

Urban League

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already assigning three staffers to the group's new satellite office, housed at the Rosewood Initiative on 162nd Ave. and Stark Street, an area that has seen a major uptick in African American and other underserved populations in the last decade.

Also, Harmon Johnson helped in transitioning Midge Purcell out of her position as policy advisor as she prepped for her retirement last month. Working with predecessor Michael Alexander and other League staffers, she helped to divide the post she says Purcell herself "created from the ground up" into two more jobs: a Policy director and an organizing director.

With her already making some important steps in her new post, *The Skanner News* decided to sit down with Harmon Johnson at the Urban League of Portland's headquarters to her vision for the organization, upcoming elections, racist symbols and the role of community in Oregon.

The Skanner News: What do you hope to keep from your predecessor Michael Alexander's work as president, and in what ways do you hope to differ your work at the helm of the Urban League of Oregon?

NHJ: I could not have had a better predecessor. He's tremendously supportive of me, and I say that presently. One of the things I'm continuing from his work is Alexander's commitment to accessing funds for the league. He did an excellent job at that and I will do right by the legacy.

One thing I intend to do is highlight the good work that we've done in 70 years. This organization is 70 years old, that's older than most of the people talking about it. When you look back at any organization, whether it be Les Schwab or the Trail Blazers, there's always rocky periods. But we've created things in this community. Some of the things even I have to learn about, like Big Brothers, Big Sisters — that's

the Urban League. If we say we're creating something new, that means you should bank on us. That's what our track record says.

TSN: What is the role of community in the Urban League's mission right now?

NHJ: When we talk to the people who hold the check-books for our community — simply, it is not enough. They'll usually say [there's a million here] we're going to divide between these various community organizations. I would like to see more people join the Urban League. The community is great. When the Urban League calls, they answer. That's

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because we call, we're on the front porch. We call from their kids' schools. We're there.

What we do better is hold people accountable. There are people who make promises to our community and when they don't deliver there's no price for the, to pay, and it's not enough for me [alone] to talk about it. The things we talk about when we're in rooms together -- we need to not say something different when we're in front of these powers that be.

Beyond holding the powers that be accountable, we need to become the powers that be. When I was a kid, there were more African Americans in the Senate [than there are now]. We need to put our names on the ballot and do the work to get elected.



Nkenge Harmon Johnson stepped into her new position as president of the Urban League of Portland in April. In May the organization published the "State of Black Oregon" 2015 report, an updated version of a report first published in 2009.

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Rent

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The Skanner News reported in 2013 on a similar incident where Section 8 residents in New Columbia received letters announcing an increase from \$800 to \$1,200. Those let-

ferent categories of affordable housing and sources of subsidies, it's important for tenants to have access to good information and to contact the agencies that manage their

'It's important for tenants to have access to good information'

ters also failed to explain that the increase would be covered by subsidies and not covered by the tenant.

Rob Prasch, preservation director for an affordable-housing advocacy group called Preserve Oregon Housing said if, over a period of time the owners didn't adjust the fair-market rents to the maximum they could charge, a property may find itself suddenly unable to cover operating costs, and may have to increase the rent drastically. He added that because there are several dif-

ferent categories of affordable housing and sources of subsidies, it's important for tenants to have access to good information and to contact the agencies that manage their

property if they have any question about rent increases. "There are different restrictions in how rent is set and which incomes that those are available to," said Justin Buri, executive director of the Community Alliance of Tenants of low-income and affordable housing renters. Often, buildings that offer affordable housing will serve a mix of low-income renters — including Section 8 voucher holders, whose rent is funded by the department of Housing and Urban Development as well

as those whose incomes qualify them for income-restricted, subsidized housing.

CAT primarily advocates for tenants who rent on the private market. Buri said because of the complex issues tied to affordable housing, tenants who receive Section 8 vouchers or live in income-restricted housing should contact Legal Aid if they can't get answers by contacting their property manager directly. He added Legal Aid gives priority to tenants in affordable housing when it comes to cases involving landlord-tenant law.

Buri added he is aware of other cases where clients in affordable housing are receiving notices of rent hikes that may affect them, though could not go into detail due to confidentiality concerns.

"It's bad enough for tenants that are living in private rental housing because they have so few protections," Buri said, adding renters private housing all over the city are facing no-cause lease terminations, sudden spikes in rent and a vacancy rate of about

one percent, meaning they have few options when they need to relocate. All of that points to a need for more ways to protect renters, he said.

"We always assume that tenants who live in subsidized affordable housing are protected. It's just a clear example of the scale of what our communities are facing as tenants, and there's no safe harbor," Buri said.

For more information:

To contact Legal Aid Services of Oregon with questions or concerns about renters' rights in affordable housing, visit OregonLawHelp.org or call (503) 224-4086.

To contact the Community Alliance of Tenants with questions or concerns about renters' rights in privately managed properties, visit <http://oregoncat.org/> or call the Renters' Rights Hotline, (503) 288.0130 from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesdays.

Homeless

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According to the United States Census Bureau 2013 estimate. In contrast, the census calculation for Multnomah County is 766,135 people.

In King County, there was a 21 percent increase in the number of people who were without any shelter, compared to the 2014 count of 3,123 people sleeping on the street.

In Multnomah County, the number of unsheltered people held steady from the previous count in 2013, the number of people in shelters and transitional housing decreased.

According to the Multnomah County Point in Time report, the decrease can be attributed to an increase in homeless services and a change in the definition of homelessness. The Department of Housing and Urban Development used to include people in "rapid rehousing," people who used subsidies and rent assistance, in homeless counts, but doesn't anymore. Including people in rapid rehousing would increase the number of homeless by 800 people.

Rapid rehousing beneficiaries are primar-

ily people of color, women, families with children and domestic violence survivors.

Though the Multnomah County numbers have decreased slightly, the gains have not benefited people equally.

'Homelessness is fundamentally about an inability to afford housing'

Communities of color are overrepresented in homeless counts compared to their percentage of the general population. African Americans have the highest relative rates of homelessness of any race with 24 percent of the homeless population but make up only seven percent of the county.

"Homelessness is fundamentally about an inability to afford housing," the report states. "Among point-in-time count respondents who answered a question about the causes of their homelessness, the most fre-

quent responses were 'unemployment' and 'couldn't afford rent.'"

The recent "State of Housing in Portland" report from the Portland Housing Bureau concluded that African Americans have

been priced out of nearly every neighborhood in Portland. With the median income of \$27,923, the average Black resident would need to find rent lower than \$698 per month to be considered affordable.

With those constraints, one could possibly afford a studio apartment in Parkrose, Centennial, Gateway or past 122nd and Division. Those neighborhoods have few to no vacancies, according to the State of Housing report.

What is harder to count than the unshel-

tered homeless are those who are couch surfing, or people who have unstable living arrangements. The Multnomah County Point in Time count tried to estimate those who were "doubled up" — that is, living with friends and family for economic reasons.

From Oregon Department of Human Services food stamp data and school district homeless student counts, the study estimated 12,543 who were doubled-up on the night of the count.

The study also found that communities of color were more likely to be those who were doubled up. In some instances, cultural barriers kept people from getting help from mainstream services. In other cases, these communities were reluctant to turn to mainstream and government agencies for assistance due to legacies of distrust.

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