

At Your Service

MORE HOMELESS SERVICES ARE NOT PROVEN
TO MAKE HOMELESSNESS WORSE

By Taylor Perse

In 1961, during a Eugene City Council meeting, members of the public debated where the Eugene Mission should be moved, or even reopened. At the time, the Eugene Police Department (EPD) said they believed the Mission would attract “undesirables” and that, since the Mission closed, there had been a decrease in “vagrancy.”

Nearly 60 years later, this idea is still being debated. The question, “Does having more services increase homelessness?” is periodically discussed by journalists, service providers and the government. Many factors contribute to homelessness in a city, but little research proves adding more services increases homelessness.

Madeline Baron is a project manager for ECONorthwest — a Portland-based consulting firm working in economics, finances and planning. Baron specializes in affordable housing policy and research analysis.

In 2018, Baron helped research and write a report on homelessness in the Portland area, assessing trends and effective ways to aid those struggling with homelessness.

Baron says services are important in the continuum of need. Service providers, she says, are opening in a response to a need that is already there. In questions asked in Portland’s yearly Point-In-Time Counts, she says, not many people claim to move to the area for services.

“The question has been asked ‘Why did you move here?’ And it’s a very small fraction of people who say

they moved here for services,” she says.

Baron also says she hasn’t come across anything in her research that proves offering services brings people to an area.

“We also surveyed the research and didn’t find anything that directly correlates to the presence of services drawing people to the area,” she says. “So far it is unproven.”

Service providers in Eugene agree that services are not a significant factor in drawing in more homeless people. Terry McDonald, executive director of St. Vincent de Paul Eugene, says it’s a small number.

“The narrative was: We always have more services so therefore people are drawn to Eugene,” he says. “But we know 80 or 90 percent of people that show up [to St. Vincent] are from this area.”

McDonald says claiming service providers increase homelessness is an easy way for people to say it isn’t their problem. Some people, he says, do come from outside, but in his experience it is usually families who are looking for economic opportunities and may be on their feet in six months.

McDonald says the service providers are one leg of a three-legged stool. This “stool” consists of public government, nonprofits or faith communities, and individuals.

“It’s healthy when they are all working together. A healthy nonprofit community can actually get you more deeply into the issues faster and quicker,” he says.

Baron’s research generated similar findings. She says helping the homeless requires intervention from a broad macroeconomic level down to aiding the individual.

“It really does take action at all those levels to solve the problem,” Baron says.

A different more anecdotal view comes from a police officer, who interacts daily with individuals living on the streets of Eugene.

EPD Sgt. Dale Dawson has been in law enforcement for 30 years. While working for EPD, Dawson says some of hardest parts of his career involve having to help and ticket people who are chronically homeless.

He says his interactions with these individuals led him to believe that many people come to Eugene because of the number of services available.

“I’ve asked them what brought them here. They go to Eugene services, and they start telling everyone else,” Dawson says. “They are here because Eugene treats homeless people well.”

He adds that he spoke with some people last year, who said they came to Eugene from Salem, because Salem didn’t have the services they needed.

Dawson also says it is important to help someone on the street rather than giving a handout. He explains he has seen people going around giving homeless people blankets and sleeping bags. Driving around a few days later, Dawson says he sees the supplies torn up, soaked and abandoned.

“Someone is donating things and we find it trashed,” he says.

Dawson says he enforces the law, which often means having to ticket individuals who don’t have a place to sleep. Regardless of what services are available, he says, the problem is getting worse, and a national intervention is needed.

“Every day I think, ‘This is not something I can win,’” Dawson says. “I go here, and I write these tickets, and I walk away. You never walk away with a win in that.” ■

slant

• Word reached *Eugene Weekly* just before press time that **Dan Bryant, a leader in the fight against homelessness in Eugene, has announced his retirement as pastor of First Christian Church**, where many programs to help the homeless are based. Bryant made the announcement on Sunday, Dec. 8; he will continue as executive director of SquareOne Villages, which operates small communities that provide housing for people on the margins. April Crow Oristano, currently associate pastor, will continue as a minister at First Christian, and the search has begun for a second full-time pastor.

• **Oregon Football** walloped Utah, 37-15, Friday, Dec. 6, at the Pac-12 Championship game in Santa Clara, California. Next up for the Ducks: the Rose Bowl on New Year’s Day against Wisconsin. It’s a big deal for the football players who are in it for the love of the game, like Eugene native Justin Herbert, who’s projected to be an early pick at the 2020 NFL Draft. But Oregon coaches will reap big bonuses for being Pac-12 champs and making it to the Rose Bowl. Coach Mario Cristobal will see a \$450,000 win bonus. A

quick scan of eight other UO football contracts shows each of those coaches will get a \$55,000 Rose Bowl bonus. Aaron “Fill The Sleeves” Feld will receive a \$10,000 bonus. The cost of Oregon seeing “roses” means the university will shell out nearly \$1 million in bonuses alone. Although these bonuses are contractually required, it’s a bit bittersweet going to the Rose Bowl after the UO issued so many budget cuts earlier this year. Put another way, to quote OutKast, “Roses really smell like poo-poo.”

• **The University of Oregon has once again weighed in on the side of patriarchy** over justice for all. You may recall that psychology professor Jennifer Freyd had her case for sex discrimination — she isn’t paid as much as her male counterparts — thrown out of court when the UO argued that a psychology professor is not a psychology professor. Now comes the news that the UO has settled out of court with two professors, Warren Gast and Hans Joachim Neis, who said they were discriminated against on the basis of age when they were reassigned from jobs they had held for years. The \$170,000 payment doesn’t mean the UO is taking any kind of responsibility for its own actions. “The settlements were made to eliminate the cost and inconvenience of proceeding through trial,”

spokeswoman Kay Jarvis said in a statement. Of course.

• **What we’re reading:** The Dec. 19 issue of *The New York Review of Books* offers a terrific article about a new book and a PBS Independent Lens documentary about the Oregon standoff in 2016 in which militants with semi-automatic rifles occupied the headquarters of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County. Adam Hochschild’s article, “Another Great Yesterday,” is one of the best we’ve read on this complicated subject.

• **Former state Rep. Phil Barnhart, a powerful advocate for electric cars** (see his Viewpoint in *Eugene Weekly* 12/5), spoke at the City Club of Eugene on Dec. 6. He joined Kelly Hoell, sustainability manager of LTD, and Michael Graham, from the Columbia-Willamette Clean Cities Coalition, on a panel persuading us to run right out and buy an electric car to do our part to fight the climate crisis. Hoell reported that LTD is committed to having at least 11 electric buses on the road in two to three years. Asked about moving past cars to bikes, walking and mass transit, Barnhart said that’s a long-range goal, but electric vehicles are a bridge. We have to move fast to combat climate change.