

We are making a difference, but it can be hard to see

Thinking about solving the issue of homelessness can feel almost impossible. For the general public it's hard to understand the relationship that nonprofits and government play in working to give people a safe place to call home. It's understandable. Why, after spending all of

this money, are people still sleeping on our streets? It's a valid question.

If you commute into downtown every day for any length of time, it may be hard to notice a difference in the

numbers of people that are visibly homeless. It's because you're probably not.

Let me explain.

We do know how to give people a safe place to call home.

Last year, both Portland and Multnomah County helped nearly 5,000 individuals and families find housing placements in the region. An additional 6,000 people received prevention services, such as rent assistance, to help them stay in housing.

What the public doesn't always see is that for every person the system finds housing for, there are more individuals and families becoming homeless on what feels like a daily basis. The struggle is real.

In short, you're not seeing a visible difference in the homeless population because we don't know how to house people, it's because we can't stop the flow of people hitting our streets.

Of course, any logical human being understands that when you have the kinds of rent increases the region and state are experiencing without any regulations there are bound to be thousands of people left out in the cold. Not to mention, funding for housing itself, which was once a federal priority, has been cut to the bone.

We all end up paying the price. Don't let anyone fool you. The housing crisis that Portland is experiencing is also being experienced in communities all over Oregon.

I believe the lack of investment in affordable housing statewide has many more residents from around the state coming to Portland to seek services.

The rich may be coming here from California, Texas and points beyond, but poor folks are migrating to Portland from small communities and suburbs across the state.

It's a perfect storm for Portland.

If the federal government doesn't prioritize housing, and the region and the state aren't going to prioritize affordable housing, then it leaves Portland to its own devices.

In many ways, it's an example of what's happening politically and socially in our country.

People and communities begin to do more with less and develop a scarcity mentality that creates a dynamic that we should only take care of our own. Unfortunately for the poor, in some communities, the mentality is that poverty has become a burden. It's a sad affair.

These realities are playing out in both local politics and on the national stage with devastating impacts to our country. Everyone begins to point their finger at someone else. It's a never-ending cycle, unless we as a community choose to rise above the noise and rhetoric.

The reality is, of course, that Portland and Multnomah County should continue investing in affordable housing and homeless services. It's not only the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do.

When we support and invest in affordable housing, we are not only investing in Oregonians today, but we are investing in future generations. Affordable housing, like our roads and parks and schools, plays a vital role in maintaining a healthy society for generations to come.

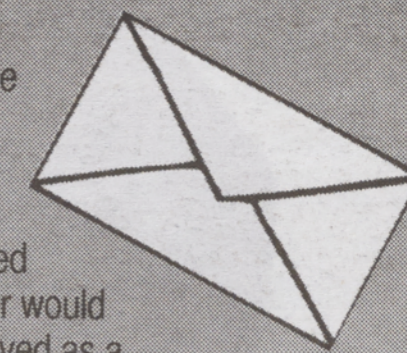
All of this is to say that it's true: it is hard to see how we are collectively making a difference when we continue to see thousands of people sleeping on our streets. For the thousands of people we are supporting with a safe place to call home, it makes all the difference in the world.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.



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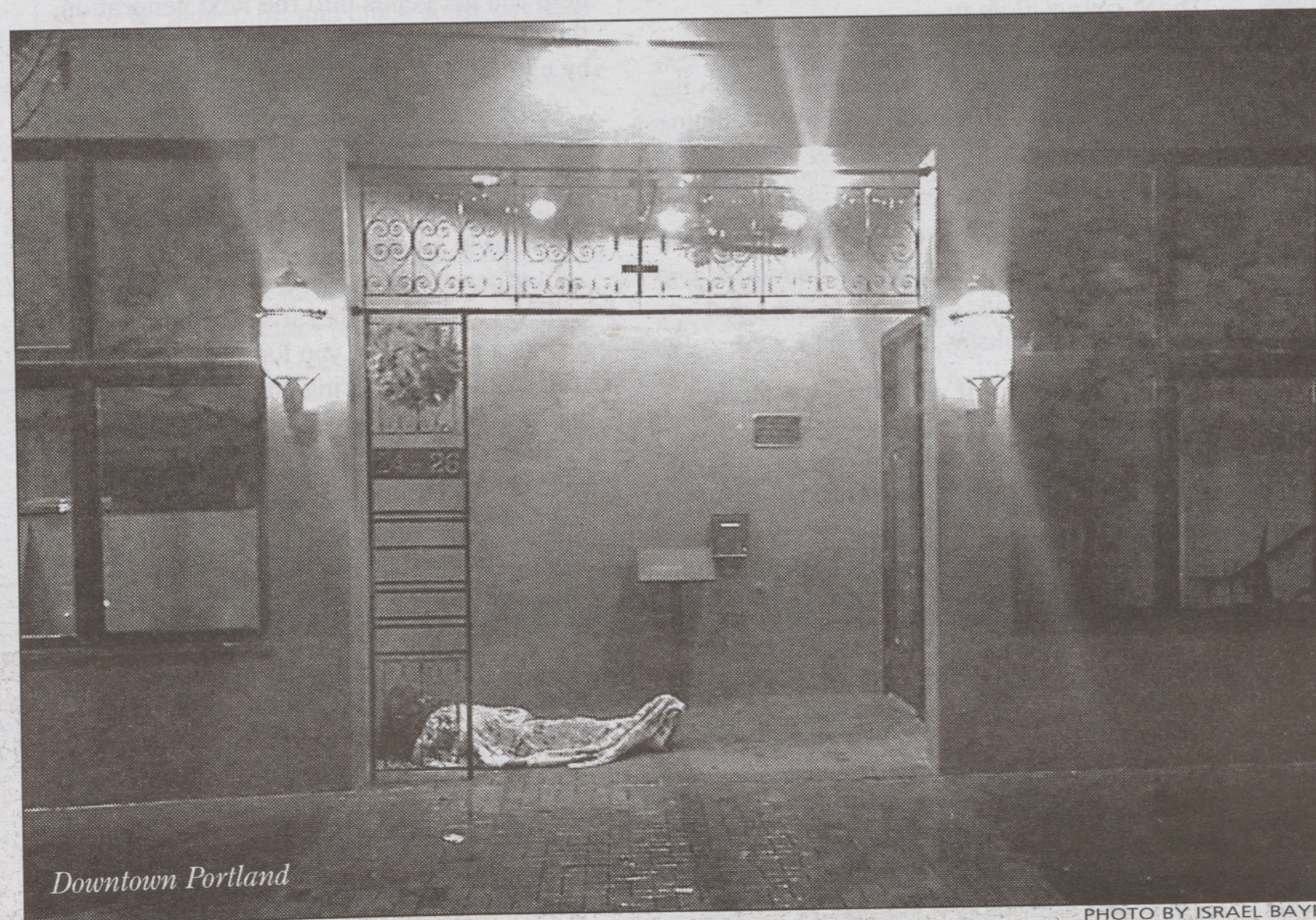
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Downtown Portland

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