



PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

Together, local and federal leadership can end crisis

Homelessness is hell, especially during the winter months.

This past week, during one of the downpours, I witnessed a homeless woman so soaked to the bone that she simply sat down in the middle of the sidewalk, took off all her clothes and said, "I give up. God, please take me."

It was a sad affair.

As I called for help, people walked by, some making snide comments, others with horrified looks on their faces having witnessed such human suffering.

Sadly, I don't know what happened to her. I assume she got help, I hope she did. It has haunted me all week. I should have done more. I tell myself I did the right thing by calling first responders. She is one of many people that haunt me.

What has become normal for me, and others living and working on the front lines of poverty, isn't normal for the rest of society. Nor should it be.

We shouldn't be responding to small children living on the streets, or an elderly person who can barely walk sleeping on concrete. Throw in a cold spell and lots of rain and it's more or less a living hell for many. People get sick and some will die. That's the harsh reality.

It's one of the many reasons I fully support our local governments' efforts to declare a homeless emergency. There's a lot that can be done, including creating more shelter space for our most vulnerable residents, setting aside space for tent cities, and investing in more housing citywide.

This week, Mayor Charlie Hales will be hosting mayors from San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle and Eugene. The goal is to share ideas on what can be done around the issue of homelessness and housing, along with trying to leverage more federal support for the issue.

The cynic in me thinks it's probably nothing more than a feel good exercise to share ideas, and that nothing concrete will come from the

meeting.

The optimist in me thinks that if these mayors really do have some skin in the game, they have a chance to change the course of history.

On its face, one city declaring a homeless emergency is just a drop in the bucket. Having multiple cities declare a homeless emergency begins to create a ripple effect regionally. If even more cities around the country, say dozens, declare emergencies, then you're talking about creating an effort so forceful that the federal government has to respond.

Let's be clear, friends, there is an emergency. Don't let anyone tell you that there's not. From the rich to the poor and everyone in between we can see with our own two ears the human suffering occurring on our streets. We're going on 30 plus years of modern-day homelessness. During that time, thousands of people have died on Portland's streets alone. More than you can imagine.

Saying that, the homeless crisis in American is manmade. It's the result of billions of federal dollars of disinvestment in social services and public housing over the past three decades. The problem can be solved. In fact, history tells us that such monumental problems in the past have been overcome. It's the very reason we have things like Social Security, the GI Bill, Medicaid and healthcare reform, to name a few.

It's my opinion that advocates like myself and organizations like Street Roots can have a real impact on local policies and moving the issue of homelessness and housing forward locally and statewide. Federally, it's a whole other ball game. It's where we've been stuck.

How do we build a national movement? It's been a question that's gone unanswered for three decades. Who would have thought that mayors up and down the West Coast would have the potential to seize the moment and create a national movement? Let's hope the mayors understand their own importance in the course of history. Let's also hope the federal government is listening. Millions of Americans are depending on it.



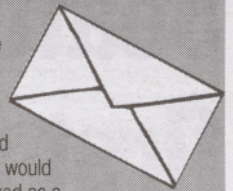
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.

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Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-5657
Fax: 503-227-3117
www.streetroots.org
www.news.streetroots.org
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m., Sat. and 7:30-11 a.m. Sun.

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israel@streetroots.org
Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org
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cole@streetroots.org
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