reality that the public trust in our ability to provide shelter during a sustained event diminished over the last week.