

Trip down the rabbit hole of homeless 'services'

Jamie didn't fit the profile for many agencies. She had a job. She had no addiction. She was mentally healthy.



Mary Metheney is the retired homeless liaison from Beaverton and currently works as a McKinney-Vento Homeless Education coach for the Beaverton School District.

BY MARY METHENEY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Ask Jamie what the highest point in her life was, and she will quickly answer that it was the day her son was born, six years ago. The lowest point? The night she had a pocketful of Shari's Restaurant gift cards as her only means of sheltering her little family from a cold and stormy night.

Eleven years ago, Jamie was in great shape. She had a job as a Head Start teacher/family advocate and was poised to move up. A change in funding and policy caused her to lose that job. At that same point, she met John, a charismatic, handsome, sound studio owner. John was living a double life for most of the 10 years they were together. He traveled frequently on business but brought home plenty of money. John now sits in a federal prison, awaiting trial for sex trafficking and other crimes that could garner him many decades behind bars.

The day the FBI surrounded her home, Jamie was playing with the children in her successful child care business. The agents arrived in full SWAT gear, entered her home and arrested John. Agents had climbed trees in the yard and had guns drawn. In the course of one devastating afternoon, she lost her business and her partner and, soon after, her home.

A sister offered shelter in her home, but conflict arose, leaving Jamie with limited options. By then, living in Portland, Jamie found a room to rent on Craigslist. The homeowner was a single woman with

mental health issues. When the landlady's behavior became erratic and money went missing, Jamie was forced to leave.

At this point, she began her trip down the rabbit hole of homeless "services" in the metro area of Portland. The array of programs, obsolete information and options unavailable to Jamie is too long to list. She didn't fit the profile for many agencies because she had a job, had no addiction issues and was mentally healthy. She was also a mother, and families are hard to shelter. The victims assistance program offered her a few nights in a shelter, as long as she could get to the coast. Her car had given up the ghost and had been sold to a junkyard. It didn't take long for Jamie to blow through her Department of Human Services domestic violence grant on motel rooms.

Community Action in Washington County offered Jamie a housing assessment. Jamie was told that no funds were available for her at that time. She was told that she would move to the top of the waiting list for a family shelter only after staying in a motel where a third party was paying for the room. This became the lowest point — standing on a corner with her exhausted child, waiting for a church member to pay for a motel room.

Jamie posted a plea on Facebook, hoping to find a room to rent, and her post was seen by one of the homeless liaisons from the Beaverton School District. "I think that we might be able to help you." That became a beacon of hope. A local philanthropic foundation paid for the motel for a night and

church members and another individual paid for three more. This gave the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education staff time to contact a second church as a last attempt to find some kind of stability for this family. A few weeks later, from the security of a temporary home provided by the church, Jamie has been able to look for an apartment that will accept her despite an earlier eviction. A rapid re-housing grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development will help Jamie pay her rent once she finds a place.

Jamie's son will be enrolled in a local school in the fall for the first time. He is excited to be in a class with other children and will no longer rely on motel Wi-Fi to connect him with his teachers. Through sheer tenacity and the help of strangers walking with her through this difficult time, this mother will create a stable and positive home for herself and her child.

Jamie's journey has been dramatic, but it is sadly not unique. The "village" that came to her aid was made up of individuals, organizations, churches and eventually government agencies. Jamie wants her story to be told. She wants us to know that she did everything in her power to end her homelessness. It is uncomfortable for many to accept, but the safety net we believe is in place is badly torn.

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