

VETERANS, from page 4

government for the rest of 2017.

The impact of rental increases on vouchers is playing itself out in the Portland area – already, Home Forward has had to use some of its reserve funding to pay for its existing vouchers. “We’re in a difficult situation in that we need increased funding to keep pace with the market,” Buonocore said. “Reduced funding is (an even worse) situation.”

Home Forward also decided in April to not draw names from the waiting list for Section 8 vouchers at all this year, meaning that nearly 3,000 Portland-area families hoping to receive a voucher must wait at least another calendar year.

If funding for VASH and Section 8 vouchers are cut, Buonocore estimates that Home Forward could continue paying for its existing vouchers for another year. After that, he said, “we would have to start planning for a following year and work with the community about how we absorb those cuts.”

Weinstock worries more for other populations of low-income people who rely upon HUD funding, such as low-income seniors, people with disabilities and people who are poor simply because they have minimum wage jobs.

“If the federal government reduces the amount of money flowing into Section 8 program, that will basically increase homelessness,” he said.

And even if funding for VASH vouchers remains flat, it’s possible that homelessness among veterans would increase once again.

Much of the success of Portland’s effort to end veteran homelessness was due to a massive influx of federal funding starting in 2015.

Transition Projects, Inc., one of Portland’s largest homeless service agencies, received two grants from the VA’s Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program in 2015, totaling \$7.3 million dollars. The SSVF program pays for supportive services such as rental

assistance, outreach, case management and helping veterans apply for benefits through the VA and the Social Security Administration.

The number of VASH vouchers also dramatically increased from 70 vouchers in 2009 to 591 vouchers that are currently being used. In addition, Home Forward dedicates 50 vouchers to veterans ineligible for VASH vouchers. Veterans are also given priority when affordable housing units operated by Home Forward became available.

The city and county spent an additional \$1.3 million dollars on homeless veterans services each year in 2016 and 2017.

Altogether, the funding paid for a wide range of services that made rapidly housing homeless veterans possible. The money paid for hiring 29 people who work as case managers, screeners, attorneys, job and benefits specialists who worked directly with veterans.

Also, \$1.6 million was used to provide rental assistance, which subsidizes the amount of rent a person pays until their income rises, to 450 households. A 25-bed shelter for homeless veterans opened last year, and a 50-unit studio apartment building that opened in July 2016 is also master-leased by agencies to be used by program clients.

The funds also created a Landlord Recruitment & Retention Team, which works with landlords who prioritize renting to veterans. Among other things, the team negotiates lowering rents, eliminating screening criteria and reducing security deposits.

A pool of flexible funding was also created to help people pay for security deposits, application fees, past due utility bills from prior housing, or transportation to meet with landlords or property managers, if necessary—which all can be barriers to quickly moving someone into housing.

Both VA grants expire this summer. Alex Glover, TPI’s housing services director, said that TPI has already reapplied for both of them, saying that “we are well-positioned to be refunded.”

According to data kept by TPI, there are fewer veterans becoming homeless than those moving into permanent housing. Glover said TPI and the other agencies involved in veteran’s homelessness would begin shifting the funding’s focus to preventing veterans from becoming homeless.

“There’s not too much being done to prevent homelessness at this point,” Glover said. “We still see a constant need for re-housing of homeless veterans and prevention services for homeless veterans.”

Auxiliary services are also facing elimination, which will only aggravate options for veterans in need of services.

Among them is the Legal Services Corporation, which is slated for defunding under Trump’s budget. That would mean a cut of \$4.5 million in legal services for low-income Oregonians, including legal aid to secure housing for nearly 400 veterans statewide. That’s according to a budget assessment released by Democrat representatives on the House Appropriations Committee.

Glover said that TPI and other services have already started planning what to do in the case the funding is not renewed, including identifying more households most vulnerable to reentering homelessness and cutting staff positions.

He said that no one would immediately become homeless if funding were cut. “As far as what’s been communicated from the VA, if the projects aren’t renewed, there will be some scaling down over time,” Glover said. “(And) there are other programs ... we could leverage.”

It would be hard to sustain over time, however. “If this funding is not renewed, veterans are going to spend a lot more time on the streets or in shelters before finding housing,” Glover said.

Kallunki doubts that he would have been able to move into his apartment so quickly without the robust amount of services available to him.

“I had a lot of worries about running into

road blocks,” he said, including turning him down for housing because of his credit and rental history, which Kallunki describes as “solid,” but not perfect.

When he applied for his apartment, he saw that the application required that his wages be two and a half times more than the rent, among other things. Kallunki, who is now on Social Security disability, receives \$1,070 a month in addition to a veteran’s pension.

“The criteria was overwhelming me,” he said. He thought that he wouldn’t get into the apartment.

His case manager met with the landlord in person, which smoothed the way for Kallunki’s application. “For people who are on disability or Social Security, it’s darn near impossible to get housing now without some kind of voucher or family help or help from the state,” he said.

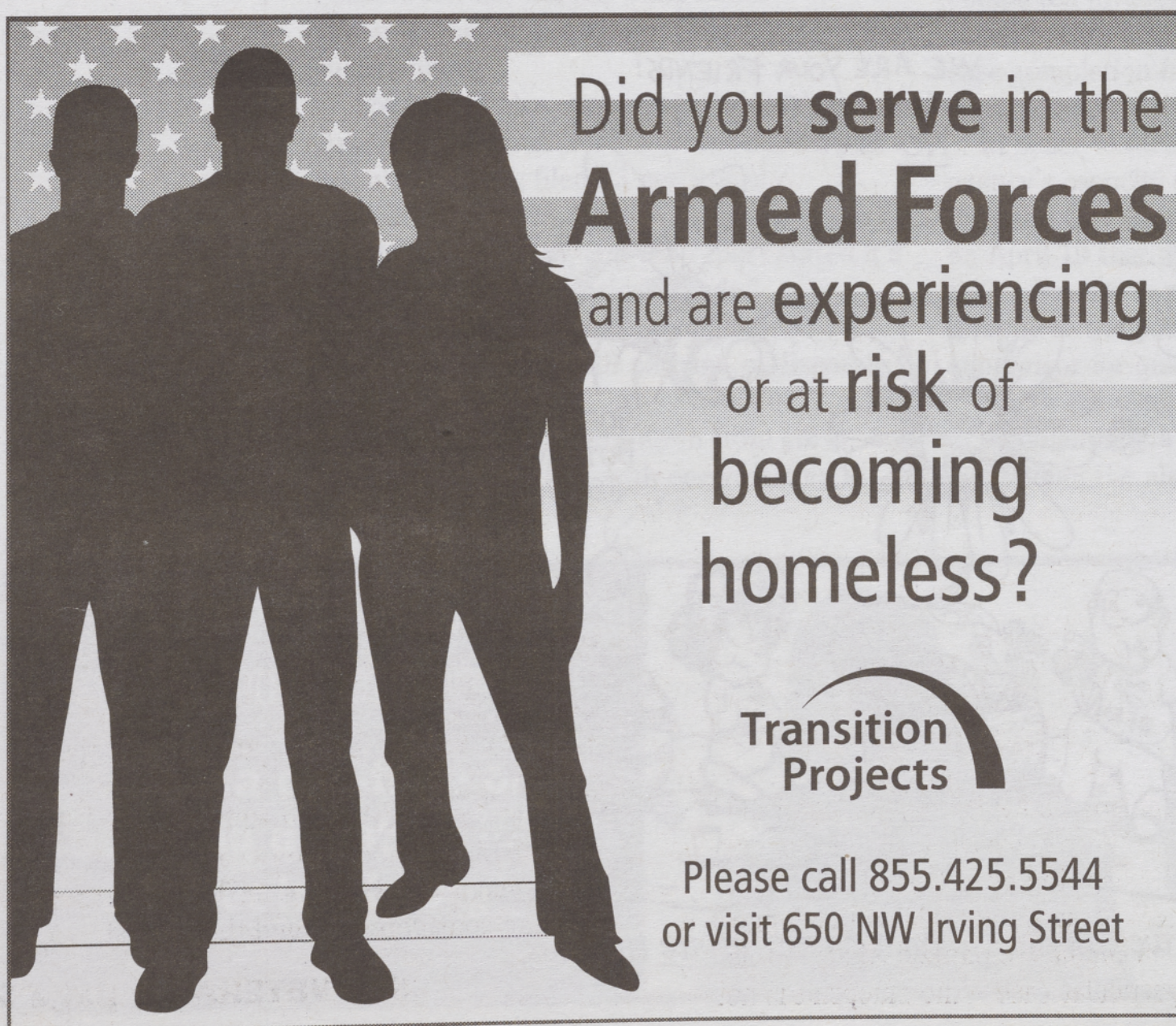
When describing the administration’s budget priorities, various members of the Trump administration have said that local government must assume responsibility for some programs currently funded by the federal government.

According to a blueprint for the administration’s 2018 budget released earlier this year, publicly-subsidized housing is no different. “State and local governments are better positioned to serve their communities based on local needs and priorities,” the budget document stated.

Deborah Kafoury, the chair of Multnomah County Board of Commissioners, said it is impossible for the county to completely absorb the cuts currently proposed. “People are in housing now because of the federal funds. The federal funding was crucial.

“We don’t have the funds to not only continue the work that we’re already doing and bail out the federal government from it’s obligation,” she continued. “I don’t know why the federal government would want to cut something that’s been so successful.”

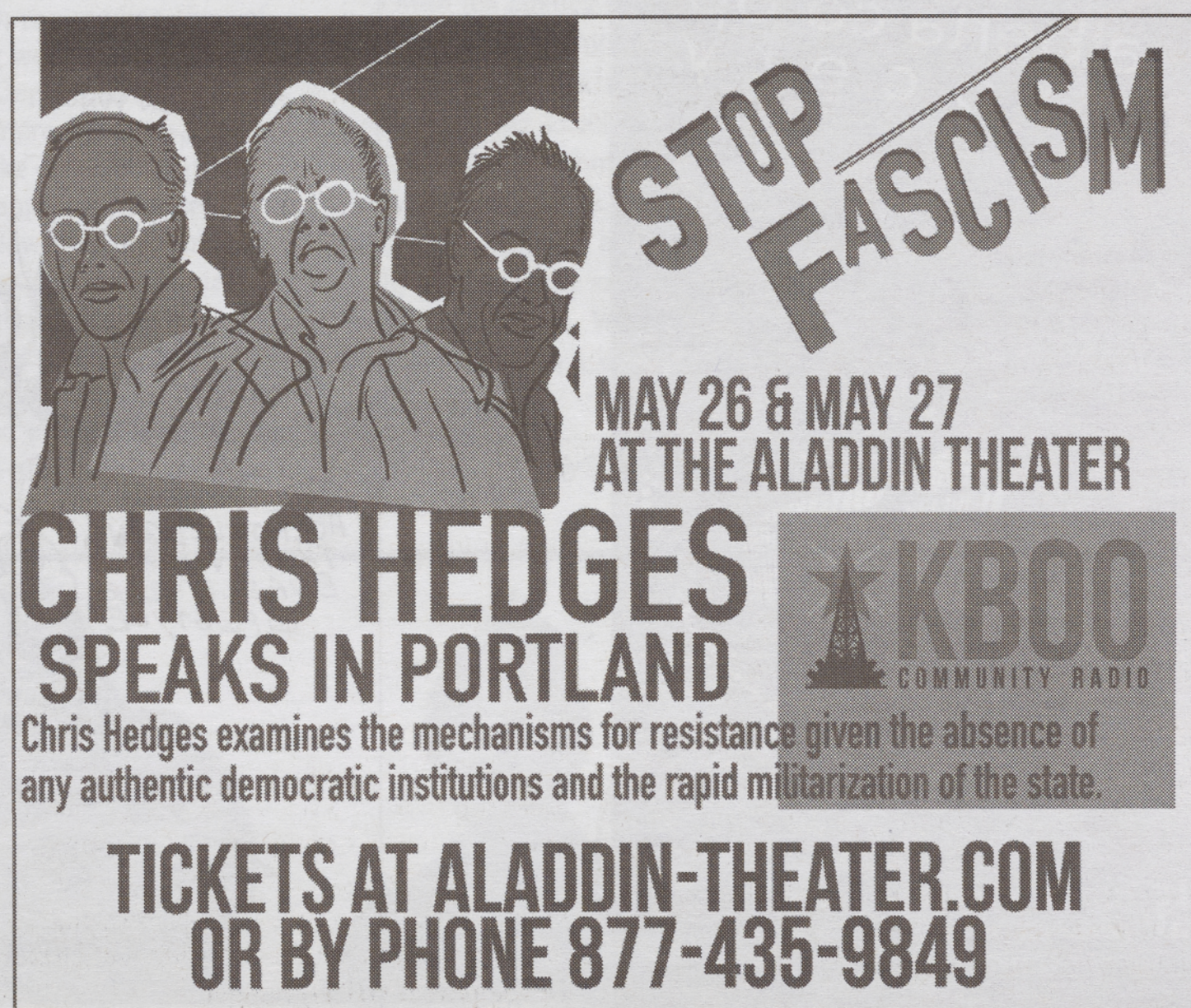
Buonocore agreed. “It is of a scale that is bigger than local governments can solve by themselves” – something that could be said of any anti-poverty or low-income program.



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