

No, Portland is not sending all its homeless people to small Oregon towns

Since the city rolled out the Ticket Home program, its been blamed for increases in homelessness in more rural areas of the state

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It's a story Street Roots reporters heard again and again as they traveled to small towns around Oregon: "Portland is sending all its homeless people here on buses."

The rumors began when the city of Portland launched its Ticket Home pilot project, then-called Homeward Bound, two years ago.

At the time, The Washington Post ran a headline declaring, "Portland wants to give homeless people a free bus ticket out of town."

The Statesman Journal's headline read, "Portland buys bus tickets for homeless to leave Portland."

While the headlines made an impression, the details of the program were lost on many readers – for example, the requirement that recipients prove they have a job or place to live lined-up at their desired destination before they can obtain a bus, plane or train ticket.

"There was an article in one of the Portland papers that talked about money being spent to bus people back home," said Tara Johnson, a homeless services provider in Coos Bay. Now, she said, there is a vocal group of locals "trying to push forward this idea that people are being bused here from Portland and

Salem."

While she said it's true that homelessness appears to be increasing in the Coos Bay area, "They're from here. Their ours."

After speaking with Johnson, Street Roots traveled down to nearby Bastendorff Beach, known at the time for being the most popular place in the area for homeless folks.

While camping at the federally managed beach has since been banned, those that Street Roots found there this spring all said they were either born and raised in the area or had lived there since a young age.

According to data provided to Street Roots by Portland and Multnomah County's Joint Office of Homeless Services, just three Ticket Home recipients have traveled from Portland to Coos Bay since the program's inception.

Farther up the coastline, Rep. David Gomberg's (D-Central Coast) office requested destination information from Ticket Home after receiving repeated complaints from constituents in Lincoln County that Portland was using the program to send homeless people their way.

The data supported what Gomberg already suspected: The area's shortage of livable and affordable homes, not Portland's ticket program, is driving homelessness in the area. Just one person has traveled to Lincoln County via Ticket Home.

While the \$200,000-a-year program has funded more than 110 tickets destined for California, nearly 40 to both Florida and Nevada and about 50 to Washington, it's only arranged instate travel for 25 people.

The most popular destination has been Las Vegas, followed by Seattle, then Phoenix.

Those who remained in Oregon dispersed widely, with

one or two people at most traveling to the majority of destinations.

The reason homelessness is increasing, say housing advocates around the state, is the housing crisis. Whether driven by population growth, an influx of tourism and vacation rentals, soaring building costs, a declining economy or all of the above, communities all over Oregon are seeing the effects widespread housing insecurity.

Although much of the increased homelessness is invisible, with families doubled up in single homes or sleeping in vehicles and trailers. Among the more visible homeless population, however, traveling can be frequent – especially along the coast.

In Lincoln City, one homeless services provider told Street Roots about 60 percent of her clients were travelers.

Several people living in Tillamook told Street Roots they see people who appear to be homeless getting off buses arriving from Portland on a regular basis.

"I can see outside my window, and when the bus comes in from Portland, there's usually three or four homeless folks that pop off the bus and they end up under our bridges," said Tillamook County Commissioner Bill Baertlein. He works in the courthouse, which sits across the street from Tillamook's bus station.

If they're arriving in Tillamook from Portland, however, it isn't because the city sent them. Ticket Home hasn't funded any tickets to the town of Tillamook or anywhere else in Tillamook County.

Despite what Baertlein sees through his window, he knows that to ease the homeless crisis, housing needs in his community need to be addressed. He's hoping legislation he's working on for the 2019 legislative session will make it possible to fund affordable housing with revenue from transient lodging taxes.

Multnomah County spokesperson Denis Theriault explained that since the program began, caseworkers have learned to ask "more thorough questions" when speaking with the

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