

At 20, Potluck in the Park feeds an ever-growing need

BY ISRAEL BAYER
STAFF WRITER

Potluck in the Park, the all-volunteer organization, is turning 20 years old this month. Street Roots had the chance to talk to longtime political and civic activist David Utzinger, who has been with the organization nearly all of that time. The organization works to nourish and enrich the lives of individuals in need by providing nutritious meals every Sunday in downtown Portland. This year alone the organization has provided 12,726 healthy meals.

Israel Bayer: *Potluck in the Park is turning 20 years old this month. Looking back what are some of the highlights you have seen with the organization and the people it serves?*

David Utzinger: Potluck struggled in early years with how to stay small and grassroots. More recently has been the realization that to serve a growing guest list we needed to increase our food sources and get our own kitchen. We joined Birch Gleaners and the Oregon Food Bank in 2008 and began cooking in leased kitchen space in 2009. The result has been good quality and more nutritional food.

From the time we started in the South Park Blocks, our guests have been a racially and ethnically diverse mix of the homeless and people with low-income housing.

I.B.: *How have you seen the relationship between food and low-income people evolve over the years in Portland?*

D.U.: Until 1996, we served meals in the

South Park Blocks to elderly, low-income and the homeless staying in the area. The move to O'Bryant Square has brought a mix of people experiencing homelessness, veterans, families, travelers and the disabled. We became geographically desirable to people staying in the northern end of downtown, Chinatown/Old Town and on the river.

Our meal count increased dramatically when Blanchet House stopped serving a Sunday meal in 2008. We hit 21,165 meals, up 15 percent. We currently feed 400 to 650 guests weekly.

I.B.: *What's happening at Potluck in the Park today, and what can we expect in the future?*

D.U.: Today we rent a good-sized, fully equipped, licensed kitchen for food storage, meal preparation and cleanup. The space is potentially suitable for collaboration with other nonprofits or small businesses.

Our community partners are the key to Potluck's success now and in the future. We need more businesses, food donors and volunteer groups to join us. As an all-volunteer, grassroots nonprofit, we are always looking for new Board members willing to work on fundraising and sponsorships.

Our guest counts are higher than they have ever been. With the future of the economy in doubt, we see no sign of this letting up.

To support by volunteering or donating, visit www.potluckinthepark.org.

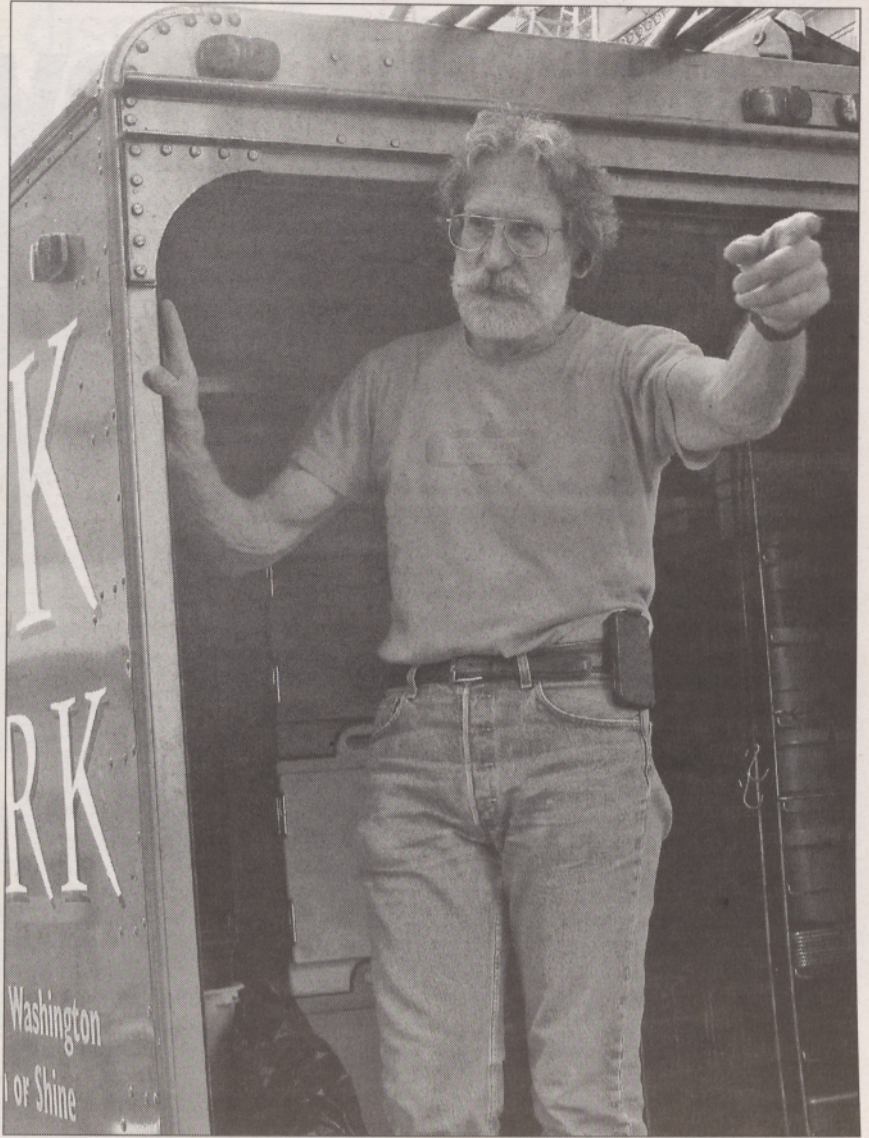


PHOTO COURTESY OF POTLUCK IN THE PARK
David Utzinger directs volunteers from the back of the signature green Potluck truck. Utzinger has watched the public Sunday meal grow from a small guest list to 400 to 650 people each week.

City's housing director takes focus to the state level

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Portland Housing Bureau Director Margaret Van Vliet is leaving her role with the city to become the new



Margaret Van Vliet

director of the Oregon Housing and Community Services Department. The OHCS is Oregon's housing finance agency to generate affordable housing for Oregonians of lower and moderate income.

Van Vliet will leave her position with the Portland Housing Bureau Sept. 15.

"I want to see housing be front and center," Van Vliet told Street Roots. "Housing has been a little bit on the sidebar, and relegated to second or third to public and private proprietries. I want to raise the profile of the issue, and be at the table when other conversations are happening about job creation, about the health profile in this or that community: What's the housing problem that sits underneath that? It tends to be an afterthought, so my

highest value and priority is to get it more entrenched in the public thinking about what's important and what we need to address in the community."

Commissioner Nick Fish appointed Van Vliet two years ago to helm the city's housing operations as it transitioned from the Bureau of Housing and Community Development into the Portland Housing Bureau. Fish told Street Roots that he has mixed feelings about her departure.

"On the one hand, a feeling of great pride, that the governor has selected Margaret to lead the state's housing efforts, and I think it's a testament to how respected she is, not just here in Portland, but statewide, and she'll do a great job. But at the same time, I will miss working with her. Over the past two years, we created a new bureau, the PHB, and she has a remarkable record of accomplishment."

Fish noted the completion of the Bud Clark Commons and the ground breaking of Veterans' housing at Block 49 among those accomplishments.

"At the state level," Fish said, "she'll be in a position to be enormously helpful to Portland and the cause of affordable housing."

Van Vliet joins a state agency that is

under pressure to do more with less in terms of supporting housing for poor Oregonians. One bit of good news arrived earlier this month when the state learned it would have a second chance to secure Section 8 management funds from the feds.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, announced July 1 that the OHCS was not selected to continue serving as the Section 8 Housing Assistance Payments Performance-Based Contract Administrator for Oregon. It would have been a \$4.5 million loss to the state agency.

OHCS was scheduled to be replaced on Oct. 1 by CMS Contract Management Services from Bremerton, Wash. At the time, Rick Crager, acting director of OHCS, said the decision would impact how the entire department administers programs. It would also result in layoffs, and move the oversight of project-based Section 8 housing further away from Oregonian residents and landlords. Oregon was one of many states that filed a protest against the contract award process.

"I've been watching that closely because the city has a stake in what happens with those Section 8 funds," Van Vliet said. "It's certainly an indicator that government all

over the place has to step back and ask, what are we doing; what are crucial services and what does our funding allow us to do?"

On Aug. 10, HUD sent out letters to those in appeals that it will essentially revise and redo the bidding process, giving Oregon another chance at restoring the contract. The letters do not give any indication as to the reason for the reconsideration, however moves by HUD to consolidate and relocate Section 8 management have been met by widespread resistance at the state level.

The decision by HUD also gives the state a six-month extension on the current contract at reduced figures. It is also expected that future contracts for Section 8 management will be less than they were in the past. That reduction, coupled with rising debt management costs, shrinking loan portfolios and the increase rates of foreclosure in residential load programs will mean future cuts for the state's housing bureau, Crager said.

OHCS's Contract Administration Section provides contract administration services for approximately 280 contracts encompassing 272 low-income properties in Oregon.

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