



Veterans in the balance

Trump's proposed budget threatens to unravel Portland's success housing veterans

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After living in his car, homeless, for a little over a year, Daniel Kallunki moved into a one-bedroom apartment near Troutdale last November, less than a month after receiving a Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) voucher.

He's able to better manage his multiple sclerosis, a diagnosis he received in March 2014. The illness forced him to quit his job, which caused him to lose his apartment and then become homeless.

Kallunki, 39, is also now able to see his 11-year old daughter regularly – she stays with him every Wednesday and every other weekend. Kallunki lives near her school, and he has a new job, working as a peer mentor at Transition Projects, Inc.

Living in an apartment again, he said, has been “a night and day” difference.

“I'm able to live a life,” he continued. “That's priceless.”

Kallunki is a Navy veteran and one of more than 1,300 homeless veterans who have moved into permanent housing since 2015, including 461 veterans who were chronically homeless (homeless for a year or more), according to A Home for Everyone, the city-county joint initiative to address homelessness.

In 2015, the city of Portland, Multnomah County and Home Forward – the Portland area's housing authority – stepped up efforts to house veterans, joining the nationwide Mayor's Challenge to End Veterans Homelessness, spurred on by President Barack Obama. One year later, the U.S.

Interagency Council on Homelessness certified that Multnomah County had virtually eliminated veteran homelessness – making the effort perhaps the most successful focused attempt to end homelessness in the Portland area's history.

There are veterans who continue to become homeless. But those numbers are small and a new Veteran-By-Name list, which was created in 2015 and identifies all veterans who are homeless in the Portland area, allows the system to quickly identify and provide housing to homeless veterans within 90 days.

But those accomplishments may now hang in the balance. Not funding veteran's programs is largely considered political suicide. But President Donald Trump has proposed the deepest cuts to the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) department since the Reagan administration. Trump's proposal defunds the Interagency Council on Homelessness, and grant funding from the Veterans Affairs administration, which played a significant role in ending veteran's homelessness in the Portland area, expires this summer.

On Tuesday, May 23, the Trump administration released its proposed 2018 budget. Among many drastic cuts to federal programs such as Medicaid, food stamps and other anti-poverty programs – while increasing defense spending – the budget proposes to cut \$7.4 billion dollars, or 15 percent, from the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) budget.

The cuts include eliminating the Community Development Block Grant and HOME Investment Partnership funds, which provide funding for urban renewal projects and which Portland has relied heavily upon for its homeless service programs.

Rental assistance programs would be cut by 5 percent compared to this year's funding levels. Those programs, which include Section 8 and VASH vouchers, cap the amount of rent low-income people pay at 30 percent of their income.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimated in its analysis of the proposed budget, released on May 23, that approximately 250,000 households could lose rental assistance, “putting them at immediate risk of eviction and homelessness.”

The proposed budget would not fund additional VASH vouchers, which combine Section 8 rent assistance and supportive services available at VA medical centers, and are reserved specifically for low-income and homeless veterans. The vouchers are considered the most important federal tool that exists to end veteran's homelessness.

Congress will not approve a federal budget until October, so it is still unknown how, exactly, federal housing programs in the Portland area will be affected.

Michael Buonocore, the executive director of Home Forward, is approaching the situation with pragmatic optimism.

“There is always a significance distance between the president's budget and what gets passed,” he said. “Everything we're hearing has reinforced (that) in this particular case – the blueprint is not

grounded in a political reality that was reflected in Congress.”

Bobby Weinstock, a housing consultant with Northwest Pilot Project, a social service agency for elderly low-income people, thinks that not funding veteran's services is politically untenable.

“Any call for a cut in veteran's funding would be dead in the water,” Weinstock said. “Veterans have more political support on both sides of the aisle in Congress ... than other homeless populations because there is the desire among both Democratic and Republican members of Congress to try to do something for the people who serve the country in that way.”

More money, not less, is needed to renew existing housing vouchers, according to a January 2017 report released by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a progressive think tank that analyzes the impact of federal and state budget policies.

The center estimates that approximately \$18.86 billion dollars is needed to renew existing housing vouchers, due to inflation and rising rents. The report found without additional funding for housing vouchers, “most housing agencies will be forced to cut the number of low-income households they assist.”

According to the report, 33,808 housing vouchers were used in Oregon in 2016. More than 400 vouchers were cut when the Senate passed a spending bill earlier this year. An additional 1,657 vouchers could be cut under a continuing resolution currently being considered to fund the federal

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