

Street Roots recently asked civic leaders around Portland, "How does supporting people in poverty help our community?"

The project was inspired by the #MyHomePDX campaign on Twitter, recently launched by Street Roots and allies to talk about homelessness and poverty in the community in a more thoughtful and engaging way. Tune into those conversations on the Street Roots Twitter and Facebook pages and follow the #MyHomePDX hashtag.

The whole concept of community assumes that the fate of one influences the whole. When you think about how you personally respond to things when you are either hungry, cold or scared, you would probably agree that you are not at your best. Not only are you unhappy, but you lose your capacity to be productive and often don't feel at all invested in the good of the whole. Just imagine feeling one or all three of those feelings most or all of the time. This is what poverty feels like. It isn't just an economic or political concept. It is the growl in your stomach, the wind whipping through your dwelling and your personal safety being at risk.

When you live in a community, you are interacting with everyone in some way or another — sharing buses, parks, shops, streets and work places. Your enjoyment of those spaces and your feeling of security and peace of mind is directly affected by whether others have access to basic needs. Of course you could buy a home in a gated community, never leave home and hope that no one you are close with will ever need a hand. But that is no way to live.

To think that we have our health, wealth and family support because we have been excellent people is just plain ignorant. Some of us were given a head start, with good nutrition, health care, nurturing and education. No one becomes successful independent of others. Those folks who say they pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps always forget that they were given bootstraps. We are all at risk of becoming sick, broke or isolated at some time in our lives. If you have been lucky enough so far to receive the long end of the stick, find a way to give something back. You will definitely improve the community to which you belong, and may just end up needing a hand yourself some day.

— Chris Bonner, Principal Broker,
Hasson Company Realtors

We are all in this together. Poverty and discrimination keep too many people, including families and children, from reaching their full potential. By extending a hand up, and creating meaningful opportunity for all, we create a more just and prosperous community — a community we can all be proud of.

— Commissioner Nick Fish

While supporting people in poverty is certainly beneficial, I don't know that it actually helps our community. My belief is that to truly help our community, we must go much further and actually eradicate poverty. "Impossible!" Some may say! But I turn to the eradication of polio as an example of how the seemingly impossible became possible when a group of people subscribed to the collective belief of service to others beyond self. Whether you're Muslim, Catholic, Buddhist, Christian or Jewish, we can all turn to our respective faiths for guidance on how to accomplish this. Working together to eradicate poverty will only foster a stronger community in which everyone thrives.

— Jamaal Folsom

Supporting people in poverty to provide them pathways to actively engage and contribute helps us as humans and it helps us build a stronger community. Working together to be sure that poverty is a temporary condition will capture the ingenuity, innovation, hard work and creativity that our neighbors have to offer. Poverty is a waste for all of us, of human potential and of opportunity. We can and must do better, for our children, for our families, for ourselves.

— Janet Byrd, Executive Director
Neighborhood Partnerships



Having experienced the ails of poverty as a child, I have personal knowledge of how community support today can lead to a successful and stronger community tomorrow. No one is living in poverty by choice, and most people will take advantage of the opportunity to utilize resources to become self-sufficient, contributing members of society. There can be no conversation about the sustainability and longevity of a community without taking into account the immediate need of the least among us.

By supporting people in poverty, we provide substantial investments in creating a stronger future for the whole of society, where all can share in the continued cultural and economic development of our community. Only when we can ensure that everyone has equal access to the tools needed to overcome the many economic barriers in existence, can we truly call ourselves progressive. We cannot be compassionate in times of convenience, while turning our backs on our most vulnerable population when times really get tough. There is no community in that; there is no humanity in that."

— Jerome Brooks, Urban League of Portland

Poverty threatens the health and safety of our entire community, not just the people directly experiencing it. When community members do not have jobs they are at risk of slipping into and becoming trapped in a cycle of poverty that can last generations. When a community has members living in poverty, this negatively impacts the health and safety of the entire community. Lack of jobs or enough jobs with pay sufficient to support families, combined with the lack of educational opportunities to provide the needed work force, all contribute to a cycle of decline. Tax revenues decrease with the loss of jobs, the public safety net funded by those revenues retracts and thins to the breaking point, which further perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

From an economic and business perspective, the entire community benefits from the pursuit of civic and economic vitality focused on jobs for people. Jobs are the foundation for a safe, healthy and prosperous community.

When a community has a shared vision of prosperity that increases the opportunities for all, economic activities are encouraged, business is attracted, jobs flourish, job opportunities are created, income levels increase, increased levels of philanthropy are enabled and tax revenues increase with every worker. The increased revenue funds increases in educational opportunities and grows our community reputation as a safe and healthy destination which attracts visitors and investments and the safety net for our most vulnerable community members becomes stronger. The cycle is perpetuated.

Investing in our shared vision of prosperity means investing in people and jobs. That means providing the vision and support necessary for members of our community to escape the cycle of poverty and be part of the cycle of prosperity.

Many examples of this vision and support exist right here in Portland. One example is the Clean & Safe District, a nationally recognized business improvement district where businesses elect to pay fees that supplement public funding

to improve the downtown neighborhood and attract economic activity. The district partners with Central City Concern to provide a unique win-win program. The "Clean" of Clean & Safe is the Homeless-to-Work Program run by Central City Concern that offers training and mentorship opportunities to workers that are formerly homeless or have other barriers to employment. For more than 20 years, Clean & Safe has offered this opportunity for formerly homeless individuals to re-enter the workforce. Street Roots newspaper vendor program is another example of a business model that provides individuals a path from poverty and an opportunity to provide a community benefit at the same time. These are just two of the many examples that exist that support the economic benefit to the community of helping people to escape poverty.

— Suzanne Hayden, Executive Director,
Citizens Crime Commission

Our community includes everyone, regardless of how much money you have. People in poverty are our community: we're all in this together. It doesn't take much for someone who thought they were on solid financial footing to lose it all. As firefighters, we see people struggling, and suffering, in every type of situation imaginable. We see people not only experience tragic events, but the struggle and despair of people — good people — from all walks of life, with no other resources. Resources don't just amount to money, but just as importantly, can mean family or friends to turn to. When you see people struggling and the enormous well they must climb out of, you get just a small taste of how overwhelming and devastating it must feel.

This is one of the reasons why Portland Fire & Rescue puts such an emphasis on prevention and education: we don't want people to be in a situation that leaves them at risk. I'm sure that economists can show all the bottom line reasons how supporting people in poverty is important for the economy, and health statisticians can show how it benefits all of our wellness and decreases risk of disease. And as a fire chief, I can tell you for certain that poverty correlates with an increase in all types of emergency incidents, every day, and the ripple of that might directly, or indirectly, affect you as well. But we don't need proof that helping people is good for us: helping people in need is what we're about, and lending support to people suffering poverty helps our community because it's the right thing to do, and just maybe it's a beginning to ending the cycle.

— Chief Erin Janssens, Portland Fire & Rescue

We are all members of the same community — and we all add to the rich diversity of our community. At this time of the year, we think about giving to others more than in other times throughout the year. Many of us have traditions and cultures which promote giving to others more at this time of the year. Some of our gifts are to friends and family — other gifts are to people less fortunate than we are. Supporting people in poverty in our community is one type of giving that feels good.

For one thing, it helps us appreciate the gifts we are receiving, or have received, throughout the year. Beyond the gift itself, we feel good when others give a gift to us — and we feel good when we give a gift to others because of the connections and relationships the gift represents. When we give to people in poverty in our community, sometimes we are helping them escape from the poverty that is trapping them. Sometimes we give to people in poverty because we want them to have all of the basic necessities of life — food, housing, medical care, clothing, etc. These gifts help us move toward a community where no one goes hungry, no one is homeless, no one is unable to obtain medical care, no one goes without appropriate clothing for the cold, wet Oregon weather. Moving toward that goal for our community feels good — and it certainly helps those in need. Our community is stronger and more self-reliant when each of its members can be strong and self-reliant.

It's not just that it hurts us to see people in need — it's that we know that they are hurting and we feel driven to do something about it. We know that no one likes living in poverty, so gifts to help people escape from poverty will help them do better and feel better. Then, the community will be a better place for them — and for us — to live in.

— Jean DeMaster, Executive Director,
Human Solutions