

Housing as a public safety concern: Yes on housing bond

Talia Gad is the communications director at Partnership for Safety and Justice, an Oregon nonprofit organization that's transforming society's response to crime with innovative solutions that ensure accountability, equity and healing.

BY TALIA GAD
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When asked how I grew so committed to public safety reform, I talk about my experience working with homeless people.

As a community health educator in shelters and soup kitchens, I quickly learned how typical it is for folks without homes to also be dealing with public safety issues. I saw how often people became homeless following a personal trauma or crisis. For others, folks who had histories of being justice-involved sometimes struggled to get back on their feet upon returning to their communities.

The crossovers were enormous, and my commitment to better public safety outcomes was cemented from there. And apparently my professional trajectory is not uncommon: of the seven of us at Partnership for Safety and Justice, four of us have backgrounds in housing or homeless services.

At Partnership for Safety and Justice, we're transforming society's response to crime through innovative solutions that ensure accountability, equity, and healing. To that end, we advance public safety policy solutions that promote better outcomes for crime survivors, people convicted of crime, and the communities of both.

So what exactly are the intersections between our public safety reform work and homelessness?

Our society has

effectively criminalized homelessness, so if reform advocates want to reduce our reliance on prisons and jails, we have to reduce homelessness.

Lack of housing means a lack of privacy, and that complicates daily activities like sitting down, bathing or going to sleep. Now, innocuous acts become criminal ones, and in what would normally be a personal moment, a homeless person's visibility gets them arrested – sometimes repeatedly – and the seeds of criminalizing homelessness are sown.

To understand the extent to which homelessness has been criminalized, we needn't look further than a 2017 analysis of arrests in Portland. In its examination, The Oregonian found that more than one in two law enforcement arrests were of homeless people. That's half of all the city's arrests, even though folks without stable housing make up less than 3 percent of the population.

To make matters worse, this dynamic renders housing even more difficult: many landlords won't rent to people with arrest records, which brings about a cycle that can keep homeless people homeless.

Housing is one of the most urgent needs among crime survivors. Without access to safe and affordable shelter, victims are vulnerable to circumstances that can prevent their healing and deepen their trauma.

Crime victims can become homeless for a range of reasons. Many flee family situations that are too dangerous to withstand. Some experience violence in their community and need to leave their old neighborhood behind. Among those who experience domestic violence, the rate is particularly alarming; according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, domestic violence is the third leading cause of homelessness among families nationwide.

Most of us know (or are) someone who's been a victim of some form of violence, so we know how strong and resilient survivors can be. And yet that strength is tested when survivors leave one risky situation only to find

themselves threatened by the risks inherent in being homeless, where people can be vulnerable to being robbed, assaulted or raped.

More affordable homes would help survivors find safety, heal from their trauma, nurture their families, access services and rebuild their lives.

Accessible shelter can reduce recidivism by helping people successfully transition out of prison.

Secure housing eliminates an enormous stressor as a person seeks to live a positive life after leaving prison. Affordable housing makes it easier to get one's life on track, allowing for greater family stability and rehabilitation, and access meaningful services should they need them.

With accessible and stable housing, people returning from prison have a home to share with family, an address to write on job applications, and a bond to a community in which to grow roots – all of which can help people succeed and reduce recidivism rates.

By voting Yes for Affordable Housing, Oregonians can support public safety by helping as many as 12,000 people gain access to safe, affordable housing.

Homes are among our most fundamental needs, and for people who are experiencing homelessness, are vulnerable after trauma, or are transitioning out of prison, housing is critical to rebuilding their lives.

Holistic public safety reform depends on greater access to affordable housing. Measure 102 and Measure 26-199 – the Metro Housing Bond – will build and preserve affordable housing for up to 12,000 people. That's housing that will help people heal, make families safer and create stronger communities.

Vote YES on Measure 102 and YES on Measure 26-199.

To learn more about how Partnership for Safety and Justice advocates for public safety and criminal justice reform, sign up at safetyandjustice.org/signup. To support the Yes for Affordable Housing campaign, visit YesForAffordableHousing.com.



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