

County chair: Community can't afford cuts to crisis center

JEFF COGEN
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Recently, I hosted a screening in the Multnomah County boardroom of "Alien Boy" – the powerful film about the life and death of James Chasse Jr.

Watching that incredibly poignant film was a tragic – and all-too-topical – reminder of the potentially deadly conflict that can arise when police encounter people diagnosed with mental illness.

As chair of Multnomah County, I know full well the importance of providing Portland police officers with every possible resource to ensure their encounters with people diagnosed with mental illness are safe for everybody and provide people the help they need.

Fortunately, we already have a great resource in our community to achieve those goals of safety and getting people effective treatment – the Crisis Assessment Treatment Center (CATC).

Unfortunately, it now faces a grave threat to its existence in Mayor Charlie Hales' recently announced budget proposal.

In our community and in our country, we have shared too often the sting of regret that follows tragedies that might have been avoided.

Whether it's a horrific national event like Newtown or perhaps a personally painful experience of a loved one diagnosed with a mental illness, each of us searches in retrospect to pinpoint the missed opportunity that could have saved a life.

It is rare when we can anticipate those moments and act upon them. But the CATC – with the stabilizing services its staff



Jeff Cogen is the Chairman of the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners. He has served on the county board since 2006.

provides – allows us to do just that.

Opened less than two years ago, the CATC in inner southeast Portland already has established a track record of success to reduce the chance for any repeat of the Chasse tragedy.

The CATC provides up to 16 beds of 24/7 secure care for residents experiencing a mental health crisis.

People needing the CATC are also referred by community partners such as Project Respond, involuntary commitment teams and treatment courts.

About 40 percent of the people placed at CATC are diverted from inpatient hospital emergency rooms and psychiatric units.

Nearly 1,300 people have used this essential community service, and I'm proud that my proposed budget for the upcoming 2014 fiscal year again contains the county's \$600,000-plus share of funding for the CATC.

But despite the county making its funding priorities based on commitments from our community partners such as the City of Portland, the mayor's proposed budget would kill the city's matching share.

If the city breaks its promise to provide its share of the funding, it's the people

served by the CATC who will suffer.

Here's what that suffering means in human terms: We estimate about 200 people a year will end up not getting admitted for the services they desperately need.

The center would have to reduce its available beds from 16 to 11, as well as limit its hours of admission, and restrict how many people the staff could see each day.

The results? Those folks now treated at the CATC would be shifted to already overburdened hospital emergency rooms, psychiatric units and jails. And the costs would fall back on the already strained general funds of the state and county for indigent people and Medicaid.

I could never predict exactly how any of those 200 people – and the many people whose lives they touch – would suffer without a safe bed at the CATC. I could only hope they don't suffer.

But I don't want to just hope. I want to act to make sure no family has to look back and wonder if the CATC could have saved their loved one.

As somebody who has been in a position of cutting budgets my entire term as county chair, I know the mayor faces a series of tough budget decisions.

But Multnomah County has made difficult budget cuts for more than a decade so the county can prioritize scarce taxpayer dollars on essential services like the CATC.

The county and city opened this center less than two years ago after agreeing to work together based on a recommendation from a mayoral task force after the death of Chasse, who had been diagnosed with

schizophrenia.

I am saddened by the new mayor's proposal to renege on that partnership.

But I am optimistic that the mental health community and the homeless community will lend their powerful voices to show the mayor and the rest of the City Council that it would be shortsighted not to find the money to honor the city's commitment to help fund the CATC, and the Police Bureau's commitment to use the CATC.

After all, the federal Department of Justice's 2012 investigation of the Portland Police Bureau concluded, "PPB officers use more force than necessary in effectuating arrests for low level offenses involving people who are or appear to be in mental health crisis."

And getting beyond the painfully human costs of hamstringing the CATC, we know siphoning money out of the mental health safety net is shortsighted. Just look at the record \$2.3 million settlement proposal coming before the mayor and the Portland City Council over a man diagnosed with bipolar disorder who was shot by a Portland cop.

That settlement alone would cover almost four years of the city's promised commitment to the CATC.

At a time when we face such deep challenges to funding our mental health safety net, we know hamstringing the CATC cannot – and will not – be supported by our community.



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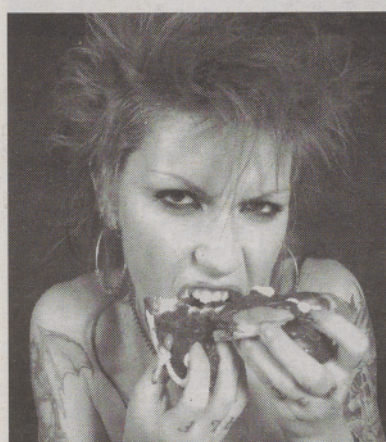


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