

'The answer is housing'

With three decades of experience housing Portland's poorest residents, Susan Emmons is ramping up her message on how all of us can help end homelessness

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In 1978, downtown Portland had 5,183 apartments affordable to the city's poorest citizens. Susan Emmons says it was enough. There were no homeless shelters and no need for public funds dedicated to subsidized housing.

Today, Portland has 3,290 units available. But the need has grown exponentially and the city of Portland is short by 20,000 rental units.

These numbers — compiled regularly by the housing organization Northwest Pilot Project — illustrate why it is so difficult for low-income people seeking a home to move through the appropriate channels — there is simply nowhere for them to go. Emmons is NWPP's executive director, and she and her staff are gearing up for a fresh bout of advocacy as Multnomah County and the Portland City Council roll-out a new "reset" plan to tackle homelessness in 2015.

For the past 38 years, Susan Emmons has been a keystone in Portland's social justice community. Emmons took the helm at NWPP in 1987, taking over for founder Peter Paulson. The small nonprofit has become an indispensable resource under her leadership. In addition to housing placement, NWPP connects clients with other social services; they provide transportation for grocery shopping and medical appointments; they make participation in the arts possible and advocate loudly in state and local government. They fund and publish the Downtown Portland Affordable Housing Inventory, which documents the number of affordable homes lost each year to redevelopment or demolition.

And when an entire low-income apartment building gets sold, gentrified or rehabilitated, it is NWPP that steps up and finds tenants a new home.

Equally important, under Emmons' leadership, the organization serves as a powerful advocate for the poor and senior citizens, working to preserve their vitality in the city's core even as higher prices are pushing them out.

Today the agency struggles with a severe bottleneck of permanent housing stock. Most people's path out of homelessness starts on the streets, segues into a shelter, then into transitional housing and finally affordable permanent housing. But the city of Portland doesn't have nearly enough subsidized apartments to house a population that has grown 17 percent in the past two years.

Emmons delivered a powerful speech at the Oliver Lecture Series on Nov. 17 at the First Congregational Church in downtown Portland. NWPP hopes the pressure on housing officials will result in a more prominent place for housing in the reset plan, complete with specific financial goals and plans for implementation.

Emmons has received numerous awards for her dedication, including the Oregon State Housing Council's "Excellence in Housing Award," the Gretchen Miller Kafoury Award for Outstanding Community Development and the Ross Dey Lifetime Achievement award from Metro Multifamily Housing Council. NWPP has helped over

7,000 people over the age of 55 find housing since 1997.

Jasmine Rockow: *What was the political and social landscape like when you first started back in the late 1970s and early 1980s?*

Susan Emmons: We didn't have as big a population of homeless people, but there was more a feeling of people getting around the table and trying to think through solutions and adopting a central city plan. Out of that came the Downtown Housing Partnership. There were representatives from the Portland Development Commission, the Housing Authority and the Chamber of Commerce, all sitting around the table. So the business sector was really buying in and saying, yes we would like to see this housing developed and we would like to make sure there's the money for supportive services. For example, if you are doing a specialized program where people might need alcohol and drug services to get rehabilitated. There was more a sense of cooperation. It feels a little more divided to me now.

J.R.: *How was your advocacy received in the beginning?*

S.E.: Our advocacy at that time centered more around getting the housing developed and the housing built. It seems to me now that the group of advocates are more focused on service dollars that they need to run their own agencies. Not that that isn't important, it is important. But I don't feel like there's a strong collective voice of advocates about solving the housing problem. And I think there may be a number of reasons for that.

Funds are more scarce. We're all seeing more need in our agencies, and people are scrambling pretty hard to keep their nonprofits afloat. I think people don't necessarily have the energy to put in those collective advocacy efforts. But when we started to really lose housing we were worried about some of the federally subsidized building. We did a great collective effort to get a preservation ordinance passed in 1998, and we had the community development network. They were led by a woman named Tasha Harmon, a strong advocacy group. We had Dana Brown at the Community Alliance of Tenants. We had some really strong players as well as social service agencies like NWPP where we really banded together and had a collective voice. I don't feel that sense of collective effort right now.

J.R.: *What changed?*

S.E.: It's hard to say. I think the community development network turned into a statewide organization. They became Oregon Opportunity Network and they are covering a much wider area. That might have been the right move but I don't think there's as strong a voice now, as a local advocate. All the organizations are having to struggle so much for the same pots of money. Federal funding has been reduced, and in some cases, so has city funding. I think the community development



Susan Emmons

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organizations that are trying to develop housing are having to look farther afield for funding. The money isn't flowing like it used to. Our urban renewal funds are diminishing. It's a lot harder to put projects together. People are scrambling after dollars to have their ongoing operating support and may not have the energy for these bigger advocacy efforts.

J.R.: *Do you think that the answer to ending homelessness has changed in the past 30 years?*

S.E.: NWPP has very consistently — at least in the 28 years that I have been here — always said the answer is housing. It can't just be about services. It can't just be about saying, "well we have these people and it's their fault that they are homeless. If somehow we get good enough services delivered to them, that's going to change the equation of what's going on." With the amount of housing we've lost, it seems clear to me that housing is the answer. For us that's always been the answer. I would hope that all the groups working on this issue would have one voice on that and say that we're never going to solve our homeless problem without housing — housing built for the poorest of the poor.

J.R.: *How do you perceive the dialogue that encompasses homelessness today? Has it changed? Is it helping or making things worse?*

S.E.: Over the past year there was a process that they call the reset process, which was looking at our original homeless plan. We were not invited into the group, the inner group. You could go to public meetings and you could observe, and we were very disappointed by that process. There were smart people around the table. We felt there was no major emphasis front and center on — that housing is the answer and housing is the key. There was a lot of discussion about prioritizing populations. We don't really agree with that. We think that all people who are homeless are vulnerable and what we should be concentrating on as a community is increasing the pot of resources to deal with it. There was a lot of talk about services and greater collaboration among provider agencies. We think that there's better collaboration now than we've ever seen in

the decades we've been doing this. There was talk about, "well we have to involve the faith community more." We've always involved the faith community.

You have to work collaboratively to be successful with social work and have a lot of partners. We felt like that was a pretty shallow process. But what they came up with was a framework to do the next step, which is an action plan. We would be terribly disappointed if there isn't housing front and center in the action plan. That's what we believe at NWPP. That's what I believe.

J.R.: *What do you think your chances are of getting that into the plan?*

S.E.: Well, I don't know. We're going to try to be very vocal. To say let's shift gears here and let's think about this. Let's look at the chart and let's look at the deficit and let's tie this back to why we have so many people who are homeless on the street. Give people a sense that there is a possibility to solve this. We need a local resource. I believe we need a housing trust fund. How do we get people excited about working on that?

J.R.: *Regarding the discourse on homelessness, there's a lot of talk about addiction, NIMBYism (not in my backyard) and deserving and undeserving poor. What are your thoughts on that part of the dialogue?*

S.E.: We need to do a better job of telling the story of where we have built buildings and how successful they have been. They have been good neighbors. If the building is well operated and well managed, you could stand on a street corner and watch people come in and out of that building and never know that they were formerly homeless. I've had this conversation with people in the business community and they agree. As a community of providers, we haven't done a good enough job with telling that story.

An example of that is The Morrison. It got built and it's a mixed-income building and it's across from the stadium where we play soccer. When that was developed by Home Forward, our housing authority, a new condo was on the same piece of property. There was great concern from the people developing the condo that we were

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