

Melissa, a Street Roots Vendor, and her husband sign the lease on a new apartment, getting them off the streets.



PHOTO BY LEAH NASH

It's time to turn the urgency into action

The Home For Everyone board recently submitted recommendations to the City of Portland and Multnomah County.

Home For Everyone is a plan to bring the community together to oversee

an array of complex services to deliver the best outcomes for ending individual and family homelessness in our region.

"The strength of the Home for Everyone plan is that it addresses both the diversity of populations experiencing homelessness and the range of interventions needed to help them find permanent housing," says Marc Jolin, director

of the Home For Everyone board. "We have a plan and the leadership it will take to turn that sense of urgency into action that generates real and significant positive outcomes for people experiencing homelessness."

The first set of recommendations is to expand shelter beds for women and families. It's the most immediate need. Currently, around 200 homeless women are on waitlists for shelter every night. It's a crime, especially considering many of the women are dealing with an array of challenges, including domestic violence and sexual assault, among other things. Providing safety for women and families on the streets is critical.

The Home For Everyone board also recommended a menu of additional options for elected leaders to consider, including increasing short and long-term rent assistance, Section 8 vouchers, creating more mobile outreach teams and \$20 million for affordable housing development. The recommendations also include allocating resources toward income opportunities to help stabilize people experiencing poverty.

Last, but not least, the group is hoping to leverage local dollars to capitalize on the federal government's plan to help homeless veterans get off the streets.

All of the recommendations come on top of what the current system is already allocating. In total, it's an additional investment of about \$33 million over two years — some of which are one-time allocations and some will be ongoing. In short, it's a heavy lift for our community.

The optimist in me thinks that it's a bold plan to help support people experiencing homelessness and poverty. The pessimist in me wonders if we have the political will to deliver such a plan. It's one thing to develop a plan with stakeholders. It's another to lead our community in prioritizing affordable housing and

homelessness and deliver the resources needed.

The collective thinking is that until we raise the bar and dedicate more local resources, we're not going to gain any ground in the fight against poverty. The newly formed Welcome Home Coalition, which Street Roots helped found, estimates that we will need an additional \$50 million annually to actually tackle the problem. That's no joke.

Having a rental and housing market that is leaving poor and middle-class Portlanders behind doesn't help. It's not just folks on the streets struggling to get out of homelessness. There are also hundreds of families trying to prevent becoming homeless.

Did you know that 7,000 Portland school children reported being homeless at one time or another last year? That's unbelievable. It's also unacceptable. It's impossible to maintain an education without stable housing. The need has never been greater.

Saying all of that, it's not just government or the taxpayers that carry the burden. It's also the responsibility of others to engage in real and intentional ways to support these efforts.

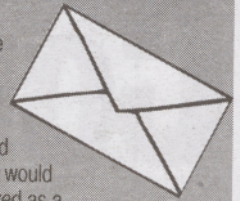
There's no reason that private developers and landlords shouldn't be at the table. We all have a responsibility. I also have to wonder — where is the Paul G. Allen Foundation? We love our Trail Blazers. Heck, we love our Seahawks. I even love reading about Paul Allen's crazy adventures trying to find lost World War II battleships. We know you care about the issue of homelessness. It's time to engage Portlanders on the issue the way we engage the Blazers night-in and night-out.

Then, there are the hospitals. Sure, local hospitals give lots of small community grants, but hospitals in the Portland region are making money hand over fist. We know that in other communities hospitals have stepped up with significant resources to help target vulnerable people on the streets. Let's get real. Study after study show that providing people with housing saves hospitals an enormous amount of money over time by deterring hundreds of emergency room visits due to the harsh realities of homelessness. Not to mention, it's the right thing to do.

At the end of the day, solving the issue of homelessness isn't about more planning. It's about resources and opportunity. No one system can do it alone. Portland, like many other communities, is facing a perfect storm when it comes to tackling the issue of poverty and bridging the gap between the rich and the poor. We need all hands on deck.

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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DIRECTOR'S DESK

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