

Be safe, be kind, be alert

Four people have frozen to death on Portland's streets since Jan. 1. City and county officials along with homeless outreach organizations have been working around the clock. It's a nightmare scenario for people sleeping outside.

Emergency shelters and warming centers around the region have opened, but unfortunately the community isn't able to reach everyone.

Readers will ask me,

Israel, why aren't people experiencing homelessness going into shelters? Many people experiencing a mental health crisis can't be around other people in large groups. No one has a plan for that.

I can't tell you the number of times Street Roots has worked with someone having a mental health collapse and there's simply nowhere for that person to access services. Social service agencies are overwhelmed. First responders don't have an answer. We offer individuals a hot cup of coffee and a restroom. After that, individuals are cast back out into the wilderness with no clear plan for how to address their mental health crisis. It's a frustrating and sad reality.

More so, many people experiencing addiction also choose to deal with the cold on their own. Why wouldn't they? They watch people die every single week on the streets.

Four people freezing to death on Portland's streets since New Year's is a wake-up call. Unfortunately, the wake-up call has less to do with shelter capacity and more to do with the lack of mental health services and housing. Long after the snow and cold are gone people will still be dying on our streets.

Saying that, it's important to recognize the many volunteers, outreach workers and first responders working on the streets to save people's lives. People are tired. They continue on. Working around the clock to save people's lives.

It's also worth noting that some social service agencies close their doors during snowstorms. If your mission is to serve people experiencing homelessness and you close your doors during a snowstorm you might want to reevaluate your priorities. It's unacceptable, period.

In 2015, an average of more than 7 people died every month in Multnomah County. Some chose suicide over living on the

streets, others died horrible deaths after having terminal illnesses. Many died of drug overdoses, some were self-medicating due to their homelessness and/or mental illness.

Homelessness is a sick and twisted deal where you're lucky to get out alive. You most certainly will be traumatized for life by the experience. It's hard to find the sunny side of the street.

In the meantime, be kind. Be alert out there, readers.

Warming centers are open in Portland and Gresham during day and night. 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.

This week has certainly has been a wake-up call for me. In many ways, working on the streets for so long and helping coordinate the annual homeless death count with the medical examiner and health department – people dying on the streets had become so normalized in my experience that the news of another homeless person dying barely even phases me. That's not OK.

The reality is that every time someone dies on our streets it should be a wake-up call for all of us. That housing should be prioritized at all levels of government and that in fact homelessness or someone dying on the streets is anything but normal.

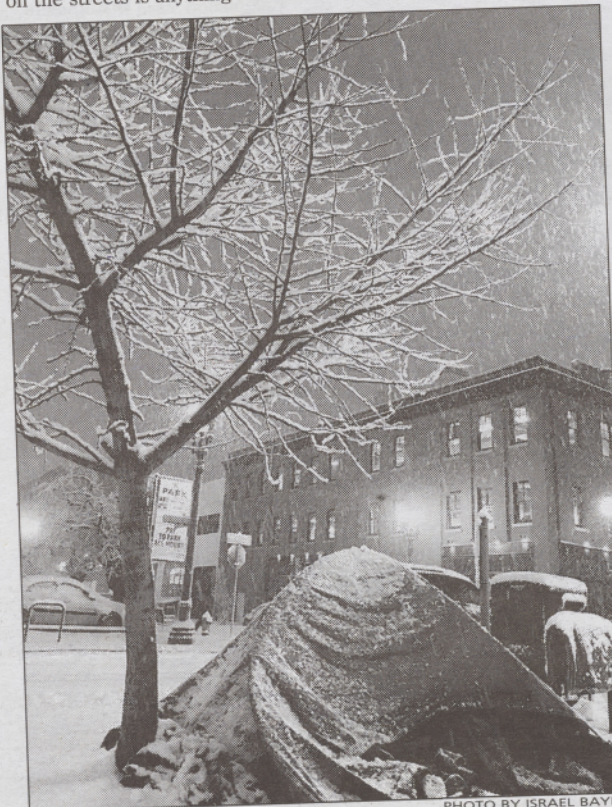
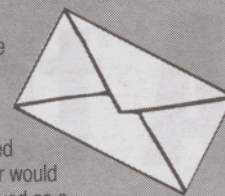


PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

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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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By Israel Bayer

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