

A homeless "czar" one option to ending homelessness

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER



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The Fourth of July has come and gone, and its passing has ushered in the start of summer in Portland. With summer comes the bounty of fresh local produce, the endless summer nights and evening dinners out on the patio. Summer also brings with it an increase in people experiencing homelessness as people come to Portland for our temperate summers. The yearly influx of those experiencing homelessness, particularly the kids, serves as our visible and yearly reminder that though our progressive city is dedicated to ending homelessness, we've still got a long way to go.

The problem isn't that city leaders don't care enough to want to solve the problem. On the contrary, the entire City Council has publicly expressed a desire to end homelessness in Portland. The problem is that in one sense, ending homelessness is the entire City Council's job; in another sense, it's none of their jobs. Besides the moral imperative to do justice and do what is right, ending homelessness is never once mentioned in the city charter, it's not *per se* a core function of local government, nor is any city bureau charged with seeing to an end of homelessness. Sure, the

Portland Housing Bureau plays an incredibly important role in providing housing to low-income folks, and in some cases, people experiencing homelessness. But homelessness is more than just housing, it includes aspects of mental health, health care, social services, education, workforce training, and countless other intangibles and services that are provided for by a myriad of other government entities each trying to solve part of the problem, but none possess the answer to the entire equation.

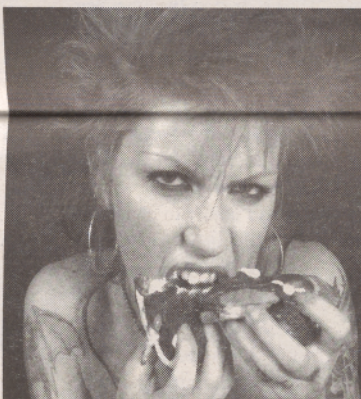
What is needed is a central point of accountability, someone whose job it is to end homelessness in the city. One solution might be for the mayor to appoint a homeless czar, a person with the sole job function of trying to end homelessness in Portland.

The role of the homeless czar would be to coordinate with other governmental agencies that address different parts of the homeless problem. The czar would work with the county on social-service issues, with the state and federal government with healthcare and Medicaid, and with the region on implementing a comprehensive strategy to end homelessness. This single conduit could lead to a more improved and coordinated approach as well as greater accountability for solving the problem.

With a czar, the issue of accountability is certain to come up. Where would the czar fit? Given that homelessness isn't a core function or responsibility of any bureau, it wouldn't make sense to house the czar in one. Nor would it necessarily make sense to create another bureau devoted to ending homelessness given the blend of governmental entities all working on trying to solve parts of the problem. Instead, the czar should report directly to the City Council as a whole. The czar could give regular progress reports and take direction from the entire City Council.

Homelessness is a complicated, multifaceted problem. It is unrealistic to expect a single individual, even one with "czar" in front of their name to single handedly end the problem. But having a single focal point, and adding a public face to the city's effort to end homelessness would go a long way to showing the public what is being done to solve the problem and who is accountable if efforts fail.

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