

EDITORIAL

TANF cuts set families up for failure

Most people, the vast majority of Portlanders, know little about the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. And that's a good thing, because it's there for the poorest families in our state, those with no other source of income. But people do need to understand TANF if they are to realize what's at stake as lawmakers look at cutting the program to the quick, ultimately reducing some families to homelessness and children to foster care.

To begin with, a parent with a young child is eligible to receive a maximum of \$395 a month. A family of four will max out at \$506. Even with food stamps, which do not

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cover basic hygiene products such as diapers, that falls far short of rent, utilities, transportation and child care, and is a far cry from the free ride it is often labeled.

Nor is it a blank check. It comes with requirements for people to get back into the work force, to get training in basic skills and pursue gainful employment. That comes through the JOBS program – Job Opportunity and Basic Skills. And with that comes child care assistance, so parents of small children can put them in a safe environment while they get training and transition back to the work.

And unlike mainstream unemployment services, JOBS helps people overcome the complex barriers to employment, working with people who have been turned down time and again for prison records, addiction and lapses in training in a changing and more competitive work force. Over the years, these programs combined have prevented hundreds of thousands of families from falling apart.

There is room for reform; holding fast to the current 60-month limit on receiving cash benefits would be a change from what people in the business acknowledge has been lax enforcement to date. There should be a limit, and it needs to be enforced, but the 18-month lifetime limit proposed by the governor is a sure-fire way to carom people into homelessness, and children into foster care, the cost of which would offset any short-term savings exponentially.

There are cuts that can be made, such as college tuition benefits for some qualifying students. It is not what we would want, but when compared with undercutting a family with small children, it is a reasonable compromise. As it stands, the state is looking at reducing the JOBS program by 60 percent.

The TANF cuts include other support programs for people with disabilities and other special needs for people with no other options.

With every budget cycle, the wagons circle around each program and service relying on state funds to operate. In more recent years, those circles have gotten tighter. This year, with the state looking at \$3.5 billion to shave from spending, the wheels seem about to come off. But you cannot end the cycle of poverty and homelessness by neglecting the potential of families to succeed.

It's easy to look at programs – valuable programs – and say cut there, not here. But in the world of social services, among programs that help people avert homelessness, or get housed; programs that help people recover from addiction, get jobs, preserve their families and restore their place in society, the lines are blurred. There is no single service that solves the problems of poverty. It is called a safety net, after all, and there are many threads that have to work in concert to catch people in times of crisis and economic catastrophes. It's what a functioning society does, and it ultimately serves its best interest.

Neighborhood relations misguided

This past week a photo with two police officers arresting a drug dealer and headline above the fold in the Portland Tribune read, "Adams vows to help Old Town." Three



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at streetroots@hotmail.com.

weeks prior, the Tribune ran an article above the fold with a homeless person smoking what appears to be crack cocaine with a headline that read, "Crack Alley."

Leaders from the Old Town/Chinatown neighborhood association and business owners have gone on a crusade about the drug dealing in the neighborhood. These voices coupled with folks at the District Attorney's office and the police bureau have, in my humble opinion, forced the mayor to respond with a plan to publicly come down on the dealers. It all amounts to nothing more than political theater that would have made for an excellent episode of the Wire.

Caught in the middle is Central City Concern, which works with individuals in recovery and people dealing with an addiction, to deliver housing, jobs and many other critical services that help people out of poverty. Some attorney's have raised questions about the legality of the Mayor's new proposal. Advocates have raised questions about the civil rights of people in the neighborhood. Meanwhile, people continue to find a way to get high.

It's not the Mayor's handling of the matter, or the questions about legality and civil rights (although I do have some), that bug me. It's the way our neighborhood is being portrayed.

Don't get me wrong. I love my neighborhood, and my spending habits prove it. I spend most every day of the week buying lunches, going to coffee dates and buying presents for family members back home in the neighborhood. I am on a

first name basis with business owners and workers around the neighborhood. We look out for one another.

SR recently published an editorial laying out several steps it would take to curb the drug dealing in the neighborhood by creating food cart pods, SR vendors, and other street-level activities to move the dealers out of the hood. I was the first to admit, after talking with city commissioners, and neighborhood heads that those ideas can't be done overnight, and it would take more revenue than we currently have to make those ideas a reality.

Here's what I don't get. The negative press created by going on a public campaign to have the Mayor do something about drug dealing has actually created more fear about the neighborhood being a horrible place than it ever had prior to the PR blitz. For what? A small tweak in policy that divides the neighborhood and may or may not result in ridding the neighborhood of a drug-culture that has existed for decades.

After reading any number of the articles in the Tribune and other papers, why would tourists, families and other Portlanders want to come to the neighborhood and support local businesses? Why would the demographics that the Tribune is marketing to want to come to Old Town to shop? The truth is, they won't and why should they? It's "Crack Alley."

This entire ordeal should have been handled in a different manner, and with a much larger harm reduction approach.

Special interest groups can spin the numbers however they like, but the truth is crime is down across downtown. And life in Old Town/Chinatown is not ghetto, and it's not "Crack Alley." It's a neighborhood in a city that is growing up, a place where thousands of people live and work and where people come together and support one another. It's not what it has been portrayed by local leaders.

LETTERS

Vendors strike a chord with reader

I just wanted to take a minute to give special kudos to the Street Roots vendor who hangs out at 11th and Alder. He is always just the nicest guy and has a great smile and something positive to share every time I see him. This morning I stopped by to buy a paper and he even remembered that I had already purchased the April 1 issue a week ago!

I don't personally agree with everything that makes it into the paper itself, but I definitely believe in and support the positive role it plays in helping people help themselves. I've been laid off from a job before so I totally get that people hit hard times in life and need help to get going again. But, unlike corner panhandlers, Street Roots vendors don't just take money from people. They work hard and contribute to society by actively trying to improve their lives and the lives of others. That I can believe in and support!

Thanks for everything you all do!

BECKY HARTSFIELD  
Portland

Working on housing

By Jo Jo the Boss Man

Working on housing  
One paper  
One dollar  
One smile  
One thank you at a time

Working on housing  
Out on the dime  
Two nickels equals something  
I left far behind  
I'm trying to find anything

Working on housing  
I won't be forgotten  
Pick myself up, got to shine  
"Get your Street Roots here!"

Doing my best to climb out of this rhyme

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Street Roots encourages readers to submit letters and columns for publication. Send letters to the editor to the Street Roots office, 211 NW Davis St., Portland, OR 97209, or e-mailed to streetrootsnews@gmail.com.

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