

Paid sick leave common sense, smart business

Despite the 24-hour nonstop work ethic of this digital age, employees aren't machines. They have families, children, unexpected life events and sometimes they get sick. Unfortunately, too many in our workforce are unable to take a day or two away from work — without being financially burdened by a loss in wages or worse — to get well.

EDITORIAL

It's an obstacle to real health care, the kind of care that rewards immediate, preventative actions that can deter the spread of illnesses; the kind

that ensures a healthier and more productive workforce for the long-term. The kind that is humane.

President Obama called it out in his recent State of the Union address — the United States is the only developed nation on the planet that doesn't require paid sick leave. Current labor law does not even protect all workers from being fired when they miss work due to illness. It's a nationwide call to get up to speed.

Unlike decades ago, when labor laws around sick leave were written, we now live in a world where many households are managed by either single parents or dual-working parents. A sick child means the wage earner has to lose a day of work. And a week from the job can put a huge strain on the fragile budgets of the working poor. According to the Institute for Women's

Policy Research, which has dominated studies in this field, a staggering 71 percent of low-wage Oregonians (outside of Eugene and Portland) don't earn paid sick time on the job. But no doubt they do live in fear of losing income or the job altogether, and they work when they are sick, jeopardizing their own health and the health of those around them.

The movement across this nation and here in Oregon to require paid sick leave is welcome and justified progress toward reforming our health care system.

Portland began a paid sick leave requirement in 2014. It has not been without its detractors, of course, and they have their points that should be considered in crafting a statewide law. The administrative process should be manageable and small businesses should have some flexibility in how the sick days are applied.

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The common complaint is that the statewide approach must not be a one-size-fits-all law. And we agree. Good

paying jobs, a vibrant workforce and a strong economy require both healthy workers and healthy businesses. It's important that Oregonians don't have to choose between one and the other. Done right, paid sick leave is the healthy thing to do for businesses, workers and the whole community, and it's the right example to set for the rest of the nation.

Ending homelessness starts with human rights

A common misnomer in many communities, including Portland, is that when you offer services to people experiencing homelessness and poverty, you attract more people experiencing homelessness. We call it the magnet myth.

The reality is this kind of thinking doesn't translate to the realities local communities face throughout the country. More times than not, it leads to elected officials and communities working to manage the problem of homelessness instead of trying to build the political means to actually tackle the problem.

In Seattle, for example, homelessness increased by 21 percent, according to their 2015 count. In Los Angeles, more than 50,000 are people sleeping outdoors. In San Francisco, 7,000 people live without a home. The list goes on and on.

Homelessness and the lack of affordable housing is a national crisis. In places like Portland, where we see rents skyrocketing and no clear path to solving the problem, this issue becomes even more exacerbated. This often leads to short-term strategies and knee-jerk responses instead of actually prioritizing the issue.

We know that the criminalization of the homeless has had a devastating effect on both our criminal justice system and people sleeping outdoors. Understanding that thousands of lives are affected by not having a safe place to call home on one hand and making it illegal to find a safe place to rest in on the other — we've more or less institutionalized people to the streets.

In a place like Portland, where public space becomes less and less accessible because of urban growth, people on the streets end up paying the price.

Ten years ago, places such as Old Town, the Pearl, areas of Northwest Portland and inner Southeast Portland were considered low-barrier areas where

people on the streets could bed down without fear of being uprooted and ticketed for sleeping. Today, those areas are mostly off limits. The result is new challenges for people on the streets who are left to sleeping in more public parks and wooded areas.

Portland needs more creative solutions and services for people on the streets, not fewer. Do we need more affordable housing and rent assistance to offer people in poverty a chance to be successful? Yes, please. Do we need more shelter space for our most vulnerable citizens? Of course we do. Do we need more projects like Right 2 Dream Too, Dignity Village and Tiny Houses? Absolutely.

What we also need are more compassionate and smart strategies to deal with people on the streets other than criminalization. This includes being able to rest or sleep when individuals and families have literally no place left to go. People experiencing homelessness should be able to access public places, like parks and sidewalks, without being targeted.

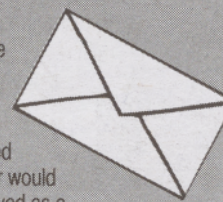
The Western Regional Advocacy Project, Right 2 Dream Too, Sisters Of The Road and Street Roots are pushing for legislation in Oregon that would give people experiencing homelessness these very rights — the right to rest and to move freely, the right to sleep in public places without discrimination.

A Homeless Bill of Rights and corresponding legislation is being introduced in Oregon, Washington, California and Colorado. To get involved and to add your voice to more than 135 organizations, visit the Western Regional Advocacy Project at www.wraphome.org.

Lastly, the next time someone says to you, "Yeah, we have too many services in Portland for poor people," tell them that actually, we don't have enough, and if we want to solve the problem of homelessness, it's going to take giving people access to housing and opportunity. It's going to mean giving people the human rights they deserve.

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.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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By Israel Bayer

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