

You can be the difference between life and death

For people experiencing homelessness, 2017 started just like 2016 ended: Survival.

On Jan. 2, Mark Elliot Johnson was found dead of hypothermia in East Portland after temperatures dipped below freezing. According to police, they found the Johnson in a doorway with a

pillow and blanket. He died cold and alone, without a safe place to call home.

The reality is people experiencing homelessness know firsthand that the chance of dying on the streets is very real.

Some people wonder, "How could anyone stay

outside given the cold spell?"

"It's hard," said Sean, a Street Roots vendor who sleeps outside. "We do look out for one another on the streets. You have to make a judgment call on if you should get into a shelter or not. Shelters can be a traumatic experience for some people. It typically doesn't stay cold for too long and if you have the right gear you should be fine. That doesn't mean it isn't dangerous, regardless of the weather. Being homeless isn't easy by any means. It's all so grueling on your mind and body."

It's true. Homelessness is grueling on your mind and body.

From 2011 to 2015, 279 individuals passed away homeless on the streets of Multnomah County. That doesn't include those who were homeless but died in hospitals or under medical care.

The number of deaths among people experiencing homelessness in Multnomah County in 2015 was the highest it has been since we began counting five years ago: Eighty-eight people. There's no reason to think that last year in 2016, those numbers won't be in the dozens. It's simply unacceptable.

Since 2011, hypothermia has contributed to three deaths, but was not the immediate cause of death. In 2013, hypothermia caused one death.

Portland Police Bureau spokesman Pete Simpson told Street Roots that they have been responding to dozens of calls this week from the community

worried about people on the streets.

Every night during the winter there is a small army of volunteers, including the fire bureau and nonprofit workers on the streets to make sure people experiencing homelessness are safe. It's not easy for anyone.

So what can you do?

Don't hesitate to offer a Street Roots vendor or people on the streets a hot cup of tea or coffee. It's a small gesture, but one that allows people to connect and make sure they are actually doing OK given the circumstances.

You can also donate blankets, socks and gloves to organizations throughout the region. For more information, visit 211info to find an organization near you.

Warming centers are open in Portland and Gresham during day and night, including Multnomah County Libraries. To assist someone in locating shelter and transportation to shelter, please call 211. Calls can be answered in more than 150 languages.

If you see someone outside, unsheltered, whose life appears to be in danger or is in an apparent medical crisis, call 9-1-1. Otherwise, if you see someone about whom you are concerned, such as not being dressed for the conditions, call police non-emergency 503-823-3333 and request a welfare check for that person.

Don't hesitate. It's better to be safe than sorry. You might just save a life – literally.

More so, homelessness isn't a seasonal experience. Surviving a Portland winter, regardless of the temperature, comes with its own set of complications. By the time the winter ends, many people on the streets will have lived through the flu multiple times or experienced pneumonia. It's hell.

The homeless and housing crisis is real. It's an ongoing emergency that should be treated as such – an emergency that could be avoided with more affordable housing production and better tenant protections. Until then, people shouldn't be shocked that someone froze to death on our streets. In fact, dozens more are in peril right now throughout Multnomah County. Every day is life or death.



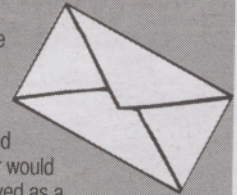
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER