

## EDITORIAL

## City should seize the potential of low-income housing request

The Street Roots office was noisy Wednesday morning, filled with a happy and boisterous conversation. A group of vendors were chatting up another who had just gotten into housing. He is a Vietnam veteran who has been homeless for the past six months, selling Street Roots to keep sane, safe and sober.

You can read more about William Howard's story on Page 6. This week he got his key. He joins many others who have passed, not just through our doors, but also through others where the opportunity of a safe home is actually a reality to work toward. It's sometimes easy to forget, amid the sensationalized news and one-hit wonders, that people are getting back on their feet; that they're worth investing in and it's paying off. But keys, it seems, don't grab headlines, and fear has always been more compelling than hope. What gets lost in the fractured lens of fear and blame — from punitive measures to random camp sweeps to the wholesale dismissal of institutionalized inequality — is the necessarily cooperative front to bolster the solutions we know exist.

**Regardless of the quality of social services in this town, you can't move into an apartment that doesn't exist.**

The reason you see affordable housing advocates relentlessly calling for more long-term support of low-income housing is because it works, and in its absence people suffer. Pure and simple. The stumbling block for people trying to get off the streets is not that there isn't a door to walk through where someone cares and wants to help. It is that regardless of the quality of that service, you can't move into an apartment that doesn't exist.

According to the Portland Housing Bureau, year-over-year rents rates in Portland have risen by nearly 7 percent, with market conditions prompting more high-end rental options that have some neighborhoods seeing double-digit increases closer to 30 percent.

That's why the bureau is making a \$3 million request to build affordable housing. It's money to be leveraged four to one in terms of public and private funds. Twelve million dollars is a vital step toward making neighborhoods affordable, and it will be essential as the city's other ongoing source of low-cost housing begins to trickle off. But unlike the boundary-burdened urban renewal district funding now in place, this money could be applied anywhere in the city.

The bureau is also requesting \$1 million in ongoing funds for housing placement and rent-assistance to connect vulnerable populations to services that can get them off the streets. Both of these resources are critical to helping people recover from homelessness and should be supported in the upcoming city budget hearings.

Because we know this works. Is it an end-all solution? Of course not. The machinery of inequality and poverty is still in motion. But no solution can be devoid of housing for people now homeless.

So let the conversation swell. Let's get boisterous about housing. William got his key this week, and many, many more are still waiting.

## Housing equals opportunity equals real success

A good friend of mine told me last week that he had read that Utah is ending homelessness. He read it all over the Internet.

Oh boy, I thought to myself.

After reading more and talking to advocates around the country, it was clear that the public was being bamboozled. Utah was not on the verge of ending homelessness, regardless of how many liberal bloggers

might think so. In fact, overall homelessness in Utah has grown in the past decade.

Utah is having success at ending chronic homelessness. What's that? No, it's not a super strain of marijuana named after homeless people. It's a method developed by the federal government as part of their 10-year plan to end homelessness. The focus was on housing individuals who have been homeless for more than a year.

According to our sister paper in Seattle, Real Change, who actually followed the numbers, Utah's baseline homeless population grew by nearly 1,300 people from 2007 to 2013. What decreased was the "chronic" homeless population.

It's all so confusing, right? It's just one example of both the mainstream media and citizen journalists believing the hype on homeless issues without fact-checking. The reality is our country has a long history of putting Band-Aids on the problem of homelessness and calling it a new plan to end the problem.

Since 1980, the federal government has had four mandated plans to end homelessness. Within those plans, comes any number of changing requirements, community planning processes, data requirements and priority populations that will be served.

What they don't tell you is that during that same time the federal government has defunded low-income housing by more than \$40 billion.

Currently, the Obama administration and federal officials are saying that by 2015 the U.S. will end veterans' homelessness. Uh-huh. It's my educated guess that after spending 15 years engaged in war overseas and currently being involved in any number of shadow campaigns around the world, that we've only seen the tip of the iceberg when it comes to veteran homelessness. I hope I'm wrong.

Slogans and campaigns to end

homelessness are good for both re-election campaigns locally and nationally, and serve as a mechanism to rally nonprofits and the general public toward creating political will to tackle the problem.

It's not so much that the plans are flawed. It's the fact that local communities are handed down mandates by state and federal officials and then given crumbs to solve the problem. It's a joke.

Local governments are then forced to carry the load. Depending on the local government, the political climate on any given day and the hard realities of seeing thousands of people sleeping outdoors, communities are then caught between public opinion, outside forces and having to manage the problem instead of solving it.

It becomes a cat-and-mouse game between local business interests, nonprofits, law enforcement and the general public; using the homeless as a political football for any number of social ills. Compassion fatigue sets in and people start to really believe there isn't a solution.

The result is criminalization in public spaces, mostly targeting the homeless and people of color, and competing interests among local nonprofits and politicians for funding and controlling the message of the day. Solving homelessness becomes political theater.

The great journalist Edward R. Murrow once said, "Our major obligation is not to mistake slogans for solutions."

Unfortunately, when it comes to homelessness we have both the slogans and the solutions. We just don't have the support from the state and federal government to prioritize the harsh realities of poverty in America.

Don't get me wrong. We do need a plan, right? Well, of course we do. Housing in America is complex.

I'm not giving up and more importantly, readers shouldn't give up. Being a critic is easy, but actually creating real change in the community is very real and achievable.

People experiencing the trauma of homelessness should not be punished for the shortfalls of a nation. We see it collectively, in the individuals and families who are unable to obtain housing. To ignore the problem would be catastrophic. We must continue on, because the reality is that housing does in fact equal opportunity, especially when there's a safe place to call home involved.



Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at [israel@streetroots.org](mailto:israel@streetroots.org) or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.

## DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Send letters to the editor to the Street Roots office, 211 NW Davis St., Portland, OR 97209, or e-mail to [joanne@streetroots.org](mailto:joanne@streetroots.org)

## Our mission

Street Roots creates income opportunities for people experiencing homelessness and poverty by producing a newspaper and other media that are catalysts for individual and social change.

Street Roots publishes every two weeks, launching on Fridays, and is available exclusively through our street vendors or by subscription. We are proud members of the International Network of Street Papers.

Street Roots  
211 NW Davis St.  
Portland, OR 97209  
503-228-5657  
Fax: 503-227-3117  
[streetroots.org](http://streetroots.org)  
[news.streetroots.org](http://news.streetroots.org)



## Staff

**Executive Director** Israel Bayer  
[israel@streetroots.org](mailto:israel@streetroots.org)  
**Managing Editor** Joanne Zuhl  
[joanne@streetroots.org](mailto:joanne@streetroots.org)  
**Vendor Coordinator** Cole Merkel  
[cole@streetroots.org](mailto:cole@streetroots.org)  
**Operations Director** Sarah Beecroft  
**Program Assistant** Grace Badik, Jesuit Volunteer,  
[grace@streetroots.org](mailto:grace@streetroots.org)  
**Development Director** Sarah Cloud  
**Office Assistant** Amber Bielman  
**Reporters** Jake Thomas, Alex Zielinski, Nathan Gilles, Sue Zalokar, Ann-Derrick Gaillot  
**Photographers** Kristina Wright, Christopher Onstott

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## Street Roots Rose City Resource

Street Roots publishes the Rose City Resource, a comprehensive booklet of services for people experiencing homelessness and poverty. To inquire about getting guides, call 503-228-5657. Resources are also available online at [www.rosecityresource.org](http://www.rosecityresource.org).

## Vendors

Street Roots vendors buy the newspapers for 25 cents each and sell them for \$1, keeping the 75 cents in profit for themselves. In order to keep the cost low to our vendors, we receive additional support from donations and in-kind contributions.



**75¢**  
goes directly to the vendor who sold you the paper

**25¢**  
goes toward printing costs

Vendor orientations are at 1 p.m. every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at the Street Roots office.