

City's new police liaison must put streets first

Two vendors leaned on the garbage can outside our office, a cloth spread over its lid like a tablecloth as they organized items from their pockets. They were discussing the announcement that the Portland Police Bureau is hiring a homeless community liaison, which we cover in this issue.

They spoke of distrust of the police, and joked with me about the word liaison – where does that second “i” land? – as one of them jotted the position title on a scrap of paper. The woman suggested that

police have a lost and found. People often describe how their backpacks “grew legs” in the night, a bit of levity to describe turmoil: For people who have little, their possessions are too often stolen from their bodies when they sleep.

It's important to remember that the two sides needing this liaison – this link – are not equal. There is a power imbalance. The effort needs to go toward listening to and representing unhoused communities.

People on the streets have reason to fear interactions with the police. The Oregonian reported that 52 percent of all arrests last year targeted unhoused people. Street Roots consistently covers aspects of this high rate of criminalization. We've covered how homelessness itself is criminalized, which ACLU of Oregon has studied. The Western Regional Advocacy Coalition – which Street Roots belongs to with Sisters of the Road and Right 2 Survive – continues to address this in the development of a Homeless Bill of Rights.

Substance use and mental illness are too often tangled up in situations that result in arrests – from possession charges to disorderly conduct – rather than addressed through the realm of public health.

People experiencing homelessness report feeling targeted for how they look, such as our vendor who rushed into our office recently, brimming with frustration as he described getting ticketed for jaywalking. Other people who did not appear homeless were also jaywalking, he said, and they were not ticketed. He calmed down once he was able to vent and be heard, but there was still the issue of the ticket, which he could never afford to pay.

We recently ran a series on how court fines and fees disproportionately affect the poor. A ticket that a middle-class person might pay without much thought can catapult a poor person into years of turmoil when the unpaid traffic ticket leads to rapidly escalating fees. This, Emily Green showed in her investigation, can lead to the loss of a driver's license or even vehicle impoundment – all paralleling one's plummet further into poverty and homelessness.

I've argued the system structures antagonism – such as people calling 911 on unhoused people for non-criminal matters or reporting campsites through the city's One Point of Contact System – rather than constructive responses. We must make it easier for neighbors to be constructive.

Street Roots won't let up on this coverage. We're determined to not just despair, but analyze and solve.

Today, Friday, Dec. 21, is Homeless Persons Memorial Day. The Domicile Unknown report, which Street Roots released with Multnomah County this

fall, shows us how violence and health struggles – from substance use to depression to cancer – are aggravated by living on the streets. Those streets took 79 lives last year. They're on track to take as many again by year's end.

Police need to learn from unhoused communities what can be done so they can be safer and heard. One of our vendors, C.W., described how his situation illustrated a lack of both: he was nearly killed when he was assaulted and robbed in his sleep, and then he could not secure a police response. Again and again, people walk through our doors with bruises, gashes and worse, beat-up and robbed in the night. Violence is recurring and it's hard to get justice. And our reports have shown how life is especially perilous for women on the streets.

In order to advocate to the police about how to help unhoused people be safer, this liaison must be entrenched in the culture of homeless folks, not the culture of police. Because one thing we can say loud and clear at Street Roots – there is no accurate stereotype of a homeless person.

At Street Roots we are privy to something special – knowing the diversity of vibrant human beings who live unhoused. Yesterday, a woman dabbed on her mascara as she cheerfully chatted. A woman in a wheelchair told me her favorite color is blue. A man who cusses as easily as he breathes was also,

simultaneously, courteous and sweet. Teasing rippled around the office. Vendors bantered with the vendor program coordinator about which Arizona college sports team is superior. A longtime vendor introduced to me to a new vendor, his neighbor – their tents sit adjacent in inner southeast.

And all of you are privy to this too through your relationships with Street Roots' vendors. Open our centerfold in this issue to see a gloriously diverse smattering of gratuities. People give thanks for life, for an RV, for customers, dental floss, autumn colors. Coffee.

So if this liaison can train police to better know the humanity of people on the streets, that's an accomplishment. What this not be is an extension of the bureau as a public relations exercise.

This liaison position cannot become another way to police homeless people, but a way to better support them, so it is promising that this is not a badged position. At its best, the liaison can improve interactions when police encounter people on their streets, and improve their responses when unhoused people need them. But we need to de-couple police work from non-criminal matters around homelessness.

This means that we must bolster the extraordinary work that nonprofit and peer outreach workers do before emergencies arise. As we report in this issue, these positions are too few and underpaid – but well-worth a community investment.

And we need a system-wide emergency outreach for non-criminal matters. As we argued in a recent editorial, CHIERS and Project Respond all offer portions, as does the Portland Fire and Rescue's Community Health Assessment Team, or CHAT, and we suggest that our city study the Eugene model of CAHOOTS, which dispatches medic and a crisis worker for mental health emergencies.

Ultimately, people who are homeless need to be policed less and supported more.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Kaia Sand

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