

Commissioner Susheela Jayapal's Budget 2022 Remarks

I can't help but look back a year and remember that at this time last year we really had very little idea of what lay ahead. We didn't know how long the pandemic would last, we didn't know how many lives it ultimately and tragically would take, and we didn't know the full extent of the impact it would have on the residents of Multnomah County. We didn't know how the racial justice movement that sprang up after George Floyd's murder would unfold. We didn't know which ballot measures would pass in November; and we didn't know who would be sworn in as president in January of 2021.

It seems fitting that the unprecedented year behind us has led to an unprecedented budget for the year ahead of us.

We've moved from planning for a deficit to planning for a substantial infusion of federal funds as well as for the implementation of the three ballot measures passed by voters last November.

I want to express my deep gratitude to everyone who has worked so hard through all the twists and turns, all while also responding to the every day challenges of COVID, to put together this budget: the Chair and her office, and especially Kim Melton, who has worn so many hats and juggled so many balls over the past year; Christian Elkin and her whole team at the budget office; and all the department directors and their teams.

It represents an organization and values that I am proud to be part of. It not only provides a roadmap for our community's COVID recovery, but also lays the foundation for a better future -- by building systems, programs, and partnerships that move us toward the goal of a more just and more equitable Multnomah County.

Throughout the course of the pandemic, COVID has exposed not only the gaping holes in our safety net, but all of the ways in which Black, Indigenous and other people of color are harmed by the entrenched inequities in our systems. And the pandemic didn't just expose those gaps, but tore them even wider, in ways that our BIPOC communities will be dealing with for decades.

Our work for the years ahead is to not only fill those gaps, and repair harm, but to put our most impacted communities on a firmer footing than they were before. To learn from the lessons of the pandemic, and create the systems that ensure that we don't meet the next crisis from the same position in which we met this one.

I believe this budget puts us on that path. Apart from the substantive areas of work in which it makes new and improved investments, I think the most important component is the degree to which it invests in the community partnerships that we will need to nurture in order to ensure that we are working with -- not for, not on, but with, -- our communities to co-create the systems that meet their needs.

In a budget this size and with so many services, it's difficult to focus on just a few things, but there are some areas that I'd like to highlight.

In the public safety realm, I'd like to call out the significant new investments in our domestic violence and gun violence programming. We know that the incidence of both forms of violence has increased dramatically over the past year, and these investments will help us respond in a holistic way. I'm especially appreciative of the Board's support for my amendment to fund the planning stage of a demonstration project to create hyper-local, place-based community coalitions to respond to gun violence. This builds on work I have already begun in the Cully neighborhoods, and will build on and complement our other investments, and I look forward to working with the health department to move that project forward.

Among the communities hit hardest by COVID were our immigrant and refugee communities. These are diverse, vibrant, and resilient communities; but their very diversity can make the barriers some of them face invisible. Those barriers include language; mistrust of government rooted in their past experiences; and cultural and social isolation. When COVID hit, it was and continues to be challenging to establish and maintain relationships and to serve each community in a focused, culturally specific way. I'd like to thank the chair for including in her proposed budget a study I proposed, to examine gaps in services, and propose structural changes that would enhance those relationships.

There's also solid evidence that the earliest days of life have long-lasting impact on the well-being of children; that poverty is among the social determinants of health; and that income is the remedy to poverty. For all those reasons, I am thrilled about our investment in the Mother's Trust Baby Bonds program. It is an example of the bold, innovative approaches we must continue to implement.

COVID and the wildfires showed us -- if we needed further proof -- that environmental health is public health. We take for granted the air we breathe -- until it chokes us. Those days that we spent trapped indoors because we couldn't breathe the air outside gave us a taste of how many county residents -- elders, children, people with asthma and other underlying pulmonary conditions -- experience our air. Science told us that poor air quality can be a contributing factor to contracting the virus and exacerbating symptoms. So I'm really pleased that with the adoption of the amendment I proposed, jointly with Commissioner Vega Pederson, that we will be able to expand our capacity to educate residents about the impacts of wood smoke, and to build on our existing regulatory scheme.

And finally, our investment in addressing our homelessness crisis.

There has been a robust public conversation about whether, in this first year of implementation of the Metro Supportive Housing Services measure, we're investing enough in emergency shelter relative to permanent housing.

That is always going to be a balancing act, and there's never going to be a bright line answer; but I believe this plan strikes an appropriate balance for where we are right now. The balance recognizes that the purpose of the measure was to fund permanent housing solutions, while also recognizing that in the early years, while we're ramping up the housing placements, some additional investment in shelter capacity is appropriate.

That being said, COVID **has** changed the landscape of homelessness, and the ways in which people are experiencing it. As we move through the next year, it makes sense to use some of our one-time-only American Rescue Plan funding to address these conditions: so I appreciate the allocation of ARP resources to the continuation of the three outdoor camps created last year as well as to medical services and survival supplies; and I appreciate the Board's support of my amendment to expand culturally specific peer outreach services and hygiene services to meet the immediate needs of those who are on the streets, to complement the City's plan to create additional shelter.

And it's going to be critical that we continue to adapt to changing circumstances. While the eviction moratorium has staved off an eviction crisis, that still looms ahead of us. I think additional, massive investments in federal rent assistance are the best solution; but if that doesn't materialize, we are going to have to grapple with the reality of thousands more families losing their homes.

It's also going to be critical, as we move forward with implementation of the plan, that we hold ourselves accountable to the outcomes projected in the Joint Office budget; and that we are more transparent and responsive to the public and among ourselves about the progress we are or are not making. The data systems contemplated in the budget will help; but we also need to have a serious and open conversation about the governance structure of A Home for Everyone and the Joint Office, and I appreciate the fact that that is already in process.

One of the things that has become clearer than ever before is the extent to which we rely on our community-based organizations to do our work. Without them, we could not have delivered tens of millions of rent assistance into the community, we could not have distributed food boxes or business relief, we could not have helped families whose children were no longer in school, we could not have stood up new shelters -- we simply could not have done our work. Those organizations and their employees have been stretched beyond capacity, all while dealing with the pandemic themselves. And we know that for too long, they have done this work without the resources they need to pay all their employees a living wage. This isn't just a Multnomah County issue; it's one that all governments, and private funders, have to reckon with. A system in which the people who do the work too often also need the services we provide; and in which those people are disproportionately people of color, is neither equitable nor sustainable. I am glad that the Joint Office budget includes an investment in addressing pay equity; it's a start on tackling this problem, but there is a great deal more we need to do. I appreciate the Chair's commitment to creating a work group to develop a comprehensive approach to this issue. Our community partners are among our most significant assets; but building those relationships into true partnerships is also one of the most significant structural issues we face.

In closing: Chair, I want to thank you and your office for your leadership over the past year. I can only imagine the toll it has taken on all of you, to respond 24/7 to a once in a generation pandemic, a movement for racial justice, and conditions that have changed minute by minute and day by day.

I'd like to thank each of my colleagues; I appreciate your continued collaboration and am always appreciative of the degree to which we share common values.

I'd like to thank my staff, Sara Ryan; Angela Donley; and Monique Smiley, for all their hard work over the course of this challenging year. I appreciate each of you; and it's a pleasure to continue to learn and grow with you.

And finally. None of this would be possible -- none of the essential work that's laid out in this budget -- without Multnomah County's six thousand or so employees. I cannot adequately express my gratitude to you. You have continued to serve, you have adapted, you have shown up, all while dealing with the pandemic yourselves. You **are** Multnomah County, and I feel honored to serve with you. Thank you.