

CRISIS,

continued from Page 1

which translates into homelessness being the result of poor choices like becoming addicted to drugs, living a lazy life or pursuing criminality.

"If it's a moral crisis, we get you right with Jesus to solve the problem," said Jones, a man of faith himself.

Even if one isn't inclined toward faith in higher powers, believing homelessness is the result of choice leads to another solution in a places like the U-S-of-A where people have proven able to overcome adversity, and transition to success, by simply pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.

"But what if you were born without boots?" asked Hamilton.

Another possibility is that homelessness is an outgrowth from socioeconomic, which would mean there are systemic issues that need to be rejiggered. If that were the case, then we should just create better systems that allow people to be upwardly mobile, something that isn't happening at the rate it once did in this country.

"But there are people who are forced to occupy the lower rungs of society, everything of value is priced at a premium and, without a social safety net, there is nothing to catch them," Jones said.

The more effective way to treat homelessness would be through the lens of a public health crisis, according to Jones. By choosing to approach the issue this way, it allows the actual costs of homelessness to be more accurately calculated and focuses treatment on the condition of homelessness rather than the symptoms.

"At the end of the day, we have individuals trapped in situations that are detrimental to their health and, in the process of that, are creating public health problems for others in society," Jones said.

The condition of homelessness places strains on almost every other conceivable public domain service: police and justice systems, emergency medical assistance and health care and environmental clean-up. Aside from burdening the people working in those roles, the bills associated with them are enormous and paid for through taxes.

"The affliction isn't drugs or mental health or the affordable housing crisis, the affliction here is the lack of a basic need. That basic need is housing. If you treat the affliction of homelessness with housing the problem begins to go away, but it's so counter to our ways of thinking," Jones said.

The cost to house someone in the Willamette Valley and provide case management services? \$17,500 a year, and then the other costs begin to go down as well. ■

STEP 3

CHECK THE DATA AND YOUR PRIVILEGE

"I love being reduced to a statistic," said No One Ever.

Nevertheless, time and again, homeless people find themselves represented by numbers on a chart presented in the meeting rooms throughout the area in hope that it makes a dent in the compassion of policymakers.

These are the facts:

- Homelessness is on the rise. In January, the annual point-in-time count of the area's homeless revealed a 20 percent increase from 2018, 1,462 people to last year's 1,218.

- Between July 2017 and the end of the first quarter of 2019, ARCHES put 1,024 families and individuals into housing of some sort. There were 1,139 adults and 817 children among those families.

- Since 2016, ARCHES has performed housing assessments on 5,869 individuals.

- More than 2,825 individuals remain on the waiting/interest list.

- The ARCHES day center, which serves a dual purpose of connecting individuals with services and simply offering respite from the outdoors, receives about 100 unique visitors a day. Visits peaked last October at 177 people in a single day between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

- ARCHES distributed more than 17,000 sack lunches last year alone.

- ARCHES opened warming centers during the 42 coldest nights of the past winter season and 922 unique individuals made use of the service.

ARCHES uses two assessment tools to determine which homeless people are in the most dire straits and which might benefit most from some sort of targeted intervention. The first tool deployed is the Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT). If someone scores in a troubling range after the VI-SPDAT, ARCHES case managers will run them through the Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT).

Hamilton likens the two methods to the difference between a single picture, the VI-SPDAT, and a photo album, the VAT.

"Assessment seems like such a heavy word sometimes. It's about having the conversation," Hamilton said.

The VAT is so effective it can identify which homeless individuals are most likely to die on the streets at age 52.

Given the choice, Jones would VAT every client ARCHES encounters, but it's too resource intensive. A VAT



KEIZERTIMES/Eric A. Howald
Ken Houghton speaks with a homeless resident about what she needs to keep going.

interview can take 20 minutes or two hours depending on the client and then has to be vetted by a supervisor or colleague.

Either assessment can debunk a long-held myth about homeless people: that offering quality support services attracts more homeless people to the area.

"A lot of them weren't born in Oregon. They came to Oregon at some point in their life, but it wasn't the homelessness life that drew them here. They came here for a job or family and then something happened," Hamilton said.

"Most of them have been in Marion County for decades and this is their community and home. They are Marion County residents and our responsibility," added Jones.

Reaching into the homeless community on a deep level requires both knocking down barriers and depth of understanding about the human condition. That is why ARCHES' day center is an important component of doing the work.

"We want the day center to be low-barrier, so anyone and everyone is invited to use the space. We have boundaries, but everyone has an opportunity to be at the center," Hamilton said.

The space, which includes couches and tables and a television, is under renovation right now, but it will add amenities like a vanity where women visitors will be able to sit and put on make-up or dry their hair. The number one request from regular visitors is shockingly simple: a place to sit and eat the sack lunches handed out every day.

"Some people just come in and veg. We'll still try to connect them to services or help them navigate the ones they are already part of, but we all have Netflix days," Aguirre said.

In addition to respite, clients can pick up personal hygiene products like deodorant, toothbrushes and incontinence underwear, and use the site as a mailing address when needed.

One of the more recent acts of ingenuity on the part of the staff was to begin collecting the handbags sent to those with monthly cosmetic subscriptions. ARCHES employees fill the bags with feminine care products and, when the clients return to the day center, all they

need to do is hand over the bag without asking for what they want in it.

"That's another of those dignity pieces that we try to offer all of our clients," Aguirre said.

The most important thing ARCHES employees do is persist regardless of initial reception on the part of clients, Aguirre added. As an example, she talked about one client whose primary form of transportation is a skateboard. He lost one in a near-collision involving a vehicle about a year ago. After ARCHES helped replace it, the newer one was stolen recently. This time while out shopping with him, the man's contact at ARCHES had proven the desire to help and he, in turn, was willing to sign up to begin the process of finding permanent housing.

This is where the homelessness crisis intersects with one in affordable housing. ARCHES doesn't own properties to rehouse clients, it relies on the participation of local landlords in affordable housing programs to meet the local need. Some only want to work with certain subgroups, like veterans, and others would prefer to have only the highest functioning renters available.

"We do have landlords that go way above and beyond the call of duty to learn how to work with our clients and we offer tenant education classes for the clients who have never had stable housing before," Aguirre said. "The thing we want the landlords to know is that our case managers work very closely with the clients and it's not like we're turning them over to supervision by the landlord."

For Jones, a landlord's desire to help only the low-need clients among the homeless population is indicative of how America gets the problem wrong. Housing the lowest need individuals gives a false sense of accomplishment – and looks good when reporting to the entities funding the work – but it never gets to the root of the problem.

"The right outcomes would be the ability to statistically prove that we've drawn down the number of outside, camping homeless population and create systems, resources and service locations that make being homeless less dangerous," Jones said. "We moved downtown without a full, realization of how bad things were and the harm being caused by homelessness. We need to provide pathways and education and make homelessness survivable."

"It's a fight just to do the work the right way." ■

STEP 4

CARRY YOUR PART OF THE BURDEN

Riding in a car with Houghton, Hamilton and Jones is not like riding in a car with other people. As they travel, they choose to see the people that thousands of others traveling the same roads will purposefully ignore, or worse, dehumanize in thought or out loud to passengers.

They look for familiar faces, tell-tale signs of homeless encampments large and small, and spaces where the grass has been worn down creating trails to places not as visible to the passersby. The changing of the seasons isn't always the boon one would think.

"This time of year they go nomadic," said Houghton. Aside from weather making travel from one space to another more appealing, the onset of

the construction season forces some homeless people out of spaces once considered relatively safe. Sometimes it means that relationships and trust ARCHES employees have spent months developing are lost and will need to be rebuilt.

Houghton parks next to a field and the trio starts loading their arms with sleeping bags, blankets, tarps, socks, underwear and toiletries. The field appears vacant aside from a growing trash pile and a few people crossing the field seemingly on the way to somewhere else.

As they begin walking, the well-trod trails crisscrossing the entire property in every direction become more evident. Then, more and more people started emerging from places not readily visible.

The group takes a path leading to hedgerows separating the field from another property, 10 yards from the main road alongside the property, the first camp comes into view, this one abandoned. The second one is only 10 yards beyond that and two men emerge when Hamilton announces who they are.

They pass out toiletries. Houghton gives them drymats to put sleeping bags on and gives them his card after a short pitch about what other services ARCHES can offer them.

"They've probably only been out here a few months so far, but you can see how it's all designed to remain invisible as much as you can," Jones says.

Another 10 yards and they pass another abandoned camp. A short distance later, another camp probably in use but no one is home. Roughly 20 yards pass without seeing anything more, but the group is now far enough in to be able to see where other camps are located in other spaces around the field. At least half a dozen are visible, which likely means at least double that number aren't.

As the hedgerows begin to taper off, a larger encampment with two larger tents and something like a living space come into view. Hamilton announces our presence and two women step out of a tent to meet us.

Houghton begins speaking with one of the ladies, Hamilton and Jones begin talking with Lorna (not her actual name).

Jones asks how long Lorna has been living outside. Her answer is mostly inaudible, but an eviction led to the current

To an outside observer, it would be easy to dismiss Lorna's tears as an attempt to elicit sympathy. For the ARCHES team and anyone with slightly more experience interacting with homeless people, the tears have nothing to do with ploys for compassion. The tears come as the result of being seen as human beings in a world that has otherwise cast them aside. Being able to share the burden of being homeless with someone legitimately willing to listen is a mostly foreign experience, and heartrending.

"There is an emotional response, but most people are overjoyed to be seen as people," Jones says.

After departing the women and heading back to the car for additional supplies, Jones offers another quick assessment.

"What you've got there is some substance abuse, likely meth. She's bounced around places looking for protection. She's not able to access medical. You start adding all those other things onto it and it's virtually impossible to get a job and make smarter choices," Jones said.

It would take \$17,500 a year to start her back on a more healthy path.

After reloading supplies back at the car, the group heads back into the field. Houghton tries some one-on-one engagement with another camp, but the residents won't leave their space. On the next leg, the group passes a younger man and his wife and there are multiple conversations happening at once.

They've been outside for about six months, their child is living with one of their parents. They were renting a room from a friend, but the relationship went south. After passing out socks and toiletries, the groups begin to separate when the man remembers something.

"Hey, before you go, I found this guy's ID out here and I don't know who to give it to. You might be the right person," the man says. The three ARCHES reps huddle quickly around the ID to see if anyone recognizes the face. Houghton does. "I lost my wallet a few months ago and it was a huge pain," the man says. "I hope you can get it back to him."

Hamilton notes that things like this happen frequently, and the people ARCHES encounters in the field or in the day center often defy

"It's not like there is an epidemic of homeless people attacking each other or anyone else. But people hear one story and then that becomes the truth for everyone."

— Jimmy Jones, Executive director of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency (MWWCAA)

stint outdoors, she has a lot of debt, she says, and begins to cry. "I'm tired, I'm 43. I can't do this," she says as tears overwhelm her.

From that point on, the report of her troubles roll in like tidal waves, one after another. She's been physically abused by partners although she tries to accept some blame for it and how it started. She's at least four months overdue for a follow-up exam on a cyst on her pineal gland. A woman she knew, a fellow homeless person, was hit by a train nearby a month prior. She shows off two other spots that Jones said appear to be spider bites. She went and got an emergency food box two days prior and it's already been stolen.

"I can't do it. I need help," she says.

The entire time she and the other woman are talking, a man also living in the camp won't come out of one of the tents.

As Hamilton, Jones and Houghton begin to part ways with Lorna and the other woman, Houghton begins making plans to come out later in the day with additional supplies.

"Is there anything else we can bring you?" Jones asks Lorna.

"Chocolate. Could I get some chocolate?" Lorna replies.

"I think we can take care of that," Jones answers. Lorna's chest heaves at this small promise of mercy. The other woman asks for pair of reading glasses.

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