

Federal plan has promise, but needs more to deliver

This month, a seldom-quoted document called the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness got a bit of a makeover.

It's only five years old, but the nation's only comprehensive policy for addressing homelessness was falling behind the times. One of the most notable is the realization that it's a lot tougher than just pointing a finger at states and demanding results: In fact, the feds have pushed the goal for ending chronic homelessness back two years to 2017, blaming a lack of Congressional support.

EDITORIAL

The changes also include adding an operational definition for an end to homelessness. Yes, the 2010 original seems to have left out that bit of whimsy. As proposed, the new operational definition states that an end to homelessness means that every community will have a system in place that ensures homelessness is prevented whenever possible or is otherwise a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.

Maybe that will put an end to the shifting sands of defining homelessness that has been problematic since states began implementing 10-year plans to end homelessness. Regardless, it's a needed definition, emphasizing the imperative on prevention and pleasantly void of complex parameters that parse those declared worthy from the simply destitute.

The changes to the federal plan also emphasize the connection between housing and health care and link services for people experiencing homelessness. Medical respite programs, like our Recuperative Care Program in Multnomah County, are proven to be cost-effective alternatives to long-term hospitalization. More importantly, it is humane treatment for people experiencing homelessness who are discharged from

hospitals yet are too sick or injured to recover on the streets. Getting the health care system working in tandem with housing makes common sense, as each network is highly influenced by the success of the other. The federal Housing and Human Services is promoting using Medicaid assistance to include permanent, supportive housing for people experiencing and at risk of homelessness. And it should. Housing is a social determinant of health.

And, of course, the plan recognizes the obvious: The need for more affordable, stable, low-income housing. It also encourages public-private partnerships, and synching networks between the streets and housing and assistance opportunities, and promoting "housing first" and rapid-rehousing programs. All well and good and in many cases working tremendously right here in Portland and Multnomah County.

All great, but where's the money?

The president's 2016 budget includes nearly \$5.5 billion dedicated to homelessness assistance, plus additional housing vouchers to help a whole range of low-income families, youths and veterans. That's a \$345 million increase over the previous budget and is to be dispersed in the form of state and local grants.

It's a start, but the forces of under-employment, suppressed wages, social displacement and a skyrocketing housing market, among other economic factors, remain unfettered and continue to work against us. Reversing poverty has to be a nationwide priority with all those factors in our scope, because homelessness is their creation. Until then, we will continue to see the dates extend into the future, on an obscure federal document, to meet our endless goal of ending homelessness.

Gentrification a sweet tune for the privileged

The latest 2015 Multnomah County Homeless Count was released in early June.

If homelessness, housing and wages are any indicator of how much Black Lives Matter in Portland — then we are failing, badly.

Homelessness in the black community is skyrocketing. "African Americans have the highest rates of over-representation among communities of color, making up 24 percent of the homeless population compared with

7 percent of the county's population as a whole," according to the latest Multnomah County street count. "African-Americans also experienced the greatest growth in homelessness between 2013 and 2015.

This comes on the heels of the State of Housing report put out last month by the City of Portland showing that there wasn't one neighborhood that black and Native American Portlanders could afford a two-bedroom apartment. Not one. Zero.

"Correlations can be made between the fact that black people have median incomes that are less than half of their white counterparts and that housing rates have gone so high that there are few neighborhoods left that people can afford," says Karol Collymore with the Equity Foundation.

It's true.

According to the Urban League's latest report, State of Black Oregon, the unemployment rate among African-Americans in Oregon age 16 to 19 was 55 percent.

If all of these facts aren't examples of blatant racism in progressive Portland, then I don't know what is. We haven't even touched on the long history of inequities in the criminal justice system and education systems.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum a different group of people live: a mostly white and progressive population that are finding Portland to be quite nice. A sustainable city filled with hope, creativity and innovation: those with resources and an education, they call it paradise.

"Creating walkability with restaurants and stores can help transition an edgy part of town into one that is hip and hopping with pedestrians," said National Association of Realtors Chief Economist Lawrence Yun at the latest national realtors conference in May. "This type of real estate development transforms the community for the better."

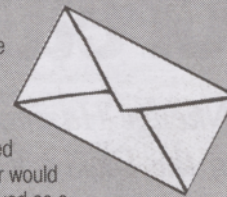
The coffee is brewing, the whiskey is flowing and the music is playing. There is money to be made and lots of it. It's a sweet tune for those privileged enough to hear its jingle.

"The soul of our community is currently being tested," says Charles McGee with the Black Parent Initiative. "We need to fight to maintain the Portland many of us fell in love with. We all benefit from a more diverse community. Until all Portlanders are able to access stable housing and living wage jobs we aren't living up to our community's promise. We can do better. We have to do better."

The question we have before us, readers, isn't whether racism is alive and well in Portland. It's what are we going to do about it?

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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