

Our state needs more homes; let's get started

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SHARE YOUR VISION

The Oregon Housing Alliance encourages you to tell a story about your vision for an Oregon where every single person has a home and how we can get there. Use the hashtag #Homes4Oregon or post on Oregon Housing Alliance Facebook page.

BY MATT KINSHELLA
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Oregonians are responsible and empathetic. We don't want to see our neighbors suffer, and often we're compelled to act when that suffering becomes obvious. At some level we all understand our fates are linked.

But Oregonians are also human, which means we can feel deep empathy for one person — often through personal connection or story — but we have a hard time multiplying that empathy to large groups of people. Even if we understand the suffering, we don't feel it in our gut the same way.

Dr. Paul Slovic at the University of Oregon calls this "psychic numbing," or put another way: If I look at the mass, I will never act.

If I were to introduce you to a starving child who is experiencing homelessness today, there's little doubt your heart would melt. But when I say there are 20,000 students who experienced homelessness last year, the problem can become distant or unimaginable.

In an effort to make that 20,000 number seem more real, the Oregon Housing Alliance piled 20,000 socks on the Capitol steps. Each sock represented a school-age child, and those socks were later donated to Oregonians who needed them. With the help of thousands of individual donors, schools, businesses, nonprofits and faith networks with more than 50 drop-off spots, we were able to visually represent a large number our minds have a hard time grappling with.

That sock unveiling happened on Housing Opportunity Day, March 11. More than 250 people rallied around that pile of socks and met with 50 legislators. We got news stories, and more than 100,000 people saw our hashtag, #20ksocks. The 20,000 socks resonated.

But if you're keeping score at home, March 11 is still far from the end of the legislative session, which concludes in early July. So the question we get asked and are asking ourselves is: What's next?

The answer lies in grappling with the same

issue the socks were meant to deal with but on the solution side of the equation. We need to make people not just understand the solution that homes offer but feel why homes are important.

On Housing Opportunity Day, we weren't just collecting socks to remind people of a big problem. We were asking legislators to solve that problem with \$100 million for homes that will help families with low incomes. We were asking for \$20 million for emergency rent and shelter assistance, \$20 million more to preserve existing affordable homes, and \$5 million to help keep the success of a foreclosure program going.

Those are the numbers. But elected officials and to some extent the larger public will be asking: Why should I care about those numbers?

What we're really asking for is something much more concrete. In the next few months, people who care about safe, decent, affordable homes must make a case for how our housing solutions will transform our communities.

We need more homes, so our kids get up with smiles on their faces, go to school with springs in their steps, and lie down to sleep with dreams in their heads.

Homes, so workers imagine the unimaginable, confront failure with a hearty "Let's try again" and leave the world a better place than the one they inherited.

Homes, so our elderly carry the spirit of a child into old age, make each day productive and pleasant, and feel secure in knowing their time on Earth was used well.

Homes, to shelter us from the storm and warm and replenish our spirits.

We need to tell stories of benevolent, active communities that saw a problem and worked together for lasting solutions, which offer a path forward for us all.

Housing Opportunity Day on March 11 and the 20,000 socks weren't just about making a large number tangible; they were a microcosm of what we can do together as people who care about homes.

There were many leaders from many backgrounds pulling from deep, personal

How do you turn socks into homes?



PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Each sock placed outside the Capitol on March 11 — 20,000 in all — represented an Oregon child without a stable home.

experiences that gave their voices resonance.

Some led us in chants on the Capitol steps, others led us in preparation for legislative meetings and others led us in testimony in front of the House Committee on Human Services and Housing.

One participant held a sign that said: "Have you ever thought: 'I just want to go home!' And then remembered you don't have one?"

Behind every number about the housing need or solutions is the fundamental idea that our success meeting goals as communities and as a state starts with having homes to wake up in and return to at night. Or as Doug Stamm, chief executive officer of one of the state's largest foundations, Meyer Memorial Trust, recently wrote: "Oregon's very future depends on getting affordable housing right."

The lesson we learned when telling the story of 20,000 kids experiencing homelessness was that we cannot let our future rest on the backs of big numbers alone. We have to speak from our hearts and make our neighbors long for the endless possibilities of an Oregon where every single person has a safe, decent, affordable home.