

A complex problem calls for multi-dimensional solutions

Time and again, despite the rhetoric, we are reminded that homelessness is not a one-dimensional issue. It is the byproduct of the unlimited combinations of economic, social and environmental forces. Its roots extend far into our educational institutions, our health care structure, our criminal justice system and the incarceration industry. And that's even before you stir in the housing crisis, wildly outrageous rents

and the loss of middle-income jobs.

Homelessness is a complex and sophisticated issue, just like the human beings living through it: We would say survive, but not all of them do. All of these forces push people downward and keep them there.

The Springwater Corridor is the latest flashpoint in this decades-long struggle around modern homelessness. It is drawing fire from all directions – toward the people who are homeless and their supporters – and back again.

Sensationalized figures aside, there are undoubtedly hundreds of people out there, and like any fledgling society, it features the good, the bad and the ugly. It also features perseverance, ingenuity and compassion.

In recent weeks, the housed and homeless alike have been coming together, organizing around civility, safety and sustainability for people on the corridor. Some of it is activism, but most of it is people trying to do the humane thing for people who have nothing. Because cursing at the problem – no matter how cathartic – doesn't move the ball forward.

How often do we hear the response – after an individual or group of people experiencing homelessness make do – “That isn't a solution.”

Dignity Village, Right 2 Dream Too, church lot camping, small camps, emergency shelter, etc.: That isn't a solution, people said.

That depends on what you're calling the problem. Yes, it's the lack of affordable housing, jobs, health and support. But if you're homeless, it also includes the

cold, hunger, isolation and vulnerability.

The solution, like the problem, is multi-dimensional, and has to span both long-term economic and social sustainability with the immediacy of sundown. To say people don't want help is to not understand the complexity of what helping really means. And to equate help with a shelter mat is missing the bigger picture entirely.

In the past year we have seen a lot of ideas laid out on the table, none of them without controversy: Sanctioned camping by the city; a proposal to create a massive consolidated shelter space; a construction excise tax and a ballot measure to bond for low-income housing construction. We've also seen rules around rent increases and eviction notices, because the problem doesn't begin on the streets. It begins in the apartments across this city where families are becoming financially drained.

And we also have to find a way for people on the streets to exist safely and peacefully, because mass shelters and mats on the floor are not good for everyone for myriad reasons – mental illness, domestic violence, PTSD to name a few.

Street Roots is excited by the opportunities ahead, but we're also cautious of the fallout that sometimes follows. If a group's big idea is questioned or challenged by advocates and the homeless, the rejection becomes another reason to blame those they profess to want to help. We've heard it time and time again: What's that you say? A mat on the floor in a room with 100 other homeless people is not for you? Why do we waste our time if you choose to be homeless? And so it goes, in many shapes and forms.

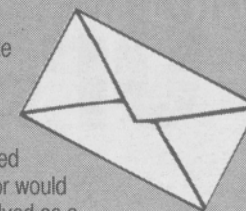
That kind of misguided attitude only pushes people further into their corners when we really need to be out pushing the envelop. The problem doesn't look like it did 30 years ago, and neither can the solution.

Our approaches can't be all-or-nothing propositions if we want to succeed. No single plan is going to have universal support, or come without its critics. That's a good thing. Discussion and debate – not ultimatums – are the cornerstones of progress.

Our approaches can't be all-or-nothing propositions if we want to succeed. No single plan is going to have universal support, or come without its critics. That's a good thing. Discussion and debate – not ultimatums – are the cornerstones of progress.

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.



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.

Advertising

Interested in advertising in Street Roots?
Contact Israel Bayer at israel@streetroots.org

Staff

Executive Director Israel Bayer
israel@streetroots.org
Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org
Vendor Program Director Cole Merkel
cole@streetroots.org
Operations Director Sarah Beecroft
Development Director Sarah Cloud
Program Assistant Scott Jackson, Jesuit Volunteer
Development Assistant Patricia Romero
Reporters Emily Green, Suzanne Zalokar, Sarah Hansell, Leonora Ko, Jared Paben, Amanda Waldroupe, Stephen Quirke
Photographers Diego Diaz, Joe Glode, Ben Brink
Editorial Assistant Monica Kwasnik
Canvasser Desmond Hardison

Board of Directors

Chairman Brad Taylor
Vice-Chairman Rachel Langford
Treasurer Heather Stadick
Secretary Amber Bielman
Directors Bruce Anderson, Rich Rodgers, Michael Anderson, Leo Rhodes, Nora Coon, Marcus Swift

Volunteers

Jan Bayer, John Barker, Stacey Heath, Stephanie Holum, Anjali Rathore, Zoe Klingmann, Haven Herrin, Dan Jones, Rob Shyrock, Dennis Hogan, Tom Wright, Eileen Deerdock, Vince Waldman, Judy Taylor, Karen Allen, Monica McKune, Susan Wolfe, Lucas Hawthorne, Thomas Buell Jr., Jeanie Lunsford, Yasmin Amirsoleymani, Jason Cohen, Tom Ray, Doug Spangle, Susannah Kamala, Jon Raymond, Hilary Smith, Diana Richardson, Cherie Manning
If you are interested in volunteering with Street Roots, please submit a volunteer application at streetroots.org/volunteer. Or call our volunteer coordinator for more information at 503-228-5657.



PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER