

City looks to cut the safety net

BY JAKE THOMAS
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Raymond Thornton turns 48 this month, but there was a time he wasn't sure he'd see another birthday.

He spent three years on the streets, battling alcohol and substance addictions before he arrived at the Clark Center in 2011. It was a graduated process – from Hooper Detox to the Community Engagement Program, a comprehensive program offered by social service provider Central City Concern aimed at chronically homeless individuals. The program placed him at the shelter. There, he says, he found the stability to get clean.

The process didn't end there. Thornton now has an apartment in Madrona Studios, located above Hooper Detoxification. He has his adult children back in his life and regularly attends Alcoholics Anonymous to help others on the path to recovery.

"The way the story normally goes is, I would have been out on the streets and not stayed sober," he says.

During his time at the Clark Center, he watched as others came in off the streets and found the same respite and opportunity. Some residents just needed a place to stay warm, says Thornton, recalling a time when a man came in with frost bite, his toes literally falling off.

Which is why he can't understand why the city would even consider shutting down a resource that he has seen do so much.

But if the current budget manifestation goes through, the city will axe wholesale its largest men's shelter facility – a 90-bed center near the Hawthorne Bridge. Last year, it served 661 people, about half of whom landed permanent housing. It is always full, with about 250 men currently on its waiting list.

Facing a \$25 million budget hole, Mayor Charlie Hales has ordered all city bureaus to come up with 10 percent cuts to their budgets: \$2.3 million to the Portland Housing Bureau alone.

Housing Bureau Director Traci Manning says most of the cuts will hit its programs aimed at relieving homelessness because that's what it spends most of its general fund and federal dollars on.

The Clark Center, which gets 72 percent of its budget through the Portland Housing Bureau, is the biggest ticket item on the block at \$425,700.

"You can't really close half the beds in a shelter," says Manning.

Even if you did, she explains, you'd still have to pay for things such as staff and building maintenance to only serve fewer people, while leaving fewer dollars left for other programs. So, from cost-savings perspective, it makes more sense to cut entire facilities, she says.

"A 10 percent cut hits our community's most vulnerable particularly hard," says Portland's Housing Commissioner Nick Fish. "One option is closing the Clark Center, which saves about \$425,000. The immediate impact of this cut: 100 people would become homeless, and nearly 700 people would lose access to emergency shelter and hot meals, housing placement assistance, case management and referrals to supportive services over the course of the year."

Nothing happens in a vacuum with budgets. Dollars leveraged from other sources could be lost as programs are cut or discontinued. The needs of Portland's

indigent won't go away, and reduced resources could place more costly strains on other already strained city services. The county and the city work in tandem, contracting for various services through programs and facilities such as the Clark Center. A cut from the city could mean another from the county.

"The Clark Center is a great example of a partnership between the City of Portland and Multnomah County," Fish says. "The city is the primary funder of the Clark Center's operations, and the building provides temporary shelter, housing placement assistance and services for people Multnomah County serves through its Community Justice and Mental Health & Addictions programs. If the cut is taken, we lose our collective investment in the center."

"This would probably be the most significant cuts we've seen," says Tony Bernal, development director for Transition Projects. "We've heard these threats before, but this is definitely the most severe threat of cuts to the entire program."

Transition Projects Inc. also runs an annex next door to the Clark Center that provides 22 units of subsidized housing for individuals making zero to 30 percent of median income, says Bernal. The center shares staff, and it's not clear what would happen to it should the Clark Center close, he says, but it could require shifting funds from elsewhere to staff the housing annex.

In addition to funding from the city, the Clark Center receives \$125,383 from Multnomah County and about \$50,000 in meals from volunteers from in-kind donors. If the Clark Center closes its doors, these funds will be lost. Those costs, plus backfilling staffing needs, push the financial impact of the center's closing toward \$800,000.

"A lot of these guys, when they're at the Clark Center, they get stabilized in the short term and they're able to triage medical needs," says Adam Lyons, manager of the Clark Center.

Lyons says the Clark Center has strategic partnerships with the Northwest Pilot Project, an organization that helps channel seniors into housing, and the Cascade AIDS Project to address housing needs among HIV and AIDS patients.

He says that people often enter the Clark Center sick from long periods of rough living on the streets. Nursing students visit the shelter periodically, and diabetic residents, of which there are many, have a place to keep their insulin.

"We serve a lot of people that are medically vulnerable here, and if the ability for them to be stabilized at a short-term residential facility is lost, I think a lot of the

stress would be seen in the medical community," he says.

If the Clark Center were to close, says Lyons, its newly homeless residents would likely be accessing the emergency room for their medical needs – a much more expensive option.

They'll also likely have more interactions with the police, he says, who, in the times of lean budgets, have become the first responders for many of the city's social problems.

"If all the cuts were to go through as proposed, they would absolutely affect what we do," says Sgt. Pete Simpson, spokesperson for the Portland Police Bureau, which is also facing steep cuts and could see 98 officers laid off.

Simpson says that cuts to social services will result in more calls to the police to deal with individuals suffering from mental health, homeless encampments and other issues.

"If people have nowhere else to call, they call the police," he says.

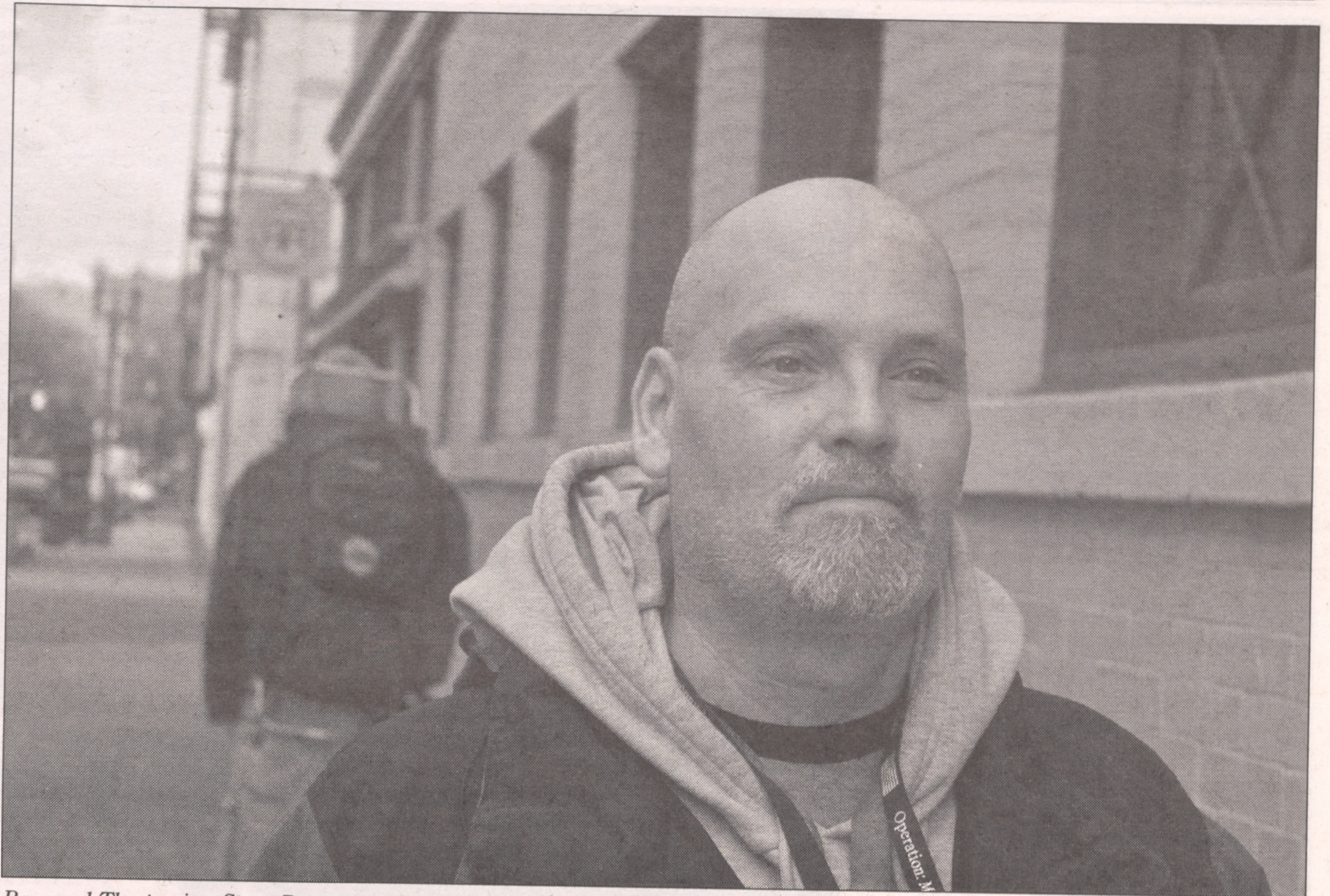
Commissioner Steve Novick says that he will be making the case to preserve social services during the budget process. He says that crime is down significantly in Portland, but the number of officers hired by the Portland Police Bureau, the largest city bureau, has remained about the same.

"I don't want to lay off police," he says. However, if crime is down by 18 percent, and the explanation that the police offer for why they need the same number of people is to deal with poverty-related issues then the last thing I want to cut in our budget are the poverty-related programs."

Manning says that it's easier to engage homeless people and connect them to housing and other services when they are in shelters.

But that's another part of the rub. Cuts are across the board, and include support services throughout the continuum of services:

- A reduction of short-term rent assistance by \$97,890.
- A reduction to the Bud Clark Commons permanent housing by \$27,000.
- A reduction in funding for Bridgeview, which provides transitional housing, by 5 percent or \$23,860.
- Elimination of \$46,609 in funding to a homebuyer retention program.
- Elimination of \$8,000 in funding of homebuyer fairs.
- Elimination of \$23,500 in funding for Oregon Community Warehouse.
- Elimination of \$89,000 in funding for shared housing program.
- Reduction of funding to Rent Well, a tenant education program, by 50 percent or



Raymond Thornton is a Street Roots vendor and spent three years homeless. He found housing with the help of Transition Projects Inc. and other providers working together. Today, he is a mentor for others on the streets working to gain housing and sobriety.

\$33,273.

- Elimination of \$30,000 in support to the Housing Connections website.
- A reduction in funding to shelters by 5 percent or \$108,490.

As a result of the cuts, 65 households won't receive rent assistance, 300 people won't graduate from Rent Well with landlord guarantees, 45 households in North and Northeast Portland won't receive case management to keep them in their homes, 300 homeless people will not receive basic services and 30 homeless people will not be placed in permanent housing, among others not served.

"If I was on the streets it would be a lot harder to get cleaned up and get a place or a job," says Ron Barr, a 54-year-old resident of the Clark Center, who knows this well. This is his third stint in the center and the first in eight years.

He says he lost his housing and is temporarily staying in the center until he can find something more permanent.

Don Sorvisto, 46, recently got out of jail and is on probation, which he says has kept him from securing housing. The Clark Center, he says, keeps him sober and stable. For about a month, he's been working part-time in Clackamas for company that moves industrial machinery. Without the basic safety net, Sorvisto says he would be "strung out on drugs and affecting my community in a negative way."

For about the last month, bad news has hung over the shelter. It could be just a matter of time before all of the residents of the Clark Center find themselves back on the streets.

"Last year the community rallied to protect \$4.6 million in safety net funding, and to convert the one-time funding to ongoing," says Fish. "This year, once again, we will have to work together to prioritize funding for our most vulnerable – and that includes keeping the Clark Center open."

A couple things could free up some money.

Novick points out that next year, everyone who is at 133 percent of the federal poverty line is automatically eligible for Medicaid. He says that the city pays for some health care services for the poor, and Multnomah County pays for much more. The expansion of Medicaid, he says, will free up money at the city and county level to pay for other services.

Manning says that the bureau will see \$1.25 million less as a result of the now-notorious federal sequester. She says that if it was delayed it could provide enough of a reprieve to keep the Clark Center open.

Until then, uncertainty hangs over the shelter.