

The responsibility to speak up belongs to all of us who can



Colleen Sinsky is a retention worker at JOIN, which works to help people experiencing homelessness secure and maintain stable housing.

BY COLLEEN SINISKY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

"Most homeless people don't care about politics. They just think that everything is how it's going to be."

This was my friend Mike, a grizzled veteran of Vietnam, and years on the streets, talking. "They're too busy or something, you know."

We were on a chartered bus, heading back to Portland after having spent a busy day at the state Capitol with the Oregon Housing Alliance. We had learned about effective messaging, the current initiatives that would promote better access to housing, and had met with legislators to express our interest in affordable housing for Oregonians. Mike and I were exhausted, but feeling optimistic about the upcoming legislative session.

I watched the I-5 scenery roll past the window and thought about what Mike had said. I agree that it's an unfortunate reality that many folks experiencing homelessness or housing instability do not have the luxury of getting politically involved. The stress of existing in constant survival mode, worrying about each meal and how to sleep in relative safety each night, compound barriers such as mental illness and lack of education that a number of unhoused individuals face. I imagine that having the energy to confront political systems would seem impossible to the folks I know who have to gather

cardboard for a bed each day.

What then, is my excuse? I have lived in Portland for four years, and worked on the front line of housing services for as long. Why was this Housing Opportunity Day the first time I've visited my own state Capitol? Why haven't I taken the time to really educate myself about the various initiatives put forward each session to alleviate the very issues of housing access that I have been working on the ground for?

In providing direct service and housing support for families transitioning off of the streets, I've let myself get swept up in the same stressful daily grind that keeps homeless and other marginalized individuals from being able to speak up and organize. I've let myself believe that I'm too busy or too stressed to challenge the status quo on a larger scale, and that because I'm "doing the work," I'm off the hook for engaging politically. However, the reality that I am letting myself realize is that I have a responsibility to speak up. Taking time away from my busy schedule at JOIN to attend the Housing Opportunity Day in Salem was tough, and I came back to a voicemail box full of acute needs from my JOIN folks. I have intimate access to the stories of individuals who will obtain safe housing because of successful initiatives, and to the stories of families who will sleep in a van together because of budget cuts to affordable housing.

I should be more proactive in leveraging my privilege, my education, and my position in our community as a social service provider to advocate for more housing support. While easier in the short-term, allowing myself to become too busy – or jaded with regard to the political system – will ensure that the families with whom I work face uncertain futures.

Even more important than personal political involvement is my responsibility to facilitate marginalized individuals in having a political voice.

The Oregon Housing Alliance created a forum for service recipients to speak directly to legislators. Organizations such as Street Roots, Dignity Village, and JOIN sent delegations to represent the communities who would directly benefit from the proposed initiatives. Organizing the voices of unhoused individuals is inherently difficult, but the chorus that comes from within the community is raw and powerful. It's a chorus that should not only be listened to, but supported. Engaged service recipients, like the several dozen who attended the lobby day in Salem, are leaping over barriers bigger than my own in order to be vocal Oregonians.

I was proud to stand on the Capitol steps in solidarity with a community, who despite being largely ignored by mainstream society, will not stop fighting for housing to become a human right.

Better banking Get it here

A financial cooperative focused on improving the lives of our members and the community. Proudly serving Federal/State/County/City Employees, Veterans, Native Americans, and their families, since 1936.

(503) 275-0300
INFO@USACU.ORG

USACU.ORG/JOINUS

USAGENCIES
CREDIT UNION

Better health here for you

Delivering physical, behavioral health and dental health care for over 230,000 children, families and individuals on the Oregon Health Plan in the Portland Tri-County area.

Together we are **health share**

Health Share of Oregon

www.healthshareoregon.org

Gary Cobb
Community Outreach Coordinator,
Central City Concern



Dignity



Poverty