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Opinion

We Say No to Wapato Jail as a Homeless Shelter

The Mental Health Association of Portland opposes Multnomah County commissioners siting any shelter for people who are homeless, for people who have mental illness, or for people with addictions, at Wapato Jail.

For decades Multnomah County evaded addressing chronic homelessness, mental illness and addiction. Evasion left good programs unfunded or crippled, discouraging participation, and undermining efforts of the state, city and outside advocates to support and fund other solutions.

The result is the public health disaster we see on our streets today.

Commissioners ignored best practices; left primary care disconnected from mental and addiction health care; maintained contracts to agencies which failed to provide worthwhile services; disregarded advice of expensive experts; and frittered away time with costly causes which

The Mental Health
Association of
Multnomah County

Guest Column

delayed and denied attention to people who are homeless.

Instead of finding solutions, Multnomah County commissioners smoothed the path for sellers of tobacco, alcohol and marijuana to proliferate throughout the community

“Instead of providing help, Multnomah County commissioners made it impossible for people in mental health crisis to navigate the service system

which expanded the public health crisis of addiction.

Instead of providing help, Multnomah County commissioners made it impossible for people in mental health crisis to navigate the service system, get effective help, reduce their symptoms so they

wouldn't be killed by cops.

The legacy of Multnomah County is damage and despair for people who are homeless as a result of untreated addiction and mental illness. Tens of thousands have been harmed, and in many cases the harm is probably unfixable. The decay has crept into their families, their children, even friends and neighbors.

And now they bring us Wapato Jail. Commissioners, our friends relied on you to

Wapato Jail is just an excuse to say you provide sufficient shelter and therefore can enforce a no-sleeping-in-public-places ordinance.

The answer to homelessness is not emergency shelters in abandoned jails at the edge of town. The answer is supportive housing — small apartments attached to supportive services. Yes, it's more expensive and complicated than a cold hard cell with steel bars for a door, but it's not inhumane. It's not a dismissive “let them eat cake.” And supportive housing actually solves homelessness.

Recovery from homelessness begins with hope. Hope is a promise things can get better. Getting better is effective drug treatment. Getting better is sanctuary where we can get real help. Getting better is peer support.

What burns trust and extinguishes hope is the message you belong in jail.

protect them by providing basic services — and you failed. Wapato Jail continues your legacy of failure.

To claim, in the midst of a so-called “emergency,” you'll allow homeless people to stay in Wapato Jail is nothing short of disgusting. Offering

To Be Equal: Hillary Clinton Stands on the Shoulders of 'Unbossed' Shirley Chisholm

“Women in this country must become revolutionaries. We must refuse to accept the old, the traditional roles and stereotypes...We must replace the old, negative thoughts about our femininity with positive thoughts and positive action affirming it, and more. But we must also remember that we will be breaking with tradition, and so we must prepare ourselves educationally, economically, and psychologically in order that we will be able to accept and bear with the sanctions that society will immediately impose upon us.”

— Shirley Chisholm

The nation has marked the historic occasion of the first woman in American history to win the Presidential nomination for a major political party.

While Hillary Clinton has come further than any woman Presidential candidate, she is not the first. Victoria Woodhull ran as the candidate for the Equal Rights Party in 1872. Margaret Chase Smith challenged Barry Goldwater for the Republican nomination in 1964. More recently, Pat Schroeder in 1988 and Carol Moseley Braun in 2004 vied for the Democratic nomination.

But the most historically significant forerunner to Hillary Clinton was Shirley Chisholm, the Brooklyn-born trailblazer who was also the nation's first African Ameri-

Marc H.
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Urban
League

can Congresswoman.

The daughter of working-class immigrants from the Caribbean, Chisholm became interested in politics while serving as the director of a child day care center and an educational consultant for the New York City Divi-

“As there were no Black Founding Fathers, there were no founding mothers — a great pity, on both counts” — Shirley Chisholm

sion of Day Care. She served three years as a New York State Assemblywoman before running for Congress in 1968 with the slogan: “Unbought and Unbossed.”

“My greatest political asset, which professional politicians fear, is my mouth, out of which come all kinds of things one shouldn't always discuss for reasons of political expediency,” Chisholm said.

Chisholm hired only women for her staff, half of whom were African Americans. “Of my two handicaps, being female put many more obstacles in my path than being

Black,” she said.

She announced her candidacy for President at a Baptist church in Brooklyn. In an article about her candidacy, the Associated Press wrote, “Ironically, her major headache seems to come from Black politicians.”

“They think that I am trying to take power away from them,” she said. “The Black man must step forward. But that doesn't mean the Black woman must step back. While they're rapping and snapping, I'm mapping.”

She competed in 14 states,

winning 28 delegates to the convention. As a symbolic gesture, candidate Hubert Humphrey released his 83 Black delegates to cast their votes for Chisholm. With the votes of several other delegates at that contentious convention, Chisholm finished fourth in a field of 13, with 152 delegates.

It is hard to imagine, in this era of sharp division in politics, the remarkable moment during that campaign when she visited her segregationist rival, Alabama Governor George Wallace, in his hospital room after he was shot and wounded. “What are

your people going to say?” he asked her. “I know what they are going to say,” she said. “But I wouldn't want what happened to you to happen to anyone.” She recalled that her words moved him to tears. Chisholm retired from Congress in 1982 and remained an outspoken activist for civil rights until her death in 2005.

It would be difficult to overestimate the impact and influence of Chisholm's Congressional service and Presidential candidacy. While Congress remains disproportionately White and male, one-in-five members of the current House and Senate are a racial or ethnic minority, making the 114th Congress the most diverse in history. The nation's first African American President is winding up his second term, and a woman — a former senator and Secretary of State — has just won the Democratic nomination for President.

In her acclaimed speech on the Equal Rights Amendment in 1970, Chisholm said, “The Constitution they wrote was designed to protect the rights of White, male citizens. As there were no Black Founding Fathers, there were no founding mothers — a great pity, on both counts. It is not too late to complete the work they left undone. Today, here, we should start to do so.”

Marc Morial is the president and CEO of the National Urban League.