

EDITORIAL

State must broaden cooperation to help families in need

This month, the Oregon Secretary of State's office released its audit of TANF — Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. It is the collection of programs that was once commonly understood as welfare, before welfare became a disparaging term.

For decades, we have known recipients as households thrown into poverty by myriad circumstances and situations. But since the onset of the great recession, we've come to know them better as friends, neighbors and family.

TANF serves extremely poor families, the vast majority of them with no income outside of the program. Since 2007, TANF's caseload has swelled as the recession spread. The number of single parent families nearly doubled between 2007 and 2013: The number of two-parent families increased fivefold.

It's priority is two-pronged — to stabilize families and get parents back to work.

The audit praises the Oregon Department of

Human Services TANF program for its effort to help stabilize the expanding numbers of needy families, but it is highly critical of its poor outcomes in getting parents back to work. No wonder: Low-wage jobs have made some recovery since the recession. Middle-income jobs that could support a family have not recovered, and state budget cuts have crippled support services that help people look for work and secure gainful employment.

There is a list of detailed suggestions for improving outcomes, but this audit reaches far beyond one program in terms of both culprits and solutions. It should serve as hard evidence to the urgent need for government cooperation to eliminate the array of senseless — and costly — barriers to self-sufficiency.

This includes partnerships with the state's low-income health care delivery systems at levels that don't occur today. The potential from coordinating with TANF is almost boundless, from providing mental health and addiction services previously cut from TANF, to eliminating physical health barriers to employment.

Better coordination is needed with higher education outlets and vocational and apprenticeship programs to improve employment options. There are isolated examples of these partnerships working in Oregon. Let's build on them.

For decades, welfare recipients have been vilified for receiving assistance in times of need, with failure laid at the feet of the poor. It would be a tragedy if this latest report draws the same response. Because today we know better. Self-sufficiency isn't just a matter of personal determination; it takes opportunity, health, education and support. It takes a responsive economy, affordable housing and living wages. It takes commitments spanning nonprofits and private organizations. Secretary of State Kate Brown said that the state can't operate in silos any longer: neither can any government — federal state or local — that wants to be effective in getting people out of homelessness and poverty and back to work and self-sufficiency. As the saying goes, it takes a village.

Looking to leadership, from on and off the streets

Last week, on my way home to grab a bite to eat before an event, I noticed 15 or so older women bedding down together in Old Town. Their presence stopped me in my tracks.

One elderly woman, homeless for less than a year, only received \$700 from Social

Security and couldn't afford to pay for rent, health care costs and a quality of life. A shelter was her only option.

Another woman was running from domestic violence. Another told me she was dealing with a physical

disability, and could barely get around. Her dog was the only thing keeping from harming herself. The list went on.

One woman, clearly dealing with a severe mental health issue, was standing at the doorway of the closed winter shelter, rocking back and forth mumbling. "I know the shelter is going to open tonight. I just know it. They wouldn't leave us out here like this."

I called a colleague, then a city official. What was going on? Was it true that the emergency winter shelter had closed for the season? It was true.

The emergency women's shelter will not reopen until next winter.

After visiting the ladies, I walked across the bridge to the Multnomah County candidates forum on housing sponsored by Street Roots and others. It had already been a long day. I sat and cried. These women's stories hit me like a freight train. Their chiseled hands, their swollen feet and their hardened faces. I pulled myself together, just in time to shake hands and play the role of an executive director in the community.

Witnessing someone overwhelmed with the hardship of homelessness is both an amazing and horrifying thing to experience. There's nothing logical about watching poverty consume a human being. It's neither kind nor romantic.

At the forum, candidates answered questions about what they would do about poverty in our community. I couldn't stop thinking about the women I had just talked with. What would be the best way to highlight their story? In a perfect world, it would be writing a much bigger story, highlighting their voices and possibly working with a photographer. There wasn't time for that. This column will have to do.

After emergency winter shelter closes this year, an additional 70 women will be homeless. They will join an estimated 1,600 individuals along with more than 600 children sleeping outdoors.

On the bright side, an official told me that with an additional \$300,000 invested by the city, 107 households, including 26 families and nearly 50 adult women were housed this year. The project is called Women into Housing Now, and led by the Portland Housing Bureau and local nonprofits.

The official also told me that the county would be investing more dollars into rent assistance for women and families, but it was unclear whether this was actually an increase in money or simply getting us back to a place we were prior to the great recession. There was also the \$1.7 million bump by the city and county this year which is helping house scores of hard-to-reach and vulnerable folks on the streets. We're hoping that this money will be carried over to next year.

What do these numbers mean to the general public? Not much. What the general

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By Israel Bayer

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

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



PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

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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
news.streetroots.org



Staff

Executive Director Israel Bayer

israel@streetroots.org

Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl

joanne@streetroots.org

Vendor Coordinator Cole Merkel

cole@streetroots.org

Operations Director Sarah Beecroft

Program Assistant Grace Badik, Jesuit Volunteer,

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.

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