

# Portland needs affordable housing: Let's do it



*Jes Larson is director of the Welcome Home Coalition, a regional movement of more than 80 organizations and hundreds of individuals devoted to solutions for housing and working to secure new and dedicated resources to better meet our regional affordable housing needs. Larson has worked in housing advocacy and social services in the Portland metro area for the past 10 years.*

**BY JES LARSON**  
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**W**e know *how* to end homelessness. We just need affordable homes to do it.

Recently I visited Dignity Village to thank them for their advocacy work with Welcome Home. Dignity Village is a thriving, active and empowered community of tiny houses, veggie gardens and micro-enterprises. And yet most members hope for a more permanent home with simple things like indoor plumbing and a kitchen for making breakfast. The 20 or so one-room buildings don't generally have electricity, and the 57 community members share just a few bathrooms. The Village is meant to be transitional, a stable place off the streets. But for many, it's become a long-term home because waiting for affordable housing in Portland now takes years. So when Dignity Village invited me out to talk about other opportunities to get involved with housing advocacy, they also asked me to bring some basic information on how to find affordable housing.

Eager to help my new friends at Dignity Village and familiar with the "how to" housing material, I was happy to put on my old case manager hat. Unfortunately, it didn't take long to find myself in the familiar position of defeat. As I presented the material, we flipped through the housing lists, noting closed wait lists and "affordable" rents still out of reach for their incomes. Many in the group replied "I'm not eligible for that one" or "I'm already on that list." It turned out there wasn't much I could offer in the way of help. I was frustrated because I knew the work of housing hadn't always been like this. I used to have lots to offer. I used to know how to help.

I got my start in housing advocacy at Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare in 2003, working with folks struggling with severe mental illnesses. I remember a handful of days on the job when I helped a client move from one apartment to another because things "hadn't worked out." We'd pack up the team car, drive a few blocks across town, and get started with a lease and the new manager at another affordable apartment. We were using "Housing First" before it was a celebrated housing model. We were making sure our vulnerable community members had a safe place to sleep each night. Today, workers around the region know that this kind of casework doesn't happen anymore; it can't. There's no more available affordable housing.

Later, in 2006, I joined the staff at Northwest Pilot Project, where my job was working with folks over 55 who didn't have a

place to live or were about to lose their home. Together, the client and I would figure out how to stabilize their housing with an apartment to rent that they could afford on their own. Each situation presented different specifics and particular needs, but the work was mostly the same. When I started out, the conversation often went like this: We can help you! Let's get started with a spot at the local shelter. While you stay there, we'll apply to the right kinds of apartment buildings, and in about three to four months, you'll have a new subsidized and permanent apartment. This conversation always brought so much relief. When I said "we can help," I meant it, and it sounded like help to them, too.

Over the next eight years, I became more of an expert in the housing field. I learned more tools for overcoming barriers; I built more relationships with landlords and staff from other programs who could help with special needs. I got involved with leadership and advocacy opportunities and started giving trainings so new housing staff from around the field could get the basics and start building connections too. But as I got better, faster and more equipped as an advocate, I also had less to offer people who needed housing.

By 2014, those same first conversations in my office sounded a lot less hopeful — they sounded more like this: We can help. There are local shelters, and we'll try to get you on those lists. It will take a few months to get a spot, and you might have to go through the shelter a few times; they don't let you stay longer than a few months. In the meantime, we'll get you on all the right lists for housing, and in about a year and a half, we can hope for a permanent apartment you can afford. I'm sorry; I don't know where you can sleep tonight.

I had a good job. I loved my job. But more and more, I was defeated in my job because it was a job I couldn't do well.

Today, we know these kinds of conversations are happening in drop-in centers, health clinics and recovery programs, with outreach workers and case managers all over the Portland metro region. We know our skilled professionals with degrees and years of experience, who work collaboratively in coordinated systems and use cutting-edge models with dedicated compassion, have little to offer the people they serve. They go to work each day to help people in housing crises, with every skill and tool possible to help, except the one we need most — housing.

How did we get here? Why does it take as long as three years to find an apartment you can afford if your income is from Social

Security or a minimum-wage job? Why do 68 percent of families with very low incomes spend more than half of their checks on rent and risk losing their home to another rent increase? Why are more than 5,000 people sleeping homeless every night of the year, in our shelters, in their cars and hidden among our urban landscapes? Why do case managers everywhere say, "We can help; here's a wait list."

Like many cities around the country, we have a severe shortage of affordable housing. In Multnomah County, the shortage is 23,000 affordable homes. In the tri-county metro region, the number tops 40,000. This means families trying to get by with less than a \$15-per-hour waged job have a 3 in 5 chance of finding a home they can afford. For retired grandparents living on Social Security pensions, the odds are much worse. This means that nonprofit organizations and dedicated social workers trying to help thousands of people out of homelessness have nothing but waitlists to offer.

We know how to end homelessness, and we're ready to do it. We have the right people, the right organizations and the right skills all ready to go to work. What we don't have are affordable homes. The federal government now invests four times more resources in home ownership for middle- and upper-income earners than we do for low-income renters. But we can't wait for the federal government to correct its course. We must take up the cause of housing ourselves, here in the Portland metro region. We must believe that we can end homelessness, and we must know that we should.

Forty years ago, Portland metro leaders and advocates came together to address the problem of urban sprawl happening across the county. They wanted to protect our region from the loss of farmland and the countryside, the threats to our climate and the livability of our cities. They organized, mobilized and led cutting-edge policies to forever protect Oregon and put us on the map for our Urban Growth Boundaries and progressive politics.

We have that opportunity again today. As we sit at the top of the list of gentrifying cities and homelessness continues to grow across our urban landscape, we can again put ourselves on the map — this time as the place that ended homelessness and displacement. We can be the place that makes housing a right to opportunity for all our residents. #WhyNotPDX?



# Dignity



# Poverty