

# Finding solutions for Portland's most vulnerable



**Dan Saltzman**

Dan Saltzman is the Portland City Commissioner in charge of the Portland Housing Bureau. He can be reached at dan@portlandoregon.gov.

Three months ago when Mayor Charlie Hales assigned new bureaus to the City Council, I was honored to be working on housing and homelessness issues as the new Commissioner in charge of the Portland Housing Bureau. I welcome the new challenge.

I see the work as a huge opportunity to affect change on issues that I am passionate about: women and families affected by abuse and neglect. As a City Commissioner, I have looked for every opportunity to make life better for these women and children who are struggling through domestic violence situations, who are being moved from one foster home to the next, or who are wondering where to get their next meal.

These are the people on my mind every day. When I began working with the Portland Housing Bureau, we wasted no time finding funds for strategies that work. Our first challenge was to address the issues of homelessness among women. The recent street count in Multnomah County showed a 22 percent increase in homeless women since two years ago. A large percentage of homeless women report that domestic or sexual violence was an immediate cause of their homelessness. Being on the streets automatically puts a woman at increased risk for violence.

Currently, the City funds two women's shelters and both have 130-190 person wait lists. If a woman needed somewhere to sleep tonight, it would be weeks or maybe months before she could find refuge in the shelter. Under my direction, the Housing Bureau will immediately initiate a two-pronged approach to address shelter wait lists, and to keep women from having to

enter a shelter at all.

The first step is to work with shelter providers to shorten shelter stays and to free up existing beds. We can start working with those already in shelter and use our many tools to get them into housing. This includes rent and utility assistance, help finding affordable homes, and legal advocacy. We are fortunate that our community has specialists who are not only skilled at navigating the housing system but who can also work with individuals in a trauma-informed way.

The second prong of this approach is keeping people out of shelters in the first place. This not only limits the trauma of entering and living in shelter, but it is a cost effective way to avoid building and operating these facilities. If we can keep people in their homes, it's better for everyone.

This twofold plan to increase options for women facing homelessness is the first step that I will introduce to City Council Sept. 18. I'm also prepared to ask my colleagues for additional resources to serve even more women and other priority populations, including communities of color, adults with disabilities, and youth.

We have seen remarkable results when we can get the resources. Two years ago, when the City Council made an additional \$1 million investment in homelessness services, we were able to move 311 households from the streets into homes. A year later, 73 percent were still in housing.

Preventing homelessness takes considerable energy and resources. Portland's non-profit agencies have done incredible work on limited budgets. They are the front line staff who work miracles

every day.

Just last week, a woman called my office in tears. She had moved to Portland to live with a friend. When the friend kicked her out, she found herself in a strange city with nowhere to go. Working with a partner agency, we found a way to get her back home and enough money for food. If not for our fast-acting partners and those funds, another woman would be on the streets tonight.

These are the miracles we're capable of when we have the resources. I'm prepared to make the case to City Council and know that we can make significant headway with our partners and in lockstep with Multnomah County.

Realistically we won't be able to solve homelessness for everyone. This is a problem embedded in bigger forces: reduced job availability, underfunded mental health services and declining federal resources. We are up against a lot. But we will strive for those small miracles each day and work to improve life for one individual at a time.

Please share with me your thoughts and ideas on how we can reduce homelessness at dan@portlandoregon.gov.

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## My Insomniac Friend

by John R. Brown

My insomniac friend called at any hour—his internal clock was shot—while I, though homeless, preferred regular hours. My friend was given to wandering and knew which doorways sheltered me. His visits came at one a.m. or three a.m. or five a.m. when the trolley begins to run. "Oh, sorry. Did I wake you?" "No, no. I was just resting. With my eyes closed." "Want to come over for coffee? Maybe clean up a little." "Sure. Thanks." and off we'd trudge to his nice public-housing apartment where I crashed on his La-Z-Boy and dreamed of the pool at the El Dorado Hotel while my insomniac friend watched infomercials about floor-care treatments that solve all your problems.



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