

EDITORIAL

Traumatic brain injuries and homelessness

When Street Roots vendor George Dennison learned that we were running a story on traumatic brain injuries and homelessness, he responded, "Oh, thank God. Because it's totally rampant out there!" In preparing this story, we spoke to five individuals who had all suffered their own versions of brain injury, from auto accidents to sports injuries to domestic violence. We also heard stories of homeless individuals being kicked in the head while they were sleeping and otherwise attacked for being homeless. After hearing all the stories, we have to agree with George.

It's rampant out there.

From a research, health care and human perspective, we are possibly missing out on a key component of homelessness itself, much less how it relates to a more accurate diagnoses of people's health.

It's all together possible that TBI may disproportionately affect people experiencing homelessness. It may also mean that as a public health system we are misdiagnosing people for the wrong ailments. That's a deadly serious charge.

Studies in Toronto, Ontario, Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Boston,

Massachusetts have shown that a disproportionate amount of people on the streets experience brain injuries. What does that mean? We don't know, and that's the problem.

The National Football League and the United States military are asking themselves the same questions. In increasing numbers, professional football players and combat veterans are coming forward with a range of symptoms associated with brain injuries - including suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and addiction. With these institutions still searching for answers, it is natural to believe, given the data, that we don't have a clue how brain injuries relate to homelessness, and how that translates to both preventive care and post-injury recovery.

The burden on the street is landing on a small number of already overwhelmed agencies. From a research, health care and human perspective, we are possibly missing out on a key component of homelessness itself, much less how it relates to a more accurate diagnoses of people's health.

This and future editions of SR will be looking at several aspects of brain injury and homelessness in Portland and around the country. We hope to be able to look at what we already know, how systems are communicating with one another, and a possible roadmap to understanding the problem.

Through a series of news reports on death and people experiencing homelessness SR came to the conclusion that our systems hadn't a clue on how many people on the streets were dying, or why. We pushed.

In 2012, the Multnomah County Health Department, in partnership with the City of Portland and the Medical Examiners Office, and supported by SR, will be releasing a report on those numbers. We're hoping the research reveals trends that will better help our systems at both a regional and national level deal with the issue of mortality and homelessness.

There's no reason to believe that research and reporting on brain injuries, or any number of issues related to health care, couldn't do the same. We spend so much money asking non-profits and government locally to respond to the crisis of homelessness, when by understanding the issue we may be able to curb or altogether major trends that lead to homelessness, and improve the lives of countless of individuals and families.

Homelessness, including mental health, is too often narrowly addressed through the lens of public safety and law enforcement. It's only half of the game. Without understanding the public health aspects of homelessness, and doing something about it, we all lose.

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Media rhetoric undermines public health debate

Last month I tagged a story in my Director's Desk titled, "Old Town Chinatown relations misguided." The article argued that bad press and a major push to create political change by the



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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

neighborhood could have a negative impact on business in the area.

The Portland Tribune published a series of articles that in my opinion are sensationalized journalism for a

political means. One article (above the fold) appeared with a photo of what appears to be an individual on the streets smoking crack cocaine with the headline "Crack Alley."

I called the Tribune editors and the writer, Peter Korn, to ask them if they actually had proof that the person was smoking cocaine after people on the streets brought it to SR attention that there's no way it could be cocaine due to the manner in which the drug is smoked. SR talked to more than a dozen addicts and former addicts, and they all believed it was marijuana, a very big difference.

SR did not have proof one way or the other. The story died.

SR had been privy to conversations that the strategy by the neighborhood was to raise a big stink, and create so much political theater (through the press) that the mayor would have to publicly react to the drug dealing in the neighborhood.

Korn's "Crack Alley" became the mantra, and it didn't take long before Mayor Adams responded with a plan that resembles a drug-free zone; a plan that targets poor people and African-Americans in an attempt to sweep America's drug problem off the open market in Old Town.

Last week the Tribune and Korn produced yet another sensationalized piece about homelessness in Old Town with the subtitle, "Housing First policy opens the doors to alcoholics and drug users."

The article lays out critics' concerns about the new Bud Clark Commons, a building that will house people dealing with an addiction. The article also calls into question the Housing First policy supported by the federal government through the 10-year plan to end homelessness.

The article quotes advocates and service providers questioning the validity of offering "wet" housing for individuals on the streets. The article alludes that the city, or local government, has failed in its responsibility

to people on the streets.

It also calls into question the Housing First policy, and the philosophy of housing people who are at risk of dying on the streets because of their addiction and because they're sleeping outdoors with very little support.

Korn's article offers no public health perspective or examples of facts from other cities, including Seattle, that have been successful in using "wet" housing to support addicts while they get help. Or how progressive harm reduction initiatives, such as those in Vancouver, B.C., have demonstrably stemmed the tide of addiction and death from overdoses.

The article doesn't include context for the Housing First policy. In fact, it doesn't even quote one government official, or give readers perspective by offering up how many people have been housed in the past five years. A quick records request revealed that between 2005 and 2010 the City of Portland and Multnomah County had successfully housed more than 5,000 individuals, and 2,000 homeless families.

The article doesn't touch on the real subject matter at hand, resources and priorities. The real issue here is the federal government's lack of support for housing on a national level.

Instead of concentrating on the facts, Korn provides coffee shop talk from advocates and social-service providers about their opinions on the new "wet" housing program and the Housing First policy.

Why does this matter? In a time when social-service programs are being cut across the board, and a growing anti-tax and government agenda is taking hold of the population, articles like these create an avenue for those voices to gain stream and to alter the public view of the government's role for supporting the downtrodden.

The real issues outlined above, such as drug dealing, addiction and how it relates to housing and neighborhood livability, are public health issues, and it's the government's responsibility to maintain harm reduction services to maintain a healthy society. It's the media's responsibility to deliver the general public as many different perspectives on a specific issue as possible, followed by facts that support these views.

In the cases outlined above, the media, namely The Portland Tribune has failed to look at these issues in-depth, and instead has chosen to go with a minority of voices and rhetoric instead of looking at all of the facts and presenting the story at hand. Portland deserves better.

LETTERS

Fair housing audit results just the tip of the iceberg

Re: Breaking News: Nick Fish releases names of fair housing test offenders (Street Roots blog)

I was privy to the results of this audit a few months back and it literally made my stomach turn, that in this day and in Portland where we are so staunchly liberal, this kind of discrimination was rampant. We bend over backwards in public here to promote diversity yet, in private, things haven't changed.

My guess is that this is just the tip of the iceberg and that not only

do we have to educate the corporate real estate folks we also will have to get out into the minority communities and make sure they understand that as they themselves become property owners and managers, they cannot discriminate against people who are not from "their country."

LYNNE
Portland

Thank you for your hard work

My ex-husband has been

homeless for years and he has received help from Street Roots for health assistance. He is diabetic and on the streets. His children are very worried for him and his family has little contact. Through the help of Street Roots we have been able to contact him and help assure the family of his general health and existence. Your work and that of people who know the situation are very important to our homeless. Thank you.

M. KALAMA

CONTACT YOUR CITY COUNCIL

Sam Adams
Mayor
1221 SW 4th Ave,
Room 340, 97204
(503) 823-4120
mayorsam@
portlandoregon.gov

Amanda Fritz
1221 SW 4th Ave,
Room 220, 97204
(503)823-3008
amanda@
portlandoregon.gov

Dan Saltzman
1221 SW 4th Ave,
Room 230, 97204
(503)823-4151
dan@
portlandoregon.gov

Nick Fish
1221 SW 4th Ave,
Room 240, 97204
(503)823-3589
nick@
portlandoregon.gov

Randy Leonard
1221 SW 4th Ave,
Room 210, 97204
(503)823-4682
randy@
portlandoregon.gov