

Health care, homelessness report charts action forward

A new report released last week by the City Club of Portland outlines the challenges and opportunities our community faces concerning homelessness and health care reform.

The report found what many advocates have argued for years, that one of the greatest social determinants of health is housing.

EDITORIAL

According to the report, national surveys have found that homeless individuals are three to six times more likely to become sick than those who are housed, and

Multnomah County is no exception. More than half (53 percent) of the homeless population in Multnomah County were found to suffer from potentially life threatening disabling conditions, with 17 percent of the unsheltered population reporting a chronic health condition.

The annual report, produced by the local government, the medical examiner's office and Street Roots, found that from 2011 to 2013 more than 135 people experiencing homelessness died in Multnomah County. This only includes individuals who actually died outside and doesn't include individuals who were homeless but died in a hospital or other such shelter. We know the number to be much higher. The average age of death for all three years was in the mid 40s — well below the average life expectancy of 71 years in Multnomah County.

The City Club report concludes that despite issues with the Cover Oregon website, new Medicaid enrollments of the homeless population are high. Participants were enrolled in OHP by social-service providers, housing and health care workers, the police and others in law enforcement. Street Roots has seen this first hand. Partnering with Central City Concern

and others we were able to enroll more than 90 percent of our vendors.

We also know that maintaining this kind of effort will require the support of local and state government to ensure that people experiencing homelessness are engaging the health care system in a timely manner. Even with an address and resources, it's not easy navigating America's health care system. Our community must remain diligent in not only providing, but helping facilitate access to our health care system.

Some of the report's other recommendations include:

- By 2016 all health care providers should be trained to address the special needs of homeless populations;

- Anyone on the streets discharged from a hospital should have a housing or shelter plan; and

- Multnomah County and the city of Portland should look at increasing housing resources for people experiencing homelessness.

The final recommendation, which may in the end be the most important one, is to have health care and housing advocates, government officials and others who work in the interest of the homeless, to strongly advocate for the social determinacy of housing. "It will further strengthen applications to receive funding for housing from public and private foundations, granting entities and private philanthropy sources."

In November, hospitals in Orlando, Fla., pledged \$6 million specifically for rent assistance to assist individuals and families. There's no reason that local hospitals and health foundations in the region shouldn't be making the same investment.

Street Roots believes that with the emergence of health care reform we can significantly decrease the number of people experiencing homelessness in our community. The pieces are in place. All it takes is the leadership to make it happen.

Rhetoric around bikes, homeless a dehumanizing narrative

BikePortland Publisher and Editor Jonathan Maus has been reporting on a growing concern that some homeless camps in Portland have become "chop shops" for stolen bicycles. One recent headline stated, "Police search suspected Springwater chop shop, find stolen frame," referring to an abandoned homeless camp.

This comes after Maus himself had his bicycle stolen and then hours later found it in what appeared to be an abandoned camp littered with bicycle parts.

After the incident, BikePortland organized a well-attended Portland Bike Theft Summit where panelists talked about the challenges facing

Portlanders and the relationship between people experiencing homelessness and stolen bicycles, among other things.

Since that time, BikePortland has been offering commentary on the issue, including posting photos of what appears to be homeless camps with a number of bicycles and bicycle parts.

It's understandable that people are pissed. I don't blame them. Having anything stolen can be a traumatic and infuriating experience. Any time something is stolen from us, there's a feeling of vulnerability. I understand the frustration.

What I don't understand is the message some people in the cycling community are choosing to deliver when talking about people experiencing homelessness and bike theft.

In one article, BikePortland quotes an unnamed source as saying, "They're considering getting some friends together, rolling up on cargo bikes, and simply carting away the parts themselves. Vigilante actions are the

result of frustration and a feeling that the police and other agencies are not taking care of the problem quickly enough."

Vigilante actions? That's a terrible idea.

Adding fuel to the fire, the group Bike Index tracks stolen bicycles distributes and sells stickers that state "Death to bike thieves."

Of course, I don't believe that any of these individuals have any ill will toward people experiencing homelessness. However, it's not funny or ironic when you're claiming that people on the streets are running chop shops, which I believe is naive to say, and then having an organization promoting "Death to bike thieves" as a sensational way to make a statement.

The reality is, regardless of this particular conversation, targeting people experiencing homelessness through verbal and physical violence is all too real.

Individually, these things might not add up to much. All of them together ends up making for a tasteless and dehumanizing narrative.

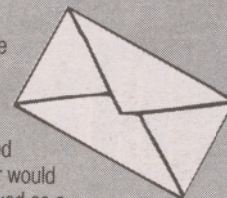
To be fair, Maus and BikePortland have always been champions for people experiencing poverty and the many cycling programs that exist in the region. He has always been fair in reporting that individuals in the camps should not be assumed guilty — trying to capture the complexity of the situation.

In the end, there might be a real opportunity to do some great things in the community. Recovering people's bikes is one of them. Maus also suggested possibly selling the bikes confiscated by police to support an agency working with people on the streets.

The reality is that besides TriMet, cycling is the No. 1 form of transportation for the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness. Possibly, "Cyclists for housing" could be our next mantra.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.com. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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DIRECTOR'S DESK

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