

Where poverty, race and homelessness intersect

BY SHANNON SINGLETON
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

A few years ago, I wrote about race in social work and the structural and interpersonal racism that went undiscussed in Portland. Portland seemed to rely on a problematic narrative about itself



Shannon Singleton

Shannon Singleton is the executive director of JOIN, one of Portland's largest providers of services to help people get into housing

that included being "progressive" and "colorblind." My issues with this approach to race and racism persist, and despite long standing equity initiatives in both Portland and Multnomah County government structures, we have yet to have honest, authentic and frank conversations about race. This began to change in March with the Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities (SPARC) initiative.

While communities of color have been waving the flag of oppression and inequity for years, having facilitators come into our community and speak frankly about the consequences and dangers of racism seemed to have helped those in the dominant culture finally listen. I have long associated homelessness with

poverty and assumed that people of color experienced homelessness at a higher rate because we experience poverty at a higher rate. While this is true, the information that I learned during the SPARC initiative helped me realize that this assumption is in fact more complex. Most communities' rates of homelessness are actually lower than their proportionate rate of poverty. In the black community, however, our rate of homelessness is double our rate of poverty, while white households' rate of homelessness drops in comparison to their poverty rate. So why, then, are we as a community not making the connection between structural racism and homelessness? The data seems to tell a pretty clear story.

During the SPARC initiative, we spent the week talking about the need to center race and make changes in our organizations. These changes include hiring practices and cultures that are often toxic to people of color, as well as structural changes that can address racism and the disparities that exist in housing and homelessness services on the basis of race.

Stay with me. It is easy and comfortable to get defensive and assert to me that you are not racist. But as a colleague once told me, we all drink from the same poison well of racism. The structures that we are all socialized into are designed to serve and lift up the dominant culture and oppress people of color, and without intentional work to examine and undo our internal biases we are

incapable of making the needed changes that will make services equitable. We need to understand our biases in order to address the organizational and structural barriers.

I implore all of us working in this field to slow down, listen to people of color, examine our biases and the structural oppression that exists within our system. To change the culture of our organizations to be more equitable and to undo and challenge the white supremacist culture that permeates the way we do this work and design our organizations.

I implore my fellow executive directors to dedicate time and resources to truly address racism. We cannot continue to rely on a few people of color in our agencies to carry this work, to call out racism, and to wait patiently while we have yet another cultural competency training. Enough is enough.

Step up, create space for real change, get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Understand that equity might mean that dominant culture organizations receive fewer resources. Listen to and believe people of color when they are sharing their experiences. Put ego aside. Embrace the reality that social justice and ending homelessness work requires us to examine and undo the institutional and structural oppression that has helped create our current reality where people of color are significantly more likely to be homeless than white people. If we can do this, we can begin to create an equitable housing system.

SPARC and Portland

- Although blacks comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population and 26 percent of those living in poverty, they account for more than 40 percent of the sheltered population.
- Black men remain homeless longer than white or Hispanic men, according to research compiled by the Center For Social Innovation.
- In Multnomah County, blacks comprise 7 percent of the population, but more than 16 percent of the homeless population. The percentage of blacks tallied in the 2017 Point in Time homeless count doubled over the previous number just two years earlier.
- Portland is part of a 10-city initiative by SPARC to examine the root causes of racial disparities in housing and related social service networks.
- Dallas, San Francisco, Syracuse, N.Y.; Tacoma, Wash.; Atlanta, Ga.; Minneapolis, Minn.; and Columbus, Ohio are among the other cities in the project.

Need health insurance?

CareOregon's goMobile Team makes it easy for you to get dental, mental and physical health care under the Oregon Health Plan (OHP). Our community partners host us on these dates, where we can check your eligibility for OHP, enroll you in Medicaid/OHP and make your doctor appointments!

CLACKAMAS COUNTY

CLACKAMAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMMUNITY CENTER
19600 S Molalla Ave, Oregon City
April 4 9-11 a.m.
April 18 9-11 a.m.

COLUMBIA COUNTY

SACAGAWEA HEALTH CENTER
1060 Eisenschmidt Ln, St Helens
April 2 9-12 p.m.

MULTNOMAH COUNTY

CLACKAMAS SERVICE CENTER
8800 SE 80th Ave, Portland
April 10 10-12 p.m.

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

50 SW 2nd Ave, Portland
April 3 9-11 a.m.
April 10 9-11 a.m.
April 17 9-11 a.m.
April 24 9-11 a.m.

EAST COUNTY CHURCH OF CHRIST

24375 SE Stark St, Gresham
April 9 10:30 a.m.-6 p.m.

FREEDOM FOURSQUARE CHURCH

660 SE 160th Ave, Portland
April 23 10:30 a.m.-6 p.m.

HUMBOLDT GARDENS HEALTH FAIR

5033 N Vancouver Ave, Portland
April 20 2:30-5:30 p.m.

JOIN

1435 NE 81st Ave, Ste 100, Portland
April 12 12-2 p.m.

MT HOOD COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Student Union - 26000 SE Stark St
Gresham
April 3 12-2 p.m.
April 17 12-2 p.m.

PCC SYLVANIA COLLEGE CENTER

12000 SW 49th Ave, Portland
April 11 9-11 a.m.
April 25 9-11 a.m.

WORKSOURCE GRESHAM

19421 SE Stark St, Portland
April 5 2-4 p.m.

PORTLAND RESCUE MISSION

111 W Burnside, Portland
April 12 8-10 a.m.
April 26 8-10 a.m.

PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

PSU TriO - 4th Floor Rm 425,
1829 SW Broadway, Portland
April 11 12-2 p.m.
April 25 12-2 p.m.

STREET ROOTS

211 NW Davis St, Portland
April 26 12-2 p.m.

UNION GOSPEL MISSION

3 NW 3rd, Portland
April 24 2-4 p.m.

WASHINGTON COUNTY

BEAVERTON CITY LIBRARY

12375 SW 5th St, Beaverton
April 5 9-11 a.m.

Invite goMobile to your event or location!

Caleb Green, Community Outreach Coordinator, greenc@careoregon.org 503-416-4883
Tamara Pedrojetti, Community Relations Program Manager, pedrojettit@careoregon.org 503-416-1479

CareOregon
goMobile team
careoregon.org