

Solution-minded citizenry deserves government support

At the Oregon Health Forum on Nov. 15, Mayor Ted Wheeler's comments about what the city – in collaboration with Multnomah County and nonprofit partners – has done to address homelessness were overshadowed by his frustration. The Joint Office of Homeless Services has coordinated thousands of responses, moving people from homelessness to housing, stabilizing people in housing through rent assistance and sheltering people. Everyone is better off from these actions – that is a success.

But because the problem is so pressing, all these actions are never enough. Speaking before a crowd of about 300 people at the Lund Report-sponsored Oregon Health Forum at the Multnomah Athletic Club, Wheeler heard from

people who raised necessary alarms. In particular, members of the audience and the reactor panel (which I participated on), raised concerns about hygiene and sweeps – from the indignity of having no place to go to the bathroom to the health urgency of showers to the trauma of removing camps.

The entire forum, though, was overshadowed in the aftermath by a comment the mayor uttered within earshot of an Oregonian reporter: "I cannot wait for 24 months to be up."

But let's rewind the tape a bit. Yes, the Mayor is frustrated, but I urge him to remember that people all across the city care about helping. That audience was pulsing with energy, an energy that he and all Portlanders can find hope in. People care. Call on each and every one of us to play a part. Because that's what I heard at this forum too: people coming up with solutions.

While the Mayor pointed out challenges with many of the fixes, such as the expense of showers, and called on people around the city to help, I argue that the city could better aid in such constructive responses from community members.

Because right now, the city structures antagonism between housed and unhoused neighbors. The main way that people can engage with the city around homelessness is based on complaints. Hundreds of people register complaints each week on a city portal called One Point of Contact, and some of these result in "camp clean-ups" – in essence, sweeps. The One Point of Contact coordinates its responses across the city government, and across governments, nonprofits and private contractors. If someone wants to complain about a camp, they don't need to figure out anything else. This system streamlines, removing barriers for residents.

Many neighbors need ways to constructively engage the city around homelessness, but they are left to figure out how. While the mayor understandably emphasizes the limits on what he can do in any of these areas, and he

emphasizes the need for private solutions, residents are left to their own devices to navigate the city bureaus and the permitting processes. But if showers are too expensive, if porta-potties are needed, if people want to open their parcels of land to help – our city needs to hold out a hand. Support the hospitable responses to unhoused neighbors – neighbors who want to team up and supply porta potties in their neighborhoods, support trash collection, erect villages on private and church properties, open up showers in neighborhood centers and churches.

Couldn't the same energy put into the One Point of Contact system be put into a constructive equivalent? Given our layers of government in Portland, people need help figuring out how to navigate numerous bureaucracies. Maybe a neighbor does not seek to displace campers, but rather, wants to better support them with regular trash collection, and this might take linking city contractors, or even Metro government, with these neighbors. We need something set up that navigates these different aspects of government that is one portal. So people don't have to spend their time jumping over these hurdles.

Don't just streamline processes for people to complain. Streamline processes so people can figure out how people can help. Let them know what is legal and create liaisons through the permitting process. If neighborhoods, businesses and churches want to provide porta potties or open up parcels of lands for villages or camping or usher people into showers or support unhoused people with garbage services – how can the city assist? What we need is the equivalent site to One Point of Contact website that creates ease for neighbors to engage with our city with constructive and compassionate responses to homelessness.

When we set up systems where people only have the option of calling the police or registering complaints, we are setting up systems of antagonism. Housed neighbors are positioned to be adversarial with unhoused neighbors, rather than collaborative.

If we structure antagonism, we get antagonism. If we structure compassion, we get compassion. And there are so many people across this region who are compassionate and want to chip in.

People can also help by donating money or time to the nonprofits and neighborhood efforts in this city doing the work. That is what keeps Street Roots going. The largest portion of our funds comes from individual donors, and the bulk of that happens at this time of the year. And there isn't a day that we don't have key volunteer help. All nonprofits around the city need this support. There is so much happening worthy of community support, and in the coming weeks, winter emergency shelters will also need volunteers; sign up at 211info.org/donations.

Step into your best role. Give money, volunteer, dream up a project and make it happen. Be kind to people suffering outside.

Mayor Wheeler, we're all out here.

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DIRECTOR'S DESK

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