

'If you have someone who's mentally ill and they don't have a stable place, then it's harder for them to manage their mental illness.'

— VAL HOYLE, OREGON STATE LEGISLATURE HOUSE MAJORITY LEADER

how to fix it, which means, basically, that we can't agree on why it's broken. When it comes to mental illness and homelessness, the issue is clear, whether we are talking about the woman with voices in her head pushing a shopping cart around Four Corners or the sick man-child who shot up Sandy Hook.

Really, it doesn't matter if we believe the homeless and mentally ill deserve their shameful fate because they're lazy and weak-willed or, instead, we see them as victims of vast socio-economic factors that alienate and rob them of their dignity. The reality is everything, and in the end, the dynamic causing mental illness and homelessness will not bend to our opinions, which simply reveal the magnitude of our empathy, sympathy, understanding, apathy or action.

Among those who are actually doing something to address the issue, there appears to be a staggering level of agreement about what works and what we need more of to get homeless and mentally ill folks out of crisis: stable housing, continuous care as opposed to one-stop fix-its, as well as peer and community support that includes an ability to broaden our understanding of reality beyond mental issues themselves as an illness.

Many people view White Bird, and especially the mobile crisis service CAHOOTS, as a highly valuable blueprint for the kind of street-level, community-based



assistance that helps those on the streets suffering chronic mental issues. "What they do is off-the-charts amazing," Smith says of White Bird, and Regan says that, given more support for agencies like this, "we would have a better track record of getting those folks stable."

Brubaker at White Bird challenges the label of "mental illness" — it's "one of those rough tools we use," he says — and notes that a big step in helping such individuals is engaging them with openness and empathy instead of pity and sympathy.

"I think helping people to feel like human beings and part of a community is central to helping them be

members of society again," Brubaker explains. "We meet people where they're at and we treat them like a human being. We believe every individual already has solutions inside themselves. They simply need the support and encouragement to find the solutions."

Brubaker says that getting indigent people undergoing psychological difficulties into some form of stable environment is of paramount importance — not, he adds, into temporary housing but into a situation that provides a sense of permanence and belonging. It's a matter of empowerment, Brubaker explains. "Housing first, in general, seems to be the general direction we need to go in," he says. ■

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