

Together, moving forward, we can make lives better

Here we are at the turn of a new year. Some of us will attend parties with glitter and clinking glasses. Others will hunker in with families around board games or a TV. Some will get away to the mountains or ocean or somewhere, anywhere, that's warmer than here.

Others of us will brave yet another night on the streets. Others still will expend an inordinate amount of energy securing a shelter bed for the night, only to start over the next day.

At the turn of this new year, we are in the midst of another public conversation about the presence of

homeless people on our city sidewalks. While the debate flares on phone screens, people continue to huddle in tents and under tarps.

This is not a new conversation, but amidst tweets and news feeds, it can feel brand new.

Some folks talk about homelessness as an eyesore, but most of us can question why a supposed visual offense looms so important when we are talking about human lives. The ire over tarps, tents, pallets, and cardboard – materials of our lives – is misplaced.

A desire to not see poverty by moving people along does not serve us well. We are one fabric of citizenry in our city. Let's not forget that for some of us, shelter itself is an impossibility. When someone erects some semblance of shelter – a tent for a bit of privacy and a wind block from the elements, a car or RV to sleep in – this is a precarious position, and that person endures the stress of knowing they must move along. People wear down from disrupted sleep and vigilance for their safety.

The adage "out of sight, out of mind" holds truth; "sweeping" away people who are homeless summons amnesia. If some of us – thousands of us – live without secure shelter, it serves us all well to know this.

In our sight, on our mind.

While some are angered over the presence of trash, it serves us well to remember that this is a structural issue. With no home, no garbage service, no public dumpster nearby, trash piles up. A little creativity here would help. Neighbors can help neighbors, housed and unhoused.

In comparison to the more insidious trappings of homelessness, such as the lack of health care and mental stability, the ravages of addiction and vulnerability to violence – the issue of trash on the sidewalk is a relatively easy fix.

And we must never forget that 80 people died homeless on our streets last year. The average age of death was 49.

So as we start our new year, let's take stock of when laws target a class of people – in this case, people living in such poverty they lack shelter – and make a decision to focus on more constructive actions. The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon has tallied 224 laws across Oregon that target people who are homeless. These laws, the ACLU points out, do not affect in the same way those who have access to private homes, regular hygiene situations, and protected sleep.

Let's reject laws that target people for their poverty, making it more difficult to escape poverty and homelessness by webbing them into the criminal justice system and furthering debt by leveling fees.

We know that our extreme shortage of affordable housing demands an extraordinary response, but as we work on this, we can also strive to get people in from the cold, making sure they have the shelter beds to save their lives, and we can also address hygiene struggles (access to toilets, showers, laundry, garbage disposal) that lead to some of the actions often criminalized. We can also champion creative organizational leadership among people who are homeless.

Let's not rehash attempts to criminalize the survival of people on the streets. That's taking three steps back.

In 2018, let's measure our actions against what makes lives better for those among us who are homeless. Let's be hospitable to their health, rest and potential to thrive.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Kaia Sand

Kaia Sand is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach her at kaia@streetroots.org. Follow her on Twitter @mkaiasand

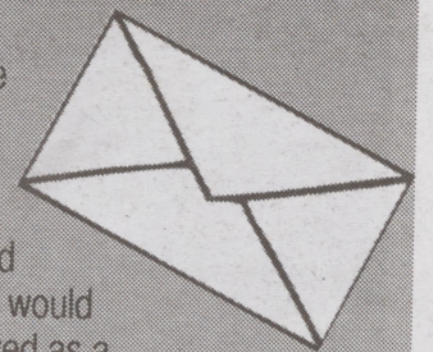


A person sleeps on the sidewalk in Old Town Chinatown.

PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

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Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-5657
Fax: 503-227-3117
www.streetroots.org
www.news.streetroots.org
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Sat. and 7:30-1 p.m. Sun.

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kaia@streetroots.org

Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org

Vendor Program Director Cole Merkel
cole@streetroots.org

Development Director Andrew Hogan

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