

## OVERVIEW OF “LOW-BARRIER” SHELTER

“Low-barrier shelter” is an emerging homeless shelter model defined as *shelter that is operated with few barriers for entry*. As a service model, low-barrier shelters are client-based, not agency-based, and focus predominantly on the needs of homeless people as they present rather than focusing on agency threshold standards that homeless people have to meet before gaining access to a bed for the night.

**Shelter for the “Hard to House”** Low-barrier shelter is designed to serve the “*hardest to house*” populations who typically have difficulty getting in to more conventional shelters (however others also welcome). These populations include people with mental health issues, severe social or behavior problems; drug or alcohol addictions; people that have a criminal past or have been released from jail, registered sex offenders, transgender people who face discrimination and abuse in other shelters, youth (17 and younger) who have limited shelter access due to the mandatory reporting aspects of the Becca Laws; and transition-aged youth (ages 18 - 25) who often shun conventional shelters. Stringent entry requirements and highly structured shelter rules and regulations found in other emergency shelters may represent barriers or obstacles to these sub-populations of homeless (see list of sample rules below).

**Pros & Cons** Supporters of “low-barrier shelter” cite the importance of getting people off the streets and into *shelter first*, dealing with behavioral issues second. Locally, advocates point to the low occupancy rates of conventional shelters in spite of significant numbers of people who remain unsheltered (*237 unsheltered people found during the 2013 Homeless Census*). Concerns regarding “low-barrier shelter” stem from fears that “low-barrier” may create “low-safety” standards, potentially endangering either residents, staff, volunteers or neighbors.

**Range of Barriers to Shelter** While there are few “low-barrier shelters” in existence, there are shelters that operate with “lower barriers”, meaning they offer a lower threshold of entry requirements. The graphic below that presents the range of local homeless shelters along a continuum of the barrier level. Following is a list of shelter entry rules that determine the level of barrier:

- Legal name and/or photo id required?
- Formal intake process?
- Required referral from other agency?
- Arrival by a specific time?
- Limits on personal possessions?
- Limits on pets?
- Requirement to participate in a specific program?
- Segregated by demographic characteristics? i.e. youth, gender, families, domestic violence victims etc...
- Bans on people with a criminal history (all offenses or just violent offenses)?
- Bans on convicted sex offenders?

For more information: M. Anna Schlecht, Olympia Housing Program Manager [aschlech@ci.olympia.wa.us](mailto:aschlech@ci.olympia.wa.us)