

# Now is not the time to give up on those who are homeless



**Deborah Kafoury**

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Last week, a young, frightened woman phoned my Multnomah County office looking for help. She was a mother, with three children, who needed housing. The family had been doubling up with a relative, but now that relative was moving out of town. She needed help immediately. She'd called the shelters in Portland, but they were full and most had a six-week waiting list. She was growing desperate.

Her call hit particularly close to home. I'm a mother and I have three children. I know too well how hard it is to get three kids fed, clothed and ready for school, to arrange childcare, pay bills, keep up with vaccinations, struggle to help them with math homework, meet with their teachers, counsel them about bullies, to care for them physically, emotionally and mentally in today's increasingly complicated world.

But, I cannot imagine what it's like to do all that while homeless.

Too many of our mothers and fathers do know, though. Between low vacancy rates, rising rents and the lingering effects of the recession, on any given night in Multnomah County, more than 2,869 people are homeless, according to the 2013 point-in-time Count.

Reading the painful headlines this summer, it's tempting to want to throw up our hands.

"Violent Attacks amid seasonal rise in homeless population raise tension in city," *The Oregonian*, July 22, 2013

"Homeless Camp in SE Portland Frustrates Neighbors, Homeless" *The Oregonian*, July 26, 2013

"Three Blocks of SW Fourth Are A Homeless Camp" *Portland Mercury*, June 7, 2013

While it's reasonable for the press to inform the community about these

incidents, the articles only tackle a fraction of the story. A more complete picture would show that the homeless population in Multnomah County include:

1. Parents who are raising children. The number of families who are homeless increased 18 percent since the last point-in-time Count.

2. Newly homeless. More than half the people sleeping on our streets have been homeless for less than a year. In other words, just a year ago, they had homes and many of them had jobs. In fact, many of them still do have jobs.

3. Military veterans. More than one in 10 of our homeless adults served this country.

4. Young people. On any given night, there are at least 100 homeless youths on waiting lists for a shelter bed.

What the headlines do capture is that our system is at capacity. Multnomah County, the City of Portland, Home Forward and community partners have helped thousands into homes in the last decade with smart strategic spending on programs like rapid re-housing, flexible rent assistance, and permanent supportive housing for those with addictions and disabilities.

Yet the federal government, paralyzed by sequestration, is actually serving fewer households and with lower benefits. The result is that despite our best efforts so far, too many people in our community cannot afford a place to live. Last November, for instance, when Home Forward opened up the Section 8 voucher waiting list for the first time in years, they received 21,000 applications in one week. Yet, under the most optimistic scenarios, only 3,000 of those households will be helped in the next five years.

We have reached a critical crossroads: we can either stay the course and hope that

forces outside Oregon's borders like Congress and the national economy will somehow resolve this issue. Or, we can boldly step together in a new direction.

We can start by knocking down the artificial boundaries of a 30-year-old agreement that made the city of Portland responsible for chronically homeless individuals and Multnomah County responsible for homeless families. Instead of this archaic system with gaps and unintentional overlaps, we can create a new unified hub that will pool our scarce resources, encircle our community partners and inspire our partners in business and philanthropy.

Toward that end, I stand with City Commissioner Dan Saltzman for his recent pledge of additional funds for housing. I commit to working with my colleagues at Multnomah County to respond in kind. And I call for a new unified effort that more closely aligns our entire efforts, streamlines our administration and re-focuses on attention toward building on what we know works. We are one community and we must work as one.

This week, we know that there are far too many children who dressed for their first day of school at a homeless shelter. Let's help their mothers and fathers bring them soon to a safe and secure home.

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## Summer

by Avendor

Summer  
glory of sun,  
importance of water,  
solace of shade.  
Vain assemblies,  
warm pennies  
bustling laundromats,  
the thoughtful elderly...  
Children chasing children,  
butterflies crossing their paths  
wars, fires, overheated cars  
cold beer, rock festivals, moonlight carousing.  
Monks in monasteries,  
fruitsellers in tents  
lovers on a park bench,  
college-bound students gearing up;  
and I  
doing my duties  
yearning for joys  
and portents of loveliness



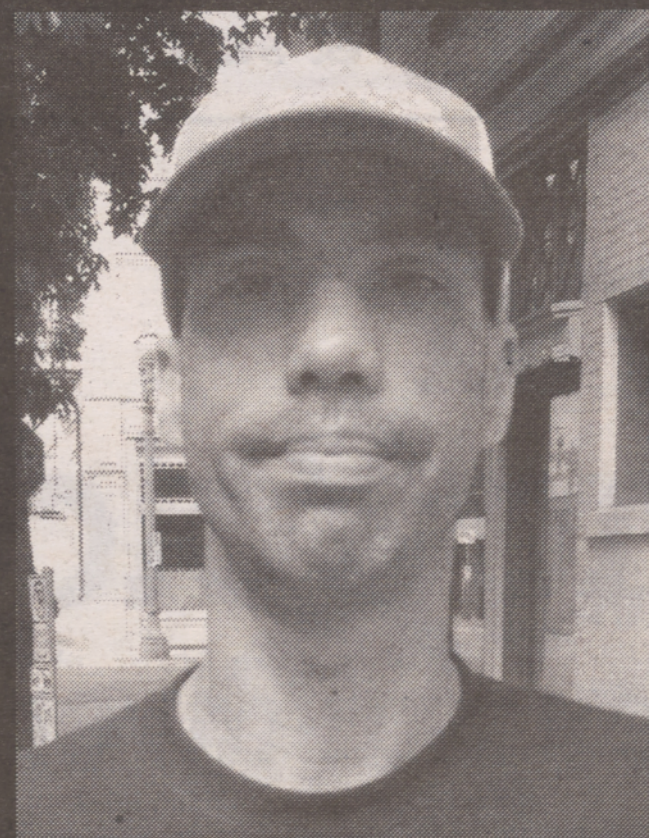
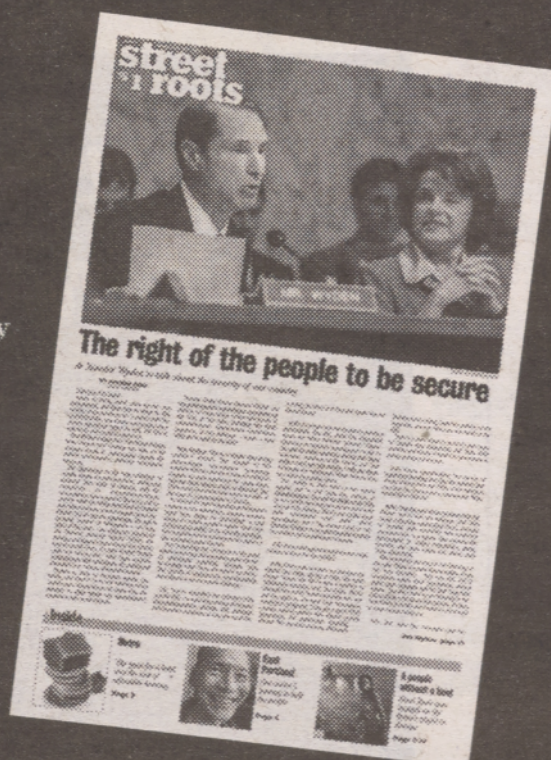
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Poverty

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