

Homeless

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director, said these challenges have disproportionately impacted women of color. She also said a big misconception about families experiencing homelessness is that they are not working or not working hard enough.

Many of the women they serve are working two or three jobs, sometimes without having a car.

“Housing has just gotten so expensive,” Lemman said. “It’s just gotten so out of reach. Vouchers for assistance are harder and harder to come by. There’s just not enough affordable housing.”

Balancing homelessness and health issues

Mikesell said her health declined in 2014, around the same time she first became homeless.

She said she was forced to move out of her apartment after it flooded, exposing a mold problem, while working as a house director for a fraternity at a university in Corvallis. She lost her position with the school and her home.

Mikesell said she developed upper-respiratory problems from breathing in the mold — an added health challenge to her struggle with type 2 diabetes, a condition first diagnosed in 1998.

On her first night of living unsheltered, she parked her car in the parking lot of the Albany Public Library but was awoken by a police officer who told her it was illegal to park there.

“I thought I was so on top of it the first time I was going to be homeless. I’d done the research. I was picturing car camping and it absolutely did not turn out that way at all,” she said. “It was survival.”

Mikesell grew up in the Bend area and moved to Salem in 2002 to attend Corban University where she studied psychology. Since then, Mikesell has worked in what she describes as mostly “low-income” jobs.

Her health took another hit in May 2020, when she started feeling lethargic and weak.

“That was right about the time when my whole body said, ‘I quit,’” she said. “I didn’t have the energy to cook properly, so I just ate junk and took my meds.”

Mikesell began having trouble staying awake throughout the day. It affected her energy, as well as her eating habits.

“If you get worn down as a diabetic, it’s hard to have the stamina to be able to cook well for yourself,” she said. “You just grab something to eat.”

But Mikesell’s part-time job as a military lease assistant with the Oregon Military Department became affected by the pandemic in December. And around the same time, the owner of the home she



Cindel Mikesell, 42, on her bed at Safe Sleep on Wednesday, March 9, 2022 in Salem, Ore. Mikesell has faced homelessness on multiple occasions while working to manage health issues, including type 2 Diabetes. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

lived in asked Mikesell to make other living arrangements.

That’s when Mikesell realized she didn’t have the income to get a place of her own.

She and her cat, Natty, moved into SafeSleep United in March 2021. She said she learned about the shelter through WorkSource Oregon, where she was also connected with a grant-based job doing data entry for the Santiam Hospital in Stayton during the pandemic.

“They’ve been really kind to me. They’re trying to help me find a place to live,” she said of SafeSleep. “And they’re awesome because I have food allergies and they make sure I have food like everybody else has food at dinner time.”

Mikesell said her health improved significantly when she began receiving assistance from a team of doctors through the Oregon Health Plan — including a dietician, medication manager and physical therapist — to help manage and prescribe medications for diabetes.

Mikesell now works the graveyard shift as a residential site assistant at Redwood Crossings, through Salem Housing Authority. She’s started putting money into a savings account and says she carefully budgets all expenses.

Things have started looking up for Mikesell in recent months. In April, she moved into a tiny home as part of a pilot program established by a private landowner in South Salem interested in housing unsheltered individuals.

More recently, Mikesell said, she’s learned how to cook diabetic-friendly and gluten-free meals and has cut sugar from her diet altogether. And with a new kitchen in her micro-shelter and the owner’s garden at her disposal, Mikesell said she’s excited to have the freedom to make whatever she wants.

“I’d love to cook spaghetti,” she said, laughing.

Being homeless is a “balancing game,” Mikesell said. “It’s like if they married puzzles and Jenga together.”

Mikesell says society tends to separate homeless people from everyone else, not acknowledging how close many people are to the edge.

“Because we don’t know any better and because it’s something we do as a society, we clump. Homeless people go here. We compartmentalize,” she said.

There are resources — but more are needed

Advocates say some of the solutions to ending homelessness are already in the community, but there needs to be more of them.

Simonka Place is one of the handful of places providing female-specific shelter beds in Salem. They offer 86 beds and typically run at or near capacity.

Kathy Smith, director of Women’s Ministries at Simonka Place, said the shelter stopped doing intakes during the pandemic and reserve certain beds for

their long-term recovery program and families.

“In the last three years, we’ve averaged turning away 1,285 women and 616 children,” she said. “That’s really when we started counting. It was three years ago that those numbers started skyrocketing.”

Simonka Place has family rooms complete with toddler beds and cribs, an outdoor playground, a dayroom and dining hall serving three meals a day.

Smith said she sees a dire lack of services.

“The biggest issue that we have encountered in the last two years has been the mental health component,” Smith said. “There’s just not enough support and services for homeless women with mental health issues.”

Smith also pointed to a high level of trauma among their clients. She estimated that about 80% of the women they serve have survived sexual and physical violence. Many still face violence while homeless.

“That’s why women aren’t as visible on the streets, because they are hiding,” Smith said. “They’re finding places where they can’t be seen as a means to protect themselves.”

Despite the record-high numbers and lack of some services, Smith said she sees hope in stories like Diaz’s.

From September to December 2021, 65 women and 19 children in their program found stable housing.

“That is amazing — just think about those 19 children who are no longer homeless, are no longer wondering where they’re going to be sleeping at night,” Smith said. “They wake up in the morning and go to school. Their moms are involved in volunteering in the schools or working there. It’s just a really wonderful thing.”

Salem Safe Parking Network by Church at the Park is another resource for individuals sleeping in their cars. It provides a safe place to park.

John Marshall, who manages the program, said they currently have six sites that provide fewer than a dozen parking spots each.

In late March, Marshall said, they had 304 households on their waiting list. He said about half of those have a woman listed as the “head of household” on the entries.

Work continues to install micro shelter villages in every ward in the city. Community donations have funded more than 150 shelters, but a proposed site near downtown is stalled due to legal push-back from neighbors and the City Council has struggled to find additional locations.

The waiting list for the micro shelters has more than 400 people on it.

Coming next week: How Oregon youths are caught in cycle of homelessness

DA

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and wellbeing of the community. She says her decision to run again for the county’s top attorney position is more than a desire to do her job — it’s an obligation.

“If not me, then who?” she said. “I am the person who knows how to do this job and I’m not going to walk away from it now when things are hard.”

Clarkson graduated from Willamette University College of Law in 1999 and has worked with the Marion County District Attorney’s office since 1997. Starting as a law clerk, she later became a line attorney, a senior deputy district attorney and trial team leader for the drug team. But she said her interest in law came from watching the TV show *Law & Order* in high school.

“I really saw those prosecutors working with law enforcement and when I watched that, I thought, I want to do that,” she said. “And what I saw in the public safety system is prosecutors are the only lawyers anywhere ... whose ethical obligation is to seek justice.”

During her time in office, Clarkson said, she’s prioritized tackling violent crimes — including those against children and women — and protecting the most vulnerable community members.

“That is a timeless problem,” she said. “That will always be something that we have to do. And I will always be prioritizing collaborative efforts and the training necessary to do those cases responsibly, and be able to hold those folks accountable.”

She also pointed to the importance of tackling cases unique to the area at this moment in history. Coming out of the pandemic, Clarkson said prosecutors in her office have been buried in cases that are considered low-level offenses including property damage, burglaries, and trespassing.

“What makes a community feel unsafe are those kinds of offenses,” she said. “If I don’t focus on that and I don’t make those a priority for us to prosecute, those little things become big things.”

She pointed to an example of the Multnomah County District Attorney not prosecuting low-level crimes during the protests in Portland.

“That’s not our process here in Marion County,” she said. “I think it’s the main reason why our protest activity was significantly minimized compared to Portland. When folks came here with the in-

tent of committing a crime --- not with the intent of free speech, that should be protected ... I think those folks learned really early on not only will you be arrested, you will be prosecuted.”

Clarkson has been outspoken against multiple orders by Brown, including using her clemency authority to retroactively change prison sentences for approximately 75 individuals statewide serving adult-length sentences for violent crimes that they committed when they were 15, 16, or 17 years old.

In a joint statement last week, Clarkson and Marion County Sheriff Joe Kast voiced their concerns over Brown granting clemency to a Douglas County man convicted of murdering his teenage foster child in 1995. Kyle Hedquist, who was housed at the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, was released into Marion County after citing “community concerns” over returning to a residence in Douglas County.

“This case represents a shocking lack of concern by the Governor’s Office for the safety of our community, disregard for the transparency of any process and apathy toward the normal safety protocols for such an obvious risk,” Clarkson said.

Clarkson says her proudest achievement as an attorney has been earning trust from victims and survivors of crimes, some of whom have maintained relationships with her long after the case is closed. As an elected district attorney, she said she’s proud of the relationships her office has built with social service agencies such as Center for Hope and Safety and Liberty House, as well as the accomplishments of the prosecutors at the district attorney’s office.

“We don’t seek attention. We don’t seek credit. And yet, when I walk down the hall of my office, I see prosecutors at work every day just trying to do the right thing,” she said.

Clarkson has endorsements from multiple law enforcement leaders and district attorneys across the state including Marion County Sheriff Joe Kast, Salem Police Chief Trevor Womack and Polk County District Attorney Aaron Felton. Other local and state leaders including Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum; all Marion County Commissioners and City Councilors Chris Hoy and Tom Anderson have also expressed their support for Clarkson.

Meet Salem attorney Spencer Todd

While it wasn’t his only career track, Todd says he always planned on becoming a lawyer like his parents. Born and

raised in Salem, Todd spent his summers in high school re-building shelves in the “bowels” of the Marion County Courthouse records department.

He graduated from South Salem High School and earned his law degree from Willamette University Law School in 2013. While attending law school, he clerked for his father, Walter Todd, and other area attorneys. He currently lives in downtown Salem with his wife, Kari, who works for Nike.

Todd says the past eight years as a public defender translate well into the District Attorney’s office. He says he brings a one-on-one client mentality to victims to help protect and advocate for them and have important conversations about their cases.

“As a DA, you’re not the victim’s lawyer, but you’re the closest thing to the victim’s lawyer because they’re ... likely only ever going to have you answering their questions.”

When it comes to the role of the lead prosecutor, Todd says he believes in an “in the trenches” approach and says he wants to lead by example.

A district attorney should be in the courtroom, he said. “If I’m asking a first-year to do a shoplifting case, I should also be doing a shoplifting case,” he said.

Similar to Clarkson, Todd says large-scale cases should be prioritized.

“Prison exists for a reason,” he said. “You have to be held accountable for bad crimes at the highest level — for child sex abuse, for murder, for those kinds of things.”

He doesn’t want to ignore low-level crimes, either, because small problems have a way of escalating.

But all cases should be prosecuted in a meaningful way. And the largest problem, Todd says, is the district attorney’s office’s current approach to justice: spending too many resources to send as many people as possible to prison for as long as possible.

“It’s enormously expensive to send someone to prison. And it takes them away from the community ... and it also makes it so that can’t work,” he said. “The longer you are in prison the harder it is for you to get a job when you come back. If you’re a single parent your children go into the foster care system and become a higher risk to engage in criminal conduct, as well.”

Instead, Todd says the district attorney’s office should strive to understand what convictions should result on a case-by-case basis; the office should also seek alternatives to prison sentences, and in-

vest in new and existing social services.

“We as the public want to be safe. We, as the system, need to hold someone accountable, there has to be some level of punishment to stop bad conduct,” Todd says. “But what we really want is that person to never offend again, get sober, get well, get whatever their issue is resolved and be a working, good parent in our society. We’ve got to prosecute with that goal in mind instead of, ‘guy did something really bad, let’s try and send him to prison.’”

Todd also says he believes in equal access to justice; receiving more input from victims to resolve their cases, address their trauma and heal; and giving judges more decision power over plea deals.

“Victims need a better lawyer,” he said. “Good leadership starts with the person at the top doing the hard work and working harder than everybody else at the office and that’s why people should vote for me.”

Todd has garnered endorsements from state and local leaders including State Representative Teresa Alonso-Leon, Salem City Councilor Jackie Leung, Cherris Board Director Ramiro “RJ” Navarro, and former Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski. He has support from multiple first responders and members of the legal community.

Paige Clarkson

- Age: 48.
- Residence: Salem.
- Family: Husband, Jason Van Meter; four children,
- Occupation: Marion County District Attorney
- Previous elected offices: Marion County District Attorney since 2019, first appointed in 2018.
- Campaign contributions: \$111,352.50
- Total for campaign: \$42,513.25

Spencer Todd

- Age: 33.
 - Residence: Salem.
 - Family: Wife, Kari.
 - Occupation: Public defender.
 - Previous elected offices: None.
 - Campaign contributions: \$168,361.21
 - Total for campaign: \$153,773.63
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