

# 2019 State of the County Address

**Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury**  
**Prepared Remarks**  
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**Contact: Julie Sullivan Springhetti, [julie.sullivan-springhetti@multco.us](mailto:julie.sullivan-springhetti@multco.us), 503-709-9858**

Good afternoon, I'm Deborah Kafoury, your Multnomah County Chair. I am honored to be here with so many of you who care deeply about our community.

I want to start our time together with a land acknowledgment.

Jillene Joseph, a member of the Gros Ventre people and executive director of the Native Wellness Institute is a passionate advocate and a strong leader. Jillene has contributed to my own understanding of the place I call home and of our shared history.

I am honored to welcome Jillene up to provide today's land acknowledgement.

Thank you Jillene for sharing that with us today.

I also want to acknowledge the City Club of Portland, and its leader, Julia Meier. The City Club continues to evolve under Julia's leadership, as it well should. Because standing still is not an option if we want our values to have meaning and not merely remain aspirational. As easy as it sounds, we know it takes bold leadership. Thank you, Julia.

Every spring, we get this opportunity to come together, take stock of the work of 6,000 amazing County employees and answer the question my kids and -- maybe even some of my neighbors -- ask:

Mom, what exactly does the County do?

Where to begin? Seriously.

Downtown? Where a hot job market and cranes crowding our skies have made it impossible for seniors to afford their apartments?

Or the Moda Center, where 19,000 people were exposed to measles during a single night?

Or East County, where a third grader takes home meals for their whole family from a SUN school pantry?

What the County does, every day, is face the most complex and confounding problems of our time, the issues that chew people up. Leave people behind. And have no easy solutions.

These problems are not necessarily unique to Multnomah County, the Portland area, or any other region in the United States.

But what's different about our issues, and why I'm optimistic, is the way that we're approaching them - guided by our values, our lived experiences, and tireless dedication to do what's right.

The very first Board of County Commissioners met not far from here. And as they set about building roads and infrastructure for this rough and tumble, relentlessly changing, impossibly beautiful place, one day they were presented with a man in need. A neighbor. He was homeless and suffering from severe mental illness. He had no one to care for him and no place to go.

So 164 years ago this month, in April of 1855, the Multnomah County Commissioners paid for his lodging and care. Sixty three cents a day.

That is our history, that is our mission, and that is why I am here:

To stand at the intersection of service and justice and face seemingly impossible crises head on.

Right now we are facing a crisis that affects everyone on the planet: Climate change.

In the time I've served on the Multnomah County board, we've had record-breaking wildfires that have threatened our property. Air quality that threatens our health. And early snowmelt that threatens our water resources.

Scientists tell us we have 12 years to dramatically cut emissions before the worst impacts of climate change are locked in.

My daughter, Anna, just turned 13. And I can tell you, those years passed in a flash.

The Trump Administration wants us to believe that there is either nothing to worry about, or nothing we can do. Not true. And, not true.

We can do something about climate change and we have.

We adopted the Climate Action Plan with the city of Portland so that while carbon emissions in Oregon have gone up more than 10 percent since 1990, in Multnomah County, despite all the growth we've had, emissions have gone down 21 percent.

Last April, we committed to 100 percent renewable energy by 2050. And in the year since, we cut emissions from the County fleet and County buildings by 57 percent.

We passed rules to reduce diesel pollution on all County and City construction sites. We adopted a wood smoke ordinance that has been shown to actually change behavior and improve our air quality — while protecting cultural practices such as sweat lodge ceremonies. We championed Cleaner Air Oregon, the first pollution limits in Oregon based on the health of the people who live near polluters.

And because climate change so gravely threatens our children's future, last month, this County became the first government in the nation to stand with the young people suing state and federal governments - demanding real action on climate change.

At the press conference last month, as I listened to Kelsey Juliana, the young woman who has spent half her life on these court cases, I felt our solemn duty to do all we can to tackle our biggest challenges.

Kelsey said, "The truest form of bravery is recognizing this is the time, now more than ever, to act."

I want to recognize all of the young people here today — to say thank you. Thank you for caring, and please know we stand with your generation in these efforts.

Let me introduce to you who else is standing in your corner:

Commissioner Sharon Meieran, our doctor/slash/ lawyer/slash commissioner, who has worked to champion physical and mental well being in every one of her fields.

Our newest Board member: Commissioner Susheela Jayapal, who is leading our efforts to support refugee and immigrant communities, and helping us tackle the ongoing issue of gentrification and displacement.

Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson who is leading our efforts to build an Earthquake Ready Burnside bridge. She's also organizing the Preschool for All task force to help bring education opportunities to children at one of the most crucial times in their lives.

And our East County champion, Commissioner Lori Stegmann, who is devoted to improving service delivery, housing stability and economic mobility in those neighborhoods. She's also leading our Census 2020 efforts to ensure that every one of us counts.

This is a remarkable board. We bring together diverse backgrounds, educations, and perspectives, and that creates better policy.

Just like climate change, we're facing the opioid epidemic head on. A year ago this week, we hosted a first-of-its kind opioid summit uniting public safety, healthcare, nonprofit and public health experts with treatment providers, insurers and first responders.

For so long, pharmaceutical companies wanted us to believe the opioid crisis was a natural disaster. But we know this is a human-made disaster driven by corporate profits and a criminal enterprise that takes advantage of human vulnerability. We know that opioid dependence leads to job loss, high healthcare costs, homelessness and, all too often, death.

To give you a sense of how many people in our community have an active substance use disorder: Central City Concern estimates about 2,500 people a year who need treatment show up at Hooper Detox.

Another 1,000 people show up in emergency departments after they overdose.

And more than 10,000 people who need treatment are booked into the Multnomah County jail every year. That's an average of 27 people a day.

But we are taking action. First, we went upstream, changing our prescribing guidelines for our community health systems and for our own clinics. And I'm proud to say that Multnomah County dentists have cut opioid prescriptions by 80 percent.

We've partnered with Sheriff Mike Reese and District Attorney Rod Underhill to support jail diversion and alternative sentences so that people charged with low-level drug crimes can access treatment, and have those charges reduced or eliminated. We want people on the path to recovery, not to jail.

We desperately need more state and federal money to get more people into treatment. But while we keep hammering away in Salem and in Washington D.C., we also keep acting locally.

We're leading a regional partnership with Metro, TriMet, Downtown Clean and Safe and the City of Portland to get used syringes out of our parks and off our streets by providing safe, convenient syringe disposal throughout the community.

And, we're holding Big Pharma accountable. We've filed suit against the pharmaceutical companies to recover some of the terrible costs of this epidemic.

Because we have learned that our legal strategies make a difference.

Just last month, under County Attorney Jenny Madkour, we stopped the Trump Administration from unlawfully pulling money from effective and evidence-based Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs and spending it on unproven, abstinence-only programs.

This win guarantees that our Health Department and community partners can provide young people in Multnomah County with the health education and skill building they need to reach their life goals. Because our students deserve to be taught reproductive health based on science, not wishful thinking.

From direct clinical services and health education, to policy, advocacy and enforcement, the Health Department's work is vital to Multnomah County's core mission. So I want to thank Health leaders Vanetta Abdellatiff, Wendy Lear, and our fabulous new Health Department Director, Dr. Patricia Charles-Heathers.

Along with hundreds of other employees, they have been crammed into an undersized, technically obsolete 1923 department store. What always worried me was that if we ever had a public health emergency, the command post to respond was housed on the 10th floor of that seismically-challenged building.

For more than a decade, we wanted out of there. But we had nowhere to go, and no money to get there.

But with a vision, partnerships with the city and Prosper Portland, and a lot of hard work, on March 20, we opened an elegant, safe and energy-efficient building designed, constructed and furnished for a 21st century workforce.

The fabulous new 9-story Gladys McCoy Health Department Headquarters in Old Town also was completed on time and on budget.

With that same grit, we're building a new, seismically strong 17-story Central Courthouse at the west end of the Hawthorne Bridge. And it is an absolute thrill to see that project, blazing with light as crews work 24-7.

These are once in a life-time projects. Between the Health Headquarters, the Central Courthouse and -- this will always be my baby -- the Sellwood Bridge, we've invested more than \$750 million in new construction in this community, creating beacons of health, safety and justice, but also thousands of family-wage jobs.

Because, at Multnomah County, it's not just what we're building, it's how we're building.

Over the last year, labor unions, subcontractors and day laborers brought concerns to me about workers on construction sites being shorted in their pay. Sometimes their jobs weren't properly classified or their time sheets not properly kept. And it happens across the industry, on private and public projects. Wage theft is a little-discussed issue that hurts our community by underpaying workers and undercutting honest contractors.

Today, I am announcing a new Fair Pay initiative to prevent wage theft on County construction sites. We will provide technical assistance to contractors so they can properly classify and pay their workers, make sure workers know their rights, and train volunteers to help us verify our certified payroll. And I'm excited that we are working together to ensure everyone gets full and fair pay for their work.

I know that our development projects can make a big difference in people's lives. We are committed to knocking down barriers to job opportunities in the trades and holding ourselves accountable to doing it.

We used labor agreements on both the Health Headquarters and the Courthouse to partner with contractors, trade unions, pre-apprenticeship organizations and equity stakeholders to create unprecedented job opportunities for women and minorities.

The result: Apprentices worked 31 percent of the total hours on the Health Headquarters, and 28 percent of the contractors or subcontractors were women, minority, emerging or disabled veteran-owned businesses.

I am proud that these public projects are changing the Portland skyline, but I am most proud that they are changing lives.

I'd like to introduce Heather Mayther-Perez and Shawn Story who will tell you what working on our Central Courthouse has meant for them.

[Multnomah County Central Courthouse Project Video](#)

I think both Shawn and Heather are here with us today. Please stand.

## Part II:

On January 2, like 6,000 other County employees, I opened my laptop and found a new little W on my computer screen.

This modest icon was the signal that we had successfully moved all the human resources and finance functions of our \$2 billion organization out of the 1990s and into the cloud.

This effort, called Multco Align, has modernized our systems — from payroll to purchasing. To give you an example, every year, the County issues more than 1,000 contracts worth more than \$260 million. Before this change, employees managed these contracts by hand, using the phone, email, and yes, sticky notes, to track, edit and get approvals.

Multco Align automates, streamlines and strengthens these systems. Now, a business can sign up with us as a supplier. And we can easily find them, hire them, and more effectively manage them, reminding them to update insurance documents or submit progress reports.

So I want to thank our Chief Operating Officer, Marissa Madrigal, and Bob Leek, (Interim) Director of County Assets, Chief Financial Officer Mark Campbell, Budget Director Mike Jaspin and Chief Human Resources Officer Travis Graves for their leadership in transforming our ability to serve the community.

Through their excellent management of our finances, this year, we once again earned the highest possible bond rating from S & P Global Ratings and Moody's.

We also received the “best audit you can get” from our external auditor Moss Adams. And, we picked up an Excellence in Financial Reporting award from the Government Finance Officers' Association for the 34th straight year. That's a commitment to excellence.

We owe so much to Chief Financial Officer Mark Campbell. He is retiring May 1, 30 years to the day he started, and I want to publicly thank him for his conservative approach. Conservative approach, never thought you'd hear me say that, did you?

But Mark's calm demeanor and conservative approach always gave me confidence that the county would stay on solid financial ground.

And I want to welcome a man who has been working side by side with Mark for years: our new CFO, Eric Arellano.

Turning a ship as large and complex as Multnomah County is a massive undertaking. But we must tackle these long-overdue issues — for the benefit of this community and the health and sustainability of this organization.

We have one of the busiest and best library systems in the country. But the last time we invested in library spaces was in the late 1990s, when our community was day-dreaming about a MAX line to the airport. Two years ago, the Board approved a vision to modernize our library spaces and the library staff have been doing that analysis, looking at sites and talking to potential partners. I am looking forward - later this year - to moving that plan forward.

Our technological and physical infrastructure matters.

But our people matter more. Our hiring and promotion practices matter. Our training and accountability for our managers matter. Our employee experience matters.

And that's what Workforce Equity is all about.

When people come to the County for services, they expect and deserve compassionate, equitable treatment, and results — especially when they are in crisis.

The only way we can meet those expectations is through the dedication of our County employees. To do that, our employees must also experience respect, support, compassion and inclusion where they work.

In the last year, County employees shared painful, personal stories of the racism and discrimination they have faced on the job. Our own data showed clear disparities in promotions and terminations.

Multnomah County has worked hard over the last decade to attract and retain a workforce that looks like the community we serve. But, we hadn't addressed the underlying institutional racism and inequities on which this organization — and our entire nation — were built.

Systems designed by white people to benefit white people — like me.

It's been humbling. It's been necessary — to listen, to learn from County employees and to leverage my position and privilege to champion this initiative and support their leadership.

I want to take just a moment to publicly thank the Employee Resource Groups at Multnomah County.

We rooted our Workforce Equity Initiative in the experiences of our employees of color, our managers of color, immigrants and refugees, employees with disabilities, LGBTQ employees, families, veterans, and older adults.

We hired national consultants and adopted recommendations, for systemic and structural change. We asked our employees to prioritize those recommendations.

And as a result: we are creating an independent unit to manage discrimination complaints. We are building a new training, coaching and evaluation structure for our 800 managers.

And, we are leading with race.

Poverty, homelessness, substance use disorders and justice involvement affect many marginalized groups, but race is the magnifying effect across all areas.

Leading with race allows us to understand the greatest challenges and to focus on where we can make the biggest difference.

We are transforming this organization and that helps transform this community. As we work to improve our internal structures, practices and policies, we are also continuing our efforts to adapt our services to meet the needs of our diverse and changing community.

This year, our County Human Services team, under Director Peggy Brey, launched Data Mart, which allowed us to identify people who, because of age or a physical, intellectual or developmental disability, need help in an emergency. Our team created a map of more than 120,000 people with case management and contact information.

So when the water main broke in Northeast Portland last month, we were able to reach 197 impacted clients. And during the Cully auto salvage yard fire, we reached 2,500 people to help them evacuate and offer them services.

Having innovative and equity-driven initiatives is important. But building a program from the ground up that is creative, culturally fluent and leading with race - that is a game changer.

And nowhere is that more obvious than the Diane Wade House.

Like almost every other community in our country, Multnomah County and its voters were caught up in the mass incarceration frenzy of the last several decades. Tens of thousands of people were jailed at what turned out to be a not-so-effective strategy and one that came at a devastating cost to our community and to our county budget.

The County has been working for years to turn the tide. And we've done a lot, cutting our use of jail beds 27 percent in the last decade. Recently, we received funding from the MacArthur Foundation to go even further. Because we all know that jail is the most expensive and least effective place to house someone with an untreated mental health or substance use disorder.

We are still jailing too many people whose behavior is driven by unmet behavioral health needs and we are still jailing too many people of color. African Americans make up just six percent of this community but 20 percent of our jail population. That cannot continue.

If we want to change our outcomes, we have to change the way we do this work - how we design it, how we lead it, how we support it.

So we are trying something new — on Wednesday, we opened an Afro-Centric transitional housing program for adult women involved in the criminal justice system. The Diane Wade House was created by Black women, for Black women.

These are all women whose personal journeys show others that a different future is possible. Women like LaToya Manlove, a Bridges to Change staff member working at the Diane Wade House. Her life story gives us all hope.

[The Diane Wade House](#)

## Part III

Like every member of this Board, I am a mother and as much as I sometimes complain about them, Alexander, Jacob and Anna are my heart and my life's work. So I will never accept that children are growing up in our community without a place to call home.

When I learned families who lost their homes in the Recession were living in cars, I pushed to open a winter shelter for families. When I saw kids sitting outside that shelter doing their homework in the freezing rain waiting for the doors to open at night, I directed staff to open a 24-hour shelter for families.

But the truth is, those families needed more than living in a large room with 120 bunks. They needed their personal space. Every family does.

Especially when the Portland housing market is keeping families in shelters longer than ever. The market here is so tight that families are stuck in shelter even when they have a housing subsidy, even when they're working full-time jobs.

So I am thrilled to announce that by this summer we will have transformed our year-round family shelter system into one where every family has the dignity of their own space.

By June, in partnership with Human Solutions, we will have personal spaces for 40 families at Lilac Meadows, a master-leased motel that will be modified to provide a full range of support services.

In addition, we have been working with Brandi Tuck and Portland Homeless Family Solutions to support their new project in Lents providing 25 families personal living space as they transition into permanent housing.

Shelters keep people safe. But they don't end homelessness. Permanent housing ends homelessness.

So we're in the midst of re-visioning our shelter system so people get what they need to get into permanent housing and stay there.

This summer, we'll open a shelter on Foster Road that will include not just beds, a kitchen and laundry, but also classrooms, computers and case managers.

We've partnered with the business community to make this happen downtown as well, at the soon-to-open Navigation Center. I want to thank that community, particularly Columbia Sportswear CEO Tim Boyle for his generous donation.

But let's be honest - opening a shelter isn't easy. In fact, it can be fraught - especially for some of the neighbors. So I want to thank community members who welcomed our shelter on 122nd -- with a party. Their compassion brought businesses, the families next door and the men at the Wy'east shelter together to eat, play games and build community.

Caleb Coder, John Haines and Sven Gatchev, thank you for seeing that people without housing are our neighbors. We don't have to wait for them to become housed to treat them that way.

And I am proud and grateful to work with Marc Jolin, Mayor Ted Wheeler, Mayor Shane Bemis, Home Forward, and all our partners in A Home for Everyone on these efforts.

We came together in a crisis but that crisis isn't over. EcoNorthwest recently reported that there are at least 56,000 households in our region who spend more than half of their income on rent. That's a razor's edge that can turn a single missed paycheck or illness into catastrophe.

So while we seek long-term fixes, we are constantly pivoting to keep people in their homes. Like the seniors on fixed incomes who lived in apartments at the Lincoln Hotel downtown. They lived there for years, thinking it was the last home they'd ever have — until their building sold last month. But with help from CareOregon, we were able to pool \$100,000 to help residents relocate without ever going into shelter or onto the street.

Because once someone loses their home, it becomes much, much harder to find another home, to stay healthy, and even to stay alive.

Last December, on the longest and darkest night of the year, the Winter Solstice, I walked with about 70 other people from St. Mark's Lutheran Church on Powell to our planned shelter on Foster Road.

It was bitter cold. We lit candles and, as the bell tolled, we listened to the names of those who had died on the streets. When the list ended, people started calling out the names of others who had been lost. There were so many names.

The only way we're going to save lives in this community and end homelessness is with housing. That doesn't mean it's the only thing we have to do for people in a housing crisis. But it is the most important thing we have to do.

With the city of Portland, we've committed to creating 2,000 new supportive housing units. These are homes that come with mental health and addiction services. And so far, we have more than 600 of those new homes up or in the pipeline. Because some people need more than just a key to the front door to end their homelessness.

There is one major piece that has eluded us for years. We've had almost no options for people downtown experiencing mental health issues. When people left the Unity Center, or lost their housing, the only choices were the least effective and most expensive ones imaginable: the emergency room or more often, our county jail.

That is, until Monday. On Monday, I am delighted to say, Multnomah County purchased what was known as the Bushong building downtown that will become a safe haven for people experiencing mental health challenges on our streets.

Our vision is to create a safe place where people can come inside, get a peaceful night's rest, a place to wash their clothes and, most importantly, support from a community of people who know exactly what they're going through because they've been there, too.

Some people might need to stay just a few hours, some might need a few weeks. But they will get the kind of help we have never before been able to offer.

And that is a pretty awesome thing.

Many days, it can feel like we're all trapped in a 24-hour news cycle nightmare.

Mass shootings, despair on the border, another catastrophic flood, and a President telling us that we can't, or don't need, to solve these problems.

It's tempting to turn on each other, instead of coming together.

But I've seen the power of our community non-profits and business partners collaborating. I've seen what six cities and the county can accomplish when we cooperate. And I would ask each of you to join with me in believing that together we can create a more equitable, just and healthy community.

I know a better world is possible because every day, I watch 6,000 County employees face the most complex and serious problems of our time with courage, creativity and heart. And I want to thank every single one of you for that. It is an honor to serve with you.

Thank you

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