

Homeless arrest investigation should focus on real solutions

Calling a city a cesspool certainly grabs attention. That's how Portland Police Association President Daryl Turner started his public Facebook statement on July 16, decrying the new Independent Police Review investigation into whether the Portland Police Bureau profiles people who

are homeless. He listed frustrations around the work that the police do with homeless Portlanders, lobbing much of his ire at Mayor Ted Wheeler.

My fear is that such a moment becomes a heated drama between

prominent people wrapped up in defensiveness and blame, when the people who really matter are the people who are homeless. Their voices are not at the center.

Because here's the real mess I'm concerned about: the unforgiving tangle of criminal justice problems for deeply poor people.

While the number of arrests that targeted unhoused Portlanders last year was startling – 52 percent according to the Oregonian – it also confirms the stories of people who struggle on the streets. Last week we ran a series of accounts of struggles with police by Street Roots vendors, and we could easily run many more.

I would suspect that many readers would agree that it is absurd and cruel that on top of everything else unhoused people have to deal with, they face far more legal hurdles than the rest of us.

Daryl Turner should not resist an investigation into whether the police are profiling people based on homelessness, because such profiling is illegal by state law, and the numbers demand accountability. An investigation can lead to changes that help the officers act legally and responsibly – something a police union should be for.

But if he bristles over the public discussion around the high arrest rates casting too much blame on individual officers, well, I agree. These are systemic problems, and half-solutions are not OK.

I think we need a much larger investigation.

I urge Mayor Wheeler to launch an investigation not just into profiling, but into this whole epidemic of arrests that target homeless people.

As I wrote last week, there are many areas to tackle – including how court fines and fees target the poor and trigger more arrests; how addiction should be treated as a public health – and not criminal – issue; and how many activities that are legal inside houses are illegal when people are unhoused. We need to take all of this on.

We need to go big. Because we need to not only find out whether police activity is illegal, but also, what is wrong with the law that they

uphold.

Our questions must be not only about how homeless people are profiled – and that's a big one – but also, about how their existence itself is criminalized.

Right now, the suffering of the poor is conflated with the unnerving term “livability,” a term both the mayor and the police union president use. Livability for whom? Exactly.

Really, it's a combative term: it's against deeply poor people forced to live their lives in the public. What would it be like if we recalibrated the idea of livability to how livable the city is for the poorest of our neighbors, and always acted from there? The idea of livability could be connected, then, to the support of mental health and addiction services, shelters, and deeply affordable housing.

What if we were a city who were brave enough to redefine ourselves according to the success of our poorest residents? What if we were a city in which, 10 years from now, people visited to learn about the courage we had in centering our poorest citizens?

Because right now, the mayor allows the system to be complaint-driven in ways that harm poor people. The One Point of Contact system is a place where enraged people can report campsites, leading to camp sweeps.

Instead of allowing the loudest people to drive the dialogue, the city could prioritize de-coupling garbage services from police work, expanding the Clean

Start garbage pick-up service run by Central City Concern as a regular, reliable program. Garbage services must be de-coupled from the traumatic work of camp sweeps.

We need to let the mayor know that if he really centers the poor, lots of people have his back, because he would have to ignore many angry voices. That's why I co-sponsored the Petition for City of Portland to Adopt a Compassionate Response to Homelessness,” which in one week garnered 2,000 signatures, and growing. Please, make your voice heard.

We need less politicking and half-solutions. We need to be all-in – and all-in for the right reasons. This should not be about appearances, but truth. If homelessness is visible – well, that's because there are a lot of people struggling with homelessness. And for every tent and every person we see on the streets, there are a host of others on the cusp due to fragile economic, housing and health conditions.

Let us take moral responsibility for poverty in a land of plenty.

Let Portland be a national leader in really confronting how homelessness is criminalized, and addressing it. To do this, we need less blame, less defensiveness, and more courage.



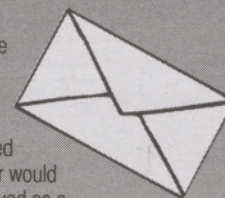
DIRECTOR'S DESK

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

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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.

Advertising

Interested in advertising in Street Roots? Email Andrew Hogan at andrew@streetroots.org

Staff

Executive Director Kaia Sand
kaia@streetroots.org

Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org

Vendor Program Director Cole Merkel
cole@streetroots.org

Development Director Andrew Hogan
andrew@streetroots.org

Senior Staff Reporter Emily Green
Operations Director Sarah Beecroft
Program Assistant Caelin Miltko, Jesuit Volunteer

Vendor Assistant Scott Jackson, Alex Gillow-Wiles

Development Assistant Rosemary Wilson
Editorial Producer Monica Kwasnik

Reporters Sarah Hansell, Leonora Ko, Emily Prado, Ellena Rosenthal, Amanda Waldroupe, Thacher Schmid, DeVon Pouncey, Helen Hill
Photographers Diego Diaz, Arkady Brown, Celeste Noche

Canvasser Desmond Hardison

Board of Directors

Chair Rachel Langford

Vice-Chair Dan Jones

Treasurer Heather Stadick

Secretary Alison Hallett

Directors Michael Anderson, Sandra Hahn, John Brown, Nels Johnson

Volunteers

John Barker, Stacey Heath, Anjali Rathore, Dennis Hogan, Lucas Hawthorne, Thomas Buell Jr., Jason Cohen, Doug Spangle, Susannah Kamala, Jon Raymond, Diana Richardson, Paul and Madeline Gefroh, Mary Anne Joyce, Brooke Anderson, Gillian Floren, Mark Oldani, Bianca Butler, Camber Hansen-Karr, Miranda Woods, Henry Brannan, Helen Hill, Mary Emerson, Brooke Anderson, Kathleen McFall, Robb Hengerer, Maile Yeats-Rowe, Erin Parsons, Faye Powell, Jon Raymond, Danny Moran and Megan Pickereel-Winer. If you're interested in volunteering with Street Roots, please submit a volunteer application at streetroots.org/volunteer. Or you can call for more information at 503-228-5657.