

Integrated city, county effort best approach to homelessness



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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNISTS

An accident brought Sara to a homeless shelter last year. Hit by a car and left unable to work, she quickly discovered that disability benefits were too little to cover rent and expenses, and too much to qualify for additional assistance.

She and her teenage daughter stayed with family for a time, but eventually landed in a homeless shelter. Sara was, in her own words, "too rich to be poor, and too poor to find housing."

Sara is one of roughly 4,000 people who sleep on our streets, in cars, in shelters or in temporary housing each night - all because they cannot afford a permanent place to live.

Homelessness in Portland and across Multnomah County is a crisis that all of us feel, and to make real progress we must all work together to solve it.

A little more than a year ago, the City of Portland and Multnomah County brought business and faith leaders together with community organizations to form a unified plan to address this crisis, led by a partnership called A Home For Everyone.

By aligning our resources and expanding our investments in services that help people find a home, we increased the number of people we housed from 3,000 to 3,500 last fiscal year. Between January and December 2015, we housed nearly 700 veterans.

While we are making progress, we must do more.

Statistics show us that. The number of people on our streets and shelters has remained relatively unchanged from 2013. Our community has experienced a 48 percent increase in the number of unsheltered African Americans in the last

two years. And during the same period, the number of adult women experiencing homelessness jumped 15 percent. The number of families with children experiencing homelessness also has risen, and the homeless population includes a persistently high number of people with disabilities.

We must address this emergency on every front, including by building more affordable housing, expanding shelters and preventing homelessness before it even occurs. But we must also ensure that we maximize the impact of the dollars we spend.

Significant public and private resources have been committed to fighting homelessness, but the system that delivers services to those in need remains divided.

The City of Portland and Multnomah County each provide services, targeted toward different populations: the city focuses on single adults, while the county focuses on families, youth and survivors of domestic violence. A divided system is more difficult to navigate by those in need of assistance, and is less operationally efficient.

We can no longer allow artificial government divisions to be a barrier to people in need of help.

We have seen through stories like that of William Hudson that collaboration can effect tremendous positive change in someone's life.

Hudson, a U.S. Army veteran, became homeless after losing his subsidized apartment when he left town for a month to respond to a family emergency. When he returned, he spent three months on the streets. He was able to find supportive services and housing through the dedicated outreach effort to veterans that was undertaken by "A Home For Every Veteran," part of the Home For Everyone

consortium.

But for many homeless individuals and families, it's not clear to whom they should turn for help.

Last year, Portland and Multnomah County began exploring bringing all homeless services together under a joint office of homeless services, guided by a shared commitment to improve outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. With shared values and a common agenda, this integrated office is a natural next step in maximizing the impact of A Home for Everyone. It will build on the investments we have made and further aligning our resources.

This office, housed at Multnomah County, would include staff who administer contracts for services, manage systems of care, and oversee system reporting and evaluation. These employees would also manage and monitor funds issued by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

A joint office would also enable the city and county to more quickly adapt to the changing need in our community. With a data-driven commitment to continuous improvement, it will foster innovation, collaboration and an open and evolving dialog with the community.

Most importantly, it would be accessible and responsive to the needs of people experiencing homelessness, to ensure that we are moving as many people as possible back into permanent housing, and ensuring that they have safe shelter if permanent housing is not immediately available.

Next Tuesday the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners and the Portland City Council will meet to discuss this proposal and we hope that the community will stay engaged as we take the next steps.



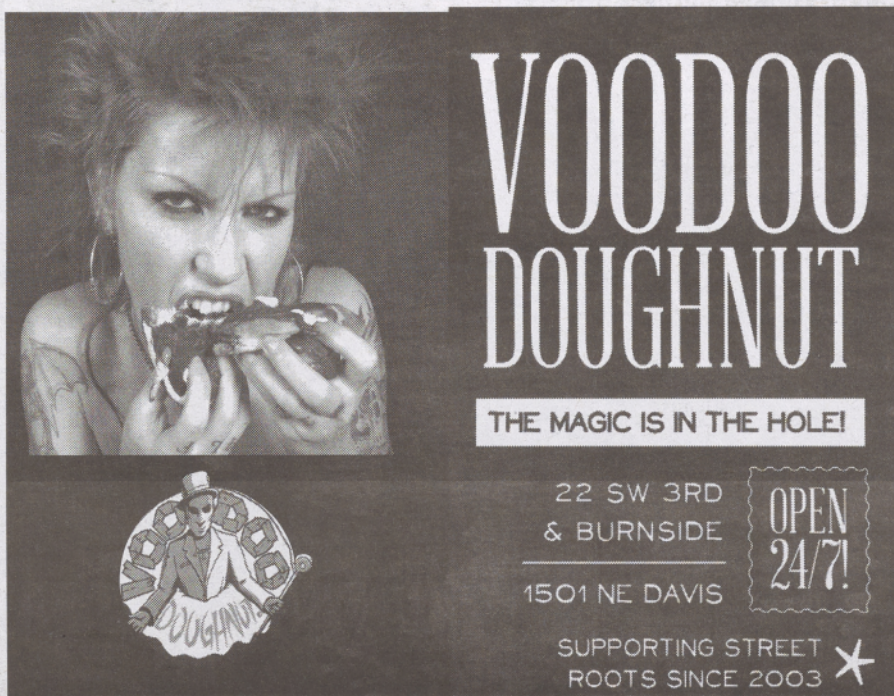
Dan Saltzman is the Portland City Commissioner in charge of housing



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