

## Jesse Beason and the battle for Portland's safety net

The head of one of Portland's leading housing programs talks about what hangs in the balance of this year's budget negotiations

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For the past five years, Jesse Beason has been a fighter in Portland's affordable housing world, standing up for economic and social equity for low-income homeowners. As the executive director of Proud Ground, a Portland-based nonprofit, he has worked to help families buy their first home, and has been a voice for an entire continuum of services that takes people out of poverty into stability.

That advocacy has taken shape in the campaigns to preserve basic shelter and housing programs dubbed the Portland safety net. Last year those programs were in the crosshairs of one-time funding cuts, and this year they are yet again on the chopping block as part of sweeping reductions in all city budgets. The battle for \$2.3 million for basic services, from shelter beds to health programs to resource referral programs, will continue until the city hashes out its final budget this summer. It could be a farewell bout for Beason: This summer, he will be leaving Proud Ground to become the director of public affairs with the Northwest Health Foundation.

**Joanne Zuhl:** *Portland has many programs that help people experiencing poverty and homelessness, but can you explain how this comes together as a comprehensive safety net?*

**Jesse Beason:** Public and nonprofit agencies have worked to coordinate funding streams as much as federal and state regulations allow. We've streamlined rent assistance, for instance, by pooling funds.

But I'd say that it's at the service-provider level that the safety net comes together to provide efficient services and effective referral and coordination for the folks we serve. This means that if a particular agency doesn't offer the services someone needs, we know where they might be able to receive them, and can hopefully help make



Jesse Beason

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that connection. It means that someone calling 211 can be steered in the right direction. It means that we all know what each other's agencies are doing, and excel at.

If a mental health outreach worker finds somebody on the streets who is ready to leave the streets, they need to be able to call another provider for housing placement dollars that will help that person get into an apartment and pay the next few months of rent. And once they're in, what do they sleep on, how do they begin a life indoors without the tools and resources of someone like Community Warehouse, and also, can the mental health outreach worker call someone on the streets and see if the resources are available, and that's what resources like 211 is providing — there's a place to call right away where the resources are and how to get those. And once that person is housed and has some basic needs met, what are the other services and case worker management and all the other things that need to come together, how does that person then get those resources, and all of that depends on a safety net that's been carefully coordinated and stitched together over the years by incredibly effective organizations. You take out any one of those pieces, and our chances of that person

succeeding drops.

**J.Z.:** *For yet another year in a row, the city is looking at making significant cuts into make-or-break services — those that directly keep people out of homelessness or directly get them into shelter. This, on top of a regular stream of cuts from the state and federal level: What's the status of these programs after years of cutting back?*

**J.B.:** We know that Portland has a successful system that, when funded adequately, is effective at moving folks into housing, preventing homelessness, providing them services they need, and even helping families move to homeownership. But repeated cuts mean these programs are doing less with less.

It means we can't adequately provide much cheaper options than the emergency room or jail. It means many of the disparities faced by communities of color in homeownership are not addressed.

It means we are turning a lot of our most vulnerable neighbors away.

We have proven time and again that the way that we help people succeed is far more cost effective than sending someone to jail or to the emergency room. But because the flavors of money follow different paths, it

has meant that instead of looking at a cost effective solution, we're looking at these cuts that aren't scalpel-like, they're really hatchets. And that undermines the entire system and costs taxpayers more in the end.

**J.Z.:** *How does homeownership fit into the safety net?*

**J.B.:** Homelessness and vulnerability look very different across various communities. In particular around homeownership, one of the biggest issues is foreclosure. We know that we have many, many low-income renters and many, many low-income homeowners that are one job loss or one missed payment away from losing their house. Whether you're a renter or a homeowner, losing your house puts you in the same level of vulnerability as far as ending up on the streets. And indeed, many of the folks, in particular families experiencing homelessness, are previous homeowners. So we know that housing stability affects both renters and homeowners.

**J.Z.:** *Who are the big losers if this budget goes through as is?*

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### The Portland safety net in the budget crosshairs:

The following programs and services have the potential to either be cut or eliminated:

- Eliminate winter shelter at the Clark Center, a 90-bed shelter for men that serves 700 people annually
- Reduce youth and other shelter support by \$100,000
- Eliminate winter recuperative care, a program that works with people experiencing homelessness who are coming out of the hospital
- Reduce short-term rent assistance by nearly \$100,000
- Reduce mental health outreach, family rent assistance, and alcohol and drug treatment by \$200,000
- Eliminate programs at 211info and the Oregon Community Warehouse, including Housing Connections — \$215,000
- Reduce support to the Bud Clark Commons drop-in by \$27,000
- Cut homebuyer education homeownership fairs by nearly \$50,000
- Reduce homeownership retention program by \$80,000
- Reduce the Rose City Resource funding by \$3,000 (The city currently gives Street Roots \$30,000 to produce the guide)

The bureau is requesting that the following programs included in the add-back package. This package includes \$1.1 million in funding that is at risk:

- Funding to keep the 90-bed men's Clark Center Shelter open
- Programs that provide winter recuperation care, winter shelter and the youth shelter
- Programs that support permanent housing outreach, placement, services and stabilization for vulnerable people. Programs include mental health outreach and housing placement, street outreach, housing placement and retention, Alcohol and Drug Free Communities, family rent assistance, Rose City Resource Guide, Rent Well, youth transitional housing, and Community Engagement Program.
- Programs that build the pipeline of potential homebuyers from communities of color and help homeowners retain their homes.

The following programs face permanent cuts at the housing bureau:

- Prevention: Reduce short-term rent assistance, \$97,890
- Supportive Housing: Bud Clark Commons permanent supportive housing, \$27,000
- Supportive Housing: Reduce funding for Bridgeview by 5 percent, \$23,860
- Homeownership education and foreclosure prevention: Eliminate homebuyer retention program funding for citywide program expansion, \$46,609
- Homeownership education and foreclosure prevention: Eliminate homebuyer fairs, \$8,000
- Emergency Services: Reduce shelters by 5 percent, \$108,490
- Eliminate funding for Oregon Community Warehouse, \$23,500
- Eliminate funding for shared housing program, \$89,000
- Reduce Rent Well administration funding by 50 percent, \$33,273
- Eliminate support of Housing Connections website, \$30,000